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## ***Suddenly Last Supper: Religious Acts and Race Relations in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire'***

Written by  
**John S. Bak**

*"'Welcome, my children,' said the dark figure, 'to the communion of your race!'"*

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown*

*"What they think we going to do—eat 'em?"*

—Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*

*"My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served."*

—Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

In widening Freud's psychoanalytical theory in "The Uncanny" (1919) that monsters are projections of our own repressed fears and desires to a national context, Leslie Fiedler had influentially argued almost half a century ago that America itself is gothicism writ large because at the heart of its ideological myth of selfhood is the desire to know that self through its antipathetic relationship to the Other, to confirm one's (national) righteousness, as it were, by affirming evil in another.<sup>1</sup> Privileging the Puritan model of heteronormative white Christendom to frame that national self, America irrevocably marginalized its sexual deviants, unshackled slaves, and godless savages, those gothic specters whose necessary presence in American literary production haunts the dominant culture and serves to justify its hegemonic control. Since that pursuit of forbidden knowledge of the Other belies the Christian innocence it proclaims to be preserving, any prelapsarian ideal contained within American selfhood must be viewed with suspicion. That suspicion has, in fact, been the locus of American letters since the Republican era, which is why scholars today view American Gothic less as a genre and more as

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1957), 241; Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960, London: Paladin, 1970), 135.

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"a discursive field in which a metonymic national 'self' is undone by the return of its repressed Otherness [. . .]."<sup>2</sup>

Tennessee Williams, like many gothic authors in America, understood perfectly the hypocrisy inbred in this Puritan model and openly attacks it in two of his most gothic works, "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer*. Queer Christian allegories whose protagonists cling desperately to an unflagging faith in the Puritan ideal and the Otherness that it inscribes, both texts irascibly reproduce the religious imperative only to expose it by their unconventional ends. Perhaps indicative of Williams's view of his own place within Cold War culture as its public spokesman *and* invisible anathema, his Anthony Burns and Sebastian Venable project a respectable front while struggling internally with the inconsistencies between their spiritual leanings and the homosexuality it repudiates in them. Consequently, both consider themselves at first to be without grace and only obtain that grace through an act of self-sacrifice—a violent apotheosis which makes them unlikely Christ figures. Avatars of the Eucharist who nourish society at the moment their bodies are literally consumed, Burns and Sebastian become for Williams a quiet plea for Christian tolerance towards its gay Other and a subversive swipe at heteronormative America for turning Communion into a performative act that determines which desire is saintly and which is sinful and who can partake of the Lord's Supper and who cannot.

That both Burns and Sebastian are depicted in the end as being finally duped by their own catechism is proof that they too are not truly the Other we are meant to pity or admire but rather victims of a larger, inescapable system which harbors the very seeds of Otherness it necessarily externalizes. Williams declares that source to be human desire, specifically the desire to know sin, especially sin in others, which he portrays as more unforgivable than the act of othering itself because heteronormative white Christian society is at its epistemological core. Taken on its own terms, desire is transhistorically inclusive but becomes, when policed, as it is in Puritan America, an effective tool—perhaps *the* most effective tool—in signifying the private Other and in protecting the national self. Yet desire, as Williams readily maintains, brings us more into communion with one another than our different skin colors, sexual proclivities, or religious leanings divide us, and therefore, any preservation of delusory Self/Other binaries

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Savoy, Introduction, *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, ed. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1998), vii.

proves to be not only inherently hypocritical but also politically futile since one's skin color and religious affiliation might align him with the cultural Self, while his sexuality would deem him its Other. Always suspicious of what is deemed the "norm"—can someone, such as that person just described, be two-thirds the norm, for example?—and eager to dismiss its dichotomizing tendencies, Williams is once again championing his famed fugitive kind here by exposing the shortcomings of social othering.

And yet, in invoking the distorted image of the Last Supper in both works to unfetter human desire from its proscriptive Christian dogma and, moreover, in equating that desire with blackness, Williams proves unable to escape his own racial othering and thus inadvertently reinscribes in "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer* that white national bugbear which Toni Morrison describes as "the potent and ego-reinforcing presence of an Africanist population."<sup>3</sup> Though allegories about religious othering, then, both works Other themselves, where certain acts of sexuality and the piety that declares them illicit are inadvertently rendered benign in comparison to the carnivorous "black mass" Williams has eating its way through white society.

Exploring tropes of blackness in Williams's work to uncover his troubling relationship with African Americans is not new, of course, though such a reading per "Desire and Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer*—two key texts that reply upon blackness to define white America's shortcomings—has curiously escaped critical attention.<sup>4</sup> Nor is studying Williams's literary obsession with desire, particularly homosexual desire within its Cold War context,

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<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Studies which have begun deciphering the Africanist presence in Williams have concentrated on other works. See, for instance, Philip C. Kolin, "Civil Rights and the Black Presence in *Baby Doll*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 24.1 (1996): 2-11; George W. Crandell, "Misrepresentation and Miscegenation: Reading the Racialized Discourse of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Modern Drama* 40 (Fall 1997): 337-4; and Rachel van Duyvenbode, "Darkness Made Visible: Miscegenation, Masquerade and the Signified Racial Other in Tennessee Williams' *Baby Doll* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Journal of American Studies* 35 (2001): 203-215. Those studies which have examined these two texts together have focused generally on their homosexual content. See, for example, Annette J. Saddik, "The (Un)Represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams's "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer*," *Modern Drama* 41.3 (Fall 1998): 347-54, but especially John M. Clum, "The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female in *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*," *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, ed. Matthew C. Roudané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 128-46, where he explores how "Christian notions of guilt and atonement" make Anthony Burns and Sebastian Venable "blasphemous Eucharist[s]" (131, 133).

particularly cutting edge today.<sup>5</sup> What is original, however, is the combined reading of these inquiries in relation to Williams's intertwining sexual, racial and religious tropes in his Cold War literary productions in an effort to defuse their othered natures but which unfailingly refract Williams's own potential fears and prejudices.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, from 1946, when Tennessee Williams was writing "Desire and the Black Masseur," to 1958, when his *Suddenly Last Summer* premiered on Broadway at the York, the African American was still very much a national scare-figure among the ruling white caste and would become increasingly more threatening at the decade's close. As such, the *black mass*, grammatically embedded in Williams's short story title and visually reproduced in its worshipers who celebrate the Passion or in the play's poor savage children who devour Sebastian on a white hot street in Spain, only casually denotes an interest in religious perversion; it also displays the author's racial fears, conscious or otherwise.

