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QUEER VISIBILITY ON THE TRANSATLANTIC MODERNIST STAGE

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### Queer Visibility on the Transatlantic Modernist Stage

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My dissertation analyzes a selection of Argentinean, Spanish and U.S. modernist plays that dramatize the double movement of what I call “queer visibility.” That is, they make queer themes “visible” but also render the visible “queer” by extending our notions of modernist experimentation. Such experimentation, I argue, is intelligible only within a transatlantic history of, in Edward Said’s sense, “traveling” influences that have informed queer drama in the twentieth century. Each of the dissertation’s chapters offers a comparative angle on a playwright and their staging of queer materials, establishing surprising connections between various geographies and theatrical cultures. Chapter one analyzes the Argentinean José González Castillo’s naturalist play *Los invertidos* (1914), the first in its kind to plot the medical category “sexual inversion” as material for modern drama. González Castillo joins in the Argentinian vogue for *realismo* with its disjunctive relation to queer visibility, the latter a symptom of morbid degeneracy. Chapter two discusses the thoroughly anti-realist practices of queer staging in *El público* (1930), an unfinished, posthumously published play by Spanish poet-playwright Federico García Lorca, which imagines a paradoxical shape for queer visibility: “a theater beneath the sand” that draws on international vanguardist desires to offend rather than entertain

audiences. The chapters on *Los invertidos* and *El público* present international models of queer visibility that cast new light on my two North American writers. Chapter three compares two works by the prominent U.S. playwright Tennessee Williams, the iconic *Suddenly Last Summer* (1957) and the little-known *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* (1979), that expose the mechanics of queer visibility as both perplexing and violent. Then I consider two understudied dramas of expatriate writer Djuna Barnes, the early one-act *The Dove* (1924) and the arcane verse drama *The Antiphon* (1957), which deploy a convoluted allegorical vision that projects an anti-modern strain in queer dramatic modernism. Combining formal analysis and historical research in each chapter, my comparative project aims, first, to theorize queer visibility as a recurrent theatrical problem grounded in material practices and, second, to contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive history of modern drama in conversation with transnational figurations of queer sexuality.

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## Introduction

My dissertation “Queer Visibility on the Transatlantic Modernist Stage” investigates the transatlantic circulation of techniques for staging and performing queer plots and persons in modern drama. I argue that my playwrights – José González Castillo (1885-1937), Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), and Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) – in their respective ways dramatize the double movement of what I call “queer visibility.” That is, they make queer themes “visible” but also render the visible “queer.” Simultaneously revealing and troubling, queer visibility extends the limits of modernist experimentation in heretofore unrecognized ways. Combining formal analysis and historical research my project aims, first to theorize queer visibility as a concept grounded in material theatrical practices and, second, to contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive history of modern drama, one that is both comparatist in methodology and international in scope.

In line with a number of calls to increase awareness for the international dimension of modernism and its repercussions for theater and performance studies, one of the axiomatic assumptions of the dissertation is, in Edward Said’s words, that “Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another” (“Traveling Theory” 226).<sup>1</sup> In each of the following chapters, I argue that the themes, techniques and sensibilities that inform queer visibility in my selected Argentinean, Spanish and U.S. plays point to a history of circulation and of—*pace* Said—“traveling” ideas on modern drama and queer sexuality.



Grouping these four self-consciously modernist playwrights is significant because it establishes unexpected connections between various geographies and theatrical cultures, and offers new angles on each author and their staging of queer materials. My dissertation thus incorporates a comparatist methodology that restores modern drama to its transatlantic contexts of circulation while acknowledging local concerns that shaped and altered its expressions. Queer visibility is the focal point of interest that emerges from this dynamic model of travel and adaptation. The dissertation inquires into the formal and historical conditions of queer-themed modern drama,<sup>2</sup> and further claims that each playwright, in his or her respective manner, treats queer visibility as a problem for dramatic representation, modernist skepticism and avant-garde experimentation.<sup>3</sup>

Generally speaking, my project is embedded in, and further expands parameters set out by Heather Love in her discussion of “queer modernism” in a recent *PMLA* special issue on queer expression in Anglophone literary modernism.<sup>4</sup> Love suggests that “what makes *queer* and *modernism* such a good fit is that the indeterminacy of *queer* seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production” (“Modernism at Night” 745). “Critics,” she notes, “have long pointed out the pervasiveness of nonnormative desires in the making of the modern; *queer*, unlike *gay* or *lesbian*, is by definition generalizable and therefore apt to make the most of this atmosphere of permission” (744).<sup>5</sup> However, calling attention in queer studies to “the effects of what has often been called the affective turn in a broader context,” Love also urges that such an atmosphere of “permission” and “indeterminacy,” however stimulating to the conversation, cannot lose sight of what queer scholarship has to offer: “not blank

indeterminacy” but contributions to “embodied knowledge and emotion, fantasy and confusion, identity and its effacement” (747). The turn to affect, she concludes, “may suggest a new scene for queer modernism: not the epistemology of the closet but an encounter with the illegible. Queer lives and queer feelings scribbled over but still just visible—you can half make them out in the dark” (747).<sup>6</sup> The explicit connection Love establishes between “queer lives and feelings” on the one hand, and “the illegible” and the “still just visible” on the other, indicates a double emphasis that is generally indicative of the aims and methods of queer historicizing: to recover and construe a queer history for those labeled *as queers* that have generally been excluded from official history, and to treat with critical awareness the historically specific language of, and by extension its capacity to represent, sexual identity categories.

Against the background of queer modernism, I propose the term “queer visibility” to analyze and historicize the particularly modern, experimental sensibilities that inform my selected plays. Because I treat Said’s notion that “ideas and theories travel” as axiomatic, I make avowedly anachronistic but consciously queer connections among the cultural context of José González Castillo in Argentina of the 1910s, Federico García Lorca in Spain of the 1930s, the U.S. playwright Tennessee Williams in the 1950s and 70s, and his fellow American Djuna Barnes in the 1920s and 50s from the vantage point of contemporary Anglophone theorizing of “queer.” As a capacious term to both interrogate the ideological complex of language, representation and identity (the “epistemological” scene of queer modernism in Love’s argument) and to historicize specific themes and gestural repertoires informed by queer experience (what Love calls “embodied knowledge and emotion”), “queer” allows sufficient, if never self-evident<sup>7</sup>

flexibility to put an Argentinean and a Spanish playwright into a transnational conversation with two—strikingly different—American ones. However, that queer visibility “travels” and takes locally specific shapes does not mean it is trans-historical. In line with the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, queer visibility—like “the birth of the homosexual”—has a material and discursive historicity, although there is no definitive ground on which we can determine beforehand what counts as “queer.”

With these epistemological repercussions in mind, this project aims to historicize the formal language in which queer sexuality is launched onto the modern stage,<sup>8</sup> focusing specifically on those rhetorical and performative properties of language and representation that continue to provoke and puzzle with queer meaning. Hence, at its most general, this dissertation’s underlying assumption is the relevance of analyzing the past for understanding the present. In that regard, Love’s central argument in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, that Anglophone queer modernism corresponds to an image repertoire of “backward” feelings that continues to inform the present, provides a helpful framework for each chapter. In pairing formal and thematic analysis to diagnose a historically specific queer “structure of feeling,”<sup>9</sup> my project thus to some extent partakes in, what Love describes as, a “movement in the field away from more discursive approaches to identity, sexuality, and representation and toward approaches that emphasize emotion, temporality, intimacy, embodiment, new forms of social relation, and everyday life” (745). Yet while I agree with this general characterization and with the goal to conduct “diffuse and local practices of reading” (745), my dissertation’s repeated emphasis on the formal and rhetorical properties of

queer visibility perhaps suggests a middle way between affect-oriented research and the “more discursive approaches” Love associates with “the fixed discourse of epistemology” (745).

While each chapter illustrates that “backward” feelings inform both my selected plays and their present-day reception, the general heuristic contribution I aim to make is to situate these affective textures in a context of transatlantic circulation out of which queer visibility arises as a formal and thematic preoccupation. In that specific sense, my dissertation further resonates with Carla Freccero’s call for a capacious “figural historiography” that would “closely track the rhetorical properties of figurative language” and serve as ground for “a specific practice of comparative historical literary study that would follow... the promiscuous and errant movements of figures and across space and time” (“Figural History” 46). That meaning, which is always shaped by history, has the ability to affect us across transatlantic routes and networks of recognition and disavowal, thus reveals, as Freccero elsewhere argues, “the force of affect in history” (“Queer Times” 20). In that sense, each of the following chapters invites us to consider that queer visibility is a problem for representation—since it queers the visible in the attempt to render the queer visible—that also “feels historical” in often oblique and unpredictable manners. Despite official and state-sanctioned ideologies, confusion and idiosyncrasy are generally the norm, not the deviation of historical (that is, lived) experience. This implies at best a fragmented understanding of the times and identities we inhabit, which accordingly shows in the errant trajectories this projects construes as a vocabulary for its modernist and transatlantic queer visibility.

In fact, to historicize the early iterations of queer drama might imply we consider “gender trouble” alongside genre trouble; what, after all, makes a queer drama in terms of the dramatic models and modes that inform it? Does queer visibility—making the queer visible, making the visible queer—have a particular genre, or does it, in line with deconstructionist queer theory or the generally skeptical mood of modernism, resist genre altogether? What, moreover, does it mean for an audience to see queer plots and persons on stage? The twentieth century is ushered in by a strong cultural sensibility for positivistic (medical, psychological, psychoanalytic etc.) discourses on sexual subjectivity that directly contribute to the novelty of staging queer themes that are recognizable as such—differently, for instance, from the sometimes queer appeal of earlier dramatic traditions to present-day readers. Yet at the same time, my selected plays in their respective manner experiment with formal constraints and generic expectations to find an appropriate langue to stage queer sexuality. Whether engaging positivistic discourse on sexuality explicitly or not, each play acknowledges and problematizes sexual subjectivity in a formal manner that calls to mind Jacqueline Rose’s observation that for Freud a “confusion at the level of sexuality brings with it a disturbance of the visual fields” (226).<sup>10</sup> In other words, the quest for form becomes a quest for staging what cannot be fully grasped or literally shown—the limit, for instance, of pornography, with its teleological design for erotic satisfaction that largely bypasses (some might even argue “shatters”<sup>11</sup>) stakes in identity—, and hence, with varying degrees of self-awareness, troubles even what can be shown. Since particularly in the wake of Lacanian psychoanalysis we have become accustomed to the idea that vision plays a structuring part in subject formation, the transatlantic circuits of gender and genre confusion this

project imagines may thus serve to historicize not only theater, but also spectatorship and subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> At its most expansive, this project thus argues that formal and thematic analysis of queer visibility in the—not so obviously related—plays I selected points to a history of international dissemination that remains to be told, and of which the outcomes as a theater history or an incursion into dramatic theory cannot yet be predicted.<sup>13</sup>

#### Chapter One, “Sexual Inversion, Modern Drama and the Performance

Genealogies of Queer Visibility in José González Castillo’s *Los invertidos*,” discusses the Argentinean José González Castillo’s play *Los invertidos* (1914), perhaps the first in its kind in the Spanish-speaking world to plot “sexual inversion,” the late nineteenth-century medical “sexologist” label for homosexuality, as material for modern drama. A self-proclaimed “drama realista” in three acts, *Los invertidos* spectacularly exposes the hypocrisy of an upper class family involved in a Buenos Aires demimonde of transvestites and sexual deviants who indulge in popular culture entertainments like tango. The play’s ambition to transform modern drama into an instrument of social investigation is clearly in line with European dramatic models by Émile Zola or Henrik Ibsen. Yet, I argue, its “realist” treatment of sexual inversion is upset by troubling moments of queer visibility that point to the limitations of mimetic realism for staging queer characters. More importantly, with its hybrid blend of positivistic naturalism and melodramatic conventions that parodies the ruling elite’s kitsch cosmopolitanism and modernist sensibilities against a background of massive immigration and anxiety about sexual deviancy, *Los invertidos* launches our inquiry into how “ideas and theories travel” and inform local iterations of queer visibility on stage. In addition, González Castillo’s play raises the broader question how to respond to a “bad” queer past in which sexual

inversion is quasi synonymous with notions of morbid degeneracy and an atmosphere of decadence—the quintessentially “backward” tropes of queerness at the start of the twentieth century. Ultimately, *Los invertidos* tempts us to consider that how we describe and contextualize queer theatre today might well be informed by González Castillo’s innovations and confusions during modern drama’s early decades.

Whether Federico García Lorca knew of *Los invertidos* during his many visits to Buenos Aires is uncertain, but he certainly spoke to the Argentinean press about *El público* (1930), his most explicitly homosexual-themed play written during his stays in Cuba and New York. The play was unfinished and unpublished at the time of his assassination in 1936. Chapter Two, “Queer visibility in *El público*: to the modern theater with Federico García Lorca,” deals with this thoroughly anti-realist project that Lorca called unstageable (“impossible”) and “a poem to be booed at.” Relentlessly experimental, *El público* dismantles the “false” theatricality of Spain’s conventional theater by questioning its ability to stage homoerotic passion and fantasy. The play imagines a paradoxical shape and presence for queer visibility: a “theater beneath the sand.” In other words, Lorca reverses González Castillo’s notions of spectacular exposure and instead chooses an anti-theatrical iconoclasm which links *El público* to international vanguardist desires to offend rather than entertain audiences. Lorca’s enormous success as a poet-playwright of folk tragedies (*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, *The House of Bernarda Alba*) casts particular light on his choices for *El público*—a play that abolishes naturalism and instead draws on a dazzling intertextuality that sets up a meta-theatrical confrontation between innovation and tradition, between poetic imagination and dramatic action, and between playwright and audience. Lorca thus sets out a blueprint for an “impossible”

queer visibility “beneath the sand” in an attempt to upset how and what theater audiences see on stage. Consequently, Chapter Two goes the heart of this dissertation with Lorca’s project for a queer modernist aesthetic that self-consciously and skeptically comments on the visual shock and affective ambivalence it provokes. While queer visibility in *El público* is fueled on by avant-gardist fervor I argue that it repeatedly retreats into feelings of loss, perplexity and melancholia—generally “backward feelings” that extend validity to Love’s diagnostic of a specific queer “structure of feelings” in modernism outside of an Anglophone context.

While very different in tone and style from Lorca’s avant-gardist affront to the audience, chapter Three, “Tennessee Williams’s Queer Scandals: The Alluring Spectacles of *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Kirche Küche Kinder*” argues that the two plays I selected from the prominent U.S. playwright Tennessee Williams equally challenge the audience with a conflictive queer visibility. Instead of proposing an “impossible” theater, I hold that Williams exploits the appeal of queer visibility as a lure, that is, as a double bind or trap that keenly exposes, yet ambivalently reinforces the formal language and tropes of queer sexuality. Both the iconic *Suddenly Last Summer* (1957) and the late, formally sprawling *Kirche, Küche, Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage* (1979) in their respective manner blend irony and exuberance with violent conformism—a confusing and despairing worldview that has often put the playwright in a difficult relationship vis-à-vis of his gay critics. Yet if, or precisely because, his oeuvre is now exemplary to the critical imagination of a “backward” Cold War US past, Williams’s formal and thematic strategies merit attention for exposing the continued appeal of a scandalous queer visibility that as a distorted mirror points back to its cultural context. Situating Williams



in an international modernist context of “plastic” theater that combines conventional stage realism with experimental techniques, I suggest that *Suddenly Last Summer* self-consciously exploits and confuses the foreign and local “figural histories” of queer meaning it sensationally puts into motion. A different approach emerges in the farcical antics of *Kirche Küche Kinder*, a self-parodic and thoroughly anti-illusionist piece that voids sexuality of identity claims and projects a perverse, cacophonous world of postmodern uncertainty. Chapter Three thus shows that both plays signal ambivalence about the place of queer visibility in the theater and the world beyond it, yet equally suggests that “feeling backward” does not cancel out the grotesque pleasures of queering the theater with distorting exaggeration and irony.

Chapter Four, “Djuna Barnes and the ‘Confusion That Is Called Biography’: The Queer Modernist Theatricalities of *The Dove* and *The Antiphon*,” examines another international trajectory in American modern drama with expatriate writer Djuna Barnes. In my analysis of two plays, the early one-act *The Dove* (1923) and the late magnum opus verse drama *The Antiphon* (1958), I explore how her characteristically elliptical, ornate dramatic prose and stylized theatricality simultaneously signals and shields a queer visibility that is not (or cannot be) explicitly staged. If in that regard her plays call to mind Lorca’s “theater beneath the sand,” they more drastically privilege figural language and gesture over action to enact queer meanings that, while self-reflexively flaunted, resist disclosure or literal understanding. Similarly, I do not propose a biographically inflected reading of Barnes’s dramatic oeuvre, but argue for the stylization of sexual confusion—that is, an elaborate joining in, and adding on of sexual meaning through figural language—as the central action of each play. First, I hold that *The Dove* ironizes the US

reception of fin de siècle “decadence” and Ibsenite stage realism to suggest a queer perspective on women’s desire that is obliquely—if at all—answered with allegorical vision. Barnes’s complicated economy of meaning for the stage culminates three decades later in *The Antiphon*, a work that is often deemed “unperformable” on account of its archaic, convoluted blank verse form. Considered to be Barnes’s most biographical play, I argue that *The Antiphon* invests its mother/daughter relationship with an unsettling queer eros that flourishes in the performative enjoyment of its formally and thematically “backward” design, which I compare to baroque allegory. The play thus finally makes a case for the unusually “backward” pleasures of its opaque queer visibility.

While the threads leading from one chapter to another are generally based on historical anecdotes and coincidences rather than explicit—for instance biographical—connections between my playwrights, I rely, next to the dramatic texts, on a variety of sources (including non-fiction essays and statements, newspaper interviews, performance reviews, and biographical materials) to set up resonances and to trace and constellate—neither necessarily conclusive nor linear—connections. Each chapter lights on a different aspect of the stakes and challenges of queer visibility across specific contexts and, with texts ranging from 1914 to 1979, period distinctions. In that regard, “modernism” and “modern drama” arguably are flexible notions in this project. Rather than hammering out, for instance, where modernism as an international phenomenon starts or ends (and to what extent the second half of the dissertation begs the question of post-modernism), we might think of this dissertation’s object as twentieth century modern drama and its ongoing attempt to dramatize queer visibility in historical time.<sup>14</sup> The language of this dramatic endeavor, I argue, not only is distinctly modern—it ranges from the positivistic

aspirations of dramatic realism to brazen avant-gardism, or ironic iterations and interrogations of past literatures and dramatic conventions—, but also points to a transatlantic history of circulation this dissertation imaginatively maps out as the background against which the concept of queer visibility emerges.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent argument in favor of an internationalized, less Eurocentric model for modern drama research, see for instance James M. Harding and John Rouse (ed.), *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*. See also the recent special issue on “Modernism” in *Theatre Journal*. Influential statements on new geographical mappings and methodologies in performance studies that inform or relate to my discussion include Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, and Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. More generally, Douglass Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz in a PMLA special issue have argued for a transnational turn as distinctive feature in “The New Modernist Studies.”

<sup>2</sup> For a helpful historical account on gay and lesbian theater in the U.S., see Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*, and Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (ed.), *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*. For a broader Euro-American, if still rather Anglophone perspective, see Alan Sinfield, *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theater in the Twentieth Century*. Laurence Senelick’s collection of French, German and Russian queer dramas in *Love-Sick: Modernist Plays of Same-Sex Love, 1894-1925*, each translated and prefaced by a lucid introductory essay, is in that regard a very welcome addition.

<sup>3</sup> With its anti-traditionalist, anti-naturalist aesthetic and representational skepticism, queer visibility in modern drama in that regard resonates with Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (ed.), *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, and Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Modern Drama*. For queer readings in a specifically American and “high modernist” context, see particularly Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance*.

<sup>4</sup> See Heather Love, “Modernism at Night.” The reception and meaning of the term is further discussed in Paul Morrison’s entry on “Queer Modernism” in Brian W. Shafer (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*, and Benjamin Kahan’s essay “Queer Modernism” in Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.), *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*.

<sup>5</sup> The notion that queer, in contrast to relatively solidified identity categories as gay and lesbian, is “by definition generalizable” calls to mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal statement “That [this] is one of the things ‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (“Queer and Now” 8).

<sup>6</sup> See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

<sup>7</sup> For a range of recent discussions on the usefulness of the term “queer” in comparative contexts, see Jarrod Hayes, Margaret R. Higonnet, and William J. Spurlin (ed.), *Comparatively Queer: Interrogating Identities across Time and Culture*.

<sup>8</sup> As a model for historicizing gender and sexuality in modern drama, this dissertation frequently invokes Elin Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*. See also the seminal anthology by Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, and Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies*. For another collection that cross-pollinates queer and feminist methods in theater and performance scholarship, see Alisa Solomon and Framji Minwalla (ed.), *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*. More recently, see the “Queer Research in Performance” special issue of *Theatre Journal*, and the forum on “Contemporary Queer Theatre and Performance Research” in *Theatre Research International*. A recent collection by Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (ed.), *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* came out shortly after I had finished writing the dissertation, leaving not enough time to substantially profit from its helpful propositions.

<sup>9</sup> See Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling” in *Marxism and Literature* (128-135), key to Heather Love’s diagnostic of queer ambivalence and to a specific body of literature that may illustrate an “affective turn” more generally.

<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Rose in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* is particularly attentive to the connection between, on the one hand, psychoanalysis’s interest in “modern painting as the image of the unconscious” (229) and in the effect of representing sexuality on the spectator—as an interpellation into a prior “primal scene”—and on the other, “a modernist and postmodernist practice which is increasingly understood in terms of a problematic reading and a theory of the sign” (229). A dynamic model of what it means to represent, see, interpret and feel, psychoanalysis (in particular Lacanian theory) has inspired several classic statements in feminist theater and visual studies that continue to raise important questions about the subject of—and audience for!—queer visibility in modern drama. For a recent, stimulating approach to psychoanalytically

inflected visual studies in performance research, see Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*.

<sup>11</sup> See Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

<sup>12</sup> That our visual rapport with the world structures subjectivity is the premise of, for instance, Kaja Silverman, who in *The Threshold of the Visible World* observes that "the images through which the subject is culturally apprehended do not always facilitate the production of a lovable bodily ego" (19). That "only certain subjects have access to a flattering image of self, and that others have imposed upon an image so deidealizing that no one would willingly identify with it" (29) certainly resonates with the "backward" image repertoire of queer modernism. On the other hand, the translation of historical ambivalence into artistic form is transformative and, as Love notes, "many of the bad feelings under review here... are in fact bound up with pleasure" (*Feeling Backward* 161). What better place than the stage, David Savran might optimistically add, to explore the unexpected pleasures and confusions of theater as "the queerest art," because it has the ability to "disarticulate and disrupt identity—whether the identity in question is that of the playwright or the spectator" (161-162), in Savran, "Queer Theater and the Disarticulation of Identity." See also Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*.

<sup>13</sup> Moreover, if we expand David Damrosch's claim in *What is World Literature?* that world literature is defined by the measure of its relative success to circulate in translation beyond its original culture, yet suspend with limited notions of "translation" and "literature" to instead look more broadly at how for Edward Said "ideas and theories travel," the question of staging queer visibility exceeds disciplinary or geographic specifics. This suggests that any history of sexuality requires an international and comparative approach.

<sup>14</sup> See in that regard, Elin Diamond, "Modern Drama/Modernity's Drama," and more generally Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins and W.B. Worthen (ed.), *Modern Drama: Defining the Field*.

## Chapter 1

## Sexual Inversion, Modern Drama and the Performance Genealogies of Queer Visibility in

José González Castillo's *Los invertidos*

*Los invertidos* (1914) by the Argentinean playwright José González Castillo (1885-1937) is probably the first play in the Spanish-speaking world to treat “sexual inversion”—a term coined in turn-of-the-century European sexology to describe homosexuality—as material for the modern stage.<sup>1</sup> *Los invertidos* exposes an illicit affair between an upper class family man, Doctor Flórez, and his childhood friend Pérez. Seemingly respectable citizens, they lead a secretive double life which involves them in the capital's demimonde of transvestite men who pose, flaunt and dance tango (a dance sprung from the city's brothels). When Flórez's wife Clara finds out his secret, she shoots the instigator Pérez and convinces her husband to kill himself, rather than bring shame on the family. Produced by the *Compañía de Teatro Libre Podestá –Ballerini*, owned by the renowned Podestá theatre clan, with celebrity Blanca Podestá in the role of Flórez's wife Clara, *Los invertidos* ran for eight performances in September 1914 at the capital's *Teatro Nacional* before being banned from the stage. The piece provoked reactions that ranged from public outcry over its distorting “inversion” of “the mission of the theatre” (“Por los teatros”) to praise for its “studied approach to a social problem both interesting and new to the national repertoire” (“Los éxitos del Nacional”).<sup>2</sup> One reviewer deemed the play's “title, subject and language” “simply repugnant” and questioned the artistic value of this “so-called realist theatre” (“El pretentido teatro realista”), a label *Los invertidos*'s generic distinction as a three-act “drama realista” self-consciously claimed.

In the controversy following the ban (which was lifted in 1919), the playwright maintained that public authorities had misunderstood *Los invertidos*' necessarily "scabrous" but "realist" approach: "It does not matter that its subject matter is scabrous... Scabrous subjects are the stuff of realist literature. If I attack a vice in *Los invertidos*, I am obligated by force to make this vice visible." (González Castillo 272) He claimed his work should be placed in line with "all literature that, since Balzac to our times, reacts against... false romantic sentimentalism" (271-272) and, even more contentiously, that "it would be an honor to be rejected precisely for being a realist and a defender who has to suffer the defaults of those who don't know realism" (272). The ban on *Los invertidos*, the playwright concludes, sets a precedent for those who "with equal ease tomorrow might want to correct Ibsen, Brieux, Favre, or whoever sets goals for contemporary social behavior" (273).

The playwright's attack on the tastes and sensibilities of the sanctioned theater of its time reminds us that the development of dramatic realism in the River Plate region (Argentina and Uruguay), as in Europe, was invariably associated with anti-establishment radicalism. Self-consciously modern in his desire for social and artistic contestation, González Castillo construed a place of his own in an internationally renowned "realist" canon of (supposedly unsentimental) novelists and playwrights. Modern drama, rather being merely entertaining or spiritually uplifting, according to this particular rewriting of theater history had become an instrument of serious social investigation and, the playwright insisted, trenchant "moralizing" purposes (271). While on the one hand, this genealogy of modern drama (which effortlessly fits the predominantly Eurocentric historical narratives that tend to dominate scholarship<sup>3</sup>) offers a very self-invested

perspective, on the other it vividly demonstrates Edward Said's observation that "like people ideas and schools of criticism, theories travel" (226). Taking Said as an axiomatic point of departure, this chapter's primary aim is to argue for *Los invertidos*' importance as a play that sheds light on—to use and extend Joseph Roach's term—a specifically queer "genealogy of performance" (462). In other words, the particular shape and meaning of its queer iterations is informed by "traveling" ideas that point to a history of "transmission and dissemination of cultural practices" (Roach 462). As a "realist drama" that sets out to present "sexual inversion" in a recognizably Argentinean idiom and setting, *Los invertidos* uses a number of stage techniques, themes and sensibilities that were forged from international and local sensibilities. The play thus gestures to an argument about the development and dissemination of a repertoire of techniques to stage queer plots and persons in modern drama.

The playwright, as I mentioned, sought "to make vice visible" (272) by all the theatrical means at his disposal. Clearly, the historical coincidence of the defense to stage "sexual inversion" in a plea for "realist" visibility is significant. Dramatic realism, after all, is not merely a technique but reflects an ideological understanding about the world it depicts and the means by which it does so. "Realism," Elin Diamond avers, "is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it *produces* a reality by positioning it spectator to recognize and verify its truth." (4) This appeal to "truth" is exceptionally straightforward in *Los invertidos*, with its on-stage use of legal documents that both discuss "sexual inversion" and predict the play's violent outcomes. This does not mean that queer themes or sensibilities in performance are necessarily dependent on the advent of dramatic realism. (Think, for instance, of the often-noted queer appeal of early modern



theater to many present-day readers.) Rather, I argue that *Los invertidos* illustrates a pivotal moment in which “sexual inverts” on stage become recognizable *as such*, i.e. as queer (sexually deviant, non-heterosexual) people. “Sexual inversion” provides *Los invertidos* with a conceptual vocabulary to render *the queer* visible as a discrete person who in modern drama, like the “homosexual” in Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, “became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology” (43).

Consequently, to historicize the queer theatricalities of *Los invertidos* means to be engaged in a kind of, what Jennifer Terry calls, “deviant historiography.” After all, as a “case history” originating in medical and psychiatric discourses, the taint of pathology and deviancy is never far off in the sexologist lexicon of “sexual inversion.” In that sense, the term has an affective leverage that resonates well with the slur “queer,” recuperated in the early 1990s as a rallying point for critical and political attention.<sup>4</sup> Heather Love, more recently, pleads for a renewed emphasis on queer’s correspondence to a history of injury that has conditioned the queer past and continues to inform its present. Love, in imagining the consequences of this affective filter for historiography, accordingly proposes “queer” as a capacious term both to critique the limitations of sexual identity categories yet acknowledge a continued (because it is entrenched in dynamics of identification) historical “structure of feeling”<sup>5</sup> that corresponds to queer experience in the twentieth century. The theater history in which I situate *Los invertidos* to some extent keeps the abovementioned methodological shift in mind, summarized by Love as follows:

The turn from a focus on “effective history” to a focus on “affective history” has meant that critics have stopped asking, “Were there gay

people in the past” but rather have focused on questions such as: “Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?” Or even, perhaps, “What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?” (Love 31)

One possible answer to these questions is that *Los invertidos* sheds light on a pivotal moment in queer theater history, even if its particular script for queer performance reminds us of, what Love calls, a “backward” past. Generally, by situating González Castillo’s drama in a queer performance genealogy, this chapter “aims to excavate the past that is necessary to account for how we got here and the past that is that is useful for conceiving alternatives to our present condition” (Jonathan Arac qtd. in Roach 462). More specifically, *Los invertidos*, with its explicit investment in “making vice visible” invites us to historicize the techniques, models and modes that inform queer visibility on the 1914 Buenos Aires stage. Queer visibility, in the context of this chapter, refers to the means by which queer plots and characters are staged. *Los invertidos*’ strategies of visualization are inadvertently riddled by confusions and contradictions that reveal the pitfalls of its dramatic and ideological assumptions. Yet while the play produces oftentimes incoherent results, *Los invertidos* effectively stages a historically specific queer visibility in a visceral, affective response to its times. In fact, the deployment of “sexual inversion” in *Los invertidos* demonstrates that epistemological saturation (evinced in the play’s positivistic, naturalist kind of realism) and affective manipulation (which links it a melodramatic mode) go together.

I organize this chapter in three sections. First, I situate *Los invertidos* in a context of sociopolitical and aesthetic upheavals in early twentieth century Argentina and briefly outline some of the questions and controversies the piece poses for contemporary queer theater research. Given the playwright’s defense of “realism” as the *sine qua non* for the

dramatic treatment of “sexual inversion,” the second section seizes the play’s reliance on the era’s positivist theories of degeneracy as a starting point to explore the formal aspects and generic modulations that inaugurate *Los invertidos* as the first queer drama on the Argentinean stage. The third section, finally, theorizes a connection between the rhetoric of “decadence” and queer visibility as symptom of backwardness within (and at odds with) modernity. The picture of queer visibility arising from these sections thus points to a gestural repertoire and figural legacy that informed *Los invertidos* and that circulates throughout the twentieth century.

### 1. Queering the Bourgeoisie: Anarchist Upheavals in the Backward Past

Until recently, González Castillo’s fame—notwithstanding a prolific career as playwright of popular comedies, farces and realist dramas, tango lyricist, scenarist of early Argentinean cinema, political journalist and founding and executive editor, between 1909 and 1912, of the theater review *El teatro criollo*—had almost entirely been eclipsed. This may be in part because his oeuvre and persona soared at the end—rather than in the heyday—of a canonized “golden age” in Argentinean national theatre at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 1980s David William Foster, one of the first scholars of *Los invertidos* and a pioneering figure in the study of queer Latin American texts more generally, proposed that González Castillo’s play had “been forgotten perhaps in part because it represents a sort of thesis drama that [...] does not attract much critical interest; perhaps in part because of the continued preference of Latin American scholars to shy away from the theme of homosexuality” (20).<sup>6</sup> Since then, however, *Los invertidos* has sparked significant cultural interest and González Castillo has been reappraised as an

innovator of the Argentinean stage (Koss) and “one the period’s most resonant playwrights” (Dubatti 44).

While a man of many hats, González Castillo is now invariably associated with the “thesis drama,” the favored genre of Argentinean realism which developed at the turn of the century. Up till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Beatriz Seibel notes, the reputable theaters in Buenos Aires generally catered to elite tastes for work produced by European companies who toured the major Latin American capitals (332). Besides this circuit of internationally recognized theater, however, there was no lack of amateur theater of all varieties, popular touring companies that specialized in acrobatics and pantomime (most famously, perhaps, the circus troupe of the Podestá family, who in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century had also made a successful transition to the “legitimate” theater) and informal entertainments like the tango which by turn of the century had conquered a noticeable place in the capital’s boisterous carnivals and balls (334). Of particular importance for the development of a local theater were the amateur “philodramatic” theater groups, which often formed around specific political positions “to diffuse their ideas” (334) and fostered an independent theater outside the commercial circuit. In particular socialist and anarchist theater groups were crucial to the development of the “dramaturgia de tesis” with its explicitly political and didactic ends (López Rodríguez 17). Socially engaged dramas by internationally renowned authors (López Rodríguez mentions Gerard Hauptman and Henrik Ibsen) found their first audience in leftwing philodramatic groups which also fostered the talent of local playwrights such as Florencio Sánchez (1875-1910)—a personal friend of, and a tremendous influence on, the young González Castillo—who wrote naturalistic plays, melodramas and *sainetes* (farces) in a style that, with its

successful blend of entertainment and serious content, by the early 1900s would become the dominant mode of the region's theater production.<sup>7</sup>

Sánchez's commercial and critical successes inaugurated a "golden age" of national playwriting. In contrast to many other Latin American countries, Sandra Cypress argues, "in Argentina before the First World War, there was no absence of commercial theatrical productions of successful works by national authors, nor a lack of knowledge of European theatre" (504). At a time when the capital's population was exponentially growing (Seibel notes that by 1916, the population number had grown by 250% in 20 years), Buenos Aires's theatre infrastructure too expanded spectacularly. Aníbal Ford and Nora Mazziotti point out that between 1880 and 1930 alone 60 theatres were built in Buenos Aires and the offer diversified.<sup>8</sup> While it is customary among Argentinean theater scholars to regard Sánchez's death in 1910 as the end of this "golden age," Jorge Dubatti disputes this judgment, based on the fact that theater production flourished between 1910 and 1930.<sup>9</sup> In the same period several theatre reviews were founded and distributed at affordable prices in the capital zone and throughout the country (Ford and Maizotti 91). "These reviews," López Rodríguez notes, "not only offered the theater text, but provided additional information about the work, the cast, the date of its premiere, the theater in which it played, critical reviews published in newspapers, notes on the author and commentaries the playwright wrote about the work" (14).

González Castillo, in other words, lived, wrote and participated in a fully-shaped culture of critical spectatorship and readership in which theater had achieved commercial and artistic status. Consequently, theater had become an institution associated not only with entertainment, but also with ideological self-positioning and—as the ban on *Los*

*invertidos* illustrates—issues of control and obscenity. Certainly, according to the playwright, the accusation of the play’s “immoral” subject matter had little to do with its artistic merits; in his incendiary essay “on morals in the theater” (“La moral en el teatro”), published in the theater review *Bambalinas* on the occasion of the play’s first—and not least—restaging in 1919, the playwright overtly accused the authorities of having a surreptitious hidden agenda:

Neither the intendant nor the secretary [of the municipality] nor the inspection of theaters will deny the existence of inverts in our society; they know perfectly well the gravity of the ill and they know to which nasty portions this aberration can lead [...] But precisely because this vice happens more often in the highest social spheres than in the popular classes and because my play combats it, they are sanctimonious about it and are compelled by their flawed morality to hide an infamy they think has no remedy. (González Castillo 281)

The passages’ anti-bourgeois vehemence is striking and revelatory; precisely to the extent that “sexual inversion” is revealed to be a “problem” mainly for the ruling classes (those depicted on stage, and, according to González Castillo, those sanctimoniously watching), *Los invertidos* is not merely a dramatization of the life and action of some “inverts,” but a downright attack on the establishment of its times. Such animus is not entirely surprising given González Castillo’s anarchist sympathies, which had brought him into conflict with authorities before. In 1908, *El parque*, a piece commemorating a revolutionary uprising of Argentina’s labor unions in 1890, co-written with Vicente Martínez Cuitiño (1887-1964), was prohibited because it defended armed resistance to the government (López Rodríguez 8). In 1910, in an increasingly polarized climate of union strikes and police repression, González Castillo had been sent into exile in Chile, where he probably started writing *Los invertidos* (9). The playwright’s anti-establishment sympathies left a strong a mark on several works written around this time which target the hypocrisy and inefficacy

of Argentina's ruling classes. *El mayor prejuicio* ("The Main Prejudice"), also staged in 1914 in the capital's *Teatro Nacional*, and *La mujer de Ulises* ("Ulises's Wife"), which premiered in 1918 in the *Teatro Liceo*, both satirize the moral bankruptcy and emotional sterility of bourgeois marriage and plead respectively for liberty of love (*El mayor prejuicio*) and women's right to divorce (*La mujer de Ulises*). *El hijo de Agar* ("Agar's Child"), produced by the theater company of fellow-anarchist Alberto Ghirardo (1875-1946) in 1915, condemns society's harsh treatment of women pregnant out of wedlock. His recurrent interest in heroines, disadvantaged by constrained marital and sexual relations, suggest sympathy for libertarian and feminist anarchist ideologies which, as Mabel Bellucci has argued, flourished in Argentina since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Generally, González Castillo's thesis dramas have a clearly articulated didactic purpose in mind and precisely in that sense—as he argued about *Los invertidos*—were meant to be “moralizing and [to exhort] ... good customs” (González Castillo 271). Holding a mirror to his middle class audiences, the playwright places his actions and characters in bourgeois settings (the household, the lawyer's office, etc.) with pristine façades of respectability that quickly unravel along the way. This basic pattern also structures *Los invertidos*: mostly set in the home office of an upper class family man, the play spectacularly exposes an illicit affair between the revered forensic expert Doctor Flórez and his childhood friend Pérez. The curtain opens on Julián, the Doctor's sixteen-year old son reading aloud the passages he still has to copy of his father's report on a criminal case which involves a “sexual invert.” As Act I unfolds and the other characters drop in (the maid Petrona, followed by Flórez, his wife Clara, his bosom friend Pérez who is accompanied by Fernandez, and finally his daughter Lola), the audience from its

privileged, voyeuristic position, simultaneously knows about the report's (pseudo-)scientific analysis of "sexual inversion" and overhears the three bourgeois men bantering and scheming about their secretive lives. By the end of Act I, we know that Pérez and the Doctor are lovers and, in a salacious twist, that the duplicitous bachelor Pérez also attempts to seduce Clara. Pérez's plan for a secretive rendezvous with Clara in his lavish *garçonnière*, however, takes an unexpected turn when she from behind the bedroom door is made an involuntary witness to a Buenos Aires demimonde of sexual deviants, who in Act II show up at Pérez's home in full women's attire and dancing the tango. Flórez's unannounced arrival (and his realization that Pérez is hiding a mistress behind the bedroom door) adds to the confusion and sets the tone for Flórez's *crise de conscience* in Act III. Meanwhile, a heart-stricken Clara puts the pieces of the puzzle together by hearing out Pérez's manservant Benito, the family maid Petrona and Julián. On Pérez's next visit to the family home in Act III, she shoots him and invokes the report's scientific conclusion that "[for inverts] suicide is their only, their good evolution" (45) to persuade her husband to kill himself.