## I

Since "the Negro problem in the United States" addresses national "obsessive concerns" particularly in "the ambiguity of our relationship with Indian and Negro," Fiedler contended, the "proper subject" of American Gothic is "slavery."<sup>7</sup> Toni Morrison would bring Fiedler's argument to its natural conclusion, positing in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* that not just American Gothic but American literature on the whole was "made possible, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism."<sup>8</sup> All recognizable traits of the national character are in fact just "responses to a

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<sup>5</sup> Numerous critics, including myself, have thoroughly tackled this subject. Among them, see especially David Savran, *Cowboys, Communists, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992); Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997); and Steven Bruhm, "Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the Economics of Desire," *Modern Drama* 34.4 (Dec. 1991): 528-37, where he locates Williams as a "threat to national security" for McCarthy because, being a homosexual, "he harbors a secret which is linked to economic imbalance, and which makes his behavior transgressive" (529).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas P. Adler did recently write in his entry on "Religion" for *The Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia* (Westport, CN, and London: Greenwood P, 2004) that "Occasionally, the Christian liturgy is inverted in a kind of black mass culminating in cannibalism that signifies a predatory world, as in 'Desire and the Black Masseur' and *Suddenly Last Supper*" (213). Yet he does not elaborate on his astute comment any.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Fiedler, 378, 493, xxii.

<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison, 44.

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dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence,"<sup>9</sup> with white literary America translating blackness into its various fears of the self, and desire residing at the heart of those fears—the illicit desire to possess blackness but also to submit to it. Coming under the scrutiny of the recent "whiteness studies," texts of white authors like Tennessee Williams, then, are said to speak through or around blackness in order to express or to hide those fears, opening his texts up to endless racial permutations:

Encoded or explicit, indirect or overt, the linguistic responses to an Africanist presence complicates texts, sometimes contradicting them entirely. A writer's response to American Africanism often provides a subtext that either sabotages the surface text's expresses intentions or escapes them through a language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register. Linguistic responses to Africanism serve the text by further problematizing its matter with resonances and luminations.<sup>10</sup>

But how can a white writer be charged with harboring a fear of black potency (sexual and political) if indeed his texts not only solicit but even trumpet its presence, as Williams's "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer* so obviously do? Such a question has, in fact, worked to deflect readings of racial tensions in the two texts toward those of a purely sexual or at least metaphysical nature, prompting most readers to isolate Williams's intended Other as the sexual deviant or the society who judges him.

In "Desire and the Black Masseur," for example," Williams exposes black-on-white racism through the racially-motivated sadomasochistic violence meted out in the story—not to fan the flames of social unease among his predominantly white reader at the time per se, but rather to allegorize how black and white relations, like any that exists between Other and Self (black/white, gay/straight, communist/capitalist, etc.), reflect a certain desire for metaphysical wholeness, for completion, which is only impeded by the social need for othering. As Williams writes, "For sins of the world are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what

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<sup>9</sup> Toni Morrison, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, 66. For further reading on "whiteness studies," see the complete volumes of "The White Issue," *The Minnesota Review* 47 (1996) and "The White Issue," *Transition: An International Review* 73 (Spring 1998), both

sufferings must atone for."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the story introduces the black masseur's racist desire to punish the white patron Anthony Burns in order to demonstrate his transformation by the end:

he hated white-skinned bodies because they abused his pride. He loved to have their white skin prone beneath him [. . .]. But now at long last the suitable person had entered his orbit of passion. In the white-collar clerk he had located all that he longed for. (CS 220)

Such language indeed runs counter to Williams's public support of Civil Rights and interracial relations (sexual and otherwise) throughout the late Sixties and Seventies and allows us to differentiate author from narrator and recognize thematic exposition.<sup>12</sup> The explicit black-on-white racism thus emphasizes mutual misunderstanding between black and white cultures that frequently privilege social over spiritual constructions and, consequently, misdirects our reading away from the story's racial implications and towards those more consistent with the homosexual author's relationship with the era.<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, since Williams overloads the story with tropes of physical and metaphysical fragmentation that, in conjunction with those of black-on-white violence, work to privilege this Self-as-Other reading, he forces us to identify with that which we are culturally inclined to repress, namely human desire. Anthony Burns, a product of mundane, white bourgeois culture, is at first ignorant of what "his real desires were" (CS 217), sexual or otherwise, probably because he could not instinctively find "his real desires" replicated anywhere in his middle-class

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<sup>11</sup> Tennessee Williams, "Desire and the Black Masseur," *Collected Stories* (New York: Ballantine, 1986), 217. All subsequent references to this, or any, story within the collection will appear parenthetically and denoted CS.

<sup>12</sup> In a 1974 interview with Cecil Brown, Williams said,

"Well, the Blacks and the Irish are my two favorite people," and it infuriated him [an Irish journalist in Chicago] because I put Black first. He gave me a bad write-up. (hahaha) So, I've discovered now that one must think no race. I am crazy about the Blacks. And I must say I know people who ask, "Why don't you write about the Blacks?" I said because I would be presumptuous; you know, I don't know the Blacks that way.

I am terribly involved in the Black movement because I think it is the most horrible thing (racism). I think that the White people in America, southern and northern equally—even more northern—have exercised the most dreadful injustices, historically, and even now, discrimination, and not just in terms of jobs. No, that's not where it's at. No, and I wouldn't blame any Black man for looking at me and saying, "There's a red-neck honky," and that he hates me. (Devlin 267)

See Cecil Brown, "Interview with Tennessee Williams," *Partisan Review*, 45 (1978): 276-305, rpt. in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, ed. Albert J. Devlin (Jackson and London: UP of Mississippi, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Bruhm, for instance, sees the cannibalism as "a trope for the social anxiety surrounding homosexuality" (533), while Saddik argues that cannibalism, though used to eradicate homoerotic desire, represents the annihilation of the body and signifies the return to metaphysical wholeness.

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environment. Being one of fifteen children in his family, graduating from the largest class in his high school, or securing a job "in the largest wholesale company of the city" (CS 216), Burns only knows the invisibility these institutions have afforded him, to say nothing of his affiliation with an even larger one: white, Christian, and presumably to others (and to himself, at the start), heterosexual. Conformity, though, stifles desire not only because it breeds sameness but also because it prohibits contact with the Other it necessarily marginalizes. Burns enjoys his conformity at first because contemplating desire would imply transgression; and transgression, a confrontation with the Other; and a confrontation with other, his resultant visibility. Once Burns enters the secret world of the Turkish baths, however, tellingly situated "in the basement of a hotel, right at the center of the keyed-up mercantile nerves of the section" (CS 218), he stumbles into that revealing world of his Other—black, pagan, and homoerotic.