Clara's "Medea-like corrective violence in the name of socio-moral integrity" (Foster 28) somewhat belatedly appears to foreground *her* and not Flórez or any of the other "inverts" as protagonist. This is also how González Castillo proposes we read *Los invertidos*: "Clara is the central character of the work... an idealist type that I propose in contrast to the other subjects of the drama with the objective that the tragic pain she feels provokes a salubrious reaction in the total mass of spectators" (271). The expected "salubrious reaction" caused by Flórez's death, structurally only makes sense from Clara's point of view (and with hers, the middle class audience watching) as Juanita and



La Princesa de Borbón, the tango-dancing characters, who come from the Buenos Aires streets associated with cruising and prostitution, walk away unscathed. This bourgeois drama, González Castillo makes clear, does not concern them. Their disdain for Flórez as “a hypocrite who goes around dissimulating in the pose of a learned man a secret that everyone already knows” (61) creates an ironic distance from the play’s melodramatic events. Unlike Clara, who desperately seeks the “truth” and a “just” solution from Florez’s medical report, the under-class transvestites mock not only the scientific terms that condemn degeneracy but also the anxieties of the city’s ruling elites. *Los invertidos*, in other words, predicts that Argentina’s bourgeois elites will be destroyed by their own degeneracy and, at the same time, recuperates “inversion” as a locus of communality, or at least collective skepticism, for its underclasses—even as they remain powerless.

Ending with Clara’s defiant moral righteousness, González Castillo presents a confused and disturbing picture. Clearly, *Los invertidos* defiantly queers the context of bourgeois respectability in which it intervenes but peppers this sexual exposé with anti-bourgeois sentiment from which it becomes inseparable. Paradoxically perhaps, Clara meanwhile is at once the bourgeois victim and heroine of these intrigues. Certainly, from her point of view, “sexual inversion” appears to invoke an atmosphere of immorality, shamefulness and prostitution—the kind of milieu, reformers of all persuasions considered anathema to social progress. Feminist anarchists and their sympathizers, however concerned with expanding personal freedom, drew the line, Bellucci notes, at “sexuality’s ‘deviant’ effects (prostitution, underage or forced (“estrupe”) sex and venereal diseases” (149). Bellucci’s observations bring to mind Leo Bersani’s, over seventy years later, that “public discourse on homosexuals since the AIDS crisis began

has startling resemblance... to the representation of female prostitutes in the nineteenth century” (17)—the point of resemblance being that both “spread their legs” (18) and their venereal diseases (whether contracted in the nineteenth brothel or the late twentieth century dark room). Though admittedly not directly concerning González Castillo’s “inverts,” the play suggests a continued figural connection—and, in the spirit of “sexual inversion,” a figural interchangeability—between the milieu of prostitution and homosexuality.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, *Los invertidos* co-opts the prevalent moral and scientific prejudices of the era’s “hygienist” (“higiniesta”) theories which, Jorge Salessi argues, originated at a time when the country’s imagined national body was being contaminated, not merely by prostitution, but by massive immigration (from the interior to the capital, and particularly from overseas, by *arribistas*, the recent European (mostly Italian) newcomers, perceived as a threat to the cultural authority of the *criollos*—creole Argentineans of Spanish descent) and a fast growing population. Government officials and public intellectuals responded to this new social order with “hygienist” measures designed to root out symptoms of cultural decadence and morbid degeneracy. Besides an expanding urban under-class associated with lawless, criminal behavior, and a working-class that identified itself with the rapidly spreading ideologies of socialism and anarchism, the ruling elites also faced an unprecedented number of women entering the paid work force, which they viewed as an “inversion” of “natural” roles (Salessi 205-212). The category of “sexual inversion,” which around this time found its way into medical and criminological discourse, thus introduced a salient example of “gender trouble” in a context of “sexual anarchy” and national crisis more generally.<sup>11</sup> Since these were confusing times (what

Lauren Berlant might call a “situation” in which the outcomes for the historical subject are disturbingly unclear<sup>12</sup>), it was perhaps to avoid confusion that González Castillo on the night of the play’s premiere addressed “two words” (“Dos palabras”) to the audience to set his intentions straight:

Following a statistical demographic of Doctor Francisco Latzina, published in 1905 and based on the census of the capital, there were at that time 10.000 inverts in Buenos Aires alone, from all social classes. You will understand that this number entails a constant danger for the moral and physical health of our society. To avoid this danger, to fight this nefarious and repugnant vice by all possible means, I made this good and moralizing piece... that is what I have tried to do, modestly. (González Castillo 267)

Yet, as González Castillo would soon find out, the performance was deemed both confusing and offensive. After all, despite its “moralizing” intent and deterministic expository design, *Los invertidos* brought sexually deviant characters on stage who unmistakably and self-consciously flaunted their immorality. Making “vice visible,” the play introduced heretofore unseen but recognizably “realist” characters (and potentially slippery circuits of spectatorial enjoyment and empathy) to its middle class audience. While we can only speculate (besides official allegations of immorality) how *Los invertidos* affected its censors, its treatment of “sexual inversion” certainly raises questions about the viewing experience. *Los invertidos*’ spectacular and titillating revelations create opportunities to destabilize the assumed “proper object” of the dynamics of spectatorial identification. For instance, while it is difficult to imagine González Castillo consciously addressing a counteraudience—an audience that against the dominant reading *Los invertidos* proposes actually would sympathize more than fleetingly with its “inverts”—, Diego Trerotola, on the occasion of the play’s latest revival in 2011 by Mariano Dossena, recalibrates the play’s investment in visibility not as

a smearing campaign, but as a politically potent act of visibilization. Refuting “those readings that accused the play of being homophobic which missed its anarchic gesture and politics of visibilization,” he proffers the play’s spectacle of cross-dressing as “the first triumph of an anarcho-queer (*anarcomarica*) visibility in 20<sup>th</sup> century Buenos Aires.” From this angle, *Los invertidos* appears to present a sly analysis of queer sexuality’s outlawed place outside the bonds of middle class family life. López Rodríguez too, coming to the rescue of González Castillo’s leftwing credentials, argues that “Flórez has to die because his own social class does not permit him to be free, contrary to the transvestites of the *garçonnière*” (22). The play’s often noted formal hybridity, with its combination of naturalist techniques, melodramatic ploys and elements of popular farce (in the style of the locally-bred *sainete*) further adds to the confusion. *Los invertidos* can’t seem to decide whether it is a bourgeois drama or a downright satire (or both)—an unevenness apparent in the contradictory reactions to Alberto Ure’s 1990 revival in the city-run Buenos Aires *Teatro San Martín*. One reviewer lauded Ure for “uncovering” the play’s “latent” “arrays of theatricality” and for turning it to “parodic” and even “grotesque” use (Quiroga). In other words, the director was praised for interpreting the play’s melodramatic exaggerations in the manner of the *criollo grotesco*, a brand of grotesque drama that became popular in the 1930s and that henceforth sporadically continued to exert influence on the national stage. However, Ure’s formal innovations, which departed from the original’s realist setting (with a big, sparsely furnished playing area tending to abstraction rather than a domestic setting, complemented with ominous, near-expressionist lighting and scattered musical accenting) could not persuade another reviewer that the production revived “more prejudices than innovations” and at best

provoked “confused,” “uncomfortable laughter” at an “ungratifying reminder” of the past (Pacheco).

In particular, Ure’s production (which brought *Los invertidos* back from under the dust after it had practically vanished into oblivion, at a time that uncannily coincided with a court ruling that refused to confer full legal standing to the Argentinean homosexual movement) stirred mixed reactions that bring to mind, what Carla Freccero calls, “the force of affect in history” (“Queer Times” 20), a destabilizing reminder that the past is not that easily (and possibly never) settled. Even if we take seriously its “anarcho-queer visibility” as a kind of proleptic template for future activism based on a politics of visibility, *Los invertidos* offers no hope for change, nor cause for redemption. If there be reserve about the value of reviving the play for a contemporary audience, clearly this is not for its lack of potential commentary on the historically contingent nature of identities we still inhabit today. However, the play reveals a continuing, unchecked capacity to inflict “backward feelings” in those who feel addressed by it. Yet as Heather Love argues, such feelings of helplessness (or even of affective ruin) matter, precisely because they reveal the historical conditions that shaped the particular “structures of feeling” of queer experience in the twentieth century.

Following Love, we might argue that scholarly and theatrical engagement with *Los invertidos* calls not only for analysis of its formal properties and historical context, but equally, to borrow Ann Cvetkovich’s term, of its corresponding “archive of feelings.” Feelings too, despite our conviction that they are deeply personal, cross over into the domain of public sphere and history. This is the case not only for the themes and sensibilities that inform *Los invertidos* but also for the present-day reactions they

occasion. Moreover, if specifically in performance or theater nothing is entirely lost to the past (because its conventions and assumptions “haunt the stage” or live on through cultural processes of substitution and “surrogation”<sup>13</sup>), there is urgency in reconstructing how *Los invertidos* “feels historical” in its response to the new sexual typologies it stages. By placing *Los invertidos* in a queer performance genealogy of “traveling theory,” I thus propose that the relevance of its queer visibilities is neither limited to its immediate past, nor exclusively to an Argentinean context. Rather, the play points to an errant trajectory of theater techniques and affective registers and thus, more generally, to a vocabulary to contextualize queer visibility in the early decades of modern drama. We might ask ourselves, for instance, what makes *Los invertidos* a queer drama in terms of the dramatic models and modes that inform it? In other words, does González Castillo propose a specific genre for representing “sexual inversion?”<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Sexual Inversion, Genre and the Making of Queer Drama

González Castillo, as mentioned, in his defense of *Los invertidos* self-consciously placed himself in genealogy of dramatist such as “Ibsen, Brieux, Favre,” strengthening a familiar association between dramatic realism and its zeal to bringing new, often taboo subject matters to the stage. Curiously, however, in the playwright’s prolific oeuvre, which covers all of the era’s popular genres, *Los invertidos* is the only drama which self-consciously bears the label “realist.” This self-nomination stands as a clear indication of the play’s empirical and ideological claims to truth. Certainly, its investment in planting a verifiable positivist thesis—however confusing its finer points—is indisputable and goes far beyond appealing to mere “realistic” representation. Rather, with naturalist, positivist

insistence, González Castillo stamps the new conventions of stage realism with empiricist (legal, medical and experiential) claims that call to mind what Foucault called a “scientia sexualis”—a “will to know” which posits sexuality as central to the modern order of things. González Castillo’s understanding of “realism” thus fits particularly well Bert States’s observation that “Like the science that inspired it, realism was essentially an art of pinning things down. The stage served as a kind of laboratory where heretofore unarticulated social processes and species could be examined under the strong light of the new electrical lamp” (61).

Particularly Flórez’s forensic report, a fictitious document that is clearly modeled on Argentinean turn-of-the-century “hygienist” theories, frames *Los invertidos* as “a kind of laboratory” that sets up a dramatic investigation in which characters are moved around as pawns in a “theater of knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> Read out loud by Julián at the start of Act I, the forensic case study, keenly aware of its timely intervention, asserts that “the defendant Calixto [...] represents one of these interesting cases of sexual inversion that medical pathology has precisely defined in a vast number of studies on this matter” (González Castillo 37-38). The document validates new scientific insight over pre-existing narratives of queer sexuality, adding that the defendant “after thorough medical examination does not show the physiological deformations that one would expect in such cases and that inspired the Greek myth of Hermaphroditus” (38). While the defendant certainly mimes the feminine, his “markedly feminine habits” and “predilection for all the futilities that make up the charm of women” (38) cannot be explained by the pre-modern regime of mythological knowledge. According to new medical insight, Calixto suffers from a “strange phenomenon of sensual splitting (“desdoblamiento sensual”) that

is caused less by an aberration of sex (“sexo”) than by a perversion of the instincts, whetted by an excess of pleasure, a frail and insufficient physical and moral education and perhaps even more, by ancestral tendencies of a morbid heritage” (38).

Interestingly, within the first few minutes, this scientific language is also revealed to be class-specific. Petrona, the family maid, overhears Julian and in the ensuing conversation heckles the fact that “Doctors and procurators always invent the strangest names for the simplest things. In my days, we simply called them mariquita, or maricón, that’s clearer. Why use so many terms?” (39). In the language of the *porteño* working class, “inverts” are named “mariquita” (more or less translatable as a “Mary”) or “maricón” (closest in meaning to the pejorative meaning of “queer” in English) or in lunfardo, an Italianate immigrant working class dialect, as “manflora.” By establishing an ironic distance towards the discourse of the ruling classes, Petrona’s scoffing remark demonstrates the play’s preoccupation with showing and situating the various registers of knowledge and ignorance that are mobilized to analyze its subject matter. It is not entirely clear, however, whether or not González Castillo purposefully plants the seeds for competing claims to discredit any particular statement; the implied difference in practice seems merely nominal. Petrona definitely does not conceal her contempt such “asquerosos” (“revolting individuals”) as she explains to Julian that she has known at least a “hundreds of those” in her life time, including the tragic case of Lili, the cross-dressing cousin of Julian’s father who “was the same as a woman,” although incongruously he “had one of those gringo moustaches” (39). This “gringo” moustache adds a jarring element of (Italian) foreignness to Petrona’s description of Lili’s behavior, which otherwise, like Calixto’s, conspicuously imitates woman’s behavior:



He was always wearing powder, perfumes and hand-held fan... and often we saw him shamelessly dressed as a woman... entirely tightened up and made up and with a stowaway ("polizón") ... Ah, how revolting...with his bulge swelled up... Like that... as if it were real... It was so upsetting.  
(39)

Petrona with dismay (in strikingly theatrical terms) describes "sexual inversion" as a performance that imitates and distorts biological reality. This transgressive theatricality, we learn, turned so grotesque that it caused Lili's expulsion from the family and "his" (the preferred gender pronoun of the text) subsequent downfall:

You see boy, one day when your grandmother had your aunt Felisa he threw himself in the bed and also starting screaming as if they were slitting his throat. [...] The pig also fancied having children... The pig! They had to throw him out to avoid scandal. The pervert! Afterwards I saw him a couple of times only, till someone told me he killed himself. See how things are... Nearly all the mariquitas that I have known or have heard of died the same way... as if it were a punishment by God" (40).

Petrona's first-hand knowledge neatly sets up the play's expository design which within moments is echoed in Flórez's report which posits a "secret law" that "tragically eliminates [sexual inverts] when life has become too much of a burden... Unredeemed and unrepentant... suicide is "their only good evolution" ... as Verlaine would say" (44). This dubious invocation of the French *poète maudit*'s authority, however, Salessi has argued, is an only thinly veiled reference to the writings of Carlos Octavio Bunge (1875-1918), at this time a well-known Argentinean intellectual (professor of law at the University of Buenos Aires and the author of numerous works of cultural criticism and fiction) and no doubt representative of the *criollo* ruling elites González Castillo satirizes. Notably the section of Bunge's *Estudios filosóficos* (1895) titled "notes about the problems of degeneracy," which considered suicide an honorable solution to stop the effects of "progressive degeneration," according to Salessi (374) appears almost verbatim

in the play, albeit by posing in Paul Verlaine's voice. This cultural appropriation of Verlaine, far from being an extraneous literary reference, is a crucial complement to Salessi's historicizing of the play in the era's "hygienist" preoccupations, criminal court cases and medical reports. It points to on a node of queer and transatlantic connections that bring to mind Sylvia Molloy's observations about the migratory movement—and queer properties—of European "decadence" into Latin American culture (more about this later.)

The important point is that *Los invertidos*'s crudely prosaic "realism"—with a veritable anti-classicist *Sturm und Drang* attitude—assaults the spectator with clues and indications of a) what an "invert" looks and behaves like and b) where the action is headed. Its heterogeneous mix of medico-legal evidence (the report), popular knowledge (Petrona) and rhetoric of degeneracy (Bunge voiced through Verlaine) gives overwhelming evidence to predict—and legitimize—the play's violent outcomes. Nearly each of the characters in Act I spew ideas and observations that support a thesis about "sexual inversion," leading Salessi to the conclusion that *Los invertidos* quite simply endorses "the cultural promotion of homosexual suicide" (372). This almost fully self-conscious manner of commenting is persistently subjected to destabilizing ironies. After all, Flórez's report—the play's structurally privileged object of discussion—is not only a product of "scientific dilettantism" (González Castillo 45) but equally of self-vested interests. His role as a forensic expert, he assures Clara, is only to "extend information on the subject... and moreover, out of compassion or something, I oddly sympathize and feel sorry for these unhappy creatures" (44). Yet Clara's disbelief that there ever could be

any “sentimental roots” between such criminal minds launches Flórez into a passionate defense:

[Inverts] love with an invincible force of instincts that are secret, unexpected, hereditary... Like a second nature, much stronger in them than their own, because it is a diseased, morbid nature they cannot escape [...] A sort of transfusion of sex, a nervous undoubling takes place in certain cases, moments and special circumstances. [...] Generally they are normal individuals, actually vigorous, manly, and youthful, like the one I am talking about in my report, who simply killed the other with his bare hands. Individuals with all the virile qualities of men in general, but who precisely are attracted to the physical or moral masculine superiority of another of their own sex... And when they are caught in the moment that we call critical, at night especially, they turn into women [...] as if in that moment their nature undergoes a wonderful and monstrous transmutation... (*as if possessed*). It's the voice of the ancestors, the cry of vice, the imperious call of genetic decadence. (44)

Flórez lists a catalogue of turn-of-the-century positivist preoccupations (“instincts that are secret... hereditary... a diseased morbid nature”) blended with unveiled fascination (“a transfusion of sex, a nervous undoubling takes place”), particularly where “inversion” troubles gender (“they turn into women... a wonderful and monstrous transmutation”). Affected by this scenario of darkly romantic exceptionalism, the Doctor a shade *too clearly* (“as if possessed”) revels in the very symptoms the report purportedly decries. The mordant irony is that the viewer—long before Clara, who fails to understand her own perceptive remark that Flórez speaks “with much enthusiasm” (44)—finds ocular proof of Flórez’s resemblance to the defendant Calixto. At the end of Act I, when at nightfall Flórez and Pérez are alone and perched over the report, the Doctor undergoes his own mysterious “critical moment” and “monstrous transmutation.” Noting that “the light bothers,” Flórez darkens the room except for one green table light. In its conspicuously green hues, he declares “What a strange effect the light has on me” and proceeds to open the window, through which “The lights of other buildings can be seen” (57). In an

atmosphere of mystery that seems closer in spirit to a gothic novel like R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1886) rather than anything in Ibsenite realism or Zolaesque naturalism, he "looks troubled as if suffering from a change in character" (57) and continues to cite from the report:

The night appears to imbue them with new life, as if in the mystery of its shadows a miraculous transformation of sex operates in them. Then, they are women, as during the day, they are men. (*He takes Pérez's head in his two hands, brings his mouth closer to his with the intention to kiss it. Meanwhile the curtain falls*). (57)

This scene not only corroborates the report's descriptions (and in that sense already gestures towards the play's conclusion) but also is revelatory with regard to the tensions that organize the play's "realist" representation. With an almost experimental sensibility (by dimming the lights and manipulating both atmosphere and perception), *Los invertidos* proposes to "naturalize" the dictates of the report. Yet curiously, the action resembles a "play-within-the-play" that is carefully orchestrated by Flórez, who manipulates the lights and recites the report as if it were a breviary to ritually enact his "miraculous transformation of sex." Here, the play's meta-theatrical gestures, which self-consciously comment on the action, accrue an almost destabilizing effect. However, rather than producing a clearly calculated *mise-en-abyme* effect to expose what it stages as "fiction," the play presents such theatrical behavior as if it were drawn from real life. It is unclear whether González Castillo meant to ironize the naturalist underpinnings *Los invertidos* proposes (this would suggest, for instance, an affinity with what Kirk Williams has called the modernist "anti-theatrical" tendencies of German naturalism, as in the influential works of Gerard Hauptman). However, what matters from the point of the viewing experience is a conflation between naturalist claims to truth and sensationalist thrills.

This produces a particularly *affective* form of drama that piques the spectator's titillating, disturbing, or even uncanny (proximate but different) sense of nearness to this *tranche de vie* theatricalized on stage. If in that sense *Los invertidos* inchoately gestures towards a higher degree of modernist auto-reflexivity, in another it unabashedly reveals and revives the roots of modern drama in melodramatic sensationalism. With its blatantly contrasting oppositions (Luis Mazas, in his review of Ure's production, considered the piece irrevocably "conservative and Manichean") and timely posturing, *Los invertidos* certainly fits Matthew Buckley's definition of melodrama as "a concentrated form of affective drama" that flourishes in "periods of cultural disenchantment and crisis, when cognitive discourses falter and affective discourses thrive" (465). This may explain why Julián, in his role as an interpreter for the audience, reads the forensic report "with difficulty" (González Castillo 37)—an opening statement that signals the novelty and the obscurantism of the era's "cognitive discourses."<sup>16</sup> Laurence Senelick too, attentive to the capacity of melodrama to absorb new social discourses and themes, points out that

melodrama acts as a kind of preceptor, familiarizing audiences with new phenomena while simultaneously as a vehicle for moral propaganda, assigning these neoterisms with benign or malign qualities. Through typology, the unfamiliar is pigeonholed and labeled, and the public is indoctrinated into the proper attitude to take. So when homosexuality, as the *fin-de-siècle* defined it, does make its stage debut, it is rife with melodramatic devices and blackmail. (3)

Clara's emotional blackmail to avert public shame, however, goes beyond a mere indictment of her husband's homosexuality. After the revelations in Pérez's boudoir in Act II, she is involuntarily interpellated as a jury member who has to put together the pieces of a puzzle that deterministically concludes with the report. As such, the play's repeated appeal to theories of degeneracy intensifies the viewing experience, leaving the

spectator gasping for breath in the light of so much “evidence.” *Los invertidos*’ positivist repurposing of nineteenth-century melodrama as a genre for queer dramatic representation in that sense resonates with Elin Diamond’s observations about the dramatization of female hysteria in the early texts of realism. “Ibsenite realism,” Diamond argues, “guarantees its legitimacy by endowing the fallen women of popular melodrama with the symptoms and etiology of the hysteric” so that “In deciphering the hysteric’s enigma, realism celebrates positivist inquiry, thus buttressing its claims for ‘truth to life.’” (4) Realism places the hysteric (who like the “invert” was considered a sexual deviant in medical discourse, one that suffered from a slumbering, unseen and enigmatic sexuality)<sup>17</sup> at center of a plot that invites interpreting her behavior. In turn, its positivist underpinnings “hystericize” stage realism till the point, Diamond argues, that “realism itself [becomes] a form of hysteria” (4). While González Castillo’s “scabrous” play deals in neither the thematic or psychological subtleties of Ibsenite realism, it clearly continues to exploit the conventions of “medical melodrama” to inaugurate queer drama on the Argentinean stage (8).

Furthermore, in order to launch queer visibility to the stage, González Castillo not only introduces certain formal techniques and new discourses (positivist realism and the persistent meta-critical feedback set up between the report and the action) but also queers the melodramatic template to which it responds: the stock-characters of villain and victim appear to be in place, although the eruptions of a troubled queer sexuality in turn trouble and confuse an “appropriate” conclusion. If Clara plays the part of victim and heroine (“an idealist type” as González Castillo insists), where does that leave the repentant Flórez or the inveterate seducer Pérez? While both pay with their lives, they don’t occupy

identical positions, even if they do belong to the same social class, a trait which sharply distinguishes them from the transvestite characters in Act I. All of the play's queer characters, as Salessi shows, are modeled on typologies drawn from contemporary medical reports, criminal cases and hygienist theorizing. However, *Los invertidos* appears to treat some of its "inverts" with more sympathy (or rather less condemnation) than others. As a result, the stark opposition between villains and victims sometimes—if inconclusively—fades.

Flórez, for instance, occupies a central, if ambiguous place in the drama's moral universe. Clearly, *Los invertidos* satirizes his hypocrisy and the social privilege reflected in his elitist jargon. For the most part, the play accordingly puts the spectacle of his self-glorified ignominy at the center and thus construes a fitting retribution in his fall from grace. With Flórez, *Los invertidos* thus achieves a striking reversal of melodramatic typologies and invents the part of "the fallen man" whose sexuality leads to his downfall. *Los invertidos* underscores and naturalizes this reversal precisely in those moments where Flórez reveals his true ("inverted") nature. For instance, like the defendant Calixto who committed a crime of passion in a fit of jealousy, Flórez on discovering Pérez's infidelity, is "trembling with jealousy" and "makes gestures that show terrible internal struggle" (González Castillo 70).<sup>18</sup> Where the body takes over (indeed does the talking), the male "invert" on stage calls to mind the histrionic, excessive behavior of the hysterical fallen woman. After the unexpected revelations in Pérez's boudoir, Flórez suffers a "nauseating resentment that shames me but that I cannot control... this vice, this aberration which already is like a second nature to me" (88). Contrary to Calixto, however, Flórez does not strangle his lover (that part is reserved for Clara, who shoots to pieces the male bond

from which she is excluded) but then writhingly deplores him to “Go away... Get out of my life [...] For the sake of my children... my home [...] you have vilified my life.” (88-89). Pérez’s scorn for this emotional outpouring is lacerating:

Are you really going to be jealous now... like a vulgar tart? [...] I thought you were a superior individual capable of lifting you out your own corruption... I see you belittled now... like one of these you defend in your report (88-89).

With these accusations of Flórez’s failure to be a “superior individual” and nothing more than “a vulgar tart,” the era’s own unresolved concerns with egalitarian relationships between the sexes (and, in the background, the social classes) implicitly hovers over the scene. To the extent, moreover, that the scene posits a dynamic between “active” seducers (coded as masculine) and their “passive” objects of seduction, Pérez now more clearly appears as the play’s true villain; having lead both his childhood friend and Clara astray, he conjures up the disconcerting image of an erratically libertarian and queer (indeed a perversely bisexual) lust that undercuts the normative bastions of bourgeois life. Certainly, for the maid Petrona, devoted to the Flórez household since the Doctor’s childhood, Flórez’s “only vice was his friend Pérez. [...] Pérez, yes, he was a devil: quarrelsome, rowdy, shameless... [...] And he could fix anything when he saw his chance” (74). “Think about it,” she notes in a conversation with the distraught Clara,

at the age of ten, he already smoked; at eleven, he broke out of school; at twelve he played the guitar; at thirteen he got suspended on account of I don’t what flagrancy; at fourteen he already went to dances; at fifteen, he got the housemaid pregnant.” (74-75)

If Flórez’s nightly “miraculous transformation of sex” cannot be understood the logic of the daylight, at least Pérez’s childhood, resistant to proper disciplining and associated with the lewd behavior of popular environments, reassuringly—empirically—casts him in



the part of the inveterate reprobate. As a source of sexual and moral depravity which progressively contaminates, Pérez is a villain whose transgressions are perhaps best described as a disturbing case of “inversion”—a term, Salessi points out, in effect occasionally applied in hygienist circles to address a wider range of social problems than only homosexual behavior.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, and in accordance with this seductive and domineering part, Pérez in the play’s finale aggressively tries to prevent Flórez from breaking up their illicit liaison, appealing (in a virulently misogynistic key) to his lover’s “natural” affinity with the feminized part of the seduced: I want to see you obedient, as you have always been, submissive, feminine, which is your real nature...like this... so that you forget you are a man. [...] This is not you... Go back to who you normally are (89-90).”

Arguably however, who these bourgeois men “normally are” by the very terms *Los invertidos* proposes leads only to repeating the enigmatic statements the play compiles. When Pérez, in an obvious echo of Act I, continues to switch the lights off, to “bring [Flórez] back to the reality of [his] misery, of [their] misery, which is the shadows” (89), he too may either be reluctant or incapable to see. Only in the dark, he insists, can Flórez forget the “manliness that [he is] faking and which is only a product of the light:” “I want to prevent you from seeing yourself...from seeing ourselves” (89). The play’s strategy of spectacular exposure (a strategy, as States might say, of the “electrical light”) makes queer, non-normative behaviors discernable to the viewer, perhaps not literally in the shadows, but definitely in the contradictions lived by its characters. However, with its sensationalist and (pseudo)-positivist staging of queer visibility, *Los invertidos* shies away from truly investigating the incongruent, conceptually muddled

nature of the sexual identities it stages. The play takes pleasure in showing Clara (and the audience) its existence, after which it constrains the radically anarchic queerness of sexual difference.<sup>20</sup> Rather than interrogating to the explanatory framework it proposes (which, I showed, draws on theories of degeneracy, medico-legal cases and first-hand accounts like Petrona's), *Los invertidos* exploits its confusions and contradictions to intensify an effect of urgency.

The salacious behavior of the transvestite characters in Act II in that regard further adds to the titillating sensationalism, although the tone shifts. The curtain opens on Emilio, "an elegant, shameless rogue" ("sinvergüenza"), Juanita, a "young man of 20 years old, pretty face and wide-open eyes, seated at the piano and playing a tango" (58), and "La Princesa de Borbón," who is "dressed as an elegant woman, affectedly posing with all the movements of a lady" (58). Here, the scene of transvestism literalizes the logic of sexual inversion while presenting it, contradictorily, in strikingly theatrical terms that underscore the artifice of the performance: Princesa "with an exaggerated feminine voice" complains to Emilio that his dancing moves are "too black" (a reminder of the dance's origin in the *candombe* music of the region's black slaves) and should be "more elegant, more refined" (58). Princesa's remark, a testimony to the changing perception about the tango's sanctioned place in Argentinean culture—from the brothels to recognized circuits of entertainment, as Salessi points out—, is greeted with Emilio's banter that "this delicate hothouse flower prefers refinement to vehemence, subtlety to the instinctive" (58). Princesa's poses, which ironically make Clara appear as a vengeful simulacrum of an idealized femininity (a class mockery we will see in queer performance practices throughout the twentieth century) further lends particular meaning to Pérez's

bachelor apartment which, the stage directions insist, must “look like a tasteful artist’s dressing room:”

Elegant room of a garconniere. Door in the back on the right. To the left, a kind of living room (“apartamento”), with a piano, sofas, visitor chairs (“confidentes”), etc. To the left side a door which suggest giving access to a bedroom. In the room, a luxurious set of upholstered chairs, a big commode with mirror and beauty supplies, curling irons, powder compacts, color pencils, etc. The room needs to look like a tasteful artist’s dressing room (“camarín de artista de buen tono”). The light, a chandelier (“plafonier”), has to be composed of electric branches with colored lights, in blue, red, etc. It’s night. (57)

The French words in the original script (garconniere, confidentes, apartamento, plafonier) underscore the refined cosmopolitan tastes of Argentina’s elites, with the artificial light of the conspicuous chandelier (like Flórez’s green lamp) further adding a hint of corruption. Meanwhile, the “dressing room” setting (with its beauty products and mirror) reiterates the play’s recurrent association of queer behavior as inseparable from self-conscious artifice and theatricality. Pérez thus appears as the ringleader of a strangely ritualized underworld which convenes behind the façades of bourgeois respectability and meets across social divisions. However, while he notes that “[Princesa] is a companion in vice... a worthy confrere” in a “vice [that] is eminently democratic” (52), she, arguably, is presented in less damning, less phantasmagorical ways. Critics are often struck by the frank, matter-of-factual representation, which certainly treats Juanita and the Princesa with amusement, but not entirely without self-pride. Indeed, the play presents their sense of selfhood *against* the duplicitous Flórez. As Juanita notes: “What do I care about Flórez... the serious man... a hypocrite who goes around dissimulating with this pose of a learned man a secret that everyone already knows... What a guy... Well I threw away my slipper a long time ago (“yo, ya hace tiempo que tiré la chancleta”) (61).<sup>21</sup> Emilio

scorns Juanita, insisting that a married man with social standing and connections can hardly be expected to go “cruising like you on the Plaza Mazzini or along the kiosks of the Calle Callao, looking for adventures.” (61) Juanita’s reply is joyously defiant:

A man with standing? Bah... and what about Nero? Wasn’t he an emperor who went out every night on the Via Apia to find men? I would like that a lot, *che*, what do you expect... Those were the times! That Heliogabalus entered the city of Rome triumphantly riding on an enormous phallus of black marble. (62)

The playwright’s acute awareness of an existent queer subculture, organized in those streets of the capital known for cruising and soliciting suggest, for the first and only time, a naturalistic “slice of life” impervious to the death-dealing moralizing intent of *Los invertidos*. Of course, while the naughty cheekiness of the tango queens and their pimp appears to go unpunished, it does not occur in a historical vacuum: from Nero’s “Via Apia” to Buenos Aires’ “Plaza Mazzini” (named after the Italian politician Giuseppe Mazzini and nowadays “Plaza de Roma”) runs an associative chain that connects queer prostitution with European (notably Italian) immigration and the excesses of Roman decadence. Like the Italianate *lunfardo* Petrona knows, these associations invoke an international, transatlantic realm that circulates people, ideas, affect and linguistic differences that inform queer visibility in *Los invertidos*. In that sense, we might think of Paul Gilroy’s understanding of the Atlantic (in the case of Gilroy’s argument the conduit of a transatlantic black diaspora in modernity) as not merely a geographical given, but a “structure of feeling, producing, communicating and remembering” (Gilroy 3). As I continue to argue in the next section, *Los invertidos* too traffics in particular “structures of feeling” and “producing” and that accordingly, on the horizon, point to

early twentieth-century iterations of an increasingly international history of queer visibility.

### 3. Being/Feeling Decadent: Modernity and the Symptom of Queer Visibility

So far, I have described *Los invertidos*' formal characteristics and typologies, and proposed—against its own insistence on “realism”—a generic affinity to popular melodrama as “a concentrated form of affective drama” (Buckley) suited to mold a historically specific queer visibility on the Argentinean stage in an era of rapidly-changing demographics, ideologies and theories. Generally, the characters of *Los invertidos* like Miss Julie in August Strindberg's eponymous “naturalist tragedy” appear to be “synonymous with degeneration” (Strindberg 60). Crucially in that regard, Matei Calinescu, in his characterization of modernity as relentlessly future-oriented enterprise, points out that European turn-of-the-century preoccupations with degeneracy and decadence illustrate an underlying anxiety with the transitory and essentially negative nature of modernity. Following Octavio Paz's pointy aphorism that aesthetic modernity is “a tradition against itself,” Calinescu proposes that the self-consciously modern constantly needs to renew itself in fear of falling behind itself (and of failing “be modern”). All claims to modernity, consequently, are followed on the heels by the prospect of becoming either “decadent” (out-dated) or, like “kitsch,” banal and trivial. This panorama of modernist affect certainly comes to mind in González Castillo's self-conscious bid to belong in an international canon of modern dramatists. However, as a “realist drama” about “sexual inversion” that stakes its claims to urgency with abundant scientific proof, *Los invertidos* engages and indicts the “decadence” of its times with

exceptional straightforwardness. Whatever the modernity it proposes in lieu of the one it attacks, *Los invertidos* finds in hygienist theories the necessary proof that the current bourgeois order will necessarily—*because* it is inscribed in the laws of diseased nature and pathology—undo itself. If sexual and moral corruption thus places the play’s bourgeoisie *against* historical time, then queer visibility consequently appears as a symptom of a “decadent” modernity with which it becomes interchangeable. In other words, I hold that in *Los invertidos* the rhetoric of “decadence” (in the broad, capacious definition of Calinescu) provides a figural and affective register that informs sexual inversion as a queer condition of being and feeling at odds with history (and with “failing modernity”). As a drama that “feels historical,” *Los invertidos* is not concerned with staging a Foucauldian style “birth of the homosexual” to denaturalize sexual identity categories. Rather, its sense of historical intervention appears to be grounded in a drastic call to rupture with the “decadent”—the already decaying and, for that matter, unproductively queer—present.

To read *Los invertidos* in the specter of “decadence” brings to mind another trope of literary debate in Latin American letters. “Decadence,” after all, was a key concept in the context of Latin American *modernismo*—the generation of literati who, spearheaded by Rubén Darío (1867-1916), often turned to then fashionable European “decadent” writers in order to find a contemporary example on which to model Latin America’s proper entry into literary modernity. As Sylvia Molloy puts it, “the appropriation of European decadence by Latin America was less a sign of degeneration than an occasion for regeneration; not the end of a period, but an entrance into modernity, the formulation

of a strong culture and new historical subject” (191). Yet the Latin American intelligentsia, Molloy continues, not only ingested European literature, but they also

read and incorporated, with equal voracity, texts that signified another form of modernity, texts belonging to a scientific or pseudo-scientific corpus that, while providing a base for incipient psychiatric research, denounced the very decadence *modernismo* emulated in literature. Thus mainly due to the influence of Nordau and Lombroso, the emergence of what one term the double discourse of *modernismo*, in which decadence appears *at the same time* as progressive and regressive, as regenerating and degenerating, as good and insalubrious.” (192)

As a “drama realista” on “sexual inversion,” *Los invertidos* too plays a part—however indirect—in the “patchy and uneven process of translation of decadence” into Latin American letters. Of course, by the time González Castillo wrote *Los invertidos*, the modernista sensibilities that revolutionized Latin American (and Argentinean) writing had become canonized, institutionalized and, for a younger generation of self-avowed modernists, completely outdated. In the polarized social climate of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Argentina, the legacy of modernismo—which had spawned a literature that some critics label as a derivative “post-modernismo”—was associated the tastes of the established elites and had lost its capacity to respond to the changing realities.<sup>22</sup> *Los invertidos*, precisely and crucially, stages the typical bourgeois environment associated with the “double discourse of modernismo.” Not modernismo *per se* is at stake here, but rather the fact that it corresponds to a formal language (and a catalogue of sensibilities) which “realist drama” can cite as sociological proof for the “decadence” of its ruling classes. *Los invertidos* acknowledges “the double-ness” of the era’s quintessentially modern preoccupations<sup>23</sup>—the irreconcilable tension between norm and perversion, health and disease, masculinity and femininity, public and private identity, etc.—to sustain a paranoid fascination and confusion that signifies in suggestively queer ways. As such, the

play sheds light on the haunting queerness of “decadence” as it moved— as part of an “episteme” or a “structure of feeling”—from its European context to early twentieth century Argentina and onto the stage. “Decadence,” because it is already outdated, is revealed to be not only “double” but also *productive*, as a migratory repository of queer signification.