Eve Sedgwick had first explored the homosexual as Gothic Other in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, then more fully in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, wherein she notes that the Gothic novel was "an important locus for the working-out of some of the terms by which nineteenth- and twentieth-century European culture has used homophobia to divide and manipulate the male-homosocial spectrum."<sup>14</sup> One of the key tropes of homosexuality that she describes is the "unspeakable," that shibboleth pregnant with signification though lacking in appropriate or acceptable signification.<sup>15</sup> When the black masseur intuits from the start there was an "unusual something" (CS 219) about Burns and does not leave the cubicle when Burns undresses, it would appear that story reproduces Sedgwick's trope in suggesting that Burns's homosexuality, and not the masseur's blackness, is the Other Williams tries to unveil and eventually demystify. And yet, the story does not stop at simple intimation, for when the Negro begins beating Burns, we discover what that "unusual something" is: "as the violence and the pain increased, the little man grew more and more fiercely hot with his first true satisfaction, until all at once a knot came loose in his loins and released a warm flow" (CS 220).

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<sup>14</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 90. See also her *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Arno, 1980), and René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972).

<sup>15</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men* 94.

As that homosexual Other of Cold War America, Williams would frequently draw on this trope of unspeakability in his drama—be it in Brick's silence about his relationship with Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the old southern spinsters' banal conversations in *Something Unspoken*, or even Violet Venable's machinations to silence Catherine from revealing her son Sebastian's homosexuality. Yet he rarely shied away from addressing homosexuality openly in his short fiction. With the pregnant silence and single-sentence dialogue between Burns and the black masseur containing a gothic element beyond the tabooed desires of the story's homoeroticism and sadomasochism, something still must be haunting this story. Who, then, is the real Other that Williams *others*? That question brings us back to Toni Morrison and to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers like Hawthorne and Melville she discusses, whose "theatrical presence of black surrogacy" unavoidably carries the authors' last word on race relations in America.<sup>16</sup>

## II

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is an excellent example of "black surrogacy," one which indirectly informs us about Williams's own complex Other in his story. In his acerbic allegory about the dangers of religious devotion and self-appointed grace, for example, Hawthorne could not avoid exposing another specter of which he was perhaps only liminally aware—the escaped slave.<sup>17</sup> Not having yet made known his abolitionist sympathies by the time of the story's writing—those only being loosely depicted in his biography of president-to-be Franklin Pierce—Hawthorne was simply unaware that in othering Goodman Brown and his religious piety, he was also othering another.<sup>18</sup> For if hypocrisy runs deep in the American idolization of the Indian at the moment we were rapidly killing him off, it never did so with its treatment of the black man, with 19<sup>th</sup>-century idolization of the blacks rarely countering the demeaning images of Jim Crow or Sambo. Thus, while assuring himself and his 19<sup>th</sup>-century readers of their goodness in light of their ancestor's mistreatment of foreign races

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<sup>16</sup> Toni Morrison, 13.

<sup>17</sup> For a study that explores how Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* rewrites "a masterplot of cultural authority and guilt" with the family's concealed history with slavery acting as a "synecdoche of the nation" (130), see Robert K. Martin's "Haunted by Jim Crow: Gothic Fictions by Hawthorne and Faulkner," in Martin and Savoy, 129-42.

<sup>18</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch claims in *Rites of Assent* (New York: Routledge, 1993) that Hawthorne was never much concerned with "Southern slavery [and] Indian genocide" (236).

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and divergent creeds, Hawthorne is equally raising elitist concerns when he makes Brown feel most pure at the story's climactic black mass, an obvious attempt to invert Christian dogma for ironic effect but one which draws visually on the fugitive slave to dramatize that inversion.<sup>19</sup>

Just as Williams would do in "Desire and the Black Masseur" and even later in *Suddenly Last Summer*, Hawthorne attempts in the final scene at the black mass to bring all men into communion, joined not by race or creed but rather by sin and desire, for among the "pious people" were those of "dissolute lives" and "spotted fame": "Scattered, also, among *their pale-faced enemies*, were the Indian priests, or powwows, who had often scared their native forests with more hideous incantations than any known to English witchcraft."<sup>20</sup> While Brown confronts all of humanity at the black mass, he and Hawthorne inevitably associate that sin with blackness, moral for certain but unavoidably racial as well, as Toni Morrison maintains. Once he stumbles upon the black mass, for instance, Brown calls the parishioners a "'grave and dark-clad company'" (STS 117). Though this is reported speech from one who has repeatedly demonstrated his racist and chauvinist attitudes in the story, which Hawthorne uses for controlled ironic effect, it is soon confirmed by the third-person narrator (who has not yet emerged differently from the author himself): "In truth they were such" (STS 117). While simply describing how their appearances are blackened by the cover of night, Hawthorne cannot, as Toni Morrison repeatedly describes, avoid rendering the racial Other through the repetitive use of tropes equating sin, evil, and desire with the black face.

Referring frequently to the "sable form" (STS 119) of the black mass's high priest or the surrounding woods of New England as the "benighted wilderness" (STS 117), Hawthorne mixes fictional setting with historical reality, for the escaped slave, not yet a reality in Brown's Puritan day despite an Africanist presence already on American soil, was literally on the run from the bounty hunters eager to profit from the Fugitive Slave Law that President Pierce did little to repeal despite the abolitionist leanings that helped lift him into Office.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, memories

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Martin informs us that slavery was "the mainstay of the Salem economy and the bartering of human bodies the origin of most New England wealth" (Martin and Savoy, 134).

<sup>20</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Selected Tales and Sketches*, ed. Hyatt H. Waggoner (New York: Rhinehart, 1964), 118. All subsequent references to this story will appear parenthetically and denoted STS.

<sup>21</sup> Pierce would later uphold the Fugitive Slave Law by returning the escaped-slave Anthony Burns to his owner Charles Suttle in Virginia. James R. Mellow notes in *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times* (Boston: Houghton

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of Nat Turner and the slave insurrections that had killed 55 whites in August 1831 in rural Virginia were still very much alive in 1835 when Hawthorne penned his story, and, despite the efforts of Garrison's Anti-Slavery Society, fears that such an insurrection would not discriminate southerner from Brahmin were all too real in Hawthorne's New England.