As mentioned, Flórez explicitly drops the name of Paul Verlaine in his forensic writings: “There is a secret law... strange and fatal, which always brings justice to these [inverts] eliminating them tragically. When their life becomes too much of a burden... suicide is their ultimate, good evolution as Verlaine would say” (45). Verlaine, *poète maudit* by excellence—infamously deemed one of “los raros” (“the strange ones”) in Ruben Darío’s eponymous 1896 collection of literary portraits—easily fits the task to suggest that “it takes one to know one.” But what in modernista literature would have been a wink of recognition for those familiar with an “epistemology of the closet”—which at least assumes a subtle, double understanding—in *Los invertidos* turns into a lurid, voyeuristic spectacle, where the public, safely behind the fourth wall, is invited to look into a world of “inverts,” and to witness a veritable perversion of law and order originating right in the heart of the model family. Molloy’s reminder that “*model* is a key notion in the poetics of imitation adopted by turn-of-the century Latin America with the purpose of creating new cultural forms (195)” specifically concerns her argument about the poetics of modernismo. Yet her observation that for Darío’s contemporaries “good came from abroad, to be imitated, in the form of high literary models; evil too came from abroad, to contaminate, in the form of despicable models bringing bad low habits” (195) clearly resonates with the Argentinean context described by Salessi. Latin America’s



entry into modernity was followed right on the heels by the specter of its own decadence which appeared “*at the same time* as progressive and regressive, as regenerating and degenerating, as good and insalubrious” (192). “Nowhere of course,” Molloy notes, “is that doubleness made so apparent as in discourse relating to the body sexual” (192).

Whereas ambivalence about decadence’s heterodox eroticism in the context of modernismo according to Molloy lead to “the almost near-total suppression of the male body from Latin American literature” (199), *Los invertidos*’ spectacularized “body sexual” achieves exactly the opposite. Situated at the nexus of scientific theories that explain and support the unapologetically “decadent” behavior of its queer characters, González Castillo’s “realist drama” recuperates the modernista taste of its outdated elite as proof of their degeneracy. Stage descriptions insist on the luxurious detail of Flórez’s office and on the refined, aestheticist manners of the bourgeois family. Clara, for instance, makes her first appearance in a “luxurious kimono,” an orientalist touch reminiscent of the modernista knack for the exotic (42). Pérez, who is described as an “opportunist, elegant, carefree, a “causueur” and spiritual,” arrives in the company of Fernandez, another “invert,” presented as a “type of sportsman” (“el tipo de sportsman”), who is

Tall, athletic, vigorous, dressed with a certain elegant nonchalance. He talks with marked pauses, as if he were convinced about his own physical strength. In essence (“al fondo”), however, he just another degenerate like the others, who considers his vice as an adornment rather than a calamity. (46)

Both Pérez and Fernandez are ascribed cosmopolitan manners: one is cast as a Francophile *causeur*, the other as a “vigorous” “sportsman.” Interestingly, Doctor Flórez, more a man of the mind than the body, quips that “something serious must have

happened for [Fernandez] to leave his habitual preoccupations, such as fencing, pigeon shooting, rowing (“el rowing”) and other barbarities and instead come to the suffocating environment of a study cabinet” (46). If Fernandez brings to stage a future anticipation of homosocial bonding around the cultivation of the male physique, Flórez’s scholarly aptitudes suggest a model of queer masculinity organized in and around the private, closeted “study cabinet.” The play proposes a tenuous, incriminating relation between scientific interest and scholarly devotion on the one hand, and sexual abnormality and deviant spirituality on the other. Petrona can affirm, as a youth, the studious and devout Flórez “always prayed his “Hail Mary” before going to bed” (73). “His mother,” she adds unaware of the reply’s mordant dramatic irony, “did not need to worry about him chasing the maids” (73). Petrona’s misunderstanding at this point in Act III is already obvious to both Clara and the audience; the report is simultaneously, from the point of view of social hypocrisy, a *cover for* and, as the case of Flórez’s childhood suggests, a *symptom of* degeneracy. Intentional acting and unconscious “acting-out” become indistinguishable and *Los invertidos* thus manages to ascribe to Flórez and his troupe an exulting “decadent” sensibility while containing the radical possibilities of their sexual anarchy as pathological symptoms. The alarmist urgency of progressive evolutionary disaster—sustained by contradictory yet complimentary notions of agency and determinacy—acts as the catalyst that propels Clara in her role as an avenger of “evolution... your good evolution” (90).

In other words, the rhetoric of “decadence” in *Los invertidos* is highly “performative” in J.L. Austin’s sense: it does not merely describe but performs—executes seem a better word here—through language (and on the stage of history) the

thesis that “sexual inversion” has no meaningful place in the teleological scheme of modernity, or at least not in the modern family (“Your children,” Clara urges her husband, handing him the gun, “Quick! Quick!”). This figural and temporal interchangeability between “sexual inversion” and “decadence” brings to mind Heather Love’s observation that “queers have been seen across the twentieth century as backward race. Perverse, immature, sterile and melancholic: even when they provoke fears about the future, they somehow also recall the past” (6). In *Los invertidos* “queer decadence”—perhaps in this context a tautology—puts into stark relief a set of binary pairs (future/past, norm/perversion, respectability/marginalization, transcendence/abasement, mind/body, nature/artifice etc.) that operate on two levels; one the one hand, they inform the riddling mystery of “sexual inversion” and the alarming affects its rise to visibility occasions; on the other, they propose a “structure of feeling” in which being queer corresponds to “being/feeling decadent,” ranging from gloriously basking in vice to despairing confessions of dejection. As a melodrama of fallen men (and conform with its moralizing design), *Los invertidos* first treats the spectator to an outré spectacle of excess to then conclude with Flórez’s tardy and ineffective attempts to distance himself from Pérez and his shameful jealousy:

I am tired. This constant misery; this life-long ignominy that like a noose oppresses me [...] Yes... I am jealous I feel a revolting spite that shames me but that I cannot control... This vice, this aberration that is already like a second nature in me is now in crisis and you have caused it... Since last night I abhor you... and I abhor myself... (*Weeping*). I am a wretch. [...] Go away...Don’t speak to me... I am less than a woman. (88-89)

Such contrition, however, is entirely lost on Pérez: “With this you hoped to regenerate yourself? ... It’s late...” (89). Like the subjects in his report, Flórez is already lost. As he

explains earlier in his forensic report, “inverts” belong to a “race of moral perversion, physical softening and progressive refineries...”

The symbolical fire that destroyed Sodom like a heavenly vengeance, your Honor, is nothing else than the secret, invincible and internal fire that creates the mystic’s fanaticism, incites the sensualist’s yearnings, fuels the drunk’s thirst, weapons the murders’ hand, and finishes off this race by exhausting the creative and reproductive energies of life. (41)

The teleological design toward “exhausting the creative and reproductive energies of life” posits a connection between non-reproductive sexuality and death. The queer kiss, Sue- Ellen Case in that regard argues, is associated with impurity and vampirism because it contaminates the distinction between the living and the non-living (“Tracking the Vampire”). This resonates with Foster William’s finding that *Los invertidos* endorses a “vampire theory of homosexuality” which at night erupts as a malignant force to ravish the living.

Intriguingly, this almost too evidently phantasmagorical rhetoric appears to be deflated under the scornful eye of Juanita and the Princesa de Borbón. To extent to which González Castillo sympathized with these characters—as for instance exploited victims in need of either affirmation or emancipation—is unclear. According to Foster, *Los invertidos* politicizes homosexuality “as an exploitation of the weak by the powerful and as a corruption of a natural condition of sexual health” (20) and /insists that “homosexuality is not to be found among the working class, that it is the result of a degenerate bourgeoisie or a rotten aristocracy” (21). However, Princesa’s insouciant embrace of life on the cruising zones of Buenos Aires (“I threw away my slipper a long time ago!”) and haughty disapproval of Flórez’s “pose of a learned man” put her at a self-conscious remove from an overriding taint of exploitation. Rather, *Los invertidos*—per

Juanita and Princesa's perspective—appears to indict the bourgeoisie's ability to “pass” between a respectable public identity and private affairs as an unlawful usurpation of class privilege. Arguably, however, the transvestite characters lack dramatic significance and in a sense simply have no history: we don't know their families, where they come from, or their legal birth names. Moreover, in terms of the play's conclusion, the relationship between “inverts” across the classes remains unmotivated. While Pérez calls theirs a “vice...eminently democratic” (52), it is a communality that keeps to the shadows: the “inverts” of *Los invertidos* either recede into background (the queens) or are forcefully written out of history (Perez and Flórez, who play their limited part in a political farce that will end when the curtain falls on the stage of bourgeois history).

The class distinctions, in other words, matter only as far as *Los invertidos* is willing to go. While the transvestite characters are supposedly less hypocritical (and in that sense more “authenticated”) than the ruling classes who act on bad conscience (a sign of moral bankruptcy that, in line with the playwright's left-wing radicalism, delegitimizes the cultural supremacy of the criollo elites), this hardly changes the drama from Clara's point of view. Moreover, it is rather ironical that the play should deploy these highly theatrical cross-dressing characters in order to accuse the ruling classes of “acting.” *Los invertidos* reveals that “inverts” across the social spectrum are involved in different kinds of everyday theatricality (passing, posing, imitating) that are antithetical to social normativity. Queer theatricality, as I have argued, is an object of both fascination and moralizing revulsion. While the titillating transvestite performance may have shocked yet entertained González Castillo's middle-class audience, Flórez's scheming is harshly concluded. Like Fernández, another invert who “considers his vice

an adornment rather than a calamity” (46), Flórez’s pose seems alarmingly aesthetic and “his vice” in that sense may be indistinct from his susceptibility to a riddling social and sexual theatricality.<sup>24</sup>

Curiously in that regard, *Los invertidos*’ queer theatricalities show a high degree of auto-reflexivity, which, I pointed out, simultaneously reinforces and counteracts the play’s naturalizing strains. “Realism” exposes its limitations by staging queer characters that, the piece believes and shows, need to “perform” or “pretend” either way.

Paradoxically, *Los invertidos* thus ends up vindicating queer theatricality as an almost ritualized object of spectatorial enjoyment while disparaging it in the context of bourgeois falsity and biological determinism. In its appeal to “realism” *Los invertidos* emphatically theatricalizes (almost as if in anticipation of modernist re-theatricalizing of performance) a queer gestural repertoire of gendered and class-specific behaviors fraught with recognizable pleasures and perils. If Flórez represents the bourgeoisie’s ability to pass back and forth between public respectability and private “vice,” the tango queens reveal, possibly for the first time in dramatic modernism, the everyday queer theatricality of cross-dressing. (Moreover, both point toward a ritualistic understanding of queer performance that anticipates the class mockery of roleplaying in Jean Genet’s *The Maids* and remains central to drag and camp.) Arguably, to present these observations is perhaps to assert—somewhat against the grain of González Castillo’s drama—that even in *Los invertidos*’ determinist universe the phenomenology of the stage and the performer (what Diamond calls the “auratic body”) does not monolithically line up with either the language or the course of action. Visual experience is controlled and constrained, yes, but imperfectly. Queer visibility in *Los invertidos* is an idiosyncratic, impacting difference

that punctures—but remains imbricated with—the play’s decadent modernity. As I argue in the following chapters, future scripts of queer performance (in particular in modernism and postmodernism) usually treat the intangible difference of sexual identity, which is always implicit in queer visibility, in a more self-conscious and self-scrutinizing manner. The figural, rhetorical and affective legacy of “decadence,” however, cannot so easily be discarded and continues to haunt queer theater.

The implicit intertwining of decadence and queer, as I have argued, was already apparent in González Castillo’s days and was radical yet backward-looking. In this context, it is worth citing the playwright’s reactions to Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* (1892), which he had seen performed in Buenos Aires in the 1913 by the company of the internationally renowned actress Margarida Xirgu. The playwright complained that “the English poet hardly limits himself to vent his proverbial morbidities in a chant for sickly and bloodthirsty lust” (276) and classified *Salomé* as belonging to the so-called “free genre” (“[el] género teatral que llaman libre”) which, contrary to his own serious, “moralizing” drama, had no object other than “provoking lust” or “the libidinal satisfaction of the spectator” (277). The queer kisses of Flórez and Pérez (at the end of Act I and Act III respectively) do not inspire lust or sympathy, although they certainly provided for the necessary sensationalism. Clearly, as a “good, moralizing piece,” *Los invertidos*’ “scabrous” naturalism has no formal or ideological affinity with the “decadence” of, for instance, *Salomé* or Huysmans’ *A rebours* (1884), but it certainly is *about* “decadence” becoming a quotable figure, or gesture of a “backward” queer visibility.

The Catalan Spanish actress Margarida Xirgu (1888-1969), who performed for the first time in Spanish during her successful tour in Buenos Aires (Seibel 2002), also provides another anecdote that leads us into the next chapter. Federico García Lorca was still a teenager when Xirgu brought a European modernist repertoire to the Argentinean stage, but the Spanish poet-playwright would collaborate repeatedly with her in the 1920s and 1930s. After García Lorca's assassination in 1936 and the instauration of General Franco's military dictatorship in 1939, Xirgu indefinitely left Spain and continued her association with García Lorca's oeuvre in Latin America, solidifying her standing as an icon of modern drama in the Spanish-speaking world. We don't know whether García Lorca had first-hand knowledge of *Los invertidos*, but it is not unlikely that he knew of its existence, either through Xirgu or any of the contacts he made during his six-month stay in Buenos Aires in 1933 to celebrate the Latin American premiere of *Bodas de Sangre*. Either way, the poet-playwright certainly spoke to the Argentinean press about *El público* (1930), his most explicitly homosexual-themed play written during his stays in Cuba and New York but left unfinished and unpublished at the time of his death. The next chapter in *El público* considers García Lorca's iconoclastic reversal of González Castillo's strategy of spectacular exposure in a context of modernist experimentation and internationalism.



<sup>1</sup> As the first Spanish-language play that, by my knowledge, explicitly deals with early iterations of homosexual identity and same-sex desire, it offers an important addition to the Euro-American dramas that Laurence Senelick discusses in *Lovesick: modernist plays of same-sex love, 1894-1925*.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Spanish in this chapter are mine. Occasionally, I include in parentheses the original words in Spanish, to signal the cultural specificity of the vocabulary and the liberties I took with the translation. By my knowledge, virtually nothing has been published in English on *Los invertidos*, save for contributions by David William Foster and Persephone Braham.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent collection of essays that looks beyond Europe for a new conception of the avant-garde, see for instance James Harding and John Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Judith Butler, "Critically Queer" and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick "Queer and Now" respectively. For a general outline of critical debate on the meaning of "queer" in queer theory and queer studies since then, see for instance "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" (2005) and *After Sex?: On Writing since Queer Theory* (2011), ed. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker.

<sup>5</sup> The term "structures of feeling," of course, was originally coined by Raymond Williams. See for instance his discussion of the term in *Marxism and Literature* (128-135).

<sup>6</sup> For Foster's pioneering work on sexuality in Latin American literature and performance, see for instance *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Writing*, and *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Writing*.

<sup>7</sup> For an account on Argentinean theater of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that posits not a difference, but a synergy between the development of highbrow theatre and popular forms of entertainment (with an emphasis on the role of the innovative grotesque style of local ("criollo") farce called *grotesco criollo*), see Teresa Sanhueza-Carvajal, *Continuidad, Transformación y Cambio: El Grotesco Criollo de Armando Discépolo*.

<sup>8</sup> The most frequently performed international playwrights in the period from the late 19th century to the early 20th century reflect a receptivity for changing artistic trends: while in the 1880's and 1890's, Alexandre Dumas and Victorien Sardou lead the list of international authors on the Buenos Aires stage, by the turn of the century, they share the spotlight with Henrik Ibsen (*Ghosts* in 1896, *Doll's House* in 1899, and *Hedda Gabler*, *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea* in 1907), Herman Sudermann (*Magda* in 1897), Gabrielle D'Annunzio (*La Giaconda* in 1899), Maurice Maeterlink (*Monna Vanna* in 1907), Hugo van Hofmannsthal (*Elektra* in 1913) and Oscar Wilde (*Salomé* in 1913). For a chronological overview of the pieces performed in Buenos Aires during this period, see Volume II of Osvaldo Pellettieri *Historia de teatro argentino en Buenos Aires: La emancipación cultural (1884-1930)* (39-74).

<sup>9</sup> Dubatti notes that theatergoers in Buenos Aires on a regular basis could enjoy melodramas, nativist (*costumbrista* or folkloric) pieces, comedies (catering either to bourgeois tastes or to audiences who preferred the tradition of popular farce or *sainete*), vaudevilles, tragicomedies and tragedies, realist dramas, and what critics dubbed "experimental" pieces by European and (from the 1920's and onward) North American playwrights (39-40).

<sup>10</sup> I concur with Carla Freccero that the rhetorical and figural properties of language are a crucial part of queer historiography. Moreover, such a "figural history," Freccero's argument implies, is particularly promising to address the transnational and transhistorical (i.e. "travelling") dimensions of sexual representation: "This could... give rise to a specific practice of comparative historical literary study that would follow... the promiscuous and errant movements of figures and across space and time" ("Figural History" 46). Figural historiography might supplement and, Freccero insists, *trouble* empirical history by "allowing fantasy and ideology an acknowledged place in the production of a "fantasmatic" historiography as a way to get at how subjects live not only their histories, but history itself, to the extent that history is lived through fantasy in the form of ideology ("Queer times" 20). Such an approach might recognize that queer visibility in twentieth century "world literature" is inscribed in circuits of figural circulation and, as such, expand debates on world literature with a sometimes narrow (literal) focus on questions of translation and translatability, for instance David Damrosch, *What is World literature?*, or Emily Apter's recent polemic *Against World Literature*.

<sup>11</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, and Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*.

<sup>12</sup> With the term "situation," Berlant refers not to a yet clearly-defined, socially fracturing event, but rather to something that happens *in media res* and thus still lacks a proper sense of meaning and response and thus

a specific (social and collective) genre: “The situation is therefore a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos” (*Cruel Optimism* 6). While *Los invertidos* has little in common with the early twenty-first century neoliberal context in which Berlant situates her argument, the play’s hybrid as a realist/naturalist *tranche de vie* that combines popular melodrama with locally bred (“criollo”) farce—as if in anticipation of the *grotesco criollo* genre, the grotesque dramas of the 1930s—appears to similarly question the appropriate genre to catch up with the times’ rapidly changing socio-political context.

<sup>13</sup> See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* and Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*.

<sup>14</sup> More generally, we might ask, does queer have a particular genre? This is one of the dissertation’s key questions that connect the following chapters. Let me recall that queer (and what I call queer visibility) in the context of my dissertation operates as a critique of social categorization and of the visual impetus that is generally, if intricately, aligned to its disciplinary effects. Given the subsequent chapters’ focus on modernist, experimental theater, the question of queer visibility further along more explicitly considers queer as a formally challenging and genre-resisting gesture.

<sup>15</sup> This is Elin Diamond’s term, proposed and expounded in her feminist exegesis of dramatic realism in *Unmaking Mimesis* (see in particular 3-39).

<sup>16</sup> The difficult language was not lost on the play’s reviewers either. A reporter in *La Mañana* opined that some of the work’s “scenes, although incomprehensible for the audience, provoke interest” (“Estreno de los invertidos”).

<sup>17</sup> See for instance the section “Translation and the Hypnoid State” in Diamond (14-25).

<sup>18</sup> *Los invertidos*’s insistence on irrational behavior and fits of jealousy among “inverts” (the mysterious “critical moment” in which “they turn into women”), according to Salessi drew from actual case histories and brings to mind a notorious scandal that took place in 1906 among high-ranked officials in the Argentinean army. Military institutions—a classic Foucauldian locus of pedagogical and disciplinary concern—had been viewed Argus-eyed following a series of homosexual scandals uncovered in the entourage of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II a few years earlier. These incidents had received wide press coverage in Argentina because since 1900 the Argentinean militaries were trained by German military instructors (Salessi 360). The Argentinean case, in which one officer was killed by his former lover, who afterwards tried to commit suicide, further added to a widespread anxiety about the occurrence of homosexuality in the military and in the highest social classes. The latter incident was widely covered by the press and analyzed in forensic reports that were published in the prestigious *Archivos de Psiquiatría, Criminología y Ciencias Afines* (“archives of psychiatry, criminology and related sciences”). This case, Salessi argues, convinced the medico-legal establishment that “passionate exaltation” was a distinguishing trait of male inverts (364-365).

<sup>19</sup> Salessi points out that psychiatrist and cultural historian José María Ramos Mejía (1849-1914), for instance, used the term “inversion” as a general symptom of a de-regularized society in need for disciplinary reform. In *Las multitudes argentinas* (1899), Ramos Mejía argued that the new demographic groups that arrived to Buenos Aires through immigration were usually uncivilized and “uncouth” (“guarango”). Regardless of their wealth and social position, the tastes and sensibilities of the new urban populations were deemed idiosyncratic and un-adapted. Even among the affluent Ramos Mejía detects the presence of the scoundrel (“canalla”), a “bourgeois individual of the new ruling classes” who had “climbed the ladder of nice clothing and money, but with a soul still full of atavisms” (qtd. in Salessi 242). While this comment is generally applicable to *Los invertidos*’s upper class characters, Ramos Mejía’s writings on “inversion” particularly resonate with Pérez in his description of the upper-class *canalla* who is “not unlike an invert of the sexual instinct [...] He needs very bright colors and piercing music, like the erotomaniac the intense smell of the flesh” (qtd. in Salessi 243). In this context, it is not surprising that the titillating spectacle of the tango dancing transvestites in Act II takes places in Pérez’s *garçonnière*, a secluded and lavishly decorated boudoir in which the wealthy patron welcomes a demimonde of cross-dressing “inverts.”

<sup>20</sup> Telling in this regard, a contemporary reviewer dismissively compared *Los invertidos* to *Der Andere* (1893) by German playwright Paul Lindau (misspelled as Lindeau), which had recently been staged as “The Procurator Hallers” (“El Procurador Hallers”):

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Not so long ago the Serrador company staged in Buenos Aires a drama by Lindeau, titled “The Procurator Hallers,” which subject matter is inspired on a curious case of mental duplicity. The protagonist, a German lawyer, during the day is a normal man and at night a scoundrel of the worst kind. This reaches such cerebral extremities (“a tanto lleva el extravismo cerebral”) that Hallers one day decides to rob his own life, and that of his other self. Something of this plot line is present in the work of Mr. González Castillo. The argument shows similarities. It’s not necessary to recount it, for then we would incur the same error its author made in bringing it to stage. (“Los anormales”)

The passage in one fell swoop presents queerness as a state of “mental duplicity” (as something hidden from the eye and the daylight) yet demonstrates an inability (or reluctance) to cope with the *alterity* (“der Andere”) that *Los invertidos* anarchically puts into play.

<sup>21</sup> As Salessi points out, Princesa’s reference to “the slipper” appears verbatim in *La mala vida en Buenos Aires* (1908), a study by turn-of-the-century criminologist Eusebio Gómez (1883-1954) who situates its meaning in an environment of male homosexual prostitution:

When an invert has “thrown away the slipper,” a saying which in the jargon means they have lost all consideration for other people, and have no more scruples about practicing their vice professionally, he joins a brotherhood (“cofradía”). From then on, he starts wearing women’s clothes, uses make up, adopts a woman’s name, starts [...] walking the streets looking for clients and frequents the dances which are periodically organized to strengthen the ties of solidarity. (qtd. in Salessi 309)

We now recognize this as an exemplary instance of Foucauldian “reverse discourse,” in which those who are labeled as deviant take hold of the medical discourse that stigmatizes them, turning it into a badge of self-identity and, as Gómez’s study shows, community.

<sup>22</sup> For a general account on the cultural importance and controversies of *modernismo* in Latin American letters, see Gwen Kirkpatrick, *The Dissonant Legacy of Modernismo*, Graciela Montaldo, *La sensibilidad amenazada*, and Cathy Jrade, *Modernismo, Modernity and the Development of Spanish American Literature*. For a more recent account that focuses on the heterodox eroticism in River Plate (particularly Uruguayan) modernista writing, see Carla Giaudrone, *La degeneración del 900*. For a provocative argument regarding the “queer potential” of modernismo, see Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui, “Modernismo, Masochism and Queer Potential in Nervo’s *El bachiller*,” *The Avowal of Difference: Queer Latino American Narratives* (25-48).

<sup>23</sup> The “doubleness” of the era’s modern sensibilities has been well analyzed by a great number of studies in literary and cultural criticism that are usually exclusively European in orientation. For a more international (albeit still generally European) contextualization, see Charles Bernheimer *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* and Mattei Calinescu (151-221).

<sup>24</sup> Note in this regard that Ramos Mejía in another essay, *Los simuladores del talento en la lucha por la personalidad y la vida* (1904), discusses “simulation” as a pathological tendency to fake and simulate personality traits and talents that in “reality” were lacking. This consequently posed a real danger to forming a healthy sense of self and reliable social interactions. See Persephone Braham’s exploration of the era’s anxious fascination with social theatricality and imitative behavior in her fine discussion of *Los invertidos* alongside other literary works of the period. This fascination and abhorrence with pathological theatricality has a fascinating afterlife in Argentinean letters and drama, for instance in Roberto Arlt’s iconic meta-theatrical play *Saverio el cruel* (1936), which explicitly, and in a grotesque, distorted style, invokes pseudo-positivist ideas that stem from the country’s turn-of-the-century context.

## Chapter 2

Queer Visibility in *El público*: to the Modern Theater with Federico García Lorca

Federico García Lorca's unfinished and posthumously published play *El público*, as perhaps no other of his works, continues to polarize critics. He probably considered this radically experimental piece as one among several projects that were "impossible" to stage (*Obras completas* 631) and that form a corpus, in Maria Delgado's term, "unknown Lorcas," that in past decades have reoriented scholarship on García Lorca's dramatic oeuvre more generally ("Federico Garcia Lorca" 121-172).<sup>1</sup> Among these pieces, particularly *El público* remains embroiled in controversy. It is not uncommon among commentators to assert the impossibility of bringing coherence to either the text or the context that informed it. There is no certainty whether García Lorca planned on staging it, or if the remaining manuscript is the only version. Lorca probably wrote most of *El público* in Cuba, at the tailend of his stay in New York (1929-1930), but it is possible that he kept working on it until right before his assassination in 1936. At some point before his death, he entrusted a handwritten copy to Rafael Martínez Nadal, who in 1970 published a study on the manuscript six years *before* the play went to print for the first time--in the 1976 annotated facsimile edition. A decade later, in the struggle over the text's authoritative ownership, Luis Fernández Cifuentes launched a call—explicitly leveled at Martínez Nadal's thematic readings—to discard attempts that make the play's permanently "illegible" features cohere.<sup>2</sup> Along those lines, in a new edition of *El público*, Antonio Monegal warns readers that attempts "to reconstruct and complete what is unfinished and incomplete" usually forces critics to "postulate the figure of the author

and to guess his intentions to justify what inevitably turns out to be a rewriting” (“Introducción” 9).<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless he concedes that *El público* presents “an easily identifiable series of recurrent themes and motives” which inevitably “[lead] to an interpretation to which the text might still resist, though not the reader” (23).

Monegal’s interpellation of the reader—although with the intention to more clearly delineate, as if almost in a vacuum, “the text”—seems fitting for a play that announces its concern with “the public” as a pretext to investigate the nature of theater more generally. In fact, both Cifuentes and Monegal agree that some of *El público*’s “illegible” features are not merely accidental but can be attributed precisely to the play’s modernist skepticism and meta-theatrical self-awareness.<sup>4</sup> While García Lorca’s interest in metatheatricality as an avant-gardist technique is certainly not limited to *El público*,<sup>5</sup> arguably no other piece (with the possible exception of the unfinished one-act fragment usually referred to as *La comedia sin título*, or “Play without a title”) goes to the same extent to imbricate its reflection on the nature of theater with a downright assault on the conventional theater expectations of its times. Notably, the playwright in an interview conducted in Buenos Aires in 1933 called *El público* a “poem to be booed at” (“un poema para ser silbado”) (*Obras Completas* 444) linking the piece to an international avant-gardist desire to rather outrage the audience than entertain it.

In this chapter, I take to heart García Lorca’s commitment to such a theatrical iconoclasm in order to address the play’s critical investment in what I call “queer visibility,” a term introduced earlier which at this point requires a more specific gloss. Certainly, *El público* is generally considered to be Lorca’s most explicitly themed homosexual writing, but to my understanding only a limited number of studies

acknowledge the structural importance of queer concerns to the play's modernist agenda.<sup>6</sup> First of all, I suggest *El público* self-consciously dramatizes queer visibility as a lynchpin for modern theater: it "queers" the theatrical context in which it intervenes—by dramatizing queer desires (and what it holds to be the elusive drama of desire more generally) and thus broadening the range of permissible subject matter for modern drama. Second, and crucially, while *El público* makes queer themes "visible" and available to the theater, it simultaneously renders the visible (the visual economy created and supported by the theatrical apparatus) "queer" with a brazen avant-gardist iconoclasm that eventually proposes to abolish the theater "as we know it." The queer visibility presented in *El público*, in other words, is both revealing and troubling in ways that are resonant both with modernist skepticism and present-day deconstructionist queer theories. The techniques, themes and sensibilities that inform the play's articulation of queer visibility, I argue, grant it a legitimate place in an archive of queer dramatic modernism, shaped by local and international sensibilities.<sup>7</sup>

Considering Anglophone modernism, Heather Love has suggested that "what makes *queer* and *modernism* such a good fit is that indeterminacy of *queer* seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production" ("Modernism at Night" 745). "Critics," she notes, "have long pointed out the pervasiveness of nonnormative desires in the making of the modern; *queer*, unlike *gay* or *lesbian* is by definition generalizable and therefor apt to make the most of this atmosphere of permission" (744). However, calling attention in queer studies to "the effects of what has often been called the affective turn in a broader context," Love also

urges that such an atmosphere of “permission” and “indeterminacy,” however stimulating to the conversation, cannot lose sight of what queer scholarship has to offer: “not blank indeterminacy” but contributions to “embodied knowledge and emotion, fantasy and confusion, identity and its effacement” (747). The turn to affect, she concludes, “may suggest a new scene for queer modernism: not the epistemology of the closet but an encounter with the illegible. Queer lives and queer feelings scribbled over but still just visible—you can half make them out in the dark” (747).

The explicit connection Love establishes between “queer lives and feelings” on the one hand, and “the illegible” and the “still just visible” on the other, indicates a double emphasis that is generally indicative of the aims and methods of queer historicizing: to recover and construe a queer history (since queers have generally been excluded, or marginalized from official history) and to treat with critical awareness the historically specific language of (and by extension, its capacity to represent) sexual identity categories. It is part of my argument that García Lorca addresses this tangle of question in a piece that dramatizes queer visibility as both a possibility and problem for a modern theater. Queer visibility is the attempt to make queer themes visible on stage (with experimental techniques, and in the dazzling history of dramatic intertextuality the piece sets up) but also a self-conscious commentary on the shock and ambivalence its aesthetic provokes. Moreover, queer visibility in *El público*, while fueled on by avant-gardist fervor, repeatedly retreats into feelings of loss, perplexity and melancholia—generally “backward feelings” which Love elsewhere has diagnosed as a “queer structure of feeling” prevalent in queer modernism.<sup>8</sup> I thus make an avowedly anachronistic but conscious connection between García Lorca’s immediate cultural context (Spain in the

1930s) and a contemporary Anglophone understanding of “queer” as a capacious term that both interrogates the ideological complex of language, representation and identity (the “epistemological” scene of queer modernism in Love’s argument) and lends itself to diagnose how the play’s themes and gestural repertoires are informed by queer experiences (what Love tellingly calls, “embodied knowledge and emotion”).

While privileging queer themes and sensibilities in *El público*, I note that Lorca left little to nothing that explicitly addresses his own feelings on the topic of homosexuality.<sup>9</sup> It is not my intention to uncritically “postulate the figure of the author and to guess his intentions” (Monegal “Introducción” 9), although arguably we also have to move beyond such methodological doxa to appreciate how *El público* registers a crucial moment in an international dissemination of modernist ideas about the theater and its capacity for staging queer passions and fantasies. In order to do so, I organize the chapter as follows. First, I provide a synopsis of the play and briefly situate its main ideas in the modernist context that held sway over García Lorca. This will set up my discussion of the term queer visibility. In the following sections, I look into how queer visibility operates at various levels of *El público*, honing in its careening acts and actions, its meta-theatrical techniques, the use of theatrical props and stage settings, and its densely metaphorical language. In the shorter final section, I return to the question of *El público* as an “impossible” play and briefly discuss the key points of the critically acclaimed adaption by Lluís Pasqual.



1. Visual Disruptions in the Modernist Theater: “The Mirror of the Audience”

Both formally and content-wise, *El público* is a brazenly avant-gardist text that doesn't hesitate to self-consciously confront and destroy the conventional theater of its times to the stage. The First Scene takes place in the Director's Room, where the Director, Enrique, and his Servant are visited first by the enigmatic Four White Horses, then by the bickering Three Men who lampoon the Director's conventional “theater of the open air” (in particular his insipid rendering of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*) and instead demand a radically different “theater beneath the sand” that would reveal “the truths about tombs” (*The Public* 5).<sup>10</sup> The accusation that the Director chooses clichés over truthful theater comes with an innuendo about his reluctance to recognize one of the Three Men, Gonzalo, as a former lover. All but Gonzalo (the First Man) and the Servant then pass behind a screen pulled on stage to drastically transform the appearance of the characters that are promptly played by different actors. An actress playing Helen, “dressed as a Grecian” (8) joins them, thus announcing the sudden shift of time and scenery of the Second Scene, set in a “Roman Ruin” (11) Here two characters of uncertain gender, “one totally covered in red vine leaves” and another “covered with little golden bells” (11) The two vie for the attention of the sinister Emperor and taunt each other in an unmistakably homoerotic dynamic—a spectacle which fills the Three Men and the Director with shame and provides the main thread of conversation during the start of the Third Scene, which takes place against a “wall of sand” (17). Halfway through the Third Scene, the stage again changes drastically: “The Wall opens up and Juliet's tomb in Verona appears” (20). Juliet's discussion “in the tomb” with the Horses on love, death, and theater is interrupted when The Director (now dressed as a Harlequin) and the Three

Men join again, still quarreling about the spectacle. At the peak of their discord, more costumes are ripped off which from thereon return to the stage, not merely as costumes, but acting as independent characters. There is no critical agreement whether or not a Fourth Scene is missing, but most editions—following Martínez Nadal’s preparations for the first Spanish edition—identify the next act as the Fifth Scene, which shows the parallel death of the Christ-like Nude and the First Man, against the backdrop of a revolution that has broken out in the theater on account of a scandalous performance of *Romeo and Juliet* off-stage. In the following “Solo of the Silly-Shepherd” (41) a figure clad in animal skins and feathers plays an organ while reflecting on the various uses of masks in the theater. It is situated in my edition between the Fifth and the Sixth Scene, but again there is no critical consensus as to where it structurally belongs.<sup>11</sup> The last Sixth Scene ends back in the Director’s Room with a confrontation between the Director and the Prestidigitator on the relative merits and drawbacks of a revolutionized “theater beneath the sand.” The play ends with striking circularity as an audience again knocks on the Director’s door.

If the play’s immediate genetic context lies with the author’s stay in Cuba and New York (a fact that testifies to the recurrence of specific themes, images and cultural references in both *El público* and in the poems of *Poeta en Nueva York*, published posthumously in 1940), *El público* imbibed a variety of international vanguard influences. Clearly, the basic features of the plot resemble Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search for an Author* (1921) in which a Director and his cast are interrupted during rehearsals by “characters” who propose to take over the stage with their own story. Mark Allinson notes García Lorca was present at the play’s 1923

premiere in Madrid—an important cultural event given that “Pirandello was treated with veneration by the Spanish intellectuals of the 1920s” (6). At this time, García Lorca attended the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, a vibrant cultural and educational institution, which introduced him to the latest international trends in arts and sciences. His friendships (and rivalries) at the Residencia with the upcoming pioneers of Spanish surrealism, notably the painter Salvador Dalí (1904-89) and film maker Luis Buñuel (1900-1983), are well-documented and frame the critical debate (and disagreement) regarding the extent of surrealism’s sway over *El público* and over García Lorca’s oeuvre more generally.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, the influence of French surrealism was palpable in Madrid: Luis Aragon’s lecture at the Residencia in 1925 was the talk of the town, as was André Breton’s 1924 surrealist manifesto (Gibson “A Life” 149). In 1928 Cipriano Rivas de Cherif (1891-1967), at the time a key innovator of the Spanish stage and in 1927 the director of García Lorca’s first commercial stage success, *Mariana Pineda* (with set designs by Dalí), further contributed to the excitement by directing Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1925), a piece that with its blend of myth and reality (and with a character playing a horse!) is oftentimes regarded as another influence on *El público*.<sup>13</sup>

Imbued with the modernist ideas of its times, *El público*’s context adds a potentially long list of conscious and unconscious influences to the play’s already dazzling, self-conscious inscription in literary genealogies. Its manifold actions and dispersed foci of attention take place against a backdrop of quickly changing settings and timeframes, densely layered with intertextual references to the Spanish and English early modern stage, to Greek and Roman antiquity and to commedia dell’ arte. If *El público* seeks to bring the past into conversation with the present, it does so by enacting a

veritable avant-gardist clash (close to its meaning as a military term) that produces a storm of images rather than a neatly laid out play. For the critic confronted with such a work, conventional notions of “plot” and “character” arguably have a limited purchase. Eleonora Basso, for instance, argues that it is quite impossible to identify a protagonist in *El público*, or at least certainly not one that fits “the traditional categories of character” (174). Indeed, the dense poetical lines cited by characters often sound programmatic and are not intended to portray real-life characters. In *El público* language itself takes poetic license to perform through characters which appear mouthpieces (or puppets, as in García Lorca’s 1920’s puppet plays) in a fast-paced theatrical experiment in which they have little autonomy. More drastically even, as the outline suggests, the stage personae are repeatedly destabilized: the Three Men and the Director are shifting shapes or are revealed to be masquerading. Dramatic character in *El público* tends to unravel into to “role playing” in accordance with the play’s repeatedly verbalized interest in a theater of “costumes” and “masks.”

These interruptions of place, time and identity, I argue, propose a radically new way of seeing and staging altogether. With modernist skepticism, *El público* auto-reflexively gestures to what it understands lies at core the theatrical experience—a dialectic between seeing and interpreting. García Lorca thus revamps a perennial problem of the theater with particularly modern visual sensibilities, ranging from Freudian dream interpretation to cinematic techniques (where the impersonal camera, paradoxically, acts as the human eye) and microscopic investigations (like the ones practiced in the laboratories of the Residencia) that allowed access to hitherto unseen interiorities.<sup>14</sup> These visual innovations (the dream, the impersonal and fast-cutting eye, the probing

microscope) revolutionize perception in ways that *El público* self-consciously explores. Queer themes and sensibilities, I hold, play a crucial part in a piece that queries the capacity of a revolutionized modernist theater to imagine/discover things hitherto unseen on the Spanish stage (and maybe “impossible” to stage).

While after García Lorca’s death the play disappeared, the poet-playwright certainly never hid neither the existence of *El público* nor his ambitions for this project. He mentions it for the first time in an interview conducted in 1930 on his way back to Spain after his yearlong stay in New York and Cuba: “[The play] is called *El público*. It consists of six acts and a murder... I don’t know whether it will be easily performable in the material order of things. The principal characters of the drama are horses” (*Obras Completas* 372). Three years later, when interviewed in the Argentinean newspaper *La Nación* about the successful Buenos Aires premiere of *Bodas de Sangre*, the poet-playwright comments candidly that “With regards to the other play, titled *El público*, I don’t plan on premiering it in Buenos Aires, nor in any other place, because I don’t think that there’s a company motivated to put it on stage nor an audience that would tolerate it without feeling undignified” (*OC* 444). According to Lorca, the play might cause the audience to feel “undignified” because

It is the mirror of the audience. The play puts on scene the personal dramas that each one of the spectators is thinking about, while they are watching the spectacle, often without fully paying attention to it. And because the drama of each one is often caustic and generally not respectable, the spectators would immediately rise in indignation and would impede that the spectacle be continued. Yes, my piece is no work to stage; it’s, as I have defined it, “a poem to be booed at.” (*OC* 444)

In this passage, García Lorca invokes the “mirror” to undo the safe distance between spectator and spectacle. *El público*, the playwright insists, blurs the lines between the

action on stage and the spectator's own fantasies and associations while they are watching the action unfold—in the shared but impersonal space that is the theater. “Public performance,” Paul Julian Smith notes in his study on García Lorca's theater, “whether it is understood as “theatrical” in the restricted sense or as the acting out of prescribed social roles, is thus connected in complex but undeniable ways to what psychoanalysis's first patient baptized the “private theater” of the psyche” (9). This image of the “private theater” both captures the dynamics of “the audience, wrapped in silence and cloaked in darkness, all the better to conceal and enjoy its guilty pleasures” (Smith 14) and equally applies to the “private theater” that opens *El público* (the Director's rueful encounter with the Horses) and on its way interpellates an increasing variety of audience members. As “a poem to be booed at,” the play as such imagines the theater as a dangerously intimate space that might set off affects that cannot be harnessed or even call to resistance. Accordingly, first the Three Men, who arguably are the play's main audience, and then a range of characters (including, in the climactic Scene Five, the bourgeois theatergoers of García Lorca's time) throughout provide meta-commentary on the spectacle and how it affects them. Like nesting dolls that create a meta-theatrical *mise-en-abyme*, “the drama of each one” (OC 444) resonates with that of the Director's dilemma; at stake is the extent to which the “caustic and generally not honorable” (OC 444) should be avowed or censored as a resource to extend theatrical practices. The question brings to mind Julie Stone Peters's insistence on the importance of aesthetic and public concerns with “obscenity” (that which is literally “against” or “off” the stage) to the shaping of modern drama (“Performing Obscene Modernism”). Similarly, *El público* opens by querying the place of the private and obscene. At the start of Scene One, as the

four White Horses come into the Director's room "blowing their trumpets," the Director is still "wearing a morning coat" in a "Blue set"—a scenic set-up that suggestively exteriorizes his interiority, caught between awakening and slumber. The Director recognizes his "little horses" (here, as often in Lorca's oeuvre, indicators of vitality and unconscious desires), but quickly drives them off the stage, barring them from representation. His investment in a keeping a commercially safe, conventional "Theater in the open air" (*TP* 4) cannot countenance, he ads in an aside, "the bed for sleeping with horses" (3). Just as in Pirandello's *Six Characters in search for an Author*, the play's characters, the Horses and the Three Men who pan the Director's latest rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, in the opening scene comment on the conventional productions of the "Mr. Director of the Open Air Theater" (4). The Second Man's complaint that we never see "Romeo urinate" (5), while almost a parodical send-up of naturalism, equally voices a concern that the Director's theater elides the body, the orifices and the excremental (hence vital, or at least "true") matters/materials of life. As the stage's "X-ray windows" and the "large imprinted hand"—hovering over the Director's Room—would suggest, the Director fails to show the actual bones and insides of the body, resorting instead to a trite and false theatricality in which the actor playing Romeo has to "pretend to throw himself of the tower in order to be caught in the drama of his sufferings" (5).

The Three Men thus programmatically link *El público* to a modernist anti-theatrical sensibility—not as much against the theater *per se*, but against the clichéd theater apparatus of its times.<sup>15</sup> The Three Men promptly present a range of theatrical metaphors that invoke both a call to anti-theatricality aimed at insipid, conventional theater and to a hyper-theatricality which self-consciously proposes to re-theatricalize the

medium's specificity.<sup>16</sup> In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, they urge the Director not to stop at Juliet's tomb (with the climax and the cliché of romantic death) but to "go down the steps into the tomb" (5), "So the truth about tombs be known" (5). The "tomb," in other words, is not a literal endpoint but a start: there the Director might find "an angel carrying off Romeo's sex while leaving another, his own, the one belonging to him" (5). Romeo's detachable and replaceable "sex" is thus revealed to be a prosthetic, theatrical prop, aligned with "the mask," another of the play's central metaphors which in turn points back to the theater as essentially an art of "masking" and "make belief." Such a theater, finally, would not take place in a "theater in the open air" but instead, paradoxically, "beneath the sand" (5), a term which suggests the possibility of a subterranean theater of heightened reality.

These complex metaphors consequently take us beyond theater as we know it and look at life as a resource that, depending on its use, can either serve or corrupt the theater. That "The Director changes his blond wig for a black one (4)" when the Three Men knock at his door underscores that he is "playing" part for his audience (and is just changing from one part to another, for that matter). His visitors too carefully stage their entry as respectable drama critics: "Three Men dressed exactly alike, in tails enter. They are wearing dark beards" (4). It is the First Man, Gonzalo, who ends this masquerade: "[to Man 2] I still recognize him... [To the Director] And you do you recognize me?" (6). Crucially, the question recalls the Director's attempt to drive the Horses from the stage: the innuendo that Gonzalo (and possibly each of the Three Men) is the Director's slighted former lover brings to the stage a theme of romantic disappointment and of a love that refuses to speak its name. The First man's ardent defense "to inaugurate the true theater,



the theater beneath the sand” (5) is thus more than casually motivated. His insistence that “we’ll have to bury the theater because of everyone’s cowardice” (5) rings with personal chagrin, but crucially extends a belief that all drama comes from life itself: “Do you think there could be any newer play than us with our beards... and you? ... I have to take you to the stage, whether you want to or not. You’ve made me suffer too much” (6-7).

As a “mirror of the audience,” *El público* thus interpellates the Director (and the audience members who are watching) as both a spectator and an actor in his own “personal drama” (OC 444). The opening scene (with its self-referential stage design, the fantastical Horses, the exposing of the masquerade and the programmatic language) immediately sets out to complicate the boundaries between theater and real life (between spectator and participant, between private theater and public performance) and reclaims hitherto silenced anthropomorphic fantasies (“my little horses”) and abjured homosexual attachments as materials for the stage. Moreover, and crucially, *El público* starts its proposal for theatrical reform by *twice* insisting on the Director’s *disavowal* of his personal, private drama as a source for modernized theater.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the failure of recognition (whether it takes the form of misunderstanding or outright denial) repeatedly recurs in the play’s actions and conversations. Disavowal has a structural and thematic importance, which causes disappointment and mounting despair (the First Man) or evasiveness and increasing recalcitrance (the Director). *El público*, in investigating the boundaries between theater and life, asserts the central importance of the psychic mechanism of recognition to both and reveals how its characters relate to others through fantasies, fictions and projections. The play’s vortex of images and situations exposes the

Director's disavowed attachments and his hesitancy to draw on this private, "personal drama" as a resource for theatrical innovation.

The stakes and problems of recognition (the process in which the self assumes an identity) in *El público* are most explicit where it concerns, what I call, "queer visibility"—a double movement in which queer themes and sensibilities are simultaneously revealing and troubling. The piece views homosexual passion through the lens of modernist skepticism, against the background of a "theater of masks" and a "theater beneath the sand"—metaphors that respectively suggest a higher degree of re-theatricalized artifice (the opposite of "naturalistic" realism) and a limited, or even illegible, visibility. In that sense, it is not exactly a gay or homosexual visibility that arises out of the play's maelstrom, but a prickly, negative "queer" visibility that is particularly resonant with Lee Edelman's contention that any project of "homographesis" (the writing of homosexual signs into a recognizable homosexual identity) on close examination fails and "proves to be only a homograph that masks a difference as bafflingly unreadable" (18). So too, but in the area of a metadramatic fiction, *El público's* insistent push to render homosexual themes visible is self-consciously complicated *both* by the circuits of (mis)recognition it dramatizes *and* by the play's experimental techniques that "mask" (and render queer) the sexual identities it brings to the stage.

However, this is not to say that *El público* unequivocally favors such a queer visibility, not even despite the fact that the Director drastically changes his beliefs over the course of action. (Here it is apt to recall Luis Fernández Cifuentes' deconstructionist insistence on the play's permanently illegible features, or Antonio Monegal's advertency that "Lorca no dice *concluyentemente* nada," 24). Rather, I suggest that the play registers

the contradictory pleasures and perils of its modernist skepticism most clearly where this involves figuring queer sexuality as an avant-gardist intervention. Its queer theatricalities are shaped against the background of what Heather Love describes as a “temporal splitting” within aesthetic modernism:

While the commitment to novelty is undoubtedly a dominant feature of modernism, no account of the movement is complete without attention to the place of the non-modern in the movement—whether in primitivism, in the concern with tradition, in widely circulating rhetorics of decadence and decline, or in the melancholia that suffuses so many modernist artworks.” (*Feeling Backward* 6)

If *El público*’s circular design (we end and start in the Director’s Room), intertextual anachronism and surrealist-expressionist techniques suggest the enactment a dream logic, the play—if dreams do contain a wish—no doubt *wills* a future queer theater that arises out of this clash between the modern and the non-modern. However, I argue, following Love, that modernism’s “temporal splitting” equally taints the play’s avant-gardist visibilities with melancholy ambivalence. After all, visual distortion too, Jacqueline Rose argues, from the vantage point of psychoanalysis (and from that of “the public” more generally) can significantly relate to sexual confusion. Summarizing a passage from Sigmund Freud’s psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci, Rose explains, “[Freud] relates—quite explicitly—[Leonardo’s] failure to depict the sexual act to bisexuality and to a problem of representational space. The uncertain sexual identity muddles the plane of the image so that the spectator does not know where he or she stands in relation to the picture. A confusion at the level of sexuality brings with a disturbance in the visual field” (226). What clearly matters here, more than Freud’s judgment about either the drawing or its creator, is the dynamic Rose spells out *between* spectator and artwork:

The sexuality lies less in the content of what is seen than in the subjectivity of the viewer. [...] For Freud... our sexual identities as male or female, our confidence in language as true or false, and our security in the image we judge as perfect or flawed, are fantasies. [...] Hence one of the chief drives of an art which today addresses the presence of the sexual in representation—to expose the fixed nature of sexual identity as a fantasy and in the same gesture, to trouble, break up, or rupture the visual field before our eyes. (227)

Rose's feminist theorizing of visual disordering as challenging the spectator's shared fantasies of sexuality resonates with David Savran's plea, more recently, for an inclusive understanding of queer theater (as opposed to an identity-oriented gay theater) that capitalizes on "the ability of writing and performance to disarticulate and disrupt identity—whether the identity in question is that of the playwright or the spectator" (161-162). These calls to "rupture the visual field" and "disarticulate identity" arguably still draw on and recalibrate the modernist skepticism that informed queer visibility in *El público*. García Lorca, like Freud a quintessentially modernist figure who did not foreclose on the past to redefine his own sense of modernity, in *El público* self-consciously grounds a proposal for queer visibility in the material and theatrical practices of his times.

## 2. "Beneath the Sand": The Mask of Queer Visibility

Among the various metaphors for the theatrical innovation *El público* proposes, in the "mask" it finds a well-used metaphor to consider, on the one hand, the essence of theater, and, on the other, the ambiguous reliance on vision, revelation and recognition in theatrical practices both on-stage and off-stage. No doubt García Lorca, through his friendship with Rivas Cherif, knew about the critical importance of masks in the writings and practices of influential European directors such as Edward Gordon Craig (1872-

1966) and Jacques Copeau (1879-1949).<sup>18</sup> In *El público* the “mask” is an avant-gardist term used with almost military deliberation to “bury” the Director’s conventional theater “beneath the sand” (*TP* 5). The First Man’s proposal to “shoot [himself] in order to inaugurate the true theater” (5), the Director exclaims, would cause “Everything [to] come crashing down...The mask would come and devour me” (5). The assumption that drama comes from real life is pushed to the extreme: the theater (“the mask”) *devours* reality to violently stage/expose its entrails: “I once saw a man devoured by the mask. The strongest youths in the city rammed large balls of thrown-away newspapers up his rear with bloodied pickaxes; and once in America there was a boy whom the mask hung by his own intestines” (5-6). The “mask” thus proposes a theater of assault which sodomizes, lynches and reveals on-stage what the Director’s theater conveniently hides, namely *himself*: “The audience is going to see me. My theater will come crashing down” [*italics mine*] (7).

The transformative “screen” ordered on stage by the First Man at the close of the First Scene further underscores the revelatory, but aggressive invasiveness of the “mask.” Antonio Monegal’s point that the screen contradictorily “undresses” or “unmasks” those who pass behind only to “dress up” the characters in the guise of another stage persona (other “masks”) suggests its operations are not revelatory in the conventional sense. Rather, the screen is “a poetic device and dramatic device” which reveals “the tension that underlies the effort to say by poetic means what cannot be said” (“Unmasking the Maskuline” 215). Nonetheless, the transformations are revealing in what they *do* show; the Director appears from behind the device “as a boy dressed in white satin with a white ruff” and a “little black guitar,” a discontinuity of appearance underscored by the stage

directions that “he should be played by an actress” (TP 7). No doubt feeling doubly emasculated to be “revealed” as a prepubescent boy embodied by an actress, the Director instantly summons Helen (“who loved me greatly when my theater was in the open air,” 8) to redress the sexual ambivalence of his persona. Tellingly, he invokes the Trojan War and the praised object of desire (Woman, “dressed as Grecian” with obvious theatrical artifice – blue eyebrows, white hair, plaster feet, pink tights) that inspired its male rivalry. Helen, however, accuses him and the Third Man of having a romantic past: “I don’t care if you were drunk and wish to justify it, but you’ve kissed him and slept in the same bed.” (8) The Second Man too is exposed by the screen, emerging as “woman dressed in black pajamas with a crown of poppies on her head” and a “lorgnette covered with a blond mustache” (8) which he/she raises to the mouth when he/she Helen enters the stage. The lorgnette, clearly, is a visual aid to perform a masculinity that he/she otherwise seems to be lacking. Even the aggressively performed masculinity of the Third Man, who appears “beardless” with a “whip” and wearing a “leather wristband with golden studs” (9) cannot persuade Helen; only the Director’s Servant who “passes behind the folding screen and comes out unchanged” (9) finally gets to take Helen in his arms and – by her request – away from this scene of profound disturbance.

It is telling that the First Man, Gonzalo, does not pass behind the screen; it would seem he has nothing to “reveal” since, as he concedes in the Third Scene, “I don’t have a mask” (26), at least not a *social* mask to hide his longing for the Director: “My struggle was with the mask, until I succeed in seeing you naked. [*He embraces him.*] [...] I love you in front of others because I abhor the mask and because now I’ve succeeded in ripping it off you” (27). The development of the action, however, suggests that the

supposed “real” under the clothes is not easily accessible. The First Man imagines that digging “beneath the sand” and “[struggling] with the mask,” he will succeed in seeing the Director “naked.” However, once the screen, like Pandora’s Box, has unleashed the devouring “mask,” *El público* wildly proliferates disturbing shapes and images that overtake, dress up and expose its characters<sup>19</sup>—a fitting illustration to García Lorca’s often-cited statement that “the theater demands that characters appear on stage wearing a cloak of poetry and that at the same time show their bones, their blood” (*OC* 630). Ironically, exactly the Third Scene, which takes places against “a wall of sand” (17) that halfway through “opens up [on] Juliet’s tomb in Verona” (20), explicitly address the paradoxes of “theater beneath the sand” as a problem for representing queer visibility. The Horses’ aggressive attempt to seduce Juliet (a clear echo of the rivalry over Helen in the First Scene), for the First Man, Gonzalo, is still not “real” enough:

We’ve already taken the first step. But I know positively that the three of you are hiding, that three of you are still swimming on the surface. [*The Three horses nervously crowd together.*] While accustomed to the coachman’s whip and the blacksmith’s tongs, you’re still afraid of the truth... They should disappear immediately from this place. They are afraid of the audiences. I know the truth, I know they are not looking for Juliet and they are concealing a desire that wounds me, and which I can read in their eyes. (26)

The Horses, in other words, still are in “hiding” because they are masks for a “concealed desire” that dare not speak its name. The Black Horse’s rejoinder they do not conceal “one desire, [but] all desires, like you” is countered by Gonzalo: “I don’t have any more than one desire” (26). At stake here, in other words, is not only the place of desire in *El público* but the very name by which it is called. Gonzalo never names the nature of his “love,” but he insists he has only “one desire,” a wounded attachment for which he keeps seeking recognition. The Horses “mockingly” read his desire as a narcissistic mirror-

image reflected in “a lake [which] is a surface” (27)—an insult to the “irritated” First Man who insists it is a lake-surface with a “volume,” i.e. with reason and true substance. Meanwhile, the Director refuses to be claimed and interpellated for public display: “Don’t embrace me Gonzalo. Your love lives only in the presence of witnesses... I despise your elegance and your theater.” (27) Clearly, Gonzalo’s “elegance” and “theater” are associated with a hyperbolic theatricality that is coded as queer and effeminate. The director’s disavowal calls to mind cultural associations with the theater as “the queerest art” and lays bare an acute problem for staging homosexual passion in avant-garde theater: queer theatricality is both a means and an obstacle to the play’s modernist iconoclasm. The conceptual tension between modernist metaphors of anti-theatricality (“beneath the sand”) and hyper-theatricality (the transformations enacted by “the mask” and “the screen”) is acutely expressed in the play’s concerns with codifying recognizably queer themes in front of an audience (“in the presence of witnesses”). The theatrical “mask,” the Director warns, can never be entirely discarded in favor of entirely *personal* revelation:

WHITE HORSE 1: “Like horses, nobody forgets his mask....  
 DIRECTOR: There’s nothing but masks, I was right Gonzalo. If we make fun of the mask, it will hang us from a tree, just like that boy in America. In the middle of the street, the mask buttons us up and lets us avoid the indiscreet blush which sometime rises to our cheeks. In the bedroom, when we stick our fingers in our nose or delicately explore our rear, the plaster of the mask presses down so heavily on our flesh that we’re barely able to lie down on the bed.” (26)

The Director delivers these lines in a “white Harlequin” costume, a *commedia dell’arte* character, and thus actively puts in play the distinction between social and aesthetic “masks” which the First Man challenges. It is a pivotal moment in *El público* that marks the Director’s skeptical rejection of an identification based on “only one desire” and for



the high demand place on a stable visibility. The First Man's insistence on an unmasked visibility calls to mind what Lee Edelman calls the homographetic desire "to produce "homosexual difference" as an object of cognitive and perceptual scrutiny [that] can easily echo... the homophobic insistence upon the social importance of codifying and registering sexual identities" (4). However, the Director, who now fully embraces modernist skepticism, deliberately thwarts such claims to stability and instead sets off a dramatic series of transformations. First, the Director

quickly takes off his costume and throws it behind a column. Underneath he is wearing a very delicate women's costume. From behind the column, Enrique's costume appears. This character is the same white Harlequin, now with a pale yellow mask. (28)

The femininity the Director performs in this "delicate women's costume" intentionally trumps any notion of romantic and idealized love: he provokes Gonzalo and the Horses to "pass through me, yourselves and boats and regiments, and if the storks want too, they can pass through me also. Such a female am I!" (28). This taunt is immediately followed by another transformation in which "he rips off the chiffon costume and emerges in full-length tights completely covered with little bells [an echo of the Second Scene] and disappears, followed by the horses" (28). The woman's Ballet Costume character enters, stutters and inverts the name of the character she supposedly belongs to ("Gui-guier-guillermi-guilermina. Na-nami-namiller-namillergui") but she quickly "falls to the ground asleep" (28). When the Second Man, still dressed as "the woman in the black pajamas and poppies," is stripped of his costume, it also appears independently from him with a face "smooth, white and curved like an ostrich egg... The Pajamas Costume sits down and slowly hits his smooth face with his hands, until the end of the scene" (29-30). The sustained desultory pose of the Pajama Costume fittingly underscores the First Man's

futile attempts to keep the Harlequin Costume in a meaningful embrace: “You had to come back for me, for my inexhaustible love,” Gonzalo utters, “Tell me, tell me that you’ve come back for me” (31). The costume’s response is oddly disconnected: “I’m cold. Electric light”—a stage trick which from thereon can merely repeat in a thinning out voice Gonzalo’s entreaties. The costume is a prop come to life that fits the shape of a person but returns only an echo of Gonzalo’s own disappointment.

Gonzalo’s demand to fix the Director in his role as a lover thus dramatizes a bitter comedy of misrecognition: the Costume is an empty shell with no substance underneath (just as a “lake is surface” and a “volume... a thousand surfaces,” 27). *El público*, in other words, demands to go where no existent vocabulary of theater can. As the Silly Shepherd, in the short interlude before the last scene, puts it:

Riddle, riddle, riddlize,  
about a theater without seats to utilize  
and a sky filled with chairs,  
with the hollow left by the disguise. (41)<sup>20</sup>

Now that the Director’s mask is discarded, the riddle of personhood (of “the hollow left by the disguise”) is exposed and so too the drama of Gonzalo’s investment in this spectral notion on which his own sense of identity is dependent. While the play’s psychodynamics of lack are not reserved exclusively for dramatizing homosexuality (most notably, Juliet too in her tomb is left thirsting for love), *El público* chooses the homoerotic as a locus to queer the embattled nature of visual recognition in theatrical practices, on-stage and off-stage. In the “private theater” of the mind, images of the loved one are imbricated with fantasies which *El público*, with iconoclastic (“image-breaking”) fervor, shatters, or rather reveals as imagined. The theater’s mission, the playwright will later explain in an interview, “is to present and solve individual, intimate problems” (OC 600). No doubt it

is telling that among all possible “intimate problems” precisely the homoerotic encounter is dramatized as a romantic failure and as a disturbance of the visual field. While in that sense I agree with Carlos Jerez Farrán that *El público* is riddled with sexual ambivalence (which no doubt signals, however refracted and speculatively, a kernel of the playwright’s personal attitudes on the matter), charges of “internalized homophobia” don’t do justice to the play’s careful modernist recalibration of homosexual and polymorphous desires. Rather, as I argue in the next section, the feelings of loss, melancholia and perplexity that haunt *El público* illuminate, what Heather Love calls, a queer historical “structure of feeling” that magnifies the paradoxes of the avant-gardist spirit more generally. Queer visibility, born of modernist skepticism, is troubling and revealing, avowing and disavowing, precisely because its investment in representing sexual identity cannot be severed from the difficult questions it raises about the role of the theater in life more generally.

### 3. “Mud on the Mirrors”: Queer visibility in the Ruins of Representation

So far, I have made a connection between the play’s key metaphors (the “mask,” the theater “beneath the sand” and “of the tomb”) and how these relate to a queer visibility that reveals and troubles a vexed visual field. In this section, I discuss the play’s enigmatic Second Scene set in the “Roman Ruin,” a homoerotic tableau that divides and galvanizes its audience. I argue that the ruins invoke a past that haunts the present moment *El público* with a self-consciously avant-gardist zeal attempts to radicalize and blast away—a simultaneous overturning and ruination of tradition (and representation) as we know it. Moreover, the modernist desire to leave the ruins behind

appears to be tainted with queer ambiguity—an affective imprint that fuels the play’s desire for a paradoxical queer visibility. After the First Scene programmatically declares war on the Spanish theater of its times, the Second Scene, as a play-within-a-play, is announced by the Horses who “sound their trumpets. The characters stand rigid in their places” (9) as the curtains drop slowly. The scene opens on two “figures” (“figuras”), Vineleaves (“One character, totally covered with red vineleaves, plays a flute while seated upon a capital,” 11) and Bells (“Another character, covered with little golden bells, dances in the center of the stage,” 11), exchanging an amorous but evasive balletic discourse at an increasingly heated pitch. Their exchange clearly mirrors the dynamic of thwarted longing introduced early on in the First Scene:

CHARACTER IN BELLS: If I tuned into a cloud?  
 CHARACTER IN VINELEAVES: I’d turn into an eye.  
 CHARACTER IN BELLS: If I turned into caca?  
 CHARACTER IN VINE LEAVES: I’d turn into a fly.  
 CHARACTER IN BELLS: If I turned into an apple?  
 CHARACTER IN VINE LEAVES: I’d turn into a kiss.  
 CHARACTER IN BELLS: If I Tuned into a breast?  
 CHARACTER IN VINE LEAVES: I’d turn into a white sheet.  
 VOICE [*sarcastically*]. Bravo!  
 CHARACTER IN BELLS: And if I turned into a moon-fish?  
 CHARACTER IN VINE LEAVES: I’d turn into a knife.  
 CHARACTER IN BELLS: [*stopping his dancing*]. But why? Why are you tormenting me? Why don’t you come along with, if you love me, to wherever *I* take you? [...] You delight in interrupting my dance, and dancing is the only way I have of loving you. (11)

The complementary images (“caca” to “fly,” “apple” to “kiss,” “breast” to “sheet”) follow a contiguous logic which violently ends, after the “voice” (probably the audience’s watching backstage) “sarcastically” comments, with the “knife” cutting (thus stabbing and/or penetrating) the “moon-fish.” The Second Scene repeats similar sequences of complimentary but contrasting images that usually end in an annihilating

opposition. The imagery, despite the contiguity, suggests the taint or impossibility of male homoerotic encounters as anything other than “tormenting,” violent or evasive. “I never follow you to those places where you so cleverly pretend to take me,” Vineleaves insists. “If you tuned into a moon-fish I’d cut you open with a knife because I’m a man, because I’m that and that alone, a man, more man than Adam, and I’d wish *you’d* be more man than me... But you’re no man” (10-11). Because the scene presents homosexual acts are potentially emasculating (especially where it means giving up control “to follow you,” to relinquish acting to instead undergo), Vineleaves and Bells turn to each other in distress; at least *one* has to play the part of the phallic masculinity, perhaps to avoid even more gender confusion. When Vineleaves proposes to “grovel at [Bells’] feet,” Bells is shocked: “No, don’t. Why are you saying that to me? It’s you who should force *me* to do it. Aren’t *you* a man? A Man who’s more man than Adam?” (13) In other words, normative gender expectations must constantly—even aggressively—be performed or risk failing entirely.

As a “mirror to the audience” the Second Scene’s antagonism continues into the Third Scene: the Second Scene ends when “The Character in Bells tugs on a column and it unfolds into the white folding screen of the first scene. From behind it enter the three bearded Men and the Stage Director” (16). The Third Scene visualizes reiteration and continuity even more explicitly, for instance, when the Director reveals his “full-length tights completely covered with little bells” (28), or in the company’s antagonistic responses to the scene in the ruins. “The anus,” the First Man despondingly notes, “is man’s failure, it’s his shame and his death,” whereas the two figures, as romantic heroes in a struggle with their state of abjection, “should have been victorious... by both being

men and not letting themselves be carried away by false desires. By being men entirely” (17). *El público*, in other words, self-consciously dramatizes a homosexual dynamic that is experienced as abject, emasculating and in that sense as belonging “in the ruins,” the quintessential trope of queer backwardness and romantic martyrdom. The ensuing fights in the Third Scene between the Three Men and the Director accordingly repeat the unresolved contradictions of the past. The “Roman Ruins,” in other words, not only invoke an antique world that is in decay, but also a state of mind that expresses a continued sense of marginalization in the midst of avant-gardist dynamism.

Repetition and circularity in *El público* thus suggests a difficulty to “resolve” and “move one” that is quite antithetical to the avant-gardist zeal one would suspect from the Three Men. In the modernist clash between past and present, maybe nothing lasts or continues, but queerness is shown to be persistent—both as a problem of abjection and as a persistent question or interruption in the visual field. While, in that regard, the play clearly foregrounds the circuits of misrecognition between the Director and the First Man, arguably *El público* refrains from indicating one final or ideal position (with the possible exception of the Prestidigitator near the end). Instead, the piece turns itself inside out to register (perhaps not unlike the “huge eye” (43) which looms over the stage in the Sixth Scene and cannot easily be ascribed to anyone in particular) the contradictions that arise from its themes and actions. Wherever the central consciousness (and “I/eye”) might reside, *El público*’s affect is mostly one of ambivalence that with increasing intensity swings back and forth between avant-gardist urgency and queer backwardness.

This wavering between two gravitational poles is expressed most poignantly in the penultimate Fifth (or, depending on the edition, Fourth) Scene, when Gonzalo is

linked to the Red Nude, who “crowned with blue thorns” and strapped to “a bed facing the audience and perpendicular to the floor” (33) in an unmistakably Christ-like way is crucified as a martyr for art and for unrequited love. As in a passion play that revives the tradition of the Spanish *auto sacramental*, the Nude inquires “How long before we reach Jerusalem” (33).<sup>21</sup> The Male Nurse who tends to the Christ meanwhile asks the Prompter if “the operation room [is] ready” (37), a reminder of the theater’s mission as place of investigation and of the First Scene’s “X-ray windows.” The Prompter’s answer (“Only the candlesticks; the chalice and the ampoules of camphorated oil are still missing,” 37) in turn re-asserts modern theater’s origin in ritualized burial practices and in the play’s abiding fascination with “the tomb.” The Nude inquires about Gonzalo who, according to the Nurse, went missing “in the ruins,” but shortly thereafter is revealed to be strapped on the other side of the Nude’s bed. Gonzalo appears “still with his tails and black beard” (38), a reminder that he has not undergone changes by “the mask.” Possibly Gonzalo’s impending death illustrates the destruction (and denial) of the high value place on romantic and supposedly timeless ideals of “love” and “art” in a radicalized modern theater. Either way, his suffering takes place against the background of revolution that has broken out in the theater on account of the Director’s now radically avant-gardist conversion. Audience members (four bourgeois Ladies with a Boy, five Students) come running on stage, either bemused or inspired by the Director’s latest production of *Romeo and Juliet* in which Juliet’s role was played by a man. While for one of the Ladies the play frightfully abolishes the distinction between real life and theater (“It’s terrible to get lost in a theater and not find an exit,” 37), the Students generally praise the Director’s innovations. Tellingly, Gonzalo’s death cries of “agony” over a lost and impossible cause

are contrasted with the simultaneous burst of “joy” celebrated by the Students, probably the ideal audience the play has in mind. Their discovery that Juliet’s role was actually played beautifully by a man—an early modern stage convention—deepens their appreciation for the suggestive power of theater:

Romeo could be a bird and Juliet could be a stone.... What difference does it make to the audience? ... It’s a question of form, of masks... In the final analysis, do Romeo and Juliet necessarily have to be a man and a woman for the tomb scene to come off in heart-rending and lifelike way? (36)

From there, it is only a small step to celebrate the poetic license of the liberated theatrical apparatus and, more tellingly, its capacity to effect in the spectator hitherto unrepresented positions of desire:

STUDENT 5: I don’t have time to think about whether Juliet’s a man or a women or a child, but only to observe that I like her with such joyous desire.

STUDENT 1: And if I fall in love with a crocodile?

STUDENT 5: You fall in love.

STUDENT 1: And if I fall in love with you?

STUDENT 5: [*flinging a shoe at him*]. You fall in love also. I’d let you and I’d carry you on my shoulders along the cliffs.”

STUDENT 2: And we’d destroy everything.

STUDENT 5: Roofs and families.

STUDENT 1: And wherever love is talked about we’d run in there with our soccer shoes on, flinging mud all over the mirrors.” (39-40)

As a perfect avant-garde audience, the Students disqualify the sentimental “love” plot of conventional drama in one breath with the core institution of bourgeois society (married life) it portrays, instead “flinging mud over the mirrors,” distorting—and queering—the visual apparatus. Homoerotic desire is accepted here (albeit as a prank) yet militantly set apart from domestic (heteronormative) “love” and blocked from straight-forward recognition in “the mirrors” (as a homosexual “identity”) by “mud” and thus continues the play’s preoccupation with establishing a theater “beneath the sand.” Crucially, this



image of “mud on the mirrors” captures a queer visibility that invokes revolution without “feeling backward”: the questions that guide the interaction in this passage (“And if...” etc.) deliberately echo the episode in the Roman Ruins, but in a significantly altered way, ringing brazenly optimistic in the promise of an ecstatic, expansive state of “Joy! Joy of the boys, and of the girls, and of the frogs, and the tiny little wooden pegs!” (40), thus linking together the human with the non-human—whether animal or yet another object to pin, hang and show. The Student’s enthusiasm, in other words, finally predicts a theater of queer and utopian desires that arises out of the ruins of representation and might instigate sweeping social and material reconfiguration.

Nonetheless, while this eruption of queer visibility gestures toward a radical reconceptualization of the social, the pathos of the First Man’s crucifixion and the Student’s anticlimactic exit suggest that *El público* treats the possibility of futurity with ambiguity. In the Sixth (and last) Scene, the now entirely radicalized Director proudly maintains that he

dug the tunnel under the sand without the people of the city ever noticing it. Many workers and students helped us, who now deny having worked on it despite having their hands full of cuts. When we reached the tomb we raised the curtain. [...] I made the tunnel to take possession of the costumes, and through them, show the profile of a hidden force. [...] And to demonstrate if Romeo and Juliet are in mortal agony and die in order to come back to life smiling when the curtain falls, then *my* characters, on the other hand, burn the curtain and truly die in the presence of the spectators.” (44)

Not only do the Director’s characters, as in Pirandello’s *Six Characters*, “truly die in the presence of the spectators,” but “workers and students” too play their part in a revolutionary subversion of the bourgeois theater of “the people of the city.” The Prestidigitator, however, wonders “What kind of theater can come out of tomb?” (44) In

the telling confrontation between the magician, dressed in a long “white cap that reaches down to his feet and... a top hat” (43), and the Director, *El público* performs its own inability to decide between a theater that either “pulls magical tricks” or “reveals the truth.” The play as such rehearses the now recognizable avant-gardist paradox; how purify the theater of its “falseness” (“A prestidigitator,” the Director insists, “cannot resolve this matter,” 43) without doing away with the theater all together (“It seems to me,” the magician wonders, “that you, man of masks, do not remember that we use the dark curtain,” 43). As an Artaudian poet-seer, the Director would destroy conventional theatricality in order to show the “hidden force” of a theater that really cuts and bruises, “where authentic dramas have been performed and where real combat has been raged, one that costs the lives of all the players” (46).