Thus, in the story's defining sentence—"Welcome, my children," said the dark figure, 'to the *communion* of your race!' (STS 119, emphasis added)—we find communion of sin and human desire being equated with the devouring black race, to say nothing of Hawthorne's use of the word "communion" in the story both as a body politic and as the Eucharist. In exposing one ghost of the American Other, Hawthorne had awakened another, and in that visual representation of the black mass, the slave—now freed of his shackles—is gathering strength in the forest around Salem's villages, an emancipation not entirely without its national fears: "this black mass of cloud was sweeping swiftly northward" (STS 115). The gothic is thus recycled for another generation of readers, with the knowledge that young *Brownman* Good is sharing his bed with his "pale wife" Faith (STS 120). No doubt this awakening of the specters of miscegenation and of black sexual potency, both historical components of WASP othering still very much active in white America today, has helped contribute to this dated critique of Calvinist grace's longevity, with discerning black readers like Morrison recognizing themselves encoded here as that sable race.

Like Hawthorne, Williams too chastises Puritanism in the end of his story for being at the root of American bigotry (religious or otherwise), suggesting that his real argument is not with blacks or homosexuals but rather with the religious zealots who position themselves as the standard-bearers of desirable human behavior. It was perhaps for this reason that gave his white protagonist the name Anthony Burns, historically the last black slave to be returned (despite public outcry) to the South under the Fugitive Slave Law in 1854, only later to be granted his freedom when he was purchased by the black congregation of Boston for \$1300.<sup>22</sup>

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Mifflin, 1980) that the Fugitive Slave Law was the only thing that finally incited Hawthorne to oppose slavery, on which he repeatedly offered conflicting views (409-10). Pierce would later enforce the Fugitive Slave Law upheld by Massachusetts Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw (Herman Melville's father-in-law) two years earlier, by returning the slave Anthony Burns to his owner George F. Suttle in Virginia.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Burns, a slave turned preacher obsessed with freeing the soul from the body, boarded a ship in Richmond, Virginia, where he was working for a pharmacist on loan from Suttle, bound for Boston. Captured on 24 May 1854 by Suttle on trumped-up charges of theft, Burns was held in a federal courthouse, while Boston abolitionists, led by white minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson, struggled to free him. See Albert J.

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By usurping the historical identity of a black man and making him into a white, middle-class Christian homosexual like himself, Williams simultaneously deconstructs the racial Other and reinserts himself in the role of the fugitive/victim—here, the gay man wandering less visibly among heteronormative America.

Yet Williams too cannot avoid succumbing to desire's need to protect the self, for buried within his allegory—where Anthony Burns becomes Christ and the black masseur sinful humankind for whom he must die—is the message that their covenant is only sealed when the one's body is figuratively, and literally in the story, consumed.<sup>23</sup> It is not by chance, then, that the story (and Burns) climaxes during the Passion, nor that once Burns discovers his desire and recognizes the sin that accompanies it, he pursues a method of atonement not unfamiliar to the Christian world, as Hawthorne had demonstrated with his Reverend Dimmesdale. For through the open window of their room, they hear the "mounting exhortations of a preacher" delivering his Easter sermon to an all-black congregation with the message "Suffer, suffer, suffer!" (CS 222), to which the "black" Mass (again, with all the racial and religious connotations being evoked) respond appropriately: "[. . .] a woman stood up to expose a wound in her breast" while another "had slashed an artery at her wrist" (CS 222). As counterpoint to the penitent hysteria taking place in the church next door, the sadomasochistic suffering the black masseur visits upon Burns reproduces desire in both, and hence its sin *ad infinitum*; the only solution for Burns is a beating so fierce that it kills him ecstatically—sin, desire and its atonement culminating in one final and grotesque homoerotic administering of last rites. As in Hawthorne, then, predatory religion and devouring blackness combine in Williams to reveal both what he intended to attack and what he culturally could not avoid as the story's white author.

To be sure, in parodying Christian doctrine through sadomasochistic homoeroticism, Williams attempts to expose the hypocrisy its mantra "procreate" but whose canonical laws police the sexual act involved. Whereas Western sexuality before Christianity was essentially an appetite to satiate like any other, it had become by Augustine a desire, a sexual instinct

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Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> For example, when the Negro breaks Burns's leg during one of their sessions, he lets out a cry so loud that it draws in the proprietor, who says appropriately, "Christ, [. . .] what's been going on here?" (CS 221). Then, when they are both thrown out of the establishment at "the end of the Lenten season" (CS 221) as a result of their sadomasochistic behavior, the Negro carries the crippled Burns to his room "in the town's Negro section" (CS 221) where for "a week the *passion* between them continued" (CS 221, emphasis added).

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othered, and so *to desire* was to recognize, and perhaps to indulge in, that forbidden Other, all the while equating it with sin. Reenacting Christ's punishment as their atonement demonstrates how religion is at the heart of gothic evil, something Hawthorne had suggested through his character Goodman Brown. Desire, that true human religion, is more salubrious in the end because it reflects a natural instinct in us, one that socially-constructed religious dogma works to pervert in the end. The true Other here, then, is not the homosexual, nor the black, but the Christian, whose hegemonic role in American society has replaced innocence as our birthright with guilt. Or so Williams would have us believe.

If "The Desire and the Black Masseur" portrays itself as an allegory about the process of othering through the Christian recognition of sin in another, just as Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" positions the community of sinners as harmless with respect to Brown's self-election, it *must* also unavoidably produce an Other. In other words, there must equally be in Williams's story a specter lurking behind the writer's words who masks a deeper prejudice of the Other, one more nationally inscribed within Williams's own relationship to the dominant caste from which Williams cannot escape. Though kin to the black race in his own role as homosexual Other during the early years of the Cold War, Williams was still relatively invisible, and if maintaining one's invisibility often included revealing it in another or calling it to the nation's attention (which not a few demagogues in white America disingenuously did in the Fifties), then perhaps Williams's tropes of blackness are not as innocent or altruistic as they at first appeared to be. Perhaps, in calling attention to the stark visibility of the black mass, Williams is also deflecting rising attention away from the more invisible homosexual, who too were objects of Cold War persecution.