That “he weeps” while delivering these lines, however, casts the boldness of such language in a different light. Instantly following these remarks, a Woman shows up in the company of the desultory Harlequin Costume and “dressed in black” (as a *mater dolorosa*) to reclaim Gonzalo’s missing and un-mourned body. That the Director callously sends the mother-figure away (“You shouldn’t ask *me* anything. Today, all that is below the ground,” 46) and still abjures the pathos of the dying lover (as part of truthful yet modernist theater “beneath the sand”) perhaps is the crime García Lorca had in mind when he described *El público* in the original manuscript as “a drama in twenty scenes and a murder” (1). At least, this might offer a purchase on the Prestidigitator’s accusation that the Director “wanted to ... murder the dove and leave in its place a piece of marble covered with time drops of long-winded spittle” (44). Instead of re-capturing “the dove” (a traditional image) in its freshness, it is discarded – perhaps prematurely –

on the heap of classic (“marble”) art objects spat upon with modernist snobbery. The Prestidigitator similarly expresses doubts about the Director’s understanding of the word “love:” “When *you* say “love,” I am astounded... I see a sandy landscape in a cloudy mirror.” (45) However, this problematizing of “love” as a blotted out “sandy landscape,” the Director in turn argues, is no less confusing than the magician’s understanding of the term: “When *you* say “love”...I see each grain of sand turning into an ant that’s overflowing with life,” or even more drastically, “That night is falling every five minutes” (45). Their discord, then, concerns not the visual disruptions of a modernist theater “beneath the sand,” but rather what gets *excluded* from it. The Director’s understanding of “love” is exclusively consumed with creative destruction:

One’s got to destroy the theater or live in the theater! Hissing from the windows won’t work. [...] I dared to perform an extremely difficult poetic trick in hopes that love would impetuously rip the costumes to shreds and then give them a new form. (45)

The Prestidigitator, on the other hand, wonders why, out of all possible dramas, the Director picked *Romeo and Juliet* to revolutionize the theater: “why did you choose such a stale tragedy and not do an original drama?” (43) Ironically, such theater of “the tomb” still continues a Romantic emphasis in resolving conflict-driven plots of impossible passion with death. A more imaginative model that allows for idiosyncrasy rather than constant opposition would broaden the scope of the theater in such a way that Gonzalo (and all sorts of queer passions) need not be sacrificed:

If you had employed “Diana’s flower” which Shakespeare’s anguish made ironic use of in a *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it’s likely that the performance would have turned out to be a success. If Love is pure chance and Titania, Queen of the fairies, fell in love with an ass, then by the same reasoning there would not be anything extraordinary about Gonzalo drinking in the music hall with a boy dressed in white sitting on his lap. (44)

Against the doomed faith of Romeo and Juliet, two star-crossed lovers who die because of who they are, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* according to the magician offers a more promising model for unfettered possibilities of representation, queer and otherwise, reveling as it does in coincidences of mistaken identities and accidental couplings. The dilemma between tragedy and comedy or between a theater that reveals “truth” and one that pulls “magical” tricks, however, seems unresolvable. The play’s ending underscores the contradictions arising from both positions. Already the Director has commanded a total dismantling of theater: “We’ve “broken down the doors, we’ve razed the roof, and now we’re left with only the four walls of the drama” (47), so that now the theater is exposed now from all sides to “real life.” Consequently, the Director gets cold—a real-life physical element—and “puts on some gloves and pulls up the collar of his tails, shivering terribly” (47). When the public again requests to see the Director, “flakes of snow begin to fall” on stage—a trick caused by the Prestidigitator who cheerfully fans himself with a large white fan. However, in the Director’s renewed theater “The cold is a dramatic element like any other” (47) and consequently, he insists, “we’ve got to endure it... we’ve got to overcome any trick whatsoever” (47). Possibly, the Director ends up freezing to death in his dismantled theater, although *El público* refrains from spelling out such a conclusion. Clearly, however, the last scene’s meta-critical discussions reiterate an emphasis on the conundrum of representation as a mysterious “hidden force,” both *real* and *magical*. Theater, in suspending the distinction between authenticity and simulacrum, presence and absence, raises the question of the ill-understood force of make-believe (perhaps akin to what García Lorca elsewhere suggestively calls *el hecho poético*, or “poetic deed”) that overcomes the chasm between these contradictions.<sup>22</sup>

This willed insistence on theater-making as an imaginative *force* (as a creative desire that simultaneously makes and undoes, resolves and contradicts) is arguably echoed in a minor key in the play's treatment of love—an affective force generally credited in the western cultural imagination with similar contradictory properties.<sup>23</sup> Buried from the start in the Director's disavowals, it would seem that love (or passion and fantasy, although none of these exactly are synonyms), haunts *El público*'s modernist project.<sup>24</sup> Love certainly is in a strange place in the play's avant-gardist ruins of representation. This illustrated not only by First Man's failure to grasp and hold love (The Director, turning to a mere costume or, in the Silly Shepherd's words, "a hollow left by the disguise"), but also by Juliet. In her tomb, she may be rid of the face (i.e. image) of her love—she does not mention Romeo's name—yet she is not delivered from its impersonal calling, even "beneath the sand." Her solitude is interrupted only by the play's fierce discussions about the theater ("A commotion of swords and voices," according to the stage directions, is heard "at the back of the stage" 20). Nonetheless, she holds, "Me, I don't care about their arguments concerning love or the theater. What I want is to love" (21). The Horse's proposal that she "mount [his] rump" to take off to "To the darkness...the quietest part of the darkness" (21)—an erotic invitation that foreshadows the more menacing atmosphere when the other Horses join to encroach on Juliet—appears to her a ruse (another argument "concerning love or the theater") to keep Juliet, with "two breast of rose-colored celluloid" (20) a wholly artificial product of the theater, within confinement:

Why do you want to take me away? It's a trick, love's word, a broken mirror, footsteps in the water. Then you'd leave me in the tomb again, just as everyone does when trying to convince those listening to them that true love is impossible. Now I'm tired, so I'll stand up and ask for help in

throwing out of my tomb all those who theorize about my heart and all those who open my mouth with little marble tweezers. (22)

Theater critics who “theorize” Juliet’s heart can’t make her speak with invasive “little marble tweezers”) about a “Love that only lasts a moment” and that makes “Juliet, so alive, so joyous, free of the piercing swarm of magnifying glasses” (22). Love, queer or otherwise, while wanting “to love” (“amar”)—a *verb* and “hidden force,” rather than a *noun* or stable entity (“amor”)—still resists stabilized visibility.<sup>25</sup> The “swarm of magnifying glasses” which *El público* applies to stage hitherto unseen passions and fantasies yield a distorted picture. The play’s optical sensibilities and metaphors, drawn from theater (“mask”) and science (“X-ray,” operation room,” “magnifying glass”) and its swirling imagery and actions (which call to mind an erratic, associative dream-logic of condensation and displacement) instill a modernist flux at the heart of representation. While Juliet knows of “women killed by the sun,” reverting to the night—the favored topos of literary modernism, from the turn-of-the-century *poète maudit* to the surrealist—does not resolve but merely realigns visual interruption: “The moon pushes uninhabited houses gently along, causes the fall of columns and offers tiny torches to worms, so they can get into the interior of cherries” (22). The play’s recurrent manipulation of scale in which the massive (for instance, “the moon”) and the small (“tiny torches”) are interwoven to get to the heart of things (“the interior of cherries”) repeats the movement from the “open air” to what lies “beneath the sand.” Such a metonymic chain of signifiers, however, only displaces and suspends the signified: if Juliet’s love partakes both in “the moon” and in “the interior of cherries,” it can never be illuminated at a glance in the theater. Elsewhere in the play, the disproportionate scale exposes precisely the contradictions that inform the social selves (the “costumes” and “masks”) that

characters wear. For instance, the Character in Bells with “A whip made of the stamens of tiny orchids” threatens to blind Vineleaves:

blinding you because you’re not a man. I am indeed a man... A man who’s so much of a man that I feel a sharp pain in my teeth when somebody breaks a stem, however tiny it might be. A giant. A giant who’s so much of a giant that I can embroider a rose on a fingernail of a newborn child. (13)

Language self-consciously reveals the contradictions that inform Bell’s hyper-performative masculinity (a “giant” with a “whip”) as a reaction to emasculating accusations (the whip of “tiny orchids,” the broken “stem” that causes “pain in my teeth,” the delicacy to “embroider a rose on a fingernail of a newborn child”) that neither wishes to see. The threat to rob Vineleaves of vision is unambiguously related to a failure of gender (“Blinding” those who are not “man” enough)—a taint, of course, of which Bells is not free, but that is complicated by redirecting the audience’s I/eye from a normal “man” to a super-sized “giant” to a miniscule “rose on a fingernail of a newborn.”

Queer visibility, in other words, not only is dramatized by the play’s actions (the drama of the misrecognized lover, the revealing screen, the transformations, the student revolt etc.), but also incessantly performed by its poetic language which changes its metaphors more quickly than the actors their costumes. At no point in *El público* is there relief from this maelstrom, reminding us perhaps (as Juliet’s presence too suggests) that its modernist skepticism, as many commentators hurriedly point out, extends beyond the play’s confinement as a “homosexual drama.” The critical point, however, as I argued, is that *El público* self-consciously dramatizes its own destabilizing gestures (and everything this implies about the staged identities and its relation to those watching) as episodes in an ongoing dynamic of torturous masculine bonds (evinced in the rivalry over Helen, the

disavowals, the struggles, and the Students' alternative model of homosociality).<sup>26</sup> Its meta-critical concerns and meta-theatrical ploys, in other words, intervene by *queering* (critically querying, visually torqueing, optically complicating, dressing up in “a suit of poetry” etc.) what it stages. This is not necessarily an exclusive property of queer performance—certainly we can see modernist anticipations of deconstructionist methods and feminist performance techniques at work in *El público*—but the play's actions are written in and under the sign of a homosexuality that is revealed as troubled and inhabited by irresolvable difference and complexity. Its theatrical techniques lay bare contradictions that inform the characters, their investment in life and the theater and in the conflicts that haunt them.

#### 4. Staging “the impossible”?

Once the play starts to devour the Director's private theater as a subject for the stage, *El público* as an “operation theater” turns theater as we know it—especially naturalist theater, with its stabilized and conventional stage realism—inside out. Such a theater, García Lorca knew, would inevitably be difficult, even frustrating to view, which may explain why he considered it among his “impossible” plays. Thematically, *El público* certainly seeks out paradoxes to process its questions about the nature of the theater. However, the sharp contrast between a theater “of the open air” and one “beneath the sand” near the end of the play seems to fade out, or rather remains unresolved in the confrontation between the Prestidigitator and the Director, who must again face the audience. If the projected future of enduring conflicts over the theater calls to mind a recognizably modernist ethos of contestation and renewal (of a modernity, in Octavio



Paz's fine phrase, defined as a "tradition against itself"), the ending casts such lack of resolve in a perplexed, even downcast manner. Gonzalo's un-mourned death and Juliet's retreat into the solitude of the tomb may be further indications of a modernist melancholia, as *El público* looks back at a past (past ways of representing, thinking and acting) it cannot hold onto. The place of queer visibility—as a field of vision that both acknowledges and troubles queer presence or, more radically, queers all claims to sexual identities—in such a theater can only be moored in paradoxes.

We can only speculate if García Lorca wanted to see "homosexual" characters ("openly gay" as the saying goes) in a theater "of the open air" and whether the theater "beneath the sand" is not in part an "impossible" response to personal and social restrictions. As we have seen in the previous chapter, *Los invertidos*'s realist/naturalist appeal to uncompromised visibility sixteen years earlier is disturbingly marred by caricatures that definitely would have deterred García Lorca—had he known about the piece before he started writing *El público*—from ever adopting a more conventional stage language for such a topic. Either way, we should remain wary of championing teleological arguments about either "homosexual visibility" or "queer visibility" from our present-day sensibilities.<sup>27</sup> *El público* to some extent resonates with both positions, but cannot be reduced to either. Its dispersed affects and actions are too bewildering, enigmatic and contradictory to cohere: the piece effectively only produces more difference and this, of course, is why (as so many modernist texts) *El público* offers important historical and critical leverage about queer performance practices before the advent of a "homosexual" theater based on identity politics.

There is no definitive certainty whether García Lorca planned to stage *El público*. Antonio Monegal has recently argued that there is indirect proof (based on correspondence, not the playwright's but surging from the literary circles he frequented) that García Lorca wished to publish and produce the play. In 1933, he certainly had already published two fragments (including the unmistakably homoerotic Second Scene in the Roman Ruins, with "ruina" erroneously—or perhaps ironically?—misspelled by the magazine's editor as "reina" or "queen").<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in the 1936 interview mentioned at the start of this chapter García Lorca announced the staging of another "impossible" play, the dream-like "Leyenda del tiempo" ("Legend of Time") *Así que pasen cinco años*, in Madrid's Club Teatral Anfistora where the playwright had directed his own *La zapatera prodigiosa* and *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*. The possible reasons for calling *El público* "impossible" are numerous, ranging from its subject matter to the sheer technical difficulties it posed for the Spanish stage at the time. José Antonio Sánchez suggests that García Lorca like other avant-garde reformers in Spain proposed innovations that were practically "impossible" to realize precisely they had so "little to do with the reality of a theatre that retained nineteenth-century methods of organization... and which appeased the lowest tastes of the bourgeois audiences" (8). Whatever the actual reasons for the playwright's delaying, *El público*'s first documented staging takes places many decades later, first in the late 1970s by university theater companies in Puerto Rico and Southern Spain Murcia, followed by Lluís Pasqual's much publicized production which premiered in Milan (1986) before moving to Madrid (1987). Critics generally agree that Pasqual's adaptation, while omitting certain of Lorca's set changes and props, generally remained close to the original's spirit of visual disordering.

Maria Delgado approvingly notes that the traditional stage of the Teatro María Guerrero in Madrid was broken down and the orchestra stalls removed to provide instead

an expansive, almost circular playing area of sparkling blue sand... Only a single row of stall seats remained, primarily for actors, a dislocated reminder of theatrical model which was inverted as the audience observed actors watching other actors, hence denying the stability of a single field of vision. ("Lluís Pasqual's Unknown Lorcas" 90-91)

She further points out the anti-naturalist, self-conscious theatricality of the production choreographed movement, which "resisted easy categorization, recognizing its own performative referents" (91). Both Delgado and Paul Julian Smith agree on to the tremendous impact of stage lighting. For Smith, lighting offers a striking technical and interpretative contribution that replaces the transformative screen (a "rather clumsy prop" 129) and extends, more generally, the important role Lorca's original piece reserved for costumes. Whereas in the original script "The costumes serve... to render more difficult the audience's recognition of the characters," lighting in Pasqual's production was used "Inversely... to establish connections and to make distinctions between, and indeed within characters" (129). Improved techniques of lighting (particularly the use of the spotlight and partial blacking out of the stage) thus intensified the audience's gaze by gesturing beyond the rapidly changing external appearances toward the elusive psychodynamics of the characters' identifications and attachments. Delgado in turn points out that the spotlight occasionally directed the attention from the action to the silhouettes of its shadows, which "provided an alluring manifestation of the ephemeral intangibility of performance, becoming itself only through disappearance" (92). Generally, for Delgado the production recognized the original's densely allusive yet hermetic design as an invitation to stage "Connections [that] were teased and traced by an

audience whose attempts to locate intentional meaning were continually frustrated” (94).

Instead,

The interplay of light and darkness—flickers and shadows, expansive spots which sought out the characters and into which the characters slid—divided and controlled the performance space, creating multiples areas and contrasting perspectives. [...] The focus was on the performers interacting in a physical landscape where visibility was not necessarily desirable and where desire always exceeded the means by which it could be satisfied. (95)

These accounts suggest that Pasqual and his team on stage successfully gave a phenomenological shape and expression to what I have discussed so far as a textual event. Although the spectator in the allotted time of the performance does not have the luxury of rereading the play’s riddling chains of textual imagery, Pasqual’s adaptation certainly calls to mind, as Bert States suggestively puts it, that “In the theater... the eye awakens and confiscates the image. What the text loses in significative power in the theater it gains in corporeal presence, in which there is extraordinary perceptual satisfaction” (29). Staging visual and narrative disruptions of character, place and time, while frustrating cognition, does not foreclose on “perceptual pleasure”—perhaps quite to the contrary in a piece that both perplexes and revels in, as Eleonora Basso puts it, “the drama of theatrical creation” itself. Moreover, as I have repeatedly argued in this chapter, it is precisely in dramatizing a theater practice of visual disruption and meta-theatrical inquiry that *El público* reveals the crucial importance of its queer themes and sensibilities. Delgado, for instance, observes that in Pasqual’s production “theatricality was the main idiom” (93) and that “gender, sexuality, social and political interacting were all presented as imitative performance” (92), up till the point that “the real is implicitly acknowledged as absent” (95). In other words, the play’s queer visibilities, as these

accounts of Lorca's "impossible" theater suggest, need an experimental stage that invite (and demand) the audience's poetic imagination. Pasqual understood the importance of *mise-en-scene* (in its full plastic and visual possibilities) to create—pace Sates—an effect of "extraordinary perceptual satisfaction," even if for the audience poetic enjoyment comes at the price of giving up comprehension. As a viewing experience, this presents a striking contrast with *Los invertidos*'s strategy of spectacular exposure. González Castillo's drama posits a stable, "realist" visibility that needs the audience's imagination in purely functional ways: what is needed in *Los invertidos* is not poetry but ideological and empirical verification, which invites the spectator to join in with the play's moralizing verdict or occasionally lets her ride the thrills of sensationalism.

As a script for queer performance and queer visibility *El público* brings its concern with the theater to the stage with a gamut of meta-theatrical and anachronistic devices, dream-like sequences, anti-naturalistic and poetic dialogues, elaborate props, costumes and stage settings, musical elements and (more explicitly so in Pasqual's actualization) strategic use of lighting and different styles of acting—all elements that align the piece with its contemporary debates on theatrical innovation. Indeed, the techniques *El público* proposes to stage its revolutionary fervor did not occur in a vacuum but call to mind the 1920s Spanish context of avant-garde polemics regarding the future of theater as an "anti-realist" and "plastic" theater "as a place where painting, poetry and music would meet, giving the playwright the task of creating not a literary text but a "programme of events"" (Sánchez 20). When asked in an interview in 1935 what he opined about the contemporary "new theater" ("el nuevo teatro"), García Lorca underscored the importance of the "plastic elements" ("la plástica"): "Half of the

performance depends on rhythm, color, scenography... Speaking of form, of formal innovation, the stage director can achieve novelty if he has interpretative capacities. An old work, well played and unsurpassably set, can still offer a sensation of new theater” (OC 563). The admission that old or canonical works could still be novel if properly adapted to fit contemporary sensibilities (a point he reiterates: “Theater has to pick up the total drama of actual living. A past theater, fed only with fantasy, is no theater” OC 563) resound with the intertextual connections *El público* proposes and retroactively sheds clearer light on the playwright’s distinctive modernist position vis-à-vis tradition. At the time of the interview, the playwright was actively engaged in directing both his own work and selected early-modern Spanish classics with the ambulatory university theater group La Barraca. One year later, at the start of the Spanish Civil War, García Lorca was assassinated and *El público* disappeared with him for many decades. However, like the international ideas that informed his thinking on the “plastic theater,” García Lorca’s poetry and theater (and of course the then publicized image of his martyred death) in turn widely traveled beyond his native Spain. Caridad Svich, for instance, has argued for an often unacknowledged influence of García Lorca in Latin American and Hispanic American theater. Similarly, García Lorca’s international visibility and association with a “plastic theater” leads us into the third chapter, to the US playwright Tennessee Williams and to the question of queer visibility in his theater.

<sup>1</sup> C. Christopher Soufas in *Audience and Authority in the Modernist Theater of Federico García Lorca* too notes that among several “notable developments in the study of the theater of Federico García Lorca... [the] most significant is the publication of *The Public* (*El público*) and *Play without a Title* (*Comedia sin título*), which strongly challenges earlier assumptions about his theater” (ix). See Luis Fernández Cifuentes’ seminal study *García Lorca en el teatro: La norma y la diferencia* for one of the first critical contributions to reevaluate Lorca’s oeuvre its entirety with the “impossible plays” in hindsight.

<sup>2</sup> Fernández Cifuentes, in a section tellingly titled “*El público* de García Lorca vs *El público* de Martínez Nadal” (277-293), submits the piece to a deconstructionist reading that critically brackets Nadal’s attempt to stress the continuity between *El público* and the rest of Lorca’s oeuvre. For Nadal, primarily, the piece stood as an invitation to conduct *A Study of an Unfinished Play and of Love and Death in Lorca’s work*. While I want to underscore the import of Fernández Cifuentes’s argument (in fact, I argue that *El público* dramatizes modernist sensibilities that are generally akin to his deconstructionist apparatus), I do, however, like Martínez Nadal suggest the thematic and structural importance of (homosexual) love in *El público*.

<sup>3</sup> All translations from Spanish are mine. Where translations in English are available, I opted to directly cite the translation to facilitate the reading and the writing.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Anderson, in a reply to Fernández Cifuentes’ relentlessly deconstructionist emphases, sensibly proposes “that *El público* actually contains a number of messages about its own interpretation, about interpretation in general, and about how sense of (or giving sense to or finding sense in) something or someone has to do with basic problems of knowing, both heuristic and hermeneutic, and both empirical and psychological in nature” (“Una desorientación absoluta 68”). Anderson’s reading of the play’s meta-critical tropes and paradoxes is acute, but doesn’t substantially address what I hold to be the crucial importance of *El público*’s underlying queer concerns.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Rosanna Vitale, *El metateatro en la obra de Federico García Lorca*.

<sup>6</sup> Usually, the play’s interest in homosexuality is acknowledged but treated hastily or in a diluted manner as one of the play’s manifold themes. I do not disagree that *El público* is not “only” a play about homosexuality nor that it definitely reveals García Lorca’s feelings on the topic. Nonetheless, I do hold that the homoerotic in *El público* offers a crucial category for analysis. For important work on homosexuality in the area of García Lorca’s theater, see Paul Julian Smith, *The Theatre of García Lorca: Text, Performance, Psychoanalysis*, Carlos Jerez Farrán, *Un Lorca desconocido: Análisis de un teatro irrepresentable* and Paul McDermid, *Love, Desire and Identity in the theatre of Federico García Lorca*. For a recent argument against the erasure of homosexuality in Lorca studies more generally, see Smith “New York, New York: Lorca’s Double Vision” and Angel Sahuquillo’s pioneering study, first published in Spanish in 1991 and translated into English in 2007, *Federico García Lorca and the Culture of Male Homosexuality*. It is noteworthy that Lorca’s biographer Ian Gibson has insistently worked to foreground the role of homosexuality on the poet-playwright’s oeuvre, most recently and explicitly so in *Caballo azul de mi locura: Lorca y el mundo gay*.

<sup>7</sup> While the internationalism of modernism seems generally established, I argue throughout this dissertation that the internationalism of queer modern drama is a history yet largely to be told. More generally, scholarly concerns within queer modernist theater studies range from the nature and availability of materials (including the criteria to determine queer themes or sensibilities in dramatic modernism) to the social and technical challenges posed by the existent theater apparatus—precisely the conditions against which *El público* rebels. For a recent, stimulating account that considers the particularities of queer modernist drama in an Anglo-American context, see Nick Salvato’s *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance*, which draws on, and further elaborates, Martin Puchner’s influential study *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality and Drama* to propose a flexible understanding of the closet drama as a mode or genre that responds to queer concerns within dramatic modernism.

<sup>8</sup> See Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*.

<sup>9</sup> See the biographical accounts by Ian Gibson, in particular *Federico García Lorca: A Life* and *Caballo azul de mi locura: Lorca y el mundo gay*.

<sup>10</sup> All citations are from Carlos Bauer’s 1983 translation of *El público*, published by New Directions in *The Public & Play without a Title*, and occasionally abbreviated for in-text citation as *TP*. I chose this edition because it stays generally closer, in my opinion, to the Spanish original than some of the subsequent translations. I would also like to suggest the productive potential of the difficulty in translating *El público* (starting with its title!), and avow its ramifications for understanding and staging queer visibility. While in this dissertation I do not directly deal with the complexities of trans-lation—as an *Übersetzung* or

“carrying-over” of meaning—, a focus on translation (and working with translated texts) will be pertinent for this project’s future revision and expansion.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Anderson, for instance, in a footnote argues that the Silly Shepherd could have appeared at the very beginning of the play, as a prologue, modeled on theatrical practices of sixteenth-century Spanish drama (“Un difícilísimo juego poético”).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, as a general reference Miguel García-Posada, “Lorca y el surrealismo: Una relación conflictiva,” or Gibson for the biographical context. See Andrew Anderson, “Tres dramas expresionistas de García Lorca” for an exploration of the play’s characteristics are *expressionist* rather than surrealist.

<sup>13</sup> For more context on the modernist innovations of the Spanish stage of the 1920s (in reality, most commentators argue, an uneven process that generally did not meet with commercial success or public acclaim), see José Antonio Sánchez, ““The impossible Theatre”: The Spanish Stage at the Time of the Avant-garde” and Dru Dougherty and Andrew Anderson, “Continuity and innovation in Spanish theatre, 1900-1936.”

<sup>14</sup> For argument about the impact of the Freudian context on García Lorca’s theater, see Julio Huélamo Kosma, “La influencia de Freud en el teatro de García Lorca.” García Lorca’s interest in cinema as a new representational mode shows in his experimental film script *Viaje a la luna* (“Trip to the Moon”), written around the same time as *El público*. See Ana María Gómez Torres’s discussion in “El cine imposible de Federico García Lorca.” For a stimulating argument about the new visualities enabled by microscopic investigations in García Lorca’s time (and its possible influence on his own writing and drawings), see Cecelia J. Cavanaugh’s *New Lenses for Lorca: Literature, Art, and Science in the Edad de plata*.

<sup>15</sup> While there is no definitive certainty that García Lorca planned to stage *El público*, the play certainly dialogues with the Spanish 1920s context, characterized, José Antonio Sánchez argues, by “a tragic imbalance between the plans for a renovation of the stage that were formulated by some dramatists, critics and intellectuals, and the outdated concept of the profession that was prevalent in most Spanish theatre companies at that time” (8).

<sup>16</sup> José Antonio Sánchez argues that while some Spanish modernist defended “the idea of realist theatre from a political perspective... in general terms, the Spanish theatre of the avant-garde was much closer to this idea of “retheatricalization”, which should be associated with the models that arose from symbolism: Appia, Craig, Copeau, Tairov and Meyerhold” (20).

<sup>17</sup> Arguably, in light of the penultimate scene in which the First Man dies in a manner reminiscent of the Christ, the two negations possibly from the start set up an intertextual connection with, as I will argue further on this chapter, the passion of the Christ who following the third denial of his name dies as a martyr for art and unrequited love. For a psychoanalytic discussion of García Lorca’s fascination with Christology and erotic suffering, see Jerez Farrán, *La pasión de San Lorca y el placer de morir*.

<sup>18</sup> José Antonio Sánchez notes that Rivas Cherif spent “A period between 1911 and 1914 [which] allowed him to become acquainted with the work of Gordon Craig, who was to become his greatest inspiration and role model” (10) and that “During a period in Paris... Rivas Cherif discovered the work of Aurélien Lugné-Poe, Diaghilev, Georges Pitoëff, Firmin Gémier, and particular Jacques Copeau, whom he considered to be “the most original interpreter, in the French style, of the ideas of Gordon Craig”” (qtd. in Sánchez 11).

<sup>19</sup> Note in this regard my agreement with Paul Julian Smith’s assertion that the proliferation of “male metamorphoses should be read not (as they frequently have been) as the revelation of a true or authentic self but rather as identifications in what Lacan [in his writing on the “mirror stage] calls the “full” sense of the term—the transformation of the subject when he or she assumes an image” (131).

<sup>20</sup> The original in Spanish is composed in a comparable doggerel form: “Adivina, adivinilla, adivineta/de un teatro sin lunetas/y un cielo lleno de sillas/con el hueco de una careta” (104). Note that I cite from Monegal’s edition, which positions this interlude before the penultimate scene with the Students and the dying Christ/Gonzalo.

<sup>21</sup> The Nurse explains that they are only “three stations” away from Jerusalem and that “they’ve already given the third bell. When the Emperor dresses up as Pontius Pilate” (37). The reference to the Emperor of the Second Scene who as Pontius Pilate orders the crucifixion of the Christ/Gonzalo is equally bleak and enigmatic. If the Director in the Third Scene is associated with the Character in Bells (28), then probably, or at least possibly, the First Man Gonzalo is associated with the character in Vineleaves who calls on the Emperor and betrays Bells to instead embrace the Emperor and “leave my head of love in the ruins” (15). Why then, does Gonzalo, who by the Fifth Scene goes missing in the ruins (“They’re looking for him, the



Nurse adds, “in the ruin”), have to die? Is his death a fitting penalty for those who stay in the ruins, looking to the past till they get petrified, like Lot’s wife, on seeing the destruction of Sodom?

<sup>22</sup> In his 1928 lecture “Imaginación, inspiración, evasión” (1928), García Lorca argues that imagination needs to reveal the world as it is in order to surpass (evade) it. Art should ultimately produce the miracle of “el hecho poético” (the poetic fact, or achievement). For a detailed reading of this lecture, steeped in surrealist (Dalían) affinities that reflect a turning point in García Lorca’s self-positioning as an avant-garde artist, see Anderson, “Lorca at the Crossroads.”

<sup>23</sup> Evidently, from the psychoanalytic point of view I introduced earlier on to define queer visibility, all language and representation is invested and (mis-)guided by desire.

<sup>24</sup> If Ian Gibson is right in suggesting García Lorca’s susceptibility to Buñuel’s and particularly Dalí’s wry reading of the modernist folk aesthetic of *Romancero Gitano* (“Gypsy Ballads,” published in 1928 to great acclaim) as evincing outmoded (i.e. anti-modern) sentimentalism and lingering religious obsessions, then possibly *El público* registers some of the unresolved contradictions that spurred on García Lorca’s daring experimentation in the years following (“A Life” 216-217). Either way, in *El público*, as in *Poeta en Nueva York*, García Lorca’s aesthetic vision undergoes a radicalization, not unlike the Director’s, perhaps not entirely at the expense of love, but certainly not without considering its losses.

<sup>25</sup> The full citation of the Horse’s reply reads: “Love. To love. Love. Love of the snail, nail, nail, nail, sticking out its horns in the sun so pale. To love. Love. To love. Of the horse that’s licking the salt in the dell” (TP 22). In Spanish: “Amor. Amar. Amor del caracol, col, col, col, que saca los cuernos al sol. Amar. Amor. Amar, del caballo que lame la bola de sal” (*El público* 83). The snail reaching out for the sun and the horse reaching toward the salt underscore desiring as an active process—it is literally a stretching out that alters the shape (both the morphology and behavior) of the desiring agent.

<sup>26</sup> For two cogent but sensibly different readings of the play’s male sociality, see Paul Julian Smith, *The Theater of García Lorca* and Carlos Jerez Ferrán, *Un Lorca desconocido*.

<sup>27</sup> See Heather Love’s defense against championing and “redeeming” the queer past in *Feeling Backwards*, especially chapter two “Emotional Rescue: The Demands of Queer History” (31-52).

<sup>28</sup> The Aguilar edition of the *Obras Completas* in its 1980 edition only contains the two *cuadros* García Lorca had published during his life, one misspelled as “reina romana.”

## Chapter 3

Tennessee Williams's Queer Scandals: The Alluring Spectacles of *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*.

In honor of the centenary birthday of the prominent American playwright Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), Paul Burston in *TimeOut* magazine hailed Williams as a “True Gay Icon.” This may seem an ironic honorary title considering the playwright’s often difficult relation with self-identified gay critics in the past.<sup>1</sup> My intention in this chapter is neither to dispute nor corroborate Burton’s judgment, but to consider what this might imply for two of Williams’s dramas, the iconic *Suddenly Last Summer* (1957) and the late *Kirche, Küche, Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage* (1979) in light of our discussion on queer visibility.<sup>2</sup> While these two selected pieces do not suffice to propose general statements about queer visibility in the entirety of Williams’s career of over four decades, which spawns a stylistically diverse oeuvre with various until recently unperformed or unpublished pieces,<sup>3</sup> both plays do invite us to consider the changing times and context (roughly, before and after self-identified gay politics) that informed the form and content of each. The Library of America edition of William’s theater includes *Suddenly Last Summer* in its second volume (1957-1980), which suggests it belongs to a “middle” period, whereas the “late” *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* after its off-off-Broadway performance in 1979 (two years before Williams’s death) remained unpublished until 2008. As this chapter’s title suggests, I hold that these queer-themed works go hand in hand with a spirit of scandal: my argument is that these plays self-consciously explore the formal

conditions of queer visibility as an alluring, irresistible spectacle that challenges the audience with a conflictive, and deliberately disorienting worldview.

As in the previous chapter, I consciously treat the term “queer” in queer visibility as a reminder, on the one hand, of a specific (originally negative, hurtful) rhetorical charge that, I argue, Williams’s dramas are keen to exploit, and on the other, as a calculated move to put the playwright’s theater into conversation with a spirit of modernist skepticism, and, in the later plays, postmodern irony. This requires, first of all, the need to recognize why which certain post-Stonewall gay critics have treated the playwright as a relic of a homophobic Cold War past that seems irreconcilable with an affirmative politics of sexual visibility. The semantic wound of “queer”—pertinent to the Anglophone context in which we have arrived for the first time in this dissertation—is certainly more apt to discuss Williams’s theater than the wholesome term “gay,” which in the 1940s and 50s had not yet become a term for political self-affirmation.<sup>4</sup> While Williams’s entire oeuvre reflects drastic shifts in tone and style that are a crucial part of the history of queer visibility this chapter lays out, it is persistently ambivalent when it broaches the topic of homosexuality. The playwright’s sensibilities and worldview seem overall irreconcilable with and, particularly in the later works, resistant to the appeal of a liberating gay visibility.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Williams’s dramas refrain from moral utility, and overall seem antithetical to any sexual (or political) agenda in favor of, in Leo Bersani’s sense, a “culture of redemption.”<sup>6</sup> Instead of affirming the liberal values of a vigorous, redemptive U.S. national culture, Williams divides the national body, and de-familiarizes official, state-sanctioned ideologies with grotesque exaggeration. Only “exaggeration,”

Williams explained in an interview in 1974, “gets closer to the essence” and “This essence of life is really grotesque and gothic” (Devlin 264).

While Williams’s queer dramas only rarely engage in direct political commentary,<sup>7</sup> I propose that formal experimentation in the works I selected suggests a dissident sensibility that exploits queer visibility as a lure, that is, a double bind or trap that keenly exposes, yet ambivalently reinforces the formal language and tropes of queer sexuality. In this regard, I think Williams’s theater agrees with Peggy Phelan’s observation that “Visibility is a trap...; it summons surveillance and the law” and, to the extent it is bound up with desire, “provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonial/imperial appetite for possession” (6). Williams’s theater shrewdly recognizes—if not always clearly challenges—that all claims to visibility occur in a theatrical regime of ocular-erotic exchange, and adroitly lures the audience into his plays’ self-consciously mediated hermeneutic and mimetic processes. In this chapter, I argue that both *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* in their respective manners deploy the rhetoric of scandal to construct a queer spectacle. Queer visibility emerges in these plays as a kind of distorted funny-house mirror of the times; one reflects the Cold War context of the 1950s, while the other projects the culturally disorienting, postmodern atmosphere of the late 1970s. These plays do not aspire to be conventional queer-themed dramas, as for instance Mart Crowley’s 1968 landmark *The Boys in the Band*, but project an ineluctably alluring queerness in a stage-idiom that cites, parodies, mimics and assembles an allusive language for the revelation of tabooed truths.

I start this chapter by situating William’s theater in a context of international influences that have informed the self-consciously modernist skepticism of *Suddenly Last*

*Summer*—a play that, with its auto-reflexive and almost allegorical design, steers its own hermeneutic processes in a manner that could be considered paranoid, yet also irreverently queer. The second section considers Williams’s queer uses of parody (such as grotesque farce, camp iterations, literary pastiche, cabaret-style performance and self-parody) in *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*. Written in a drastically changed national and artistic context, this late play stamps all sexuality with a perverse queerness that suggests an ironic distance from the times’ politicized (and idealized) insistence on sexual identity. In their respective ways, these plays trump redemption for a ruthless and distorted state of affairs. As a result, Williams’s dramatic universe—intent on proving its repressive hypotheses—may appear debilitating; it portrays a reality that, to use Kaja Silverman’s psychoanalytic jargon, “provides neither idealization nor pleasure, and which is inimical to the formation of a ‘coherent’ identity” (27).<sup>8</sup>

However, while psychic incoherence and irresolvable conflict arguably haunts the world of Williams’s plays, on closer consideration they show no lack of pleasures, biting ironies, savage parodies and theatrical excesses. This brings to mind what we have seen before in *Los invertidos*: the scandal of staging queer sexuality often treads a line between scandal and laughter. Williams once noted that “my approach to my work is hysterical. It is infatuated and sometimes downright silly” (*Selected Letters* 325).<sup>9</sup> This tongue-in-cheek self-mockery suggests that discomfort (about “grotesque and gothic” truths) and enjoyment (whether “hysterical,” “infatuated,” or “silly”) can go hand in hand. This may also explain the occasional difficulty of grasping the tone of Williams’s work. This formal and ethical ambivalence—resonant with a queer experience of, what Heather Love calls, “feeling backward”—is also at work in *Suddenly Last Summer* and

*Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, two works that, in their respective manner and like *El público*, point to a conflictive relationship between the playwright and his audience over the conditions of queer visibility.

### 1. The Rhetoric of Queer Scandal: *Suddenly Last Summer*

While there had been several precedents of—more or less explicit—queer presence on the American stage of the 1920s and 30s, commentators observe that playwrights in the 1950s Cold War context generally avoided ideologically risqué topics, such as sex and politics, especially “of the wrong kind,” in the aftermath of the McCarthy era. This fear was not unwarranted; like many people working in the arts (particularly in Hollywood), Williams’s contemporary Arthur Miller was interrogated and subpoenaed by the House of Un-American Activities Committee in 1956 “for contempt of Congress for refusing to identify writers I had met once at one of the communist writer’s meetings I had attend many years before.”<sup>10</sup> Another revealing example of the time’s strained cultural climate is that New York, the country’s largest center for arts and entertainment, had still not modified its decades-old obscenity laws that had been instantiated on account of Mae West’s queer scandal play *The Drag* in 1927; restrictions would remain in place till in the late 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Despite these conditions, queer concerns are never far off in Williams’s dramas and fiction, not even in his successful work of the 1940s and 50s.<sup>12</sup> Robert Corbert lists Williams as an example of the Cold War era’s understated—yet certainly not invisible—homosexual culture of “resistance.”<sup>13</sup> David Savran, in one of the first and still most ambitious queer approaches to Williams’s oeuvre, has argued that

specifically the playwright's "language of obscurity or indirection" (*Cowboys* 137) in that sense suited the often obliquely "closeted" thematic of his dramas.

More generally, for Anne Fleche the "closet" is a useful metaphor to indicate the peculiar dialectic between being-looked-at-ness and self-disclosure that poignantly applies to the particular style of Williams's plotting and staging, perhaps best described as a theater-as-a-closet that strategically opens and withdraws from visibility. Williams's dramas show "the limit of what can appear, it's what marks the appearance of sexuality and identity—I would argue for *any* person" (Fleche "When a Door Is a Jar" 267).

Williams's fascination with "the limit of what can appear" for Fleche goes to the heart of a modernist self-awareness about the nature of theatrical mediation, which shows in both the form and content of his plays. In other words, representation in Williams's trademark blend of (apparent) realism and experimental techniques is recognized as a means and a problem, a pleasure and a conundrum:

Tennessee Williams's plays persistently question the relation of "art" to "reality," the problem of formal constraints in the theater, and the violence and destructiveness of closure, of establishing limits and defining moments... and visually he plays magical tricks that call attention to the theatrical illusion: he puts the set inside out and puts a Chinese lantern over the lightbulb. Perhaps it is this obsessive worrying over representation itself that makes Williams's dramas seem particularly unconcerned with getting anywhere and gives them their strong sense of undecidability and dislocation (*Mimetic Disillusion* 1).