### III

Early in her book, Toni Morrison describes her sudden awareness that, as each text is an inevitable extension of its author's consciousness, any racial Other encountered or suppressed in it is the liminal projection of the author's view of self:

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary mediation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in

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the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity [. . .]. What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence.<sup>24</sup>

If Anthony Burns is a very loose autobiographical sketch of Williams himself during his early discovery and internalized rejection of his own homosexuality (as most readers would agree), and if Toni Morrison is correct in how she characterizes white literary America's obsession with blackness to define itself (which most readers would also be inclined to accept), then how are we to see Williams's reflection in the character of the black masseur? Or is he? Is it that the writer pursues the dual nature embodied in the story's two antipathetic characters? Or is that Burns's whiteness (and Williams's too, by Morrison's contention) becomes more visible by comparison and thus his homosexuality more invisible, the open secret only those who knew Williams, arguably the majority of Williams's contemporary readers of his short fiction, were meant to understand?

To be sure, Williams clearly emphasizes the political language of color in the story's chiaroscuro. Whether they be the "milky glass" (CS 218) which obscures the view to the bath's interior, or the white patrons walking about the "white tiles" (CS 218) of the baths dressed in sheets of "white fabric" (CS 218) and looking "as white and noiseless as ghosts" (CS 218), tropes of whiteness are used to offset the presence of blackness, since all the "masseurs were Negroes" (CS 218). Burns, himself a "white-collar clerk" (CS 220), only adds to this sepia photo's negativity, as do the steams of "white vapor" and the bath's "white tables" (CS 219), with the black masseurs appearing "very dark and positive against the loose white hangings of the baths" (CS 218).<sup>25</sup> As Morrison suggests about all "images of impenetrable whiteness" in American literature, they "need contextualizing to explain their extraordinary power, pattern, and consistency":

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<sup>24</sup> Toni Morrison, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Such visual poetics were exploited in the recent French film adaptation of the story, *Noir et blanc*, dir. Claire Devers, starring Marc Berman, Francis Frappart, Joséphine Fresson, and Jacques Martial. Films du Volcan, 1986.

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Because they appear almost always in conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control, these images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both antidote for and mediation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness—a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing."<sup>26</sup>

Though the black masseur seems anything but "dead" or "impotent" or even "under complete control" given how he treats Burns, it should be remembered that he works *for* his white boss, who exercises ultimate control by firing the black masseur by the story's end. If the black masseur is powerful it is only because the feeble white Burns allows himself to be dominated by him.

Thus, if the homosexual Burns grants the black masseur authority over him so as to satisfy his desire/penance duality, the black masseur finds pleasure in projecting upon Burns all that he finds offensive about white America, so that every strike of his fist on Burns's white flesh is retribution for every lash white America laid on his ancestors and continues, economically and socially speaking, to lay upon him. Williams makes this politically implicit among the story's imagistic details, for when the black masseur tells Burns, "Put this one," and holds out to him "a white sheet" (CS 219), we are to understand that he is costuming Burns as a clansman (ironically, itself an instrument of heteronormative Christian invisibility) and exacting his revenge vicariously. With all power structures inverted here, where the black man can now mock the timidity of the white homosexual man with his identity-concealing white sheet, the reader is confronted with two pervasive gothic Others in the story. And yet, it is the specter of black/white relations in America that remains to haunt the reader, for if the "pervert" Burns dies in the story's end (as do most pre-Stonewall gay characters, and not only those found in Williams), the black masseur not only moves on to haunt the baths of another city, but takes with him his own desire to consume white society along the way, just as he had the body of Burns. His black-on-white racism, which was only meant to signify his transcendence with the white Burns at the end, is restored after their completion is achieved, and thus the specter allowed to escape.

The story's final image of the black masseur literally consuming the white man all the way down to "his splintered bones" (CS 222), in fact, is not without its racist precedent in

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<sup>26</sup> Toni Morrison, 33.

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Williams's oeuvre. In his youthful story "Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll" (written in 1931 when Williams was only twenty), for example, the predatory black man is described repeatedly as being "a black beast who had taken grotesque human form" (29), who is "prodigiously, repulsive ugly" (CS 28) like the "'nigger' in the revolving circle of wooden dummies at which baseballs are cast for Kewpie doll prizes at carnivals and amusement parks" (CS 28), and who is "savage, inarticulate" (CS 29).<sup>27</sup> And he is also given a voracious appetite, both for his work, which he "gorged" (CS 28), as well as for the naked young white girl swimming in an isolated river, whom he "devoured with his eyes" having felt "sick with desire of her" (CS 32). While slave insurrection is only hinted at with the gang of Negroes who "work" for an Irish boss laying road in Jackson, black predatoriness is implicit. Even when the hulking black figure decides against raping the young white girl whom he discovers alone by the river because he sees himself as "Ugliness seizing upon Beauty—Beauty that could never be seized" (CS 33) and calls himself a "big—black—devil" (CS 33), he thwarts any attempt at being allegorical. As such, Nicholas Moschovakis finds the story "for the most part irredeemably [. . .] racist in its premise and execution": "At best, its conclusion testifies to Williams's jejune efforts to affirm the humanity of African Americans—to himself as well as to others—however unseemly and embarrassing the results look now."<sup>28</sup>

Despite this story's similar metaphysical message to "Desire and the Black Masseur," its language also plays upon white fears of the marauding black mass, with Big Black finding reincarnation in the later story's black masseur. With the black masseur "mov[ing] to another city, obtain[ing] employment once more as an expert masseur" (CS 223), just as Big Black is freed to join another road gang in Savannah, any final metaphysics that Williams had intended to capture in either is irreparably undone through its reliance upon images of the consuming black mass:

And meantime, slowly, with barely a thought of so doing, the earth's whole population twisted and writhed beneath the manipulation of night's black fingers

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<sup>27</sup> For two studies of this story, see Philip C. Kolin's "Tennessee Williams' 'Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll' and Race Relations," *Arts and Letters* 20.2 (1995): 8-12, and his "'No Masterpiece Has Been Overlooked': The Early Reception and Significance of Tennessee Williams's 'Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll,'" *ANQ* 8.4 (Fall 1995): 27-34.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Moschovakis, "Tennessee Williams's American Blues: From the Early Manuscripts through *Menagerie*," *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 7 (2005): 21.

and the white ones of day with skeletons splintered and flesh reduced to pulp, as out of this unlikely problem, the answer, perfection, was slowly evolved through torture. (CS 223)

Nor is it coincidental that both works should express black emancipation through tropes of eating or of being eaten, for nearly every spatial reference throughout "Desire and the Black Masseur" is equated with the mouth—an image which figuratively reinforces the allegorical parody of the Last Supper, but which also raises more literal white fears of black mobilization.<sup>29</sup> For example, in an attempt to hide from his desire, for "Desire is something that is made to occupy a larger space than that which is afforded by the individual being [. . .]" (CS 217), Burns "had betrayed an instinct for being included in things that swallowed him up" (CS 216). Even his jacket "should have been cut into ten smaller sizes" (CS 217), since it too absorbs him into its folds. And just as he once enjoyed losing himself in the darkness of the movie cinema, which swallows him "like a particle of food dissolving in a big hot mouth" (CS 216), he now frequents the steam baths, with their "blank walls heav[ing] and sigh[ing] as steam issued from them [. . .] enveloping him in a heat and moisture such as inside of a tremendous mouth" (CS 219). Even during the closing lines of the story, when the black Mass climaxes in its frenzy while the black masseur was "completing his purpose with Burns" (CS 222), the room itself where the cannibalism takes place is described as a hungry mouth whose window curtains flap like "little white tongues" (CS 222). Though Williams couches homoerotic allusions to fellatio within those of recognizable Christian consubstantiation, both are rendered insignificant in light of the more visibly shocking image: that of a black man literally eating a white man's body.

#### IV

If Williams's "Desire and the Black Masseur" is about anything it is about the process of othering, a process from which Williams himself cannot entirely escape in writing the story. What Williams demonstrates best here is that *each* Other is inextricably bound to each *other*, including the Self, be it the protagonist of the story or the creator of that protagonist. Therefore, we cannot accept a given Self/Other binary because the complexities of human desire deny a one-to-one correlation between sexuality, race, and creed. Williams would continue to explore

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<sup>29</sup> John M. Clum rightfully points out how Burns's final thoughts before death—"Yes, it is perfect, he thought, it is now completed" (CS 223)—are "a parody of Christ's last words on the cross, 'Consumatum est'" (132).

this theme for the next decade and a half, including many of his signature works like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Baby Doll*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*, culminating finally in the violent Christian allegory *Suddenly Last Summer*, where his use of homoerotic tropes and Christian consubstantiation would once again be countered by the presence of a hoarding black mass with cannibalistic intentions.

While much good scholarship has already appeared concerning the play's treatment of religion and sexual economics, surprisingly little commentary has discussed the racial implications of Sebastian's offering up his gay body as Holy Communion to the hungry children of Cabeza de Lobo.<sup>30</sup> And yet, as with the story "Desire and Black Masseur," we find obvious images of blinding whiteness in contrast to the blackness of the skin that, when combined with homoerotic, religious and cannibalistic tropes, reconfirm a consuming Africanist presence in the play different from the one Williams openly solicits. In fact, devouring could be understood as the play's main theme, be it the literal consumption of the organism reflected in the symbolic Venus flytrap or the carnivorous birds on the Encantadas; the materialist consumption of Sebastian's fortune by his opportunist aunt and cousin George; or his poetic legacy by his megalomaniacal mother/surrogate wife Violet Venable. Even the psychiatrist Dr. Cukrowicz, in pandering to Violet to secure her money for an endowment to continue his research into lobotomies, cannot avoid contributing to the play's *quid pro quo* leitmotif.<sup>31</sup> All are, in fact, vivid

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<sup>30</sup> In addition to Bruhm's and Clum's articles, for example, see Robley Evans's essay on the trope of eating in the South to undermine identity, "'Or else this were a savage spectacle': Eating and Troping Southern Culture," *The Southern Quarterly* 30.2-3 (Winter/Spring 1992): 141-49; Andrew Sofer's study of theatrical production and the (absent) human body, "Self-Consuming Artifacts: Power, Performance, and the Body in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*," *Modern Drama* 38.3 (Fall 1995): 336-47; and Lincoln Konkle's examination of the Calvinist influences over Sebastian, "Puritan Paranoia: Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* as Calvinist Nightmare," *American Drama* 7.2 (Spring 1998): 51-72, which examines how Williams exploits Calvinism as Hawthorne had done in "Young Goodman Brown." For two studies that examine these issues as well but with respect to the Joseph L. Mankiewicz film version, see Kevin Ohi's essay on the erotica of baiting and on the film's use of madness, cannibalism, sodomy, and lobotomy for visual structure, "'Devouring Creation: Cannibalism, Sodomy, and the Scene of Analysis in *Suddenly Last Summer*," *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, eds. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (London: Routledge, 2001), 259-79, and D. A. Miller's assessment of the "hetero-structuration of the visual field" (109) in the film, "Visual Pleasure in 1959," *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 97-125.

<sup>31</sup> Williams also told Cecil Brown in 1974 what the metaphor of cannibalism meant to him: "Man devours man in a metaphorical sense. He feeds upon his fellow creatures, without the excuse of animals. Animals actually do it for survival, out of hunger. Man, however, is doing it out of, I think, a religious capacity. I use that metaphor to express my repulsion with this characteristic of man, the way people use each other without conscience" (Devlin 274).

tropes of consumption that Williams uses antithetically to the taking of the Eucharist and that are actualized in the play's climactic, cannibalistic scene.

By itself, the trope of consumption is purely thematic and dramatic. Set during the heart of the Depression in 1935, when lobotomies (like the one performed on Williams's sister Rose) were beginning to be used when shock therapy proved ineffectual, *Suddenly Last Summer* is ostensibly all about money—the contrast not between those who have and do not but rather between those who had and those, like the Venables, who still do. At a time of Social Realism, when Williams the playwright began cutting his own teeth, the true cannibal was perhaps capitalism itself; thus, the starving of the Venus flytrap, which dramatically opens the play, is one of Williams's most poignant criticisms of the laissez-faire politics responsible for the 1929 crash and its aftermath. But Violet also refuses to keep the insectivorous plant alive because it reminds her too much of the way in which her beloved Sebastian died, consumed by everyone, including herself, for his beauty, grace, and illicit desire. Alone, then, the multiple references to consuming merely replicate the play's main theme of predatorily social politics. Once that theme becomes mixed with the play's religious and homoerotic tropes, however, the idea of consuming takes on greater racial significance.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike the homoerotic beginning to "Desire and the Black Masseur," Williams first establishes the play's religious context with Violet's story about her and Sebastian's voyage to the Galapagos Islands, "looking," as she says, "for God."<sup>33</sup> That cruel or indifferent God that Sebastian finds is represented in the horrific story of the "flesh-eating birds" (3:355) which ravage the baby sea turtles during their flight to freedom on the volcanic black-sand beaches of the Encantadas.<sup>34</sup> The parable, of course, is repeated in Catherine's story about how the poor

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<sup>32</sup> John M. Clum has already noted the homoerotic and Eucharistic overtones of the "*imitation Christi*" (132) here and in the short story, but he glosses over the racial implications in both texts and, if anything, sees black and white as coming together in "an allegory of race relations where perfection, communion, can only come through ritual violence, where cultures meet and atone" (132).