That the playwright's dramas exude a "sense of undecidability and dislocation" indicates a skeptic attitude toward representation (as a "problem of formal constraints") that meanwhile, Fleche continues, acknowledges and exploits the spectator's "desire for the union of reality and representation... in allegory" (92). Heavy-handed allegorical themes and settings—that is, manifesting a taste for the figural and the artificial—in Williams's

dramas function as a meta-language to guide the spectator through the dramatic action, and incessantly point back to what is strictly speaking “closeted”: interiority, private thoughts, sexual subjectivity and past experience. In a sense, the result is permanently unsettling; it “imposes a unity of language and experience to make structural sense of the play... yet this reading feels false, because allegorical language resists being pinned down by realistic analysis—it’s always only half of the story” (93). The dramatist emerging from Fleche’s understanding seduces and challenges the spectator with a lure of interpretation that cannot reach a conclusion. Under this logic, Williams’s dramas appear to be reading their own signs as contradictory, and lead toward suspension and indecision, despite a rhetorical insistence on truthful revelation.<sup>14</sup>

As a result, Williams’s staging of queer materials takes place under the sign of meta-critical scrutiny and doubtfulness: queer visibility emerges in a dramatic universe that subtly wavers between truth in fiction and the pleasure of mediation for its own sake. The tenuous line between representation and referent is further reflected in the tension between discourse (what is said on stage) and actions and settings (what the audience sees). “In drama,” Fleche avers, “the process of signification leaps into view” (17), and particularly in Williams’s theater “We can watch it covering its tracks on different levels of perception: the written/spoken word, the visible/implied space, the utilitarian/symbolic object, the particular/typical human being, and the synchronization of sound and gesture” (17). Williams’s dramatic experimentation with what he called “extra-literary” and “plastic” elements (sounds, rhythms, musical accenting, lighting, projections, screens and choreographed movement) shed light on the contradictory nature of the theater’s appealing artifice; if on the one hand this aesthetic allows for a higher degree of self-



reflective mediation, on the other, the playwright insists in the “Production Notes” to *The Glass Menagerie* that such “unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim and that is a closer approach to truth” (131).<sup>15</sup>

We have seen the paradox that theatrical mediation is both a pretext and a problem at the heart of modern drama before, for instance in *Los invertidos*’ striking use of artificial light to suggest the mysteries of sexual inversion, or in the “impossible” project of a “theater beneath the sand” in *El público*. In tracing Williams’s absorption of such international trends, critics have often pointed to the influence of Erwin Piscator, who taught at the New School, which Williams attended in 1940.<sup>16</sup> Also the playwright’s less canonized, but not less significant praise for Federico García Lorca’s theater is worth citing in this regard. Williams lauds the Spaniard’s theater for launching modern drama in the direction of “the turn to the non-representative in painting” (26):

When the art of the playwright approaches that of the painter, he thinks in corresponding terms of balance, rhythm, and harmony. His work then begins to depart from the strictly literary province. It begins to enter that of the plastic arts: painting, sculpture, architecture. A plastic theatre emerges which in the hands of the sufficiently gifted artists can offer the same mysterious shock and delight that is given by great paintings, a correction of chance by the longing and vision of poets... A similar turn to something more abstract may very well be the direction of the plastic theater. That way has already been taken by the pioneer Lorca. Perhaps no play has been written in more plastic terms than that one of Lorca’s called *If Five Years Pass*. Reading it you are struck by a mysterious congruity of its wild and unlikely events. (“Notes to the Reader” *Essays* 26)

John Bak avers that Williams attended the English performance of García Lorca’s surrealist play *Así que pasen cinco años* “in April 1945 at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York City, by the Jane Street Cooperative, artists who were all heavily influenced by [Hans] Hoffman’s Abstract Expressionism” (273), the German-born American painter who the playwright knew and admired. In another article written around the same time,

Williams further puts Lorca in the same line with Chekhov, Shaw, Ibsen and Shakespeare as “playwrights... who have voices that carry beyond the national frontiers” (“A Playwright’s Statement” 29). A first translation of *Poeta en Nueva York* into English by Rolfe Humphries was published by Norton in 1940, and more translations of García Lorca’s poetry and theater would steadily follow during the decade. In the immediate post-Spanish Civil War and post-World-War-II context, the Spaniard’s fame as a political martyr and an artistic innovator—and no doubt, albeit more covertly, as a homosexual—was thus not lost on the young playwright, and probably sheds new light on his inspiration for *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, a highly anti-naturalistic and dream-like allegory written in the late 1940s and produced in 1953.

The point I want to make, however, is not to ascertain García Lorca’s direct influence on Williams,<sup>17</sup> but to invite us to consider the wider international context of Williams’s artistic horizons, and the, in Edward Said’s sense, “traveling” techniques and sensibilities that inform *Suddenly Last Summer*—ironically a piece in which “traveling” of any kind conjures up a specter of foreignness and suspicion. Projecting at once a spirit of representational skepticism and—contrary to this—an insistent rhetorical pull towards reified understandings of the exotic and the unfamiliar against which queer visibility takes shape, I argue that *Suddenly Last Summer* inscribes queer subject matter in an indecisive economy of meaning. The result seems deliberately confusing: the piece mimics a positivistic rhetoric that is lifted from the U.S. 1950s cultural and medical context to destabilizing effect (contrary to, for instance, *Los invertidos*), but its design relentlessly turns on itself like a distorting mirror. Crucially, while *Suddenly Last* does not directly propose a project to legitimize queer visibility on stage, I argue that the

play's critical intervention lies in its self-conscious presentation of what Carla Freccero, in a different context, has called "the rhetorical properties of figurative language" ("Figural Histories" 46) that generate queer meaning in an atmosphere of sexual scandal.

An interview with Don Ross at the night of the play's premiere certainly suggests that Williams had scandal on his mind with *Suddenly Last Summer*, a piece that recounts how "a young woman who witnesses the violently shocking murder of man [...] in order to clear herself of suspicion [...] tells a story about the death that damages the man's reputation" (Ross 52). By design a reconstruction of Sebastian Venable's death as recounted by his cousin Catherine Holly, *Suddenly Last Summer* analyzes the dramatic potential of queer scandal—a scandal, I argue, which on the one hand, outlines the visibility of *a* queer in absentia while, on the other, operates as a pretext to explore the disturbing affect and effect of queer visibility more generally.<sup>18</sup> At the start of Scene One, Violet Venable, a wealthy and ageing socialite, has invited the young Doctor Cukrowicz to examine Catharine, an impoverished niece of her late husband's, who since returning from a trip with Violet's son Sebastian to Cabeza de Lobo, a fictitious place inspired by Williams's trips to Spain in the 1950s, uncontrollably "babbles" about the strange circumstances regarding his death. Violet, eager to clear her son's name from any blemish, hopes to persuade Cukrowicz that Catharine is either completely mad or downright lying and promises him a large donation for medical research in return for lobotomizing her niece—a medical practice to which Williams's sister was forced to submit. In Scene Two, Catharine, who since her return has been confined to a psychiatric hospital, arrives with her dour Nurse and is visibly suffering from traumatic stress disorder. Shortly thereafter in Scene Three, her mother Mrs. Holly and brother George,

convened by Violet to complete the awkward family reunion, attempt to dissuade Catharine from “tellin’ that story about what you say happened to Cousin Sebastian”<sup>19</sup> (*SLS* 122), since they covet an inheritance from the wealthy Venables. In Scene Four, Violet finally confronts her niece and Cukrowicz, in order to make her speak truthfully and without obstruction, injects Catharine with a hypnosis-inducing serum. Drugged and defenseless, Catharine’s ensuing account confusedly suggests that Sebastian’s homosexual exploits, and possibly sexual exploitation of underage youths, lead to his death: on the beach of Cabeza de Lobo, a group of Spanish children (“boys, between childhood and older...” some of whom “he recognized”) chased Sebastian and cannibalistically “*devoured* parts of him (147). After these revelations, Violet furiously leaves the stage, urging the Doctor to “cut this hideous story out of her brain” (147). The play immediately thereafter ends: Cukrowicz concludes that “we ought to at least consider the possibility that the girl’s story could be true” (148) the curtain falls.

While drama critics like Kenneth Tynan “called the play ‘an excursion to the brink of paranoia,’” and opined ‘we must pray for Mr. Williams to return to the true dramatic world of light and shade, where the easy violence of melodrama is softened by compassion’” (qtd. in Saddik *The Politics of Reputation* 31), *Suddenly Last Summer* enjoyed a hugely successful run off-Broadway in the New York Playhouse, even to William’s surprise: “I thought I would be critically tarred and feathered and ridden on a fence rail out of the New York theater” (94), the playwright noted later. In the aforementioned interview, Ross summarizes that the play “was written during the period, beginning last summer, that Mr. Williams went into analysis. It is violent and shocking, he feels, but in a sense a catharsis, a final fling of violence” (50). The playwright insisted

that “It’s not a realistic play... The set lighting establishes a nonrealistic mood. I hope people will realize it’s a moral fable of our times” (52) and hence a piece for “The off-Broadway theater,” which is much better suited “for experimental and controversial works” (52). Williams’s concern that people might misunderstand its “nonrealistic” character flared up again when the play the following year was turned into a successful Hollywood film by Joseph Manckiewicz, with a star-studded cast including Katharine Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift. While appreciative of the cast and the script, adapted by Gore Vidal, Williams lambasted the production:

Brilliantly constructed as the screen version was by Gore Vidal it still made unfortunate concessions to the realism that Hollywood is too often afraid to discard. And so a short morality play, in a lyrical style, was turned into a sensationally successful film that the public thinks was a literal study of such things as cannibalism, madness and sexual deviation. (*Essays* 119)

Yet contrary to conventional expectations regarding a “morality play” (one expects this presupposes a didactic distinction between right and wrong, between good and bad behavior), *Suddenly Last Summer* arguably operates through confusion and contention, by inviting the spectator into, what Andrew Sofer calls, “a dizzying exercise in hermeneutics, two conflicting ‘readings’ of Sebastian Venable’s life and death” (341).<sup>20</sup> Structurally, the play stages a confrontation between Violet and Catharine that functions, to borrow Michel Foucault’s suggestive term, as an “endless mill of speech” (*The History of Sexuality* 21) through which the secret of Sebastian’s sexuality is produced. Driven by a desire to shock and outrage the audience with a sexual scandal, *Suddenly Last Summer* pushes to the limit of explicitness Williams’s familiar strategy of a spectrally invoked queer presence—for instance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*—and invites the audience to imagine and corroborate the conditions of out which queer

visibility emerges. In that sense, I hold that the play depends on the rhetorical effects of sexual scandal for a coup that is both alluring and perplexing.

Hence, we might understand *Suddenly Last Summer* as a “drama truly concerned,” as Williams noted, with “all human confusion and its consequence: violence” (*Essays* 119) that almost explicitly equates interpretation with violence. Fleche reminds us that “Williams’s dramatic language is too free, too wanton; it’s a trap, it’s asking to be analyzed, it lies down on the couch” (*Mimetic Disillusion* 106). Certainly, Cukrowicz (“Doctor Sugar”) invites us to listen in on an awkward family reunion turned into an object of psychodynamic analysis, not unlike a metatheatrical play-within-the-play. The violence and pleasure of representation resides in the fact that its allusive, associative qualities are too inviting, too evidently imposed upon a stage that avows the gap between reality and its mediation.

Thus, the sensationalist quality of *Suddenly Last Summer* not merely lies with the “open secret” of Sebastian’s sexuality. Rather, whether voiced through Violet’s highly idealized picture of her son as an effete Apollonian poet, or through Catharine’s account of a hedonistic Dionysian predator (an extremist type of, in André Gide’s sense, “immoralist”), it matters, to lend Carla Freccero’s terminology, that the play emphatically and “closely [tracks] the rhetorical properties” and “figural histories” (“Figural Histories”<sup>46</sup>) that make queer meaning emerge exclusively on the fringes of what cannot be said or represented. In other words, instead of staging a queer character, the play reflects back the constituent elements and discourses of queer figuration as a distorted mirror-image (that is, an image with socially determined—structural rather than individual—meaning) of what is generally *disavowed* in the 1950s Eisenhower years: a

cultural fascination with lurid sexuality, repressed violence, and a thirst for exoticism that slumbers under the veneer of everyday lives of “civilized people, which,” for Williams, “means that we are all savages at heart but observing a few amenities of civilized behavior” (*Essays* 93). No other of Williams’s plays so explicitly sets up queer visibility as a paradoxical epitome of both primitivism and civilization, sensual violence and cultured restraint, and thus as an aporia, refracted by a part-allegorical, part-hallucinatory theatrical apparatus.

*Suddenly Last Summer* from the start imposes a heavy-handed interpretative frame to guide the spectator’s “desire for the union of reality and representation” (Fleche *Mimetic Disillusion* 92): the set, according to the stage design “as unrealistic as the décor of a dramatic ballet (101),” is an evidently constructed, allegorical stage arrangement that

represents parts of a mansion of Victorian Gothic style in the Garden District of New Orleans on a late afternoon, between late summer and early fall. The interior is blended with a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle or forest, in the pre-historic age of giant fern-forests when living creatures had flippers turning to limbs and scales to skin. The colors of this jungle garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature. The jungle tumult continues a few moments after the curtain rises; then subsides into relative quiet, which is occasionally broken by a new outburst. (101)

We immediately learn from Violet’s conversation with the Doctor that “this was Sebastian’s garden” (101), a “well-groomed jungle,” the Doctor opines, and a point Violet eagerly takes up as proof of her son’s character: “That’s how it was meant to be, nothing was accidental, everything was planned and designed in Sebastian’s life and his... work... You see, strictly speaking, his *life* was his occupation... Sebastian was a poet! That’s what I meant when I said his life was his work because the work of a poet is

the life of a poet (102). Immediately, the connection between the poet-gardener and this extravagant primeval jungle garden (with an insectivorous Venus flytrap, handfed with “fruit flies flown in at great expense from a Florida laboratory,” 101-102) establishes an unusual proximity between slumbering “savage nature” and scrupulous—poetic and horticultural—cultivation.<sup>21</sup>

Although this connection first of all establishes a rather obvious association between horticultural experimentation and transgression (only the first example of an exhaustive catalogue of clichés that will denote sexual deviance), the more interesting point might be that two very distinct *temporalities* that are pressed into one frame: on the one hand “savage nature,” associated with a “pre-historic age,” on the other Violet’s Victorian mansion, which in the play’s 1950s context suggestively marks a previous era and a sense of stasis, even decay. Looking back at the spoils of Victorian culture in a setting that is vibrantly charged with primeval darkness, the play’s set thus reimagines, what Heather Love calls, a “temporal split” (*Feeling Backwards* 6) in modernism that troubles the “place of the non-modern” (6) in the present. In that sense, this is from the start a haunted (and indeed a “Gothic”) stage that exhibits a modernist fascination with “primitivism” and a “concern with tradition” (6), alongside—or virtually indistinct from—a “rhetorics of decadence and decline” (6). More precisely, I argue that *Suddenly Last Summer* haunts the contradictions of the present, bringing into close visual proximity markers of nature/culture, primitivism/modernity, savagery/cultivation, life/art and civilization/repression to drive at a semantic implosion that is perversely queer and unmanageable.



The stage area neatly corresponds to this temporal split: most of the play's dialogues take place in a "patio area," situated halfway in-between the rectitude of Violet's Victorian mansion and Sebastian's "well-groomed jungle." (In fact, contrary to the detailed descriptions of the garden the stage directions only scantily indicate an outline of Violet's house). The actors thus retain a physical closeness to the restless garden that invokes "body parts, torn out, still glistening with undried blood" and a raucous "jungle tumult" that repeatedly erupts at specific moments—as if playing the part of a chorus that comments in a non-human language. For instance, when Violet shows the Doctor a preciously "thin gilt-edged," "gold leaf" copy of Sebastian's *Poem of Summer*, her face suddenly has "the look of a visionary, an exalted *religieuse*. At the same instant a bird sings clearly and purely in the garden and the old lady seems to be almost young for a moment" (103-104). At her description of "flesh-eating birds" (105) feasting on sea-turtles during their trip to the Galapagos Islands, the garden reacts savagely: "There is a sound of harsh cries in the air... we hear wild, ravenous hard cries of the birds. The sound comes in rhythmic waves like a savage chant" (105). The bird cries not only correspond to Violet's memories, but in addition, its "rhythmic waves like a savage chant" anticipate and align with the maddening sound of the "ominous fanfare" music (115) that haunts Catherine Holly's traumatized memories about the events in Cabeza de Lobo. The children's quasi-ritualistic chanting or "serenade" (143) and drumming in turn echoes both the jungle garden and the Galapagos episode. The mob of children is compared to "a flock of plucked birds" that "made gobbling noises with their little black mouths" (141) and finally—in analogy with the devoured sea turtles—"pursued [Sebastian] and overtook him halfway on the white hill" (147).

Although the play's reliance on aural and visual cues to highlight the characters' interiority and past experiences continues the Williams's trademark style associated with *The Glass Menagerie* and the "memory play," *Suddenly Last Summer* more self-consciously alerts the viewer to the limitations of representation. That is, its unspeakable "truth" can neither be concealed—it intrudes, in the form phantasies, memories and affects that transverses the body—nor adequately staged or verbalized; Catharine must be assisted into confession with a hypnosis-inducing truth serum to go where no other visual apparatus can follow. (For a U.S. Cold War audience, this event also might have brought to mind cultural anxieties about the possible use of psycho-pharmaceutic techniques for manipulation and brainwashing, as later proposed in Richard Condon's sensationalist thriller *The Manchurian Candidate*.) To add dramatic emphasis, after the injection "the light gradually changes as the girl gets deeper into her story; the light concentrates on Catharine, the other figures sink into the shadow" (140), visually marking off on stage the interior, dream-like filter through which she verbalizes her troubled memories. But while Catherine's drugged confessional, as Kevin Ohi points out, mimics the associative style of the "talking cure" (de facto suggesting a likeness between the stage and the pseudo-psychoanalytic "scene of analysis"), her rambling confessions lead us only further into allusive chains of signifiers and into symbolizing circles.<sup>22</sup> Despite the allure of interpretation, the prospect of revelation is deliberately confused and its parody of the 1950s psychiatric context (Catherine's sensuous hysteria, Violet's overbearing mothering, and the dubious medical treatments—all, no doubt, informed by Williams's personal experience with the medical establishment) grotesquely overdone.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, while Cuckrowicz at first appears as an arbiter of truth in a cacophonous jungle of voices (the jungle garden, the raucous birds, the drumming children at Cabeza de Lobo, the Venables and the Hollys), his position as a detached observer is gradually compromised: his good looks and “icy charm” (he is “very very good-looking” 101) seal his circulation as a desirable mouthpiece of “truth” in a volatile economy of desire and power, entrenched in the dynamics of competing views. Once drugged, Catherine’s body speaks truth, as she “crushes her mouth to his violently... presses her lips to his fiercely, clutching his body against her” (135) But also Violet’s “manner and eloquence indicate her undeliberate response to his icy charm” (101). Cukrowicz pleasantly reminds her of Sebastian: “You would have liked my son, he would have been charmed by you” (109) overlooking the homoerotic innuendo of her flirtatious statement. That the young psychiatrist believes that like poets, “doctors look for God too” (106) further undercuts whatever presumably stable ground was left to investigate Catherine’s declaration that “The truth... it’s at the bottom of a bottomless well” (134).

Even if Sebastian lived to tell, *Suddenly Last Summer* at every step suggests that his “truth” may finally not be the point, although per Violet’s accusations and Catharine’s confessions the play insists on directing us there. Instead, I am arguing that Williams seems intent on demonstrating the play’s powerful rhetoric of queer signification, or what Andrew Parker and Eve K. Sedgwick in *Performativity and Performance* have called the “performative” dimension of meaning-making. Particularly Violet’s idealized portrayal of her son shows that willful ignorance actively sustains queer meaning (this, of course, is the central idea of Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*). Sebastian emerges as a cross-

over between a pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, a fastidious dandy and a dark romantic poet—all tropes with queer potential that she happily, and apparently blinded by motherly love, flourishes for Cuckrowicz and the audience. That her son looks identical in age and appearance (in a “Renaissance pageboy’s costume at a masked ball” 109) in two photographs taken twenty apart is vaguely yet sufficiently suggestive of a Dorian Gray-like character, who has the “character to refuse to grow old” (109).<sup>24</sup> That this is a literary reference—and not to be taken *literally*—does not distract from its rhetorical effectiveness. To the contrary, this all the more clearly suggests that Sebastian, as Andrew Sofer points out, “is an absent signifier under which slide conflicting signifieds” (341), a fulcrum of figural plasticity, and as such, a powerful signifier of Violet’s own desires—a mirror on which her delusions feed (“This sounds like vanity, Doctor, but really I was actually the only one in this life that satisfied the demands he [Sebastian] made of people” 110-111).

Violet’s portrayal invokes a crassly overdone parody of 1950s cultural anxieties about the relationship between mothering and a perceived “crisis in American masculinity” (Ehrenreich and English 258). Yet equally important is her unmarried and geographically unbound state, which metaphorizes the foreign scene (the cosmopolitan Riviera, the primeval Galapagos, the seedy beaches of an impoverished Spain under Franco’s regime<sup>25</sup>) as a conduit for the extra-ordinary and the transgressive. In its portrayal of Violet and Sebastian as a cosmopolitan couple who frequent Cairo, Paris, New York, Venice and the Riviera, *Suddenly Last Summer*, like *Los invertidos*, reminds us that a taste for refinery and the foreign is always potentially suspicious, in particular to those who stay at home, cut off from the luxury of travel, limited to hearsay and

fantasizing. The Galapagos Islands (linked to “Herman Melville’s description of the Encantadas” (104), and thus another referent with evident queer literary resonance<sup>26</sup>) and Cabeza de Lobo (a place name with sexual innuendo) are telling in that regard: wherever Sebastian travels, we are invited to consider the exotic, and the violent, up till the play’s orgiastic finale, where queer visibility culminates and expires against a densely accumulated figural background of ritual sacrifice, madness, sexual exploitation and finally unimaginable violence.

*Suddenly Last Summer* thus invites its audiences to imagine a disturbing, increasingly hallucinatory Otherness that even thousands of miles away from the white picket-fenced lawns of Eisenhower America can only be retold, not actually staged. Yet its rhetorical coup, as Catherine’s brother George realizes, is possibly all the more perverse and *ob*-scene, as that which literally must be kept *off/against* stage:

GEORGE: You’ve just GOT to stop tellin’ that story about what happened to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo, even if it’s what it couldn’t be, TRUE! —You’ve got to drop it, Sister, you can’t tell such a story to civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country.

MRS HOLLY: Cathie, why, why, why! —did you invent such a tale.

CATHARINE: But, Mother, I DIDN’T invent. I know it’s a hideous story but it’s a true story of our time and the world we live and what did truly happen to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo....

GEORGE: She’s isn’t crazy, Mama, she’s no more crazy than I am, she’s just, just—PERVERSE! WAS ALWAYS! —perverse...” (123)

With Catharine’s “perverse” behavior as a symptomatic indication of a Real that “you can’t tell... to civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country,” the play here explicitly turns its representation back to the audience as a distorted mirror-image of that which it cannot reasonably bear to see, except as proof of a madwoman’s ravings. The moment underscores that queer visibility in *Suddenly Last Summer* far exceeds the question what it means to stage a queer plot or person. Sebastian spectrally conjures up not “the closet”

but paranoid dread, a destabilizing affect that from the point of any affirmative identity politics—at a time in which early “homophile” organizations like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis were founded<sup>27</sup>—is “queer” for all the wrong reasons: for signifying the unspeakable, the abyss of an irrational self, and the excesses of slumbering sexual violence.

In that sense, as Williams’s self-identified “gay” readers from the 1960s and beyond realized, *Suddenly Last Summer* is an exemplary backward text that cannot, nor wants to be redeemed. This however, need not mean that Williams merely pays lip service to hegemonic discourse. Self-consciously theatrical in language and design, *Suddenly Last Summer* instead slyly distorts various contradictions and transfers of meaning that are relentlessly presented as competing—and limited—views. More specifically, the probability of speaking “truth” in the era’s dominant ideological currency is jeopardized: “truth,” contrary to official ideologies of medical and military containment, is revealed to be impervious to reason, control or propriety. Truthful revelation has become unspeakable, unruly, and perversely queer. As a “Gothic” play haunted by “the place of the non-modern” (Love *Feeling Backward* 6) in the present moment, the rhetoric of queer scandal may in fact illustrate, what Freccero has called, the “force of affect in history” (“Queer Times” 20): an affective force that disrupts claims to a seamlessly teleological, linear, and homogenous modernity. In that sense, *Suddenly Last Summer* dramatizes on stage—in the condensed temporality where real time is transfigured into performance time—a “‘fantasmatic’ historiography” “as a way to get at how subjects live, not only their histories, but history itself, to the extent that history is lived through fantasy in the form of ideology” (“Queer Times” 20).<sup>28</sup> The piece almost

evacuates or blurs cognizance of concrete socio-political terms, but instead submerges the audience in “temporalities” that resemble “understandings of our time as subjectivity and affect more than they do the time of progressivist history” (Freccero “Figural Histories” 46).

Accordingly, if experience of/or time—passed on in performance and through history—is “queer” in *Suddenly Last Summer*, it is because its figural dis/orientations allow no grasp on truth from any identity-affirmative (national, or sexual, or political, etc.) narrative. Meaning is brought to cohere under the logic of sexual identity and “savage nature”—with Cukrowicz compelling the audience to “consider the possibility that the girl’s story could be true”—yet unravels, or lacks affirmation. The piece mauls over the tension between reality and allegory, between the rhetoric of truth and its embellishment. Instead of didactically deconstructing its spectacle, *Suddenly Last Summer* draws the viewer back in with a textual and plastic enjoyment that irreverently calls to mind the kind of amoral “jouissance” (“bliss”) that Roland Barthes analyzes in *The Pleasure of the Text* in the distinction between “figuration” and “representation.” Barthes holds that “Figuration is the way in which the erotic body appears... in the profile of the text... [The] text itself... can reveal itself in the form of a body, split into fetish objects, into erotic objects. All these movements attest to a *figure* of the text, necessary to the bliss of reading” (55-56). “Representation,” on the other hand, is

encumbered with other meanings than that of desire: a space of alibis (reality, morality, likelihood, readability, truth, etc.) ... That is what representation is: when nothing emerges, when nothing leaps out of the frame: of the picture, the book, the screen. (56-57)

Barthes does not address the phenomenology of the stage, yet offers a provocative vocabulary to consider *Suddenly Last Summer* less as “a space of alibis” and more as an

excessive attempt to “leap out of the frame.” (Of course, with its devices for visual and narrative enhancement, the almost novelistic stage descriptions and dream-like cinematic sensibilities, Williams’s theater to some degree encapsulates all the pleasures Barthes finds in “the picture, the book, the screen.”) “Pleasure,” Barthes further insists, is not to be confused with “desire,” a term in many ways already privileged in western philosophy and in criticism: “we are always being told about Desire, never about Pleasure; Desire has epistemic dignity, Pleasure does not” (57).

If *Suddenly Last Summer* eagerly incites and exploits our desire for understanding (for “epistemic dignity”), its greatest pleasure—and perhaps for the viewer (who, we cannot forget, in the theater is not merely a reader) too—ultimately lies in deferral and postponement. Or rather, to use Foucauldian terms, since the episteme of this dramatic universe is already over-determined (and perhaps inescapable), the pleasure does not consist in knowing what is already obvious, but in submitting to the multi-media induced titillations of William’s theater. That on the way, *Suddenly Last Summer* seems representative for the kind of “thriller, detective and mystery plays... [that have] fed off queer anxieties” (Sinfield 168) is only problematical from the point of identity politics (another “space of alibis”); the scandal of queerness is that it distorts all claims to “epistemic dignity,” instead following a trajectory of modernist aestheticism that seeks no moral end or utility. In this self-conscious preoccupation with the pleasures of mediation, Williams fuses the melodramatic underpinnings of modern drama as “a concentrated form of affective drama” (Buckley 465) with modernist sensibilities—not to induce distanced reflection (as for instance in Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect), but to intensify shock and delight. (In fact, in that regard, it would seem that *Suddenly Last Summer*



rather relishes the prospect of spilling an Artaudian “spurt of blood” on the audience.) Williams, who already in the 1940s had praised the abstract paintings of Hans Hoffman for showing “physical laws with a spiritual intuition” and “dynamic forces, identified but not explained by science” (*Essays* 197), in *Suddenly Last Summer* approaches the stage as an almost painterly “dramatic ballet” (101)<sup>29</sup>—a forcefield that dramatizes interpretation as a violent movement from which queerness, after it has been dislodged as an index of perverse figuration (in Barthes’s sense), becomes indistinguishable.

Not surprisingly, *Suddenly Last Summer* been an obvious target for accusations of homophobia and xenophobia. Certainly, however, this is no queer psychodrama in the usual sense, where the character’s thoughts are transparently rendered and lead to a logical conclusion. *Suddenly Last Summer* retains several of the outward trappings of positivistic language-based theater but arguably, as Annette Saddik argues about Williams’s aesthetic more generally, also “[echoes] Antonin Artaud’s insistence on a theatre that is ‘not psychological but plastic and physical’” (*Theatre of Excess* 43). It is a piece that certainly resonates with the playwright’s dictum that “exaggeration gets closer to the essence” and that the “essence of life is really grotesque and gothic” (Devlin 264). *Suddenly Last Summer* possibly also marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of Williams’s aesthetic: his growing suspicion that the audience would mistake the play as a “literal study of... cannibalism, madness and sexual deviation” (*Essays* 119) might shed new light on the more pronounced stylistic departures he was soon to try out in the 1960s. It is also revealing, Michael Paller points out, that most reviewers at the time failed to mention the play’s treatment of homosexuality.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps this silence acutely illustrates the play’s failure to spark the controversy that Williams had anticipated. Either way, in

my discussion of *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* (one of his 1960s and 70s—in Linda Dorff’s term— “outrageous plays”) it is crucial to recognize that not only Williams’s aesthetic, but his audience too would soon rapidly change.

## 2. Queer Uses of Parody: *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*

Donald Spoto, in the preface of his Williams biography *The Kindness of Strangers*, asserts that by the 1970s Williams’s “career was in an odd, dark eclipse”:

If his plays were no longer considered to have the same wild alchemy of the sordid and the sensitive, he now did. He replaced his work as the talk of town, or at least of the television show. When his *Memoirs* were published in 1975 (and a selection of letters to his old friend Donald Windham soon after), the trend of attention to sensational aspects of his life continued. What had been unmentionable in the 1950—that Williams was homosexual—was by 1970 all that many people (and sometimes even he) considered interesting. This corresponded to a new climate of curiosity and tolerance (if not exactly a warm acceptance) about the varieties of sexual preference in America. (xvi)<sup>31</sup>

If Williams’s apparently unplanned “coming out” in 1970 in a televised interview on the popular The David Frost Show made public the open secret of his homosexuality, it is perhaps the publication of the *Memoirs*, peppered with unapologetic anecdotes about his sexual life and drug use, that definitely sealed “the trend of attention to sensational aspects of his life” (xvi). Neither the public nor the critics seemed interested by the fact that the playwright consistently kept writing as a self-conscious experimentalist. As Williams explained in a 1972 interview with Jim Gaines:

I have certainly grown less naturalistic, in the Sixties very much less. I think that I am growing into a more direct form, one that fits people and societies going a bit mad, you know? I believe that a new form, if I continue to work in the theater, will come out of it. I shall certainly never work in a long play form for Broadway again. I want to do something quite different. I am interested in the presentational form of theater, where everything is free and different, where you have total license. (Devlin 218)

However, Williams was unable to find an audience for his new work. For a younger generation of critics *Suddenly Last Summer*'s fascination with "cannibalism, madness and sexual deviance" (*Essays* 119) might have seemed proof of the playwright's confusing attitudes about gender, sexuality, race and cultural politics. For those writing in the wake of Gay Liberation Williams's queer characters of the 1960s and 70s (for instance the part-aesthete, part-transvestite Lot in *Kingdom of Earth*, or the self-deprecating homosexual Quentin in *Small Craft Warnings*) would have appeared equally out of tune with the era's increasing demand for salubrious visibility and self-affirmation. Williams, now a known homosexual, irascibly refuted the prospect of being labeled a "gay playwright:"

Frankly, at the risk of alienating some at my friends in Gay Lib, I have never found the subject of homosexuality a satisfactory theme for a full-length play, despite the fact that it appears as frequently as it does in my short fiction. Yet never even in my short fiction does the sexual activity of a person provide the story with its true inner substance. (*Essays* 172)

His increased public visibility as an established playwright unable to find either an audience or a persuasive form of address in some ways calls to mind the Director's situation in *El público*. It would seem that more than ever Williams needed an avant-gardist "theater beneath the sand" in order to challenge a "theater of the open air" governed by audience expectations. Meanwhile, critics at the time often dismissed his latest works as failed experiments in navel-gazing that overshared his personal anxieties on stage. There was a trend to collapse Williams's public persona as an "outdated playwright" associated with personal drama, substance abuse and sensationalism *into* the writing, as if, as Foster Hirsch held, the late works were basically "portraits of the playwright as a failure" (71). Consequently, while Williams did not write necessarily

more (or less, for that matter) autobiographically than previously, his public visibility had now altered the context of production and reception of his work.<sup>32</sup>

In this context, is tempting to read *Kirche, Küche, Kinder: An Outrage for the Stage* (1979) as an idiosyncratic balancing act between self-revelation and auto-fictionalizing. Until recently unpublished but produced in 1979 by New York's off-off-Broadway Cocteau Repertory, the two acts of *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* take place in the present, "in a as section of lower Manhattan which is known as SoHo" (111), at the time a ravaged bohemian neighborhood at the heart of New York's art scene.<sup>33</sup> The piece is a sardonic family portrait of a Man, a retired artist-hustler pretending to be invalid, a loquacious foul-mouthed Wife, and their two children (the "Kinder"), a boy and a girl, who having been expelled "From kindergarten...after fifteen years attendance" (127) are now trained to prostitute themselves to secure the dwindling family income. In Act One we are introduced to the Man, "a suspiciously healthy, handsome and powerful-looking man [who] is seated in a wheelchair" (109) and dressed in leather pants, who in a thick Irish accent directly addresses the audience and pontificates about art and life in his "church" ("Kirche"), accompanied by tunes that often segue into Irish popular songs delivered by the angelical organist Miss Rose. Meanwhile his German Wife, who speaks a grotesquely Germanized English and throughout mocks her husband's sexual ineptitude, is constantly interrupted in the "kitchen" ("Küche") by her abusive father, the Lutheran Minister, his hyper-sexualized ninety-nine-year-old mistress Fräulein Haussmizensschlogger ("Hotsy"), the "Kinder," and members of the sensation press. Act Two starts with the children's return from school without their report cards and ends after they return a second time empty-handed, now from their forays into the sexual and

economic market; they failed because, as they explain, “we... give it...away, like for nothing, but *love!*” (145) The Man then decides to “face and accept the old male responsibility and prerogative of providing a living for himself and household” (147) and returns to the street as a hustler, marching into the audience to the tunes of a “rousing march” (148).

That *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* stages an atmosphere of sexually transgressive, bawdy behaviors and languages in an anti-naturalist parodic manner, has lead critics to compare the piece to the “camp” aesthetic of the Ridiculous Theater Company, founded in New York by Charles Ludlam (1943-1987) in 1967. Annette Saddik points out that “Williams was often at Ridiculous Theatre performances” (*Theatre of Excess* 38), and Linda Dorff includes *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* in the misunderstood “ironic, meta-mimetic project of the outrageous plays” that self-consciously experimented with theatrical artifice and self-parodying irony “in an over-the-top manner that could be compared, in its effects, with camp” (15). Drawing on Ludlam’s theater and Susan Sontag’s definition of camp as a “way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon” (277) rather than an explicit content, Dorff and Saddik remind us of the changing historical context in which queer presence became visible, as a kind of “sensibility,” or in New York’s “queer theater” scene.<sup>34</sup> Some critics, however, are quick to point out that this new visibility occurred in a context of postmodern pastiche and pop art in which camp tended to lose its subcultural specificity.<sup>35</sup> To consider to what extent camp matters to our discussion of a specifically queer and (post)modern visibility, we might think of Jonathan Dollimore’s definition of camp as a performance mode that displaces the alleged “truth” about sexual

deviancy “through parody and mimicry” (310), thus reinvesting it as a strategy of sexual dissidence. Accordingly, camp is a way of acting and representing that

undermines the depth model of identity from inside... making depth recede into its surfaces. Rather than a direct repudiation of depth, there is a performance of it to excess... The hollowing out of the deep self is pure pleasure, a release from the subjective correlations of dominant morality (normality, authenticity, etc.)—one reason why camp also mocks the *Angst*-ridden spiritual emptiness which characterizes the existential lament. (310-311)

Like the ambitious re-semanticizing of “queer” in queer theory, Dollimore’s definition of camp is a formally expansive anti-definition that displaces any imposed sexual (or mimetic) truth and situates it most trenchant usage in the subcultures of those deemed deviant by the majority. This understanding of camp is not limited to drag performance, although the latter’s pleasurable “repudiation of depth”—in which biological gender is temporarily suspended or appended—is particularly well-suited to describe the appeal of cross-dressing (for instance in Ludlam’s theater) as a recognizably coded manner to present an inverted, distorted mirror of gender and cultural norms. That, as Saddik argues, *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* parodies the German saying that refers to the traditionally prescribed women’s tasks of childrearing, kitchen-work and church-going (“Kinder, Küche, Kirche”) in that sense seems consistent with the choice to feature a man in drag for the part of the Wife—a hyper-parody of female domesticity—in the play’s 1979 production.

Arguably however, this is only one example of parody in Williams’s formally hybrid, sprawling piece that combines meta-theatrical techniques with grotesque farce and very physical comedy, reminiscent of slapstick or, as Dorff argues, a “frenetic animated cartoon” (20). On closer consideration, the play’s transgressions lucidly reveal

the structural resemblance between camp and others mode of cultural inversion, such the carnivalesque, a mode of festive critique which in laughter, as its main theorizer Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* optimistically holds, “celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order” (109), with an aesthetic that challenges, inverts and distorts what is commonly called “good taste.”<sup>36</sup> The point to be made is not that one term effectively excludes the other—although it is potentially problematic, I think, that Dorff and Saddik use these terms almost interchangeably—, but that *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* makes the most out of both registers for its aesthetic of willed perversity that relishes “transgressing the boundaries of what is regarded, on Broadway, as good taste” (Dorff 22). To the extent this involves a long-list of obscenities—including male hustling, children’s prostitution, comically rendered rape, and blasphemous language—the piece continues *Suddenly Last Summer*’s strategy of sexual scandal and grotesque parody. I thus agree with Linda Dorff’s observation that

rather than breaking with the style of the earlier plays, the shift in Williams’s work may be viewed as a gradual evolution of dramaturgic elements which had been present in his work from the beginning. The shift toward grotesque parody in some of Williams’s later plays represent one of the more crucial aspects of this evolution, for comedy was never far beneath the surface of the tragic elements in his drama. (14)

This is particularly clear in the case of *Suddenly Last Summer*, which for all its paranoia is never far off from uncomfortable laughter. (In fact, some of Williams’s most iconic dramas are noted for their camp potential—Split Britches’ 1990s adaptation of *Streetcar*, *Belle Reprieve*, is a noticeable example—and even before *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* the playwright self-parodied his work and persona, for instance in the 1968 comic tragedy *The Kingdom of Earth*.) However, and contrary to its precursor, I argue that *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* no longer ironizes repressed truths about “savage nature” (SLS 101) that

cannot be spoken or represented: the joke now seems to be on the repressive hypothesis itself, or rather on the lack thereof in a cultural climate of increased sexual frankness and liberalism. The play combines carnivalesque caricature, camp and cabaret-like sensibilities to effectively *queer* the conventional (“serious”) theater, and “outrage” the audience with a hyper-sexualized and fragmentary worldview.

Formally, *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* explicitly abandons any pretense at illusionistic realism. Instead, it self-consciously parodies both its status as a theater text and the playwright’s public persona of the 1970s as “drunk, hyper-sexed, perverse, and generally grotesque” (Saddik 40). In that sense, the piece qua tone and design calls to mind of the first “axiom” of Ludlam’s “Manifesto” of the Ridiculous Theatre, that “If one is not a living mockery of one’s own ideals, one has set one’s ideals too low” (157).<sup>37</sup> While Dorff, who includes the play in an overview of “late ‘outrageous’ plays,”<sup>38</sup> cautions against “autobiographical approaches [that] devalue parody as a serious art form and ignore the metadramatic implications of the works” (14), I am not advocating for a *factual* autobiographical approach in proposing that the play’s retired artist-hustler is a “living mockery” of the Williams persona. Rather, I argue that this calculated figural presence functions as a meta-theatrical mediation of reality and theater, and thus with postmodern irony extends the self-consciously modernist skepticism of Williams’s iconic works of the 1940s and 50s. For instance, the Man repeatedly resumes working on his “great memoirs” and ostensibly “displays a notebook labeled “GREAT MEMOIRS” (125), has won “the Hotlicker Award”—a reference to Pulitzers won decades ago, “at the age of fifteen” (137)—and credits Miss Rose—yet another incarnation of Rose



Williams—for being his muse. Breaking the fourth wall at the start of Act One, he confrontationally addresses the audience from his wheelchair:

Who am I? I am, God wot, a legitimate card-holding member of that union that's devoted to the care an' feeding of actors of any gender. I trust mine's established as male. But more than that, what am I but the visionary projection of an old man's junk-heap of erotobilia, and if there is no such word in *Webster's Unabridged*, than let us include it immediately in an appendix thereto. Why do I bother with 'im? Why does he bother with me? (110-111)

There is some post-Beckettian ambiguity in this statement. Is the Man acting a part in a “visionary projection” of another “old man's junk-heap of erotobilia” (erotic memorabilia)? Is he a self-referential function of the play (a “projection”), or of a higher instance, such as a God or the playwright (“Why do I bother with ‘*im*?’)? Whatever the answer, the Man then directs our attention to the “*Kirche*, this room to which I'm confined by my state of invalidism” (111), a part of the stage that “contains certain elements suggestive of ‘High Church’” (109). With self-referential insistence, the Man invites our scrutiny of the *Kirche* as a space that extends and encloses his being: “A man” he clarifies, “constructs about him his own world as the chambered nautilus constructs about it those delicately iridescent chambers which are its dwellings—its place of retreat and refuge” (110). “This dwelling,” he continues, is a product of his body” which man is “then obliged to occupy... till he's evicted by— [*He smiles ruefully with a slight shrug*]—the expiration of his lease on personal—existence.... But I, when my time's run out, will leave behind this single chamber now visible to you, ordered as best as I'm able to” (110). The stage is thus a plastic extension of his inner being, but also “the limit of what can appear” (Fleche “When a Door Is a Jar” 267) in, what I before called, Williams's theater-as-a-closet. The passage's elegiac tone and inward-looking mood, however, is

then quickly dispelled; the Man—with a “grin” that is “lascivious “yet “engaging”—proceeds to unzip the fly of “his black leather pants,” attempting to titillate the audience with “the top of his blond pubic hair” and baiting us with further piquancy: “Now what? All the way, exposin’ me privates? Shame! I say shame without shame. This show is about as far out as the lingering bit of propriety in my nature will permit me to go” (112).

Hence, the tone is set for a “presentational” and “direct form theater” (Devlin 218) that contrasts lyrical ruminations on the ephemerality of life and art, associated with contemplative sphere of the “High Church,” with lewd exposure that rather brings to mind a peep-show or naughty cabaret. Further, with a hustler luring the audience’s attention with a “lascivious” pose, the play drives at a repeated analogy between prostitution, exploitation and theater, which conflates the promise of literal and figural revelation, and meanwhile insists on the theater’s economic value as a fetishized, titillating commodity. *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* thus explicitly continues William’s skeptic fascination with the allure of theater as an illusionistic art-form that can be parodied—that is, dismantled and distorted with anti-naturalist techniques—but not so easily resisted. That the Man at the end cannot give up hustling suggests no foreseeable way out of the circuits of sexual, economic and visual exploitation that drive its naughty, Ubu-esque “roguery,” the term used to characterize the Wife. While the play calls to mind the permissible atmosphere of a 1970s context in which queer performers, writers and activists instigated with politically charged—to use Sarah Warner’s term—“acts of gaiety,”<sup>39</sup> its profanity and laughter appears to lack direction. The joke seems to be on everyone (the critics, the theatergoers, the playwright, the times...), but the punch line lost. Instead, the play reveals a hypersexualized mirror of human transactions that

perhaps ultimately calls to mind *Suddenly Last Summer*'s "savage nature" (SLS 101), now unrepressed, but without sense or purpose.

Particularly Fräulein "Hotsy" and the Lutheran Minister are directly associated with a gratuitous and bawdy sexuality. The Fräulein, who is "a very old lady" dressed as a 1970s "groupie chick—shot-cut Levis and a kind of sweat shirt with cartoon characters and captions, etc." (122), is accredited for giving "wonderful head between the hymns" (114) and is pregnant because of the Minister, "who rapes me before and after church service" (122). Like the children, who are played by "two tall adolescents... dressed as kindergarten students" (126), the Fräulein's look, age and behavior don't correspond—a sign of temporal disorderliness that matches her insatiable, crazed sexuality and, in Bakhtin's sense, carnivalesque grotesque features.<sup>40</sup> Her name, "Hausmitzenschlogger," is a suggestive, if odd quasi-German compound: if the word "smitz" at the center is intended to evoke "Schmiss" ("raciness" or "punch"), this might indicate that her "raciness" is "trembling," "hanging loosely" or "flapping" ("schlottern") "out" ("aus"), or out of the "house" ("Haus"). Certainly, when Hotsy, on the run from the sexually demanding Minister, seeks refuge with the Wife and the Man, she immediately tries to seduce the Man, and offers to "give...head, a good blow job, personal, private, no talk of...Ja?" (124). Meanwhile, the Lutheran Minister, "very dour-looking... all in black" (133), who never speaks but occasionally "growls" and hits people over the head with his umbrella, in the Second Act comically "plops his huge bible under the Fraulein's derriere and mounts her" (136).

In this context of rampant sexuality, the Man apparently has retired from hustling and worldly affairs in the confines of the Church, "a sanctuary... I like to think this is

one" (117), while the Wife slaves away in the Kitchen. She, who is "older than the Man and not so carefully preserved" and is "inclined to slatternly ways of dress and behavior" with "a certain roguery... in her eyes and manner of speech" (112), bemoans her "fate for a Lutheran minister's daughter to wind up the life of a retired hustler, contented entirely with his retirement" (138). "It's been more than fifteen since you've thrown a good one in me. The screwing I get is not worth the screwing I got, if ye get what I mean" (138). This state of affairs is quickly revealed as specious, since the Man only feigns invalidity; when addressing the audience, he repeatedly "springs from the wheelchair, does some cartwheels etc., to demonstrate an excellent state of health, then jumps back into the wheelchair" (117).

Interestingly, the Man's ruse to stay in Church (and at peace from the Wife) is not only a variation on an archetypal gag in farce; that he "sits in a wheelchair like a throne in Ireland" (123) as "a straight-down-the-line descendant of the Old Kings of Ireland" (117) adumbrates a parodic reference to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (1957). This is explicit in the Man's defense that "due to the paralysis which afflicts me, how could I mount the ladder to take a look out" (139). Like Beckett's Hamm, the Man is trapped—voluntarily, but perhaps also inescapably—in a room, reflecting on "Time: relentless obsession" (139). Irishness is further present in songs (the Man knows "Danny Boy" and "My Wild Irish Rose" by heart) and, as Dorff points out, in the Wife's wink to a key passage in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), when she loud-up wonders whether "you [was] dozin' your life away while I sautéed the kidneys in wine sauce?" (139). This intertextual Irishness, suggestive of Joycean epiphanies that interrupt solipsistic waiting and farcical outbursts, is completed with references to Anton Chekhov's 1895 drama *The Sea Gull*,

and to a floral-themed Strindbergian stage-design, with a “giant daisy” and “night-blooming vine” that unfold on stage to mark the passing of time—a send-up of the chrysanthemum blooming at the end of *A Dream Play* (1901).

This distinctly European literary heritage of solipsism and dream-like suspension further embeds the Church as a space of sexual inertia and reflection, with its three walls in red, blue and yellow that resemble “huge Venetian blinds” (112), and that alternatingly open and close to divide the Church from the Kitchen, rudimentarily invoked by “a depilated stove and a chair” (112) on the stage’s right side. Each blind corresponds to a proper color symbolism: the blue blind, on the right, when properly closed, is the wall the Man faces “when I’m feeling sentimental” (111) the red one, on the left, is “stimulating” and sometimes evokes “violence” (111), whereas the yellow one, center-upstage, forms the background for the giant flowers and for the Man’s obsession with intractable time. While we are far-removed from the aesthetics of a “memory play,” *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* thus self-parodies a trademark of Williams’s dramas. However, here memories do not interrupt the present, but quite the other way round; reflection is constantly interrupted by a two-dimensional, cartoon-like present, for instance, when the Wife attacks the Man with an evidently fake rubber axe, or when a thump on her head is amplified by a sound effect of “Invisible canaries [that] sing as she turns slowly and dizzily about” (114). By alternating between introspective, intertextually laced ruminations on the one hand, and farcical eruptions on the other, the play sets up the contrast between high (literary) and low (farcical) forms of entertainment which it seems intent on subverting.

However, even the more solemn parts where the Man directly addresses the audience and momentarily assumes distance from the play's actions cannot be taken at face value: although the play's structure of revelation-through-memory apparently authenticates the Man's recollections, these fleeting revelations quickly evaporate. For instance, the Man, accompanied by melancholy Irish-themed songs, shares memories about his first sexual affair with a man: "Fifteen I was when a uniformed lad me own age—a bellhop—crossed out of the Plaza to the duck pond and blushing delivered an invitation to visit a suite of four rooms" (140). The Man does not present this as a significant moment in terms of his identity as a, say, "gay hustler," nor as the preamble for a lasting romantic involvement. Rather, "when the visit was over and my host rewarded me as was befitting for to a descendant of the kings of old Ireland...me benefactor said... 'I do so anticipate your future visits'—which have yet to occur" (141). Immediately following this speech, "Miss Rose segues into 'Danny Boy' and the man sings it" (141). The song's conclusion, where the poem's narrator imagines from the grave to "hear, though soft you tread, above me" (141) the belatedly returned friend or lover, suggests that the scene (perhaps the entire play) is construed as a swan song for the Man's allegedly fading hold on life and desire. While it is tempting to argue that the song—a clichéd staple of Irishness in the U.S—takes on a homoerotic meaning that has dramatic importance, it seems truer to the play that this is merely another form of titillation.

Of course, what "authentic" revelations (queer or otherwise) can we expect in a self-proclaimed "outrage for the stage" that self-consciously drives at an analogy between theater and prostitution? Williams lures the audience into an elaborate joke at the expense

of the sacrosanct family, which produces an obscene and abusive sexuality—evident in Hotsy and the Minister, but also in the Man’s pedagogical teachings—that like the theater is supported by principles of voyeuristic enjoyment, economic exchange and use-value. “So you’re up to it again,” The Wife notes in a self-conscious reminder of the play’s “presentational” form, “to display yourself once more on the park benches” (147), as the Man resolves to put his pen back to work and plans a visit to “the esteemed professor Emeritus Hotlicker, patron of the humanities and arts”: “I shall be there to serve him, butter his toast, crack his three-minute eggs, and then, and then—contend once more for the great Hotlicker Award” (147). Catherine’s often-cited remark in *Suddenly Last Summer* that we “all use each other and we call this love” (131) thus again resonates twenty-two years later in *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, which overtly situates art and same-sex interaction in an atmosphere of hustling and exploitation.

The play ends half-heartedly as the Kinder deliver a “‘Love song,’ staring straight out and getting softer and softer, becoming inaudible as the lights fade” (148)—a schmaltzy church hymn for derelict, confused times, and a distorted echo of 1960s cultural optimism (epitomized by The Beatles’ pop song *All you need is Love*).<sup>41</sup> That the Son has hair at shoulder-length—a staple of the 1960s—could be either a sign of social progress or decadence: “transvestitism’s a common symptom of a society in advanced state of decadence” (128) the Man observes, flipping through “a copy of some such magazine as ‘Screw’” (118). There is no sense of direction or redemption as the Man marches back off into SoHo’s urban jungle, a place off-stage not unlike *Suddenly Last Summer*’s fantastic jungle garden, and an essential backdrop to the sexual truths both

dramas seek to expose. The action ends with an overtly delusional “happy ending” that, the Wife contends, if “not provided by life, what’s wrong with so believing? (148).

While other of Williams’s later work deal more explicitly with recognizably queer (or gay) characters, *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, like *Suddenly Last Summer*, raises questions of tone and sensibility in Williams’s oeuvre that also go the heart of this dissertation’s attempt to historicize the conditions of queer visibility in modern drama. Queerness in this idiosyncratic play emerges against the background of an aesthetic of perversity and messiness that combines a presentational anti-naturalist form with grotesque distortions, with references to Irish modernism and theatrical intertextuality, and with outright bawdiness, cartoon-like, silly action and profanities formulated in quack-German and -Irish idioms. *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* is not explicitly queer-themed, neither in terms of its protagonist (although from the point of heterosexual convention, a hustler servicing men is, if not gay, then certainly not heteronormative), nor its plot. Yet the play explicitly seeks a marginal position from where to intervene, and in that sense self-consciously and drastically exiled—and queered—the playwright from the conventional theater, and from his persona as an established playwright. This is apparent in the foreign language-based inspiration of *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, which revives a comical tradition of immigrant English, spliced with references to foreign traditions in farce and drama, and to 1970s U.S. popular culture. In that regard not unlike *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams again brings queer perversity home to the American stage: with its hypersexualized, distorted bodies and behaviors, *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* marks the drastically changed conditions for staging and understanding sexuality in Post-Stonewall America. Arguably, it also is a postmodern pastiche that belies ambivalence and uncomfortable laughter in an imploding



world—a collapsing reality that Douglas McKeown, in the set design for the play’s production at the Cocteau, attempted to make palpable with the use of “soft sculptures” and props that appeared to melt and drip in the manner of Salvador Dalí’s clocks.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, Williams places sexual confusion (rather than sexual optimism) at heart of life. Perhaps therefore, sexuality, whether as a force or a malaise, cannot be limited to one discreet perspective. If Williams in retrospect, as I started this chapter, nowadays can be considered a “true gay icon,” it is least of all because his work proposes a salubrious, coherent gay visibility. Williams’s theater, as I have argued throughout, exhibits a permanent distrust towards closure and acknowledges that viewing pleasure is never innocent; the theater begs surrender. Keeping this in mind may mean, among other things, that Williams’s sprawling oeuvre still has a queer future ahead of it. A similar case might be made of Djuna Barnes, who is the subject of the next, and final, chapter.

<sup>1</sup> John Bak observes that “In the opening years of the 1970’s, Williams was battling certain members of the gay community as much as the homophobe critics in New York” (*Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life* 208). In addition to Bak (especially pages 228-229), see David Savran, Michael Paller, Dirk Gindt and Annette Saddik, “Out of the Closet, Onto the Page: A Discussion of Williams’s Public Coming Out on The David Frost Show in 1970 and His Confessional Writing of the 70s.”

<sup>2</sup> By the time I finished this chapter, Annette Saddik’s *Tennessee Williams and the Theater of Excess: The Strange, The Crazy, The Queer* had just been published, filling up a long-standing lacuna of scholarship on Williams’s later works that Saddik had begun to explore before in *The Politics of Reputation: The Critical Reception of Tennessee Williams’s Later Plays*. In addition to Saddik and David Savran’s *Communist, Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (still one of the most ambitious queer readings of Williams’s extensive oeuvre) this chapter aims to broach a discussion about Williams’s prolific career by means of its particular emphasis on queer visibility.

<sup>3</sup> Recent additions to previously unpublished and/or unperformed pieces include collections edited by Annette Saddik, *The Travelling Companion & Other Plays*, and Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson, *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays by Tennessee Williams*. Linda Dorff discusses two unpublished late manuscripts, *THIS IS (An Entertainment)*, which was staged in 1976, and the unfinished fragment *The Everlasting Ticket* (1981) in “Theatricalist Cartoons: Tennessee Williams’s Late, ‘Outrageous’ Plays.” Saddik analyzes recent productions of quite a number of these plays in *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess*.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of pre-Stonewall queer life in New York, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. For the 1940s and 50s context, see David Savran, *Communist, Cowboys and Queers*, and Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*.

<sup>5</sup> However, my privileging of the term queer over gay to approach the treatment of homosexuality in Williams’s oeuvre is certainly not intended to corroborate, as Gore Vidal (a personal friend of Williams) once suggested, that “deep down inside Williams was self-hating and suffered from ‘interiorized guilt’” (qtd. in Savran 84). David Savran in *Communist, Cowboys and Queers* points out:

Vidal’s statement seems to imply that a position radically different from William’s is possible, that the product of a deeply homophobic culture can somehow avoid internalizing its values.... Is not the homosexual subject of Williams’ era necessarily split, alienated from its own desires, its guilt articulated by an inveterate... discourse of homophobia, while it desires to rise in mutiny against that very discourse?” (84)

<sup>6</sup> See Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*.

<sup>7</sup> Michael S.D. Hooper, in response to scholarly attempts to revalue Williams’s oeuvre as a critical project, holds that the playwright generally lacks an explicit focus on the *polis*, or community. This seems true enough, although arguably this is a limited notion of the political, and not the most productive one to discuss a queer politics of representation, either in Williams or more generally. See Hooper, *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire over Protest*.

<sup>8</sup> See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*.

<sup>9</sup> See the Second Volume (1945-1957) of *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*.

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur Miller, “Are you now or were you ever?” *The Guardian/The Observer*, June 17 2000.Web.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Kaier Curtin, *We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians: The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage*. For a recent account on Mae West’s 1920s “gay plays” and the conflict with New York obscenity laws, see Ariel Nereson, “Queens ‘Campin’ Onstage: Performing Queerness in Mae West’s ‘Gay Plays.’”

<sup>12</sup> While unrivaled in term of thematic explicitness, *Suddenly Last Summer* is certainly not the first play to deal with either queer characters or subtexts. The commercially flopped *Ten block on the Camino Real* (1953) features a character named Marcel Proust as a sadomasochistic homosexual, whereas in *A Street named Desire* (1947) Blanche Dubois’s deceased homosexual husband haunts—and is foreground by the play as an explanation for—the heroine’s troubled mind. The spectral presence of dead homosexuals and un-mourned attachments is restated in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) in Brick’s riddled investment in Skipper.

<sup>13</sup> See Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity*.

<sup>14</sup> See Anne Fleche's discussion of Paul de Man's "allegories of reading" in *Mimetic Disillusion*.

<sup>15</sup> I am citing from Volume I of the New Directions editions of *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*.

<sup>16</sup> For an argument on Piscator's influence, see Richard Kramer, "'The Sculptural drama': Tennessee Williams's Plastic Theatre." John Bak too observes that Williams's ideas about the "plastic" first took shape around the time Piscator considered (ultimately to no avail) to produce Williams's *Battle of Angels* (1940); see Bak, *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life* (92-95). For Williams's own—and ongoing—part in an international conversation on modern drama, see for instance John Bak (ed.), *Tennessee Williams and Europe: Intercultural Encounters, Transatlantic Exchanges*.

<sup>17</sup> For a tentative exploration of Lorca's influence on Williams, José I. Badenes, "The Dramatization of Desire: Tennessee Williams and Federico García Lorca." R.C. Lewis too in an interview for *New York Times Magazine* in 1947 observes that the playwright's "favorite authors are Chekhov and the Spanish poet and dramatist Garcia Lorca and it is probable that they more than any others have contributed to his own particular style" (*Conversations* 28).

<sup>18</sup> Both Andrew Sofer and Annette Saddik too are attentive to the complicated interaction between language, performance and desire in their commentary on the play. See Sofer, "Self-Consuming Artifacts: Power, Performance and the Body in Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*" and Saddik, "The (Un)Represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams's 'Desire and the Black Masseuse' and *Suddenly Last Summer*." For additional commentary on the play's treatment of homosexuality, see John Clum, "The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female in *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*" and Robert F. Gross in "Consuming Hart: Sublimity and Gay Poetics in *Suddenly Last Summer*."

<sup>19</sup> All citations are from the Library of America Edition of *Tennessee Williams: Plays 1957-1980*.

<sup>20</sup> That being said, most critics make *Suddenly Last Summer* cohere as a morality play in which Sebastian dies *because* of his sexuality. Those readings range from overt condemnations of homosexuality to defenses for his self-determination, for instance in Michael Paller's suggestion that "Sebastian knew exactly what he was about. He believed in appetite... and accepted the death that unchecked appetite might bring" (147). While the latter's argument stacks a lot of weight on guessing the thoughts of an absent character, Paller's overview of the play's reception and biographical correspondences is helpful. See Paller, *Gentleman Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama* (especially "A True Story of Our Time" 115-155).

<sup>21</sup> This connection calls to mind, for instance, one of Des Esseintes's favorite pass-times in J.K. Huysmans's decadent novel *A rebours* (1884), namely to create new, artificial-looking flowers for his sole enjoyment. The American theater audience, however, may have been more familiar with such extravagance through Susan Glaspell's drama *The Verge* (1921), which indexes Clare Archer's consuming passion for horticulture as a sign her madness and transgressive behavior.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Ohi in his discussion of the film adaptation notes: "not only does each element in the chain of symbolic associations refer to every other element, but each symbol also symbolizes the cumulative effect of overdetermination of the chain as a whole." See Ohi, "Devouring Creation: Cannibalism, Sodomy and the Scene of Analysis in *Suddenly, Last Summer*" (42).

<sup>23</sup> For the era's medical concerns with women's health, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirde English, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of Expert's Advice to Women*. Michael Paller in *Gentleman Callers* (114-155) speculates about the influence of Williams's treatment by the psychoanalyst Lawrence Kubie on *Suddenly Last Summer*.

<sup>24</sup> Sebastian's ageless appearance calls to mind the protagonist of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a key text in emerging queer fin-de-siècle literature that was held as proof against the "immorality" of its author in the 1895 trial. In that sense, *Suddenly Last Summer* self-consciously inscribes itself in a "genealogy of discourse" that, according to Ed Cohen, followed the pivotal cultural moment marked by Oscar Wilde's trial; see Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of Discourse on Male Sexualities*. For the dissertation's central argument about the international implications of Wilde's visibility, Sylvia Molloy, "Too Wilde for Comfort: Desire and Ideology in fin-de-siècle Spanish America."

<sup>25</sup> While Spain was generally isolated following the Second World War, the Eisenhower administration maintained close military ties with Franco's regime as an ally in the Cold War. *Suddenly Last Summer* makes no direct references to this political entente, although Laura Torres-Zúñiga reads the cannibalism-motif as an allegory of international politics in "Sun, Sea and 'Quien Sabe!': Tennessee Williams and Spain."

<sup>26</sup> Even with biographical aspects aside, Caleb Crain's analysis of the connection between Melville's preoccupation (particularly in his early travel and adventure writing) with the "unspeakable" crime of cannibalism and anxieties over the other "unspeakable" of homosexuality provides a direct link with the subject matter of *Suddenly Last Summer*. See Crain, "Lovers of the Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels." For additional commentary on the racial, religious and economic overtones of the cannibalism motif, see Steve Bruhm, "Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the Economy of Desir", John S. Bak, "*Suddenly Last Summer*: Religious Acts and Race Relations in Tennessee Williams's Desire", and Keven Ohi, "Devouring Creation." Ohi reads the scene of cannibalism in Spain as a "lurid figure of sodomitical penetration" (40) that repeats "the rending and eating" of the turtles' "undersides" (*SLS* 105) in the Galapagos.

<sup>27</sup> That being said, two more conventional approaches (first, *Suddenly Last Summer*'s companion piece *Something Unspoken*, Williams's only play with—very discrete—lesbian characters, and second, *And Tell Sad Stories of Death of Queens*, with its sympathetic portrayal of an effeminate "queen") perhaps suggest a different response to this new phase of visibility that slowly ushered in.

<sup>28</sup> For "fantasmatic historiography" and its practice, see Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*.

<sup>29</sup> While the play's self-announced distinction as a "dramatic ballet" (101) seems for the most part figurative, the start of Scene Two actually inserts an explicitly rhythmic and musical moment: "quick, cadenced lines are accompanied by quick, dancelike movement, almost formal, as the Sister, in her sweeping white habit, which should be starched to make a crackling sound, pursues the girl about the white wicker patio table and among the wicker chairs: this can be accompanied by quick music" (116).

<sup>30</sup> "While most... New York critics found a way to say 'cannibalism' in their reviews," Paller observes, "none except the critics for *Cue* and *The Saturday Review* could manage 'homosexual'" (155).

<sup>31</sup> John Bak gives a helpful overview of the various biographies that have up till 2013 appeared in *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life*. While he finds Spoto's biography "a hastily written study" (ix), I cite Spoto to convey a general public impression of Williams's career.

<sup>32</sup> Williams of course sporadically, and with increasing openness, played along with the public "Williams persona," fortifying the perception that the work and the author's personal life were closely interpenetrated. In his noted 1972 stage appearance in *Small Craft Warnings* (a rewrite of the tellingly titled 1967 play *Confessions*) he acted not as Quentin, the play's self-conflicted homosexual, but as the ageing alcoholic Doctor, yet a perceived underlying "confessional" connection would have seemed near at hand—and if so, successfully, since the production drew a larger audience than any other late play. Williams to some extent elucidated his resemblance to Quentin in an interview with Robert Jennings for *Playboy Magazine* in 1973. Similarly, when *Vieux Carrée* (1977) premiered, the *Village Voice* issued a double-interview conducted by James Grauerholz with Williams and queer coryphée William Burroughs (1914-1997) about the play's autobiographical elements. When he wrote *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), he had no issues clarifying to Dotson Rader in 1981 for *The Paris Review* that the play was inspired by his love affair with the dancer Skip Kiernan in the 1940s.

<sup>33</sup> I cite from Annette Saddik's edition of *The Travelling Companion & Other Plays*, a collection of previously unpublished plays. Saddik explains that the play was originally staged as *Kirche, Kutchen und Kinder* and that for this edition she corrected the misspelled "Kutchen" for "Küche" (the German word for "kitchen") and dropped the "und." Interestingly, the title reflects Williams's recurrent interest in foreign-language influence (for instance, and again in German, *The Gnädiges Fraulein*) and foreign models (such as his excursions into Japanese Noh theater) since the 1960s. Saddik argues that particularly German-ness—ranging from German characters to ideas and techniques lifted from the German literary and theatrical tradition—is crucial to the playwright's experimentation with the grotesque and the fantastic. See Saddik, *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess*.

<sup>34</sup> "Sensibility" is a key term that Susan Sontag introduced to ongoing debates about camp in the iconic 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp.'" "Queer Theater" is the subject and title of Stefan Brecht's 1978 collection of essays that focusses on performances in New York City by Jack Smith, John Vaccaro, Charles Ludlam, and Hot Peaches. Brecht defines "queer"—before queer theory—as born from "inconsistency, choice and paradox" (9), suggesting that its meaning (and above all its pleasure) resides in a constant contradiction, displacement and trans-valuation of the norm.

<sup>35</sup> For instance, Moe Meyer argues that "the function of Camp... is the production of queer social visibility" (5) and that all other uses of camp are "un-queer appropriations" of "the camp trace, or residual camp" (5).

On the other hand, one might wonder if camp cannot also matter to queer theater history without this exclusively minoritizing rhetoric? See Meyer (ed.), *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*.

<sup>36</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin's classic study *Rabelais and his World*, which vitally informs the discussions of Williams's late plays as "outrageous" (Dorff) and "excessive" (Saddik). For an account on the critical leverage and problems of the carnivalesque, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*.

<sup>37</sup> The manifesto was originally published in 1975 in *The Drama Review* and reprinted in the collection by Steven Samuels from which I cite.

<sup>38</sup> Besides *Kirche, Küche, Kinder*, Dorff discusses *The Gnädiges Fraulein* (1965), *THIS IS (An Entertainment)* (unpublished, 1976), *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* (1979) and the unfinished *The Everlasting Ticket* (unpublished, 1981) as exemplary "outrageous" plays.

<sup>39</sup> See Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure*.

<sup>40</sup> Stallybrass and White observe that "Grotesque realism imagines the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish" (9). Further, and in line with what I have so far argued about Williams's dramas, that the grotesque is a distorted reflection of reality, and "uses the material body—flesh conceptualized as corpulent excess—to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world" (8-9).

<sup>41</sup> The Love Song maybe parodies *All You Need Is Love* in its earnest, repetitious refrain: "Love came down from hea-venn/To dwell with us on earth!/L-O-V-E, LOVE, L-O-V-E, LOVE!" (146).

<sup>42</sup> See Philip C. Kolin, "An Interview with Douglas McKeown on the Production of *Kirche, Kutchen, und Kinder*, 1979."

## Chapter 4

## Djuna Barnes and the “Confusion that is Called Biography”: The Queer Modernist

Theatricalities of *The Dove* and *The Antiphon*

Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) is more renowned as the author of queer-themed expatriate modernist novels such as *Nightwood* (1936) and *Ladies Almanack* (1928) or for her early modern-styled pastiche chronicle *Ryder* (1928) than for her dramatic writing. Yet Barnes, who at a young age started her career as a journalist in the New York of the 1910s, took her first significant steps as an artist in the theater. Susan Clark points out that “Before the age of thirty, she had three plays produced by the Provincetown Players and had gained attention of New York’s top drama critics; by 1926, over eighteen Barnes plays had been published in various newspapers, periodicals, and in a book of her collected works” (105). After abandoning the dramatic form for several decades, Barnes wrote *The Antiphon* (published in 1958 and reissued, with slight revisions, in *Selected Works*), a daunting verse drama that continued an oeuvre that, Louis Kannenstine points out, “became progressively involved in assimilating and coordinating itself with literature of past periods” (x). Nonetheless, with the exception of *The Antiphon*, Barnes’s plays have not attracted much scholarly attention, in part because critics remain unsure about their dramatic effectiveness. For instance, in *Silence and Power*, the seminal collection of essays that arguably re-launched Barnes scholarship in the nineties, Joan Retallack argues that Barnes’s early one-act pieces show “brilliance... in description” (47) but are overall dramatic failures: “Her characters hold each other and time itself at bay with stalemates and diversionary epigrams... that neither advance the

action nor contribute to their understanding of one another” (47-48). This judgment is not far off from the reviewer who in 1919 complained that the production of her one-act *Three from the Earth* by the Provincetown Players “floats in a nebula of its own connotations into which the audience tries to force a battered entrance...You are floated despairingly out to sea, far past the hope of negotiating a landing on any simple basis of understanding” (qtd. in Clark 115).<sup>1</sup> Complaints of obscurity and difficulty are also persistently leveled at *The Antiphon* which remains embroiled in a controversy whether it should be treated as a formidable closet drama intended solely for reading, or as a script for performance.<sup>2</sup>

One of this chapter’s primary aims is to reconsider two of Barnes’s idiosyncratic dramas and their characteristically verbose, elliptical language in light of our discussion on queer visibility in transatlantic modernist drama. While Barnes’s stature as an expatriate lesbian writer—a label she resisted throughout her life—and more recently as a queer modernist<sup>3</sup> rests almost entirely on her novelistic output, I propose that her early one-act *The Dove* (1923) and the magnum opus verse drama *The Antiphon* invite us to consider an internationally shaped Barnesean mode of queer modernist theatricality. Despite the fact that Barnes’s dramas generally have not been successfully, or frequently, staged (as a result, detailed information about productions in the past or the present is scarce), I argue that the plays I selected for discussion are, if not easily performable, at least imminently theatrical in ways that resonant with the preoccupations of the previous chapters. Crucially, Barnes’s interest in drama cannot be severed from her ornate, densely belabored—for lack a better word—literary style. It is certainly not my intention in this chapter to establish a distinction between “literature” and “the theater”—two powerful

ideologies that shape and sometimes divide modern drama scholarship. Rather, I suggest that Barnes's writing is both particularly readerly (demanding time and patience for its complex meaning) and theatrical (desiring a stage to be heard and seen). In doing so, I join a number of critics who have argued that her highly performative style signals and shields queer themes and sensibilities that are not necessarily limited to queer experience (as representative of *a* "lesbian" or *a* "queer" person) as such, but that exceed identity claims or a politics of visibility based thereon. More specifically, I argue that *The Dove* and *The Antiphon* are queer dramas that self-consciously gesture to sexual subjectivity, but evade theorizing or naming its dramatic import according to the seamless realist-positivistic conventions of, what Elin Diamond calls, a "theater of knowledge" which middle-class audiences are invited to decode.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I align Barnesean theatricality with this dissertation's core concept, the double movement of a modernist queer visibility that is both revealing and troubling.

As in the previous chapters, I use queer visibility at once as an oxymoron, in which "queer" contradicts a sexual politics based on visibility, and as a functional—an aesthetic and experiential—category to analyze two plays that, while written over thirty years apart, illustrate the complicated relation between Barnes's formal concerns and her sexual politics. While Barnes no doubt considered *The Dove* a work of juvenilia, I argue it merits attention for launching the discussion of what it means to stage queer visibility in an evasive style that stalls action and instead revels in the theatricality and materiality of gesture and language—an aesthetic that culminates in the convoluted early modern-styled *The Antiphon*.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Barnes like García Lorca in *El público* situates queer visibility in a kind of "theater beneath the sand" that resists full disclosure. Moreover, and



crucially, Barnes's plays suggest that the formal language and dramatic models to specifically stage women's sexuality depends on, what Luce Irigaray calls, a prior relationship of "mimesis imposed."<sup>6</sup> Barnesean theatricality offers no position outside of the discourses it cites, nor resolves ongoing controversies of her work as "both a resource and a problem for feminism" (Caselli 247), but I propose that *The Dove* and *The Antiphon* mime/mine the conventions of staging of sexual difference in a gender-specific, feminine voice, and in decidedly queer ways.

The added emphasis, reflected in this chapter's title, that Barnes's dramas bear an equally suggestive as troubling relation to what she described once as "the confusion that is called biography" does not necessarily mean I follow Andrew Field's confident assertion that "the Barnes oeuvre may be said to be one of the best instances of deep auto-analyses outside the Freudian canon in modern English literature" (98). Rather, biography as a mode of writing about a real or fictitious person's life points to Barnes's interest in the reach of art to mediate—and to put into a heavily codified form—"the real." Paradoxically though, these plays' convoluted, artificial aesthetic creates an anti-realist, or meta-realist distance that reminds the viewer of their mediated nature. (Auto-)biographical elements in *The Dove* and *The Antiphon* operate as switch points between fact and fiction, between literal and figural meaning, and as such, between "mimesis imposed" and ironizing mimicry. Rather than decoding queerness in Barnes's oeuvre with biographical criticism in mind, I suggest that biographical motifs point us back to mediation, and to the pleasures of a stylized modernist theatricality that offers—generally indirect or obscured—commentary on queer visibility.

I start this chapter by briefly situating Barnes's early dramas in a context of a modernist theatricality conversant with, what David Weir calls a, 1910s and 20s US "decadent revival." I then argue that *The Dove*, while imbued with the era's bohemian spirit and vogue for European-style decadence, instead ironizes decadence's promise of sexual heterodoxy as a pose that cannot bring about, in the play's own terms, a truly "perverse" or "obscene" transgression. In the following section, I discuss *The Antiphon*, generally considered Barnes's most autobiographical, and on account of its riddling figural language, entirely written blank verse possibly most challenging work. As an allegorical rendering of a past that can neither rest nor heal, I read the play as exemplary of what Heather Love calls a "backward" modernism, that drives at queer phantasies that cannot literally be staged. As such, both works continue our discussion on queer visibility as an always compromised, or even—pace Lorca—"impossible" project for modern drama.

### 1. Modernist Theatricality: The Dangerous Pleasures of *The Dove*

Since Barnes never explicitly theorized her dramaturgical principles, scholars often turn to either her personal correspondence or journalistic miscellanea (which include interviews, investigative pieces on cultural trends, social reform, sensationalist on-site stunt work and reviews on theater and the arts) for insight or tropes to describe her work. Clark, for instance, finds in one of Barnes's film reviews for the *Theatre Guild Magazine* in 1931 "what might be viewed as her artistic credo: 'I like my human experience served up with a little Silence and Restraint. Silence makes the experience go further and, when it does die, gives it that dignity common to a Thing that has been touched but not ravished'" (qtd. in Clark 106). While not immediately pertaining to the

theater and written, moreover, at a time when Barnes had temporarily abandoned playwriting, it is tempting to regard the statement's valorization of tone, atmosphere, ephemerality in tandem with an international *fin-de-siècle* symbolism that several decades earlier had crossed the Atlantic with a vogue for European-style Decadence.<sup>7</sup> Yet whether as a ceremonious plea for "Silence and Restraint" or a self-conscious pose of ennui and morbidity, the ever-skeptical Barnes, Daniella Caselli warns, never simply endorses an aesthetic model as redemptive or truthful, not even in her early "decadent" works where, despite reliance on its trappings and themes, "the strategies of the decadent... are exposed in their ineffectiveness" (Caselli 18). The more important point for Caselli is that Decadence "Like the Gothic and the Baroque" reveals Barnes's engagement with archaic and obsolete style elements as "opportunities to fabricate and expose the histories and legacies of words and syntax" (18).<sup>8</sup> This is crucial not only for Caselli's sensible thesis that Barnes's oeuvre of "improper modernism" is entirely built on a "second-hand" (18) language that is already borrowed or "used, never innocent" (3) and so constructs "its own untimeliness" (8), but also because it invites us to consider an international trajectory of "belated" and "posthumously" traveling ideas that inform Barnes' aesthetic sensibility.