<sup>33</sup> Tennessee Williams, *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1981-1992), 3:357. All subsequent references to this play or any other in the collection will appear parenthetically with a colon separating volume from page number.

<sup>34</sup> As noted, Morrison has quite a bit to say about the racial encoding of Melville's work, which is subsequently imported into Williams's play through the intertextual references to his allegorical sketches, "The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles":

For while no spectator can deny their claims to a most solemn and superstitious consideration, no more than my firmest resolutions can decline to behold the specter-tortoise when emerging from its shadowy recess; yet even the tortoise, dark and melancholy as it is upon the back, still possesses a

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children from whom Sebastian has solicited sexual favors kill and eat him out of ritualized retribution for his failing to uphold his end of their economic exchange. When the starving children do devour parts of Sebastian's body, having cried out "*Pan, pan, pan!*" (3:415) moments before the attack, Sebastian becomes the Holy Eucharist—the bread of life and the Bread of Life—whom these "featherless little black sparrows" (3:422) literally ingest, just as the others before had done so metaphorically.

These multiple tropes of consumption which emerge from the play's religious and homoerotic content, however, evoke a blatant dichotomizing of race into its black and white components of which Williams is perhaps only liminally aware. Just as he had done in "*Desire and the Black Masseuse*," Williams first establishes a black/white binary so as to deconstruct it. To be sure, the "good" Sebastian is frequently describes as being dressed all in white, donned in his "spotless white silk Shantung suit and a white silk tie and a white panama and white shoes, white—white lizard skin—pumps!" (3:414). But the nasty Sister Felicity who "chaperones" Catherine is also dressed in her starched "sweeping white habit" (3:370), to which Williams draws our attention more than once.<sup>35</sup> And yet, if the white presence in Williams is never wholly "good," the black presence is never anything but antagonistic.

For instance, in relating the story to Dr. Cukrowicz, Violet describes how the carnivorous birds, soaring over "the narrow black beach of the Encantadas," which earlier she had said was the "color of caviar" (3:355), had "made the sky almost as black as the beach!" (3:356). As innocent as Violet's description first appears, once those hoards of black birds are translated into the hoards of those dark naked children with "little black mouths" (3:415) many summers later,

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bright side; its calipee or breastplate being sometimes of a faint yellowish or golden tinge. Moreover, everyone knows that tortoises as well as turtle are of such a make that if you but put them on their backs you thereby expose their bright sides without the possibility of their recovering themselves, and turning into view the other. But after you have done this, and because you have done this, you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side. Enjoy the bright, keep it turned up perpetually if you can, but be honest, and don't deny the black. Neither should he who cannot turn the tortoise from its natural position so as to hide the darker and expose his livelier aspect, like a great October pumpkin in the sun, for that cause declare the creature to be one total inky blot. The tortoise is both black and bright. But let us to particulars.

See Herman Melville, "*The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles*," *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 9 (Evanston: Northwestern UP and Newberry Library, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Catherine notably passes from white to black as she moves from procurer to companion, wearing the transparent "one-piece suit made of white lisle" (3:412) to a "decent dark suit" (3:413) after Sebastian has made his homosexual connections.

and the sea turtles' flesh into that of Sebastian, Williams's Holy Eucharist becomes less a tale about misappropriated consubstantiation or misrepresented homoeroticism and more one about the voracious appetites. To be sure, Sebastian too equates desire with eating, evidenced by his rendering his rough trade in culinary terms:

Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that's how he talked about people, as if they were—items on a menu.—"This one's delicious-looking, that one is appetizing," or "that one is *not* appetizing" [. . .]. (3:375)

His language, though, is purely metaphorical here (to be more accurate, they are not even *his* words but those that Catherine says that he said), just as words and actions are of all of the other characters Williams portrays as "white" in the play. Only the "black" elements—first the carnivorous birds and then the children—turn idiom into action.

That action takes place during the scorching, "blazing white hot heat" of a Spanish summer, one that "blazed so bright it was white and turned the sky and everything under the sky white with it!" (3:420). In fact, Williams repeatedly references whiteness in this climatic passage of the play so as to accentuate the red of Sebastian's blood, but blackness is the instrument that draws out that redness. For instance, though he sees himself in Christ-like terms and was searching each summer for a way to satiate his homosexual desire and atone for it at the same time (like Anthony Burns), Sebastian's final sacrifice (a sort of "Completion!—a sort of!—*image!*—he had of himself as a sort of!—*sacrifice* to a!—*terrible* sort of a— [. . .] *cruel* [God]" [3:397])—is achieved by offering his white flesh up for communion to "the band of naked children" (3:421) who made "gobbling noises with their little black mouths, stuffing their little black fists to their mouths and making those gobbling sounds, with frightful grins!" (3:415):

I heard Sebastian scream, he screamed just once before this flock of black plucked little birds that pursued and overtook him halfway up the white hill. [. . .] They had *devoured* parts of him. [. . .] Torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with, they had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs. (3:422)

In one final apocalyptic image, with homosexual *quid pro quo* being expressed in terms of actualized fellatio and religious performativity, Williams equally dichotomizes saintly white

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and satanic black, where the white body/politic is being torn asunder and eaten by the savage and encroaching masses of little hungry black mouths.

Though Williams's cannibalism here is meant to be symbolic—the culmination of all of his previous uses of the consummation metaphor—it cannot entirely avoid a racial reading either. As such, Sebastian's uncharacteristic social critique of Spain just moments before his death only loosely camouflages his racist ideologies: "Don't look at those little monsters. Beggars are a social disease in this country. If you look at them, you get sick of the country, it spoils the whole country for you . . ." (3:415, Williams's ellipses). If we recall Toni Morrison's comment earlier about the need to "contextualize" the images of "impenetrable whiteness" found in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American writers, however, what we discover in Sebastian's comment is perhaps a larger 20<sup>th</sup>-century concern with black mobilization in America. We should remember that, while *Suddenly Last Summer* is set in 1935, it was penned in 1957, a seminal year in the U.S. for the push for Civil Rights. Fallout from the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott, for example, saw the 1957 signing of the Civil Rights Act and the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under King's presidency. It equally witnessed Arkansas Governor Orval Rubus's attempt to derail desegregation by ordering the National Guard to block the entrance of nine black students to the all-white Central High School in Little Rock. Over the next few years, repeated dynamiting of Southern black churches and black schools offered frightening testimony to the realities America would face in enforcing *Brown's* overturning of *Plessy* in 1954.<sup>36</sup>

The year of *Suddenly Last Summer's* release as a popular film in 1959 also saw Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* become the first Broadway play by a black woman. Ostensibly about the assimilationist/separatist debate within the black community, not in terms of Civil Rights per se (though *Beneatha* does provide plenty of examples of black activist rhetoric), but rather in terms of class ascension, Hansberry's play would also allay white fears of black mobilization. If Lena Younger's purchasing of a modest house in the all-white, middle-class

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<sup>36</sup> In an interesting side note, as *Brown v. Board of Education* celebrates 50 years of age, not only has Central High School become 40 percent black to the 55 percent white student body, the 2000 U.S. census has reported that the Little Rock School District is becoming predominantly black; while white racists might see this increase as proof of black mobilization, the recent publication of the Harvard University's Civil Rights Program points to the fact that the numbers account for an increase in white private school education. Still, segregation is returning to Central High School but in an inverted form that repeats the discrepancies between black and white economic (dis)advantages.

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suburb of Clybourne Park is met by Karl Lindner's sugar-coated, racially-motivated attempts to keep the black man from spilling over its urban borders and into his suburban arcadia (or, as Beneatha puts it, to keep the spreading black mass from "eat[ing] 'em"<sup>37</sup>), it is less to criticize white America and more to show them that black America understands its fears. At the moment the Younger's show Clybourne Park and its Improvement Association that it shares their moral values such as hard work and family unity, and thus poses no real threat to their suburban havens, Hansberry seals her own racial contract with her predominantly white Broadway audiences. To be sure, black emancipation was imminent, and neither a northern black liberal playwright, nor a southern white one, could entirely escape from its inscription in her/his imagery. Simply put, if *Suddenly Last Summer's* surtext is about predatory economics and religious determinism, then its subtext is about how those two issues are realized in racial terms—for Morrison, that "dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing."<sup>38</sup>

### Conclusion

At the end of *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison calls for an academic agenda to reread the black characters of white literary America, not to point racist fingers at knowingly or unwittingly xenophobic writers but rather to expose how those black characters reveal the author's construction of Self and the fears of the Other which help define it:

Such studies will reveal the process of establishing others in order to know them, to display knowledge of the other so as to ease and to order external and internal chaos. Such studies will reveal the process by which it is made possible to explore and penetrate one's own body in the guise of sexuality, vulnerability, and anarchy of the other—and to control projections of anarchy with the disciplinary apparatus of punishment and largess.<sup>39</sup>

What such a reading about Tennessee Williams reveals is that, despite having always praised African Americans and having frequently said in interviews and elsewhere that he believed

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<sup>37</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 101.

<sup>38</sup> Toni Morrison, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Toni Morrison, 52-53.

America would only achieve its national project through the mixing of its black and white bloods, he never aggrandized racial issues convincingly in his work nor created sympathetic black character.<sup>40</sup> Though racial issues simmer behind the plots of his Cold War plays (*Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Kingdom of Earth*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*), they serve only to haunt his altruistic critique of white (heterosexual) social power structures since the final image of white society slowly being consumed by blacks through miscegenation effectively redirected national attention away from the homosexual as Other and onto its more visible one.

As Eric Savoy has convincingly argued, the most effective representations of American Gothic need be allegorical in nature, for its interpretative nature allows the reader to inscribe a national history within a text which is not there, especially given "the thinness, the blackness of the American historical past and much of the American landscape" necessary to gothic representation: "allegory [. . .] provided a tropic of shadow [. . .] in which the actual is imbued with the darkly hypothetical, a discursive field of return and reiteration."<sup>41</sup> With Williams's two allegories intending to demonstrate that the "communion" of race is one based not on creed, color, or sexuality, but rather on human desire, he too cannot but help reproduce the national fear of the predatory black race in presenting that message of brotherhood, since the "American historical past" and its landscape have relied upon the myth of black savagery to define its national self. So when the giant masseur devours a bar of chocolate while daydreaming about Burns, social cannibalism becomes implicit, just as Ned's consuming his gingerbread Jim Crow

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<sup>40</sup> In a comment to documentarist Harry Rasky (and to C. Robert Jennings during their *Playboy* interview in April 1973), Williams said:

I think whatever indigenous culture America has produced has come from the blacks. Our music, our humor mostly, our dancing. The great body of entertainment seems to me to have a black origin. I think that ultimately when the two races, the white and the black, when their blood is mingled, through the passage of time as has already been accomplished to some extent, I think it would produce the handsomest race on earth, and perhaps the strongest. (70)

See Harry Rasky, *Tennessee Williams: A Portrait in Laughter and Lamentation* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1986). Williams even added that he "always felt that [he] was black" (70), which could account for why he called himself an octoroon, if even in jest (cf. C. Robert Jennings, "Playboy Interview: Tennessee Williams," *Playboy* Apr. 1973: 80, and Williams's essay "'Happiness Is Relevant' to Mr. Williams," *New York Times* 24 Mar. 1968, sec. 2: 3).

Williams deals with black/white miscegenation frequently in his drama and fiction: Cassandra in *Battle of Angels* is run out of town for having "intimate relations" with a black man; Boss Finley will not let the black blood "adulterate the pure white blood of the South" (4:73); Chicken in *Kingdom of Earth* has "some black blood in him" (5:201); and the title character of "Miss Coynte of Green" takes it upon her self to begin the "great new race in American" which will inevitably come from "the total mixing together of black and white blood [. . .]" (CS 528-29). Even Lance, the only black ice-skater on the circuit, in Williams's novel *Moise and the World of Reason* admits to being "a product of miscegenation" (99).

in Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables* suggests how Brahmin abolitionism was not without its predatory desires: whether it is white society devouring the blacks via the spectacle of Jim Crow in the minstrel show, or black society consuming the white race through sociopolitical advancement or interracial marriage and breeding, in one way or another we are all just eating one another up.

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<sup>41</sup> Eric Savoy, "The Face of the Tenant: A Theory of American Gothic" in Martin and Savoy, 6.