To some extent, the international dimension to Barnes's aesthetic is implied in David Weir's consideration of her early works against the background of an already belated 1910s and 20s American "decadent revival,"<sup>9</sup> or in David Sherry's understanding of *Nightwood* as an after-effect of a US modernist "reinvention of decadence." However, none of these studies are particularly interested in Barnes's dramatic output. Such omission is perhaps less a symptom of preferred objects in modernist studies than

indicative of Barnes's marginal place in American theater history. It might seem her dramas fell on the least successful side of the panorama James Huneker construes in his study *Iconoclasts: A Book of Dramatists* (1905), which instructed the American audience that the future of modern drama would depend both on the tempestuous ("realist") kinds of Ibsen, Strindberg or Hauptmann and inwardly-oriented (symbolists and decadent) poet-playwrights like Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Maeterlinck. However, in a cultural context where dramatic realism and naturalism "had appeared later on the scene in the US than in Europe" and was still "far from the norm in the American theatre of the early twentieth century" (Murphy 41), even a full decade later enthusiasts of the "New Theater"<sup>10</sup> were unsure where to place Barnes's one-act dramas. More voluble and restless than Maeterlinck's symbolist plays, Barnes's amalgamation of Wildean affectation and Synge-like folk-themed experimentation (most explicitly in *An Irish Triangle* and *Kurzy of the Sea*, both produced in 1920 by The Provincetown Players), put the speaking subject at the center of dramatic attention in settings ranging from typically symbolist (a graveyard, an island) to realist (domestic and urban). Not plot, but character—while elusively drawn or limited in psychological development—forms the visual and aural center of dramatic imagination. There is no unifying aesthetic or thematic principle to these early pieces, but their sense of brevity as painterly tableaux that speak for themselves suggests a preoccupation with transient surfaces, sounds, fashions and objects suited to Barnes's mythicized persona as a self-styled bohemian *flâneuse*.

I do not make this point in an attempt to recover or validate Guido Bruno's exalted portrait, from 1919 for *Pearson's Magazine*, of "the real Djuna" who

“picturesquely dressed... walks down Fifth Avenue” and whose “morbidity is not a pose. It is as sincere as she is herself” (*Interviews* 388).<sup>11</sup> Not the veracity of this portrayal matters, but rather that Bruno contemplates Barnes’s appearance as a performance in its own right. Barnes similarly deploys a number of strategies in her on-site journalism and interviews, for example in her use of perspectival irony, that point to an urban and modernist sensibility for the relatively porous boundaries between performance on stage and beyond, between scripted acting and stylized self-presentation. In that sense, theatricality—that which, for Tracy Davis and Thomas Postlewait, “can be abstracted from the theatre itself and then can be applied to any and all aspects of life” (1)—in Barnes’s work navigates the gulf between “art” and “real life,” a division that modernists of all kinds have attempted to complicate or break down. Particularly Barnes’s plays appear less preoccupied with plotting than with luxuriating in the performance quality of self-contained theatrical gestures, made up of—pace Caselli— “second-hand” language and, what Richard Schechner calls, “twice-behaved behavior” that is self-reflexively extended in stylized mediation. In addition, Barnes indicated that the space between theater and theatricality is fecund yet confusing ground to query the place of the personal in art. Looking back on her association with Provincetown in “The Days of Jig Cook,” she explains

So we talked, and we went our separate ways home, there to write, out of that confusion that is called biography when it is wedded to fact, confession and fancy in any assembly of friend versus friend and still friends. Of such things our plays were made. Eugene O’Neill wrote out of a dark suspicion that there was injustice in fatherly love. Floyd Dell wrote archly out of a conviction that he was Anatole France. I wrote out of a certitude that I was my father’s daughter and Jig directed because he was the pessimistic Blue Bird of Greece. Such things made atmosphere, as a chalk line on the floor of a magician’s home makes terror and association, —atmosphere and a dead line over which the public could not go. When

and on what day or succession of days did we, unknowingly, walk over our own dead line and into the general life of a world which, until then, had been the audience? (qtd. in Senelick *The American Stage* 388-389)

In this passage, written around the same time as the autobiographically inflected, *Ryder* (1928), Barnes is unusually explicit about her writing “out of a certitude that I was my father’s daughter.” Yet all the while, the meaning or importance of “confession”—like the passage’s syntax—is fundamentally riddled with “confusion” and consequently not at all straightforward. We are again reminded of “atmosphere,” or “terror and association” that emanates from behind the “chalk line” that divides art and reality, till the playwright, in a paradoxical spin, crosses over, walking “into the general life” of which she or he before “had been the audience.” The passage destabilizes the relations between fact and fiction, between private and public theater, and between the absolutely personal (“a dead line over which the public could not go”) and the becoming public of the personal (when playwrights “walk over our own dead line”). Barnes’s interest in “biography” exceeds the conventional—that is historical, or empirical—meaning of the term, and instead avows personal experience as a necessarily incoherent point of departure for further—and always tangential—exploration.<sup>12</sup> Biography, in other words, in Barnes leads us straight into the artifice of make-belief, or as Matthew O’Connor in *Nightwood* has it, “One’s life is particularly one’s own when one has invented it” (125).

Similarly, both *The Dove* and *The Antiphon* in their respective ways point to biography, though never quite for the sake of autobiography. In this section, I argue that *The Dove* self-reflexively dramatizes a “confusion” that cannot be explained by recourse to biographical information or conventional dramatic standards. While Kannenstine considers it “a study of ennui in the parlor” (136) “flaccid by dramatic standards” (135),

the enigmatic piece extravagantly ironizes and mimes Ibsenite “dramatic standards,” deliberately stalling action and understanding in a manner that suggests a modernist double movement of troubled queer revelation. Produced in 1925 at both Smith College and the Bayes’ Theatre in New York, *The Dove* is described by Clark as “one of the first lesbian plays by a lesbian-identified playwright produced on the American stage” (105), written in the early 1920s during her time in Paris as a correspondent for *McCall’s Magazine* and “published soon after Barnes had begun her live-in relationship with Thelma Wood” (117). While Barnes’s relationship with Thelma Wood, afterwards famously fictionalized in *Nightwood*, does not necessarily make her a “lesbian-identified playwright,” the play’s rather explicit queer sensibilities do stand out among her other one-act plays. Written in Paris, it seems not incidental that the piece sardonically looks back over the ocean (and perhaps in time), at the unconventional household of Vera and Amelia Burgson, two middle-aged sisters and “advanced virgins” (152), who live “in a long, low rambling affair at the top of a house in the heart of the city” (148) and keep a younger woman mysteriously named “The Dove” as a live-in companion.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, the Dove, who is “barely out her teens” (150), has a “highbridged and thin” nose and “red hair” (149) that suggest a striking resemblance to Barnes, who at the time of writing was in her early thirties. Further biographical parallels reveal that the Dove was “born on a farm” (153) and experienced a history of family distress (“my brothers were fond of me—in a way, and my father in—a way,” 153) that motivated her to move to New York. Ultimately, however, her history and identity remain uncertain, in accordance with her own “wish [that] every man were beyond the reach of his own biography” (157). This gesture of anonymity points to a willed opacity that *The Dove* maintains throughout.

The curtain opens on the Dove, who “gowned in white, is seated on the divan polishing the blade of an immense sword” (150), in the company of Vera Burgson. It is early morning and we immediately learn that the Dove is polishing the sword for Amelia who, out for a walk, arrives near the play’s ending. Obsessed with weapons, Amelia, the Dove reports, “carries a pistol with her, just to go around the corner for a pound of butter” (152) and Vera knows “She keeps an enormous blunderbuss in the corner of her room” (152). Amelia has ordered the Dove “To take off all the blood, stains first, then polish [the sword]” (152), for Vera proof that “She is quite mad, there’s no doubt. Blood stains! Why she would be afraid to cut her chops with it—and as for the rest of her manifestations—nonsense!” (152). The scene is thus explicitly set up to discuss Amelia’s “manifestations,” but *The Dove* lacks both medical representatives or reassuringly naturalistic conventions to make complete sense of the action and the characters. Instead, as Retallack bemoans, the piece appears to elaborate verbal “surfaces” (47) until at its dramatic height “the surface cracks” (48) yielding no plausible or transparent conclusion.

Besides the abundance of “firearms,” “Many groups of swords, ancient and modern... secured to the walls” and “A pistol or two... in chairs, etc.” (149), the stage directions indicate the flat has a “decoration [that] is garish, dealing heavily in red and pinks. There is an evident attempt to make the place luxuriously sensual” (149). Accordingly, Vera Burgson, at the start of the play lies half-reclined “in a thin yellow morning gown” with “A French novel [that] has fallen from her hand” and “Her eyes... closed” (150). Her reading taste for the foreign and risqué, and her “thin”—i.e. scandalous—“yellow morning gown” suggest the faded aura of fin de siècle decadent aestheticism, in the Anglophone world indelibly associated with the 1890s British



periodical *The Yellow Book*. The sexual heterodoxy with which this has become synonymous further looms in Vera's remark that "our beds are... full of yellow pages" (151) and in her posturing with a lurid, forbidden "album that no one ever sees. [*She laughs.*] If we had any friends we would have to throw that book in the fire" (158). However, Vera "wearily" concedes that Amelia's beliefs that they "live dangerously" (150) as free-thinking cultural radicals that "have made it our business to know—everything" (150) is exclusively accessed through the imagination:

We say this little thing in French and that little thing in Spanish, and we collect knives and pistols, but we only shoot our buttons off with the gins and cut our darning cottons with the knives, and we'll never, never be perverse though our entire education has been about knees and garters and pinches on hind-quarters—elegantly bestowed—, and we keep a few animals—very badly—hoping to see something firsthand—and our beds are as full of yellow pages and French jokes as bird's nest is full of feather—God! [*She stands up abruptly.*] (150-151)

That they "keep a few animals... hoping to see something firsthand" suggests a vicariously-lived prurience that will never be satisfied; in the explicitly psychoanalytic currency of the day, they will "never, never be perverse" enough to be transgressive. In that sense reminiscent of Susan Glaspell and George Cook's satire of Freudianism *Suppressed Desires* (1915), *The Dove* quizzically relies on psychoanalytic jargon to voice the sisters' attempts to self-analyze their failure to "live dangerously." Tellingly, the enigmatic Dove with mild scorn compares the Burgson sisters to "two splendid dams erected about two little puddles" (157).

Like her fellow playwrights among the Provincetown Players, Barnes was captivated by polemics regarding the era's "New Theater" and its treatment of the "New Woman" in the manner of the "New Psychology."<sup>14</sup> However, contrary to the fairly conventional stage realism of for instance Glaspell, *The Dove*'s circuitous conversations

and strained non-actions point to a deliberate, post-Ibsenite genre confusion that in its language and setting hyperbolically echoes the central trappings of *Hedda Gabler* (1890). When the Dove wonders why Vera is “so restless,” Vera first shrugs “Because I’m a woman. I leave my life entirely to my imagination” (155) and then quickly adds that “Perhaps what I really want is a reason for using these pistols! [*She laughs and lies back*]” (155). The understated hysterics of Vera’s repeated nervous laughter places her on a continuum with Amelia’s “vitally hysterical” (149) behavior. In her splendidly theatrical entrance she cites the visual logic behind the scenario of the Ibsenite hysteric who, according to the current fashion for Freudianism, “plays” an aggrandized, distorted version of herself—that is, a diseased femininity as masquerade—that points back to the enigma of a slumbering sexuality. In Barnes’s tilted post-Ibsenite universe, Amelia’s hysterical performance is more flamboyant than Hedda’s — in fact, it is almost operatic: “She is wearing a cloak with three shoulder-capes, a large plumed hat, and skirt with many flounces” (158) and nervously paces around the stage, abruptly switching moods and subjects, humming “an Italian street song” (158), “[walking] about hurriedly (159), “shuddering” (159), “stopping short” (159), “throwing up her hands” (159). She is despairs at her lack of romantic satisfaction (“Someday I will look like a bat, having beaten my wings about every corner of the world, and never having hung over anything but myself,” 159) and is utterly mystified about life (“Why should I wear red heels? Why does my heart beat?” 160).

In a wink to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), Amelia, like Nora Helmer, dances wildly while avowing she “could talk for hours, all about myself—to myself, for myself” (160). And yet, as the play’s aesthetic underscores, talking leads nowhere; it has a

presentational quality that cannot be fully narrativized even if its signs and actions demand to be read as symptomatic. “It’s wicked!” Vera observes about her sister, “when I make up her bed, all I find is some Parisienne’s bathing girl’s picture stuck full of pinholes” (152). The Dove too acknowledges that Amelia “sits before me hours making those pinholes in the borders of everything in sight” (152). This repetitive, nervous tic suggests an erotic blockage that is all the more puzzling in light of the conditions that brought the young Dove to the the Burgson household:

I came to New York [...] then one day I met you walking through the park, do you remember? You had a parasol, you tipped it back of your head, you looked at me a long time. Then I met Amelia, by the same high fence in the same park, and I bowed to her in an almost military fashion, my heels close together. (153)

That she met both Amelia and Vera “by the same high fence in the same park” points beyond the stage, toward an urban theater of seduction for cruising lesbians. Yet crucially, erotic seduction does not appear to be a cause of dramatic tension. Instead, a brooding atmosphere accumulates with Vera’s eager inquiries why the Dove stays (“What do you find here?” 125) and whether she “ever did anything wild, insane” (153) or has “taken opium and hashish” (153), perhaps as some of the writers she is reading.<sup>15</sup> The girl’s evasive answers and strange passivity is progressively unsettling to Vera, who wonders if her “terrible quality were not one of action, but just the opposite, as if you wanted to prevent nothing” (154). Clearly, Vera’s remark self-reflexively points to the play’s forestalling of action, which is further reflected in its eponymous heroine’s “expectant waiting air of a deer” (150). The emphatic waiting defies conventional dramatic expectations, and instead charges the stage with restless energy that suggests, in

the Dove's words, impatience with "necessary continuity": "I want the beautiful thing to be, how can logic have anything to do with it, or probable sequence?" (157).

Grinding "probable sequence" to a halt, *The Dove* delays and relays our attempts to decode what it means to see a recognizably queer *ménage à trois* in a concrete Bohemian setting. Its "second-used" stage language of decadence and hysteria self-consciously sets the scene for an obscured subtext that apparently bypasses the dramatic import of establishing sexual identity. Instead the play and its eponymous heroine gesture to an eruptive moment in which "the beautiful thing [can] be," that is, the longed-for "perverse" behavior the Burgson household lacks. The play's self-containment is almost shattered when the Dove forcibly "places her hand on [Vera's] throat" (156) and sanctions her to use of "one of those pistols" (156) for more than merely decorative purposes. Following Vera's startled response of non-action, she complains

Ah! ... I suppose I shall *always* wait... Always, always! ... I suppose I'm waiting for the person who will know that anything is a reason for using a pistol, unless one is waiting for the obvious, and the obvious has never been sufficient reason. (156)

That "anything" is better than "the obvious" suggests a preference for unpremeditated, anarchic pleasure over logic causality and stale convention.<sup>16</sup> Yet while Vera's suspects that "It's just like Amelia to call the only dangerous thing she ever knew the 'Dove'" (157), *The Dove* till the end refrains from spelling spelled out its dangerous pleasures. The three women remain locked into inertia, vampirically feeding off of each other's presence or comparing themselves, like Amelia, to "a bat" (159), till the Dove near the end with literal insistence mimes the play's subtext of vampirism as she "Slowly... bears Amelia's left shoulder and breast, and leaning down, sets her teeth in (161).<sup>17</sup> The vampire-like bite, which in the play's context of self-styled decadence reads as a queer

kiss, might present either a failed or imminent transgression, and occurs immediately after Amelia

*[...has danced until she comes directly in front of THE DOVE. She drops on her knees and lays her arms on either side of THE DOVE.]*

AMELIA: I hate the chimneys on the houses, I hate the doorways, I hate you, I hate Vera, but most of all, I hate my red heels!

THE DOVE: *[almost inaudibly]* Now, now!

AMELIA: *[in high excitement]* Give me the sword! It has been sharpened long enough, give it to me, give to me! *[She makes a blind effort to find the sword; finding THE DOVE's hand instead, she clutches it convulsively. Slowly THE DOVE bears Amelia's left shoulder and breast, and leaning down, sets her teeth in. Amelia gives a short stifled cry.]* (161)

It is not entirely transparent why Amelia asks for the sword (is she planning to kill herself as Vera has augured, or will she rather hurt someone else?) nor to which extent she intentionally “clutches...convulsively” the Dove’s hand instead of finally grabbing the sword. Either way, the bite/kiss absorbs Amelia’s impetus, after which the Dove with a pistol in hand “turns in the doorway hastily vacated by VERA” (161). This doorway, as the directions stipulate, “leads into the back hall directly back center” (150), into the flat’s entrance, a space obscured from view that houses the sisters’ painting of “Carpaccio’s Deux Courtisanes Vénitiennes” (158). In another obvious echo to *Hedda Gabler*, an unseen gunshot is heard after the Dove takes “a deep military bow” and declares her actions “For the house of Burgson” (161). Finally, Amelia retrieves “the picture of the Venetians courtesans, through which there is a bullet hole” (161), while she “slowly, but with emphasis” utters the play’s closing line: “*This* is obscene!” (161).

While clearly the Dove’s military action is a rectification of some sort—an act of violence different from Amelia’s obsessive pin-holing, occurring under an extra-domestic logic—, this might equally be another persiflage to set up the play’s deliberately opaque ending. Moreover, it is revealing that at its dramatic climax *The Dove* instead of action

proposes additional comment on its symbol-laden aesthetic by invoking Vittore Carpaccio's painting *Due dame veneziane*, a "popular print in Victorian England" (Parsons 21), which introduces an allegorical gesture reminiscent of, in Heather Love's terms, Walter Pater's "backward" chaste aestheticism.<sup>18</sup> It represents two richly dressed women, solidly seated on a balcony, parallel to one another, making no eye contact amongst themselves or with the viewer, but staring off at an unknown object on the left. They are accompanied by two dogs (one bears its teeth, gnawing on its short leash or whip, while a smaller-sized white dog is petted), several birds (two doves, a peacock and a parrot), a little boy and red shoes.<sup>19</sup> Barnes no doubt picked this painting to suggest Amelia and Vera's rigid, uncommunicative pose, frozen into time and torn between petting the white dog/Dove and keeping the more aggressive hound (and unruly instinct) at bay, and almost entirely out of the frame. Further, if these expectant women are Amelia and Vera's self-chosen, idealized stand-ins, the Dove's blasting gun in a more explosive form reiterates the nagging question she insistently poses: "What does a woman want,"<sup>20</sup> perhaps in particular when, like the inaccessible Venetian ladies, she apparently already has material wealth.

So "What do you want, Vera?" (155) "Some people say a lover," she rejoins, "but I don't say a lover; some would say a home, but I don't say a home. You see, I have imagined myself beyond the need of the usual home and beyond the reach of the usual lover" (155). We might wonder whether Vera's dismissals mark her as transgressive, particularly since she is already living a rather queer *ménage à trois*, or delusional. The line between collusion and transgression in *The Dove* is vague, as many critics agree is generally the case with sexual politics in Barnes's oeuvre. With no men in sight *The Dove*

bypasses the oedipal families of stage realism altogether. It quite unabashedly stages a dramatic tableau with three queer women, yet with uncertain irony navigates a cultural legacy of decadent degeneracy and Freudianism—the latter particularly shows in the play’s hyperbolic insistence on the relation between femininity and hysteria—that stands in the way of being truly “perverse,” or of “anything” that is not “obvious.” While conspicuously avoiding positivistic theorizing, the intense pleasure, puzzlement and aggravation caused by Amelia’s “red heels” stands as the play’s sardonic comment on the bisexual component that is implicit in hysteria, given that “Freud finds an instability of gender identification in all his hysteria cases” (Diamond 27). Contrary to the sisters’ hesitancy to shoot, the Dove’s gunshot into Carpaccio’s stylized picture of femininity would thus appear a bold call to arms to destabilize and *queer* femininity as it is self-consciously presented—either hysterical, or allegorically abstracted.

Why the play’s unraveling action is “obscene” is not in and of itself clear. However, changing perspectives from Amelia to the Dove, it certainly tempting to regard that the Dove, who disclaims any resemblance to a dove (“If you were sensitive you would not say that” (155), she warns Vera) enacts the “perverseness” the sisters lament their lives lacks by disfiguring the picture. Does Amelia recognize, but brush away the Dove’s plea for a different aesthetic, or of an ethos/eros of which she is the disruptive harbinger? Either way, it would seem *The Dove* not only responds to an already too recognizable cultural fascination with woman’s enigma and/as hysterical bisexuality, but also opaquely gestures to its locked up and seething potential, which for now remains off-stage and, in the double sense of the word, “ob-scene.” In fact, and for that reason, *The Dove* is remarkable for apparently obscuring, relaying elsewhere—off-stage and in the

realm of the un-seen—the dramatic point of staging queer visibility in the first place. Yet his is no mere case of “closeting,” as a contemporary performance review with irritation shows:

It is, one fancies, a study of inhibitions in the *fin de siècle* period and shows, perhaps, what awful things inhibitions were in those days. It gives an effect rather as one might obtain if, say, one were to read Gertrude Stein on a merry-go-round, by candlelight. But so lamentably few have had such experience. (qtd. in Clark 120)

The review not only, Clark argues, evasively acknowledges “the lesbian subject matter” (120), but further proposes an exclusively minoritizing view from which to judge its interest and validity; not everybody, after all, has had first-hand experience with such “inhibitions” or with reading/being “Gertrude Stein”. Although less vociferously than the public outcry over the role of “morality in the theater” that ensued with *Los invertidos*, this review siphons off the play’s potentially disruptive queerness and insidiously reads its restless energy back into pathology.

Such reluctance to look beyond convention reminds us why Lorca in *El público*, written within seven years of Barnes’s one-act, radically turned to international avant-gardism to conceptualize a queer visibility grounded on the premise of the theater’s destruction. Of course, this desire to blast away the vestiges of the past, as we have seen, is haunted by contradictions that directly bear on the play’s queer interests. In contrast to the iconoclasm of *El público*, what will become fully obvious in *The Antiphon* and already shows in *The Dove* (certainly in the pivotal role reserved for Carpaccio’s painting and, closer to the present, in its decadent, fin-de-siècle atmosphere) is Barnes’s penchant to read the present through past iconographies and styles. In the next section, I argue that *The Antiphon* continues *The Dove*’s double movement of a part-revealing, part-



obfuscating queer visibility, but departs with a drastically backward-oriented aesthetic and allegorical vision.

## 2. Allegorical Visions for a Backward Modernism: *The Antiphon*

Commentators point out that Barnes started working on *The Antiphon* in the late 1930s but kept revising and excising the manuscript till going to print for the first time in 1958. If in that sense a “late work,” after a near total retreat from public visibility for almost two decades, *The Antiphon* is no isolated incident in Barnes’ oeuvre. For Julie Taylor, it is perhaps “the most Barnesian” piece of all, because: “Of all the works in Barnes’ oeuvre, *The Antiphon* has suffered the most from the charges of difficulty and unreadability – and in this case unperformability – that have marked her critical reception” (125). Charges of difficulty are no understatement: drastically harking back to a deliberately archaizing style and idiom, *The Antiphon* in over a hundred pages of blank verses takes the reader from one convoluted speech to another in a dramatic prose that, despite its grave tone and subject matter, has occasionally been admired for its “camp” quality.<sup>21</sup> In addition, *The Antiphon* might also be called typically “Barnesian” on account of the assumption that it revisits mostly autobiographical materials. With its treatment of themes as rape, childhood abuse and polygamy, *The Antiphon* has had no lack of feminist readers,<sup>22</sup> although Barnes scholars generally disagree how to balance an argument that takes into account both its sexual politics and formal difficulties rather than privileging one over the other.<sup>23</sup>

While I do not propose biographical criticism as an alternative out of this dilemma that allows “decoding” the play’s textually riddling nature, it is important to

recognize that *The Antiphon* insists on keeping a plausible parallel between Miranda, the play's protagonist, and the author in clear sight. The point of this observation is not to verify to which extent *The Antiphon* dramatizes biographical fact, but rather to recognize how the slippage between the stage and real life is mediated by the play's self-consciously meta-dramatic (and accordingly anti-illusionist and anti-naturalist) design. In that regard, *The Antiphon* takes a double-sided, allegorical view which, as in the etymological sense of the term, replaces one thing with another (*allos*). Allegory generates meaning not through literal denotation or disclosure—the putative objective of conventional realism—but following a logic of addition and supplementation which in this particular piece borders on perplexing opacity. “As a misreading of *The Antiphon* is not impossible,” Barnes tellingly insists in the renewed preface of the *Selected Works* that “this play is more than merely literal” (79). Accordingly, if there is biography at its root, the play is neither literally about Barnes nor to be taken literally. Rather, and particularly in light of the author's notorious reluctance to discuss her work and private life, *The Antiphon* points to a self-aware modernist mediation that folds the personal into the impersonality of figural and, in Caselli's more specific terms, “used, never innocent” (3) and “second-hand” (18) discourse. With its ornate language welded from references that range from the canonical and conventional to the utterly private and obscure, it stalls voyeuristic pleasure, and instead appears to insist that the difficulty of sense-making *is* the play's main action. That the play's title evokes a liturgical musical form, sung alternately—and in a “antiphonal” pattern of call-and-response—between two choirs in worship self-announces a highly stylized, at once anti-realist and meta-realist script for performance.

Its difficulty is also tactical—an inviting cue for queer readers. Admittedly however, *The Antiphon* is no evident choice to complete our discussion on queer visibility. In contrast to *The Dove*, there is no explicitly stated queer subject matter or subtext. It is apparent that Miranda, an actress and playwright “in her late fifties” who has been living in Paris for several decades and, like Barnes at the time, “favours her left side on heavy headed cane” (7), is treated with contempt by her family for her unconventional (and, between the lines, sexually ambiguous) life. Nonetheless, as a piece that analyzes sexuality through the prism of family relations that have gone awry, *The Antiphon* bristles not only with riddling but also queer sexual meaning. In its preoccupation with questions of original sin and seduction—two prominent cultural narratives of sexuality, one biblical and pre-modern, the other recast through a Freudian lens as both “primal” and modernist<sup>24</sup>—the piece continues a “pervasive concern... with the way in which identity is constructed—and performed—in a cultural matrix” (Warren ix) in Barnes’s oeuvre. More specifically, I argue it mines and mimes the “cultural matrix” in a manner evocative of early modern baroque allegory that goes to the heart of both its convoluted queer visibility and its place in a, in Heather Love’s sense, “backward modernism”<sup>25</sup> that extends Barnes’s association with a lesbian modernist “erotics of loss.”<sup>26</sup> Because it is a drama that revisits the past to exact, in Barnes’s own words, “justice, not revenge” (qtd. in Herring 281), I propose *The Antiphon* is radically backward-oriented in a double sense, namely for its archaizing formal conceits and for its revisionary, though not necessarily “curative” intent. With regards to the latter distinction, Love discriminates between “curing” and “curating” in her call for queer historians to avoid redeeming the past:

We might take this distinction to suggest that the work of the historian is a kind of ‘interminable analysis.’ Taking care of the past without attempting

to fix it means living with bad attachments, identifying through loss, allowing ourselves to be haunted. (43)

*The Antiphon*'s excursions into the aesthetics of the past are not historiographic in this sense, but it is tempting to think of the piece as one that self-consciously allows "to be haunted" by its "bad attachments." In its uncompromised insistence of feeling/representing backward, the piece queerly con-fuses—joins in an abstracted, allegorical manner—sexual meaning that resist literal disclosure but revels in a convoluted presentational form.

The three acts of *The Antiphon* take place "During the war of 1939" in "England, Burley Hall...formerly a college of chantry priests, in the Burley Family since the late seventeenth century" (6) and now the decayed ancestral home of Augusta Burley Hobbs, widow of the deceased American patriarch Titus Hobbs.<sup>27</sup> We gradually learn that Augusta's youngest (and favorite) son Jeremy, who until the play's ending appears in disguise as the mysterious "coachman" "Jack Blow," has chosen these ravished surroundings to set up a disquieting family reunion between Augusta and her estranged children. Act One opens when Jack, "wearing a patch," "high boots and a long coachman's coat" (7) arrives from Paris with Augusta's eldest, his sister Miranda, an expatriate playwright and actress "in her late fifties" (7) who is dressed in full regalia of the theater, "wearing an elegant but rusty costume, obviously of the theater" (7). Whence all have gathered (Miranda's two other brothers Dudley and Elisha, her uncle Jonathan Burley, and the ageing but "gaunt, determined" (36) Augusta), the long Act Two quickly unfolds as a series of bitter complaints hurled at Augusta for her complicity in Titus' abusive and polygamous household. In particular Dudley and Elisha take turns at baiting Augusta, but also abuse Miranda, who is taunted for choosing a bohemian (that is

obscure, insolvent and sexually ambiguous) life in Paris. Their haranguing reaches a sinister climax when, wearing a pig's and an ass's mask respectively, they seize Miranda and attempt to make Augusta dance to the lashing of a whip, "making imaginary squares on the ground, as children do in street games" (90). Immediately following this sadistic masquerade, Jack brings a doll house to the stage that replicates in miniature his sister's rape by "a travelling cockney thrice her age" (95), under Titus's condoning eye, and tricks Augusta, who cannot but resist curiously peeking through its windows, into repeating the position of an accomplice. After Elisha has congratulated Jack for his "trick [that] unseats us all" (96) and handed Miranda the masks as if to finish what her siblings started ("Miranda, I give you our weapons," 96), everybody goes to rest and the curtain falls. Following the turmoil of the preceding scenes, Act Three resumes more subdued, with Augusta's pleading with Miranda to make amends and to "let us play. The epilogue is over, the boys asleep, and we are girls again" (101). Miranda too wishes to undo and overcome the past; pointing to the two halves of the gryphon (a fantastical animal, half-lion, half-eagle) that was cut into pieces by her father and now flank the dinner table on each end, Miranda seeks to "make of this divided beast an undivided bed" (98). However, this exchange quickly takes the shape of a fiery duel. In a distressed reaction to Dudley and Elisha's unexpected departure ("A sudden derisive blast of the car-horn" (126) heard off-stage), Augusta beats Miranda over the head with a tolling curfew bell leading both to fall to their death from the upper gallery of the stage "across the gryphon" (126). *The Antiphon* ends with no clear conclusion when Jack shortly reappears and after the play's rueful closing speech "with what appears to be indifference, leaves the stage" (127).

As Louis Kannenstine observes about *The Antiphon*, “When attempting to describe the concrete events of the play, one becomes aware of the author’s extreme distrust of literal experience itself, of the reality of the present moment” (143). Certainly, the setting and stage design place the action at a double remove “During the war of 1939”<sup>28</sup> in a decaying seventeenth century English abbey from the actual time of writing (the 1950s). Framed by a cataclysmic socio-historical event that brought Miranda and Jack to England “In the shutting down of Paris” (49), Miranda’s opening lines sets the tone for the play’s disquieting encounter with the past: “Here’s a rip in nature, here’s gross quiet,/Here’s cloistered waste;/Here’s rudeness once was home”(7). In images that, according to Alex Goody, are sampled from Shakespeare’s tragedies *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1606) and *Macbeth* (1611),<sup>29</sup> *The Antiphon* adapts the tone and diction of early modern tragedy to dramatize the present action, described by Miranda as an unnatural cleavage in time that shows—literally and figuratively—in the disarray on stage. Accordingly, the archaic language and the peculiar setting add self-reflexivity to Elisha’s remark that “Everything’s a little out of context” (21) or Miranda’s disquieting sense of discomfort that “It is not well to be so moved in lost familiarity” (12). The opening scene insists on the preponderance of a past that crucially informs—and haunts—the play’s actions in an unusually allegorical sense that urges the spectator to abandon “the reality of the present moment” (Kannenstine 143).

This set-up, I argue, encapsulates the play’s self-aware, anti-illusionist mediation between past and present, and between past fictions and present ones, and is consistent with a spirit of allegory that is figured in the meticulous arrangement of stage props and in the decayed surroundings, dominated by the imposing dinner table. The “long table

with a single settle facing front, at either end of which is set the half of a gryphon, once a car in a roundabout” (6) is “laid in formal order, dominated by heavy candlesticks, a large tureen, a brass curfew bell, and a battered gilt mardi-gras crown” (6), objects that elicit commentary about the family past.<sup>30</sup> Over the balustrade of the upper-level gallery “hang flags, gonfalons, bonnets, ribbons and all manner of stage costumes” (7), on the left hand there’s “a dressmaker’s dummy, in regimentals, surrounded by music stands, horns, fiddles, guncases, bandboxes, masks, toys and broken statues, man and beast” (7) and through the tumbled wall, we discern “In the aperture, back view, a grey baize donkey, sitting” (7). Next to the “gonfalons” that indicate Augusta’s noble lineage and the “music stands, horns, fiddles, guncases” that elicit her fond memories of *Kapellmeister Stack*, a “major-general” whose “baton rocked/Thawing out a trumpet voluntary” (52), the stage is littered with children’s objects and insignia of the theater (“bonnets, ribbons and all manner of stage costumes”). Most of these are probably Miranda’s who, her uncle Jonathan confides, visits often and “As you see/She leaves her bonnets, flags and boxes/She’s fond of carnivals and all processions” (19). The “battered gilt mardi-gras crown” lying on the dinner table is Miranda’s, and it extends her personality as a playwright and actress, who enters the ruins in “a long cloak, buckled shoes and a dashing tricorne blowing with heron feathers” (7)—an overblown costume that recalls Amelia’s in *The Dove*.

Clearly however, the play’s meta-theatrical nods and sensitivity to role-playing, which shows in the incorporation of various literary and performance genres (such as religious ritual, fantastical storytelling, the use of costumes and masks, musical performance and children’s games and rhymes) exceeds Miranda’s perspective. Plotted

beforehand by a disguised Jeremy/Jack as a family reunion that once started shall take its dramatic course, all the characters know—certainly with the added hindsight of time—how to acerbically “play” their parts in a piece that revisits “lost familiarity” (23) “in [the] hiatus” (5) of parent-child and sibling relations. Yet to the extent that *The Antiphon* is modeled on early modern revenge tragedy, arguably only Jack (and perhaps Dudley and Elisha) truly plays the part the avenger. Tellingly, Caselli compares him to a modern-day Vindice, the caustic plotter in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607), whose scheme with sinister dramatic irony unfolds while he is applauded as a “Fantastick—Scapin” (28) for the acumen of his “wild and saucy” (76) observations, whereas for Warren he represents the violin’s “jack,” and thus the leading voice that takes us through the movements of a drama defined in musical (“antiphonal”) imagery. Arguably however, while the revenge theme provides a frame, *The Antiphon* is not primarily concerned with plotting action. Instead, its action almost exclusively consists in showing, with clamoring verbosity, the characters’ perspectives. In that sense, not Jack’s scheme, but perhaps particularly Miranda’s and Augusta’s lamentations form the heart of the play’s extravagantly self-imposed, to use and extend Love’s beautifully suggestive phrase, “forced exile” (53) into the past.

While from the start Miranda’s costume ostentatiously marks her association with art and artifice, she appears to play no active part in Jack’s plot, which calculates the reconstruction of her rape as the evening’s climactic point. If an apparently passive object in his orchestrations, she is no mere pawn, nor, as Jack initially scoffs, a “bumpkin” (34); instead, he finally concludes that possibly all along “Miranda knew” (127). While her self-martyrized passivity finally comes as no surprise (“I might have known, being weary



of the world,/And all the bootless roar of vindication,/ She'd not defend herself," 127), Jack underestimated her determination, "going backward to her target/her face set grim for Beewick" (28). Somewhat like *The Dove*'s eponymous heroine, Miranda's passivity is deliberate, and fitting, she asserts, to a "Trappist—sprung—and of hard-won silence" (109), a self-aware nod of the author to her own, who at the time had become a notorious recluse. In an evasive rejoinder to Augusta's question "Who are you become?" (116), Miranda impatiently insists on her association with the theater: "Have I not said it?/ One of a strolling company of players./Say wardrobe mistress, tiring many parts" (116). Hence Miranda's unexplained but spectacular stage entrance, "Dressed," an outraged Augusta notes, "as though there was no God—/All those feathers blowing from her hat;/And such a drag of velvet!" (48-49). While "Embroidered, and embossed for some high scandal" and "all in all, magnanimous," Augusta finds it "strange is that [Miranda] is not famous" (80)—an acerbic reminder of Barnes's obscurity as the self-proclaimed "most famous unknown" of her generation.<sup>31</sup> Elisha and Dudley in turn scorn Miranda for being best at acting as "Herself, the Duchess" (49) or as "Queen of the Night" (49), self-conscious references, Caselli argues, to the faded aristocratic milieu of *Nightwood*.

In the face of Miranda's silence, Jack's rhetorical prowess—which has a self-consciously obfuscating effect, perhaps to remain in disguise<sup>32</sup>—presents an evidently biased perspective. Yet his "bravado" (17) as a manipulative orator all the more clearly sets Miranda apart as, her uncle Jonathan proffers, "a poet," "a light and winged thing, and holy,"/As Plato said. You are in the wash of such;/The which your people know; it is their cruel pleasure" (97). This is crucial, for Miranda's association with the arts repeatedly brings up her marginalized position, in particular vis-à-vis of her brothers'

pecuniary interest as “merchants.” Dudley, for instance, according to the stage directions is “very much the executive... chewing on a cigar” and holding “a large gold watch, chain dangling” (20), and is predictably obtuse. Noting the setting’s “broken Greeks” and objects from the past, he exclaims that “when I don’t understand a thing—/.../I kick it!” (21). He and Elisha have no regard for Miranda’s literary credentials; even if she is “all get-out in France/And apparently a scrivener in England,” she has “no credit in New York” (44). In particular the “foreignness” of Miranda’s lifestyle makes her ideologically suspect and a failed national (and sexual) subject: “What profit anyone who trips the foreign scene?/And prefers her bloodshed in an alien tongue/And is said to write her comedies in French./As far as I’m concerned, expatriate’s/The same as traitor” (63). For her brothers, Miranda is “manless, childless – a safeless document” (89), thus marked figuratively as a “loose woman” and in socio-economic terms as a “Aristocrat, pauper, artist, beggar!/.../souser!” (89).

Contempt for the cosmopolitanism and literary modernism of a 1920s European-based American—often coined “lost”—generation is more ambivalently voiced from Augusta’s point of view, who alternately treats her daughter with reserve and jealousy about rumored new life-styles and unprecedented sexual liberties that her own advanced age and aristocratic dignity do not permit. She finds Miranda “so ambiguous, that mourning dogs/Follow her off graves” (57), drawing on canine imagery that in light of prior remarks (“Your father said; ‘Don’t wag your bottom,’” 55) suggests a sexual innuendo about her unmarried, and possibly promiscuous, life (“She’s been in and out of wills, like dogs through hoops,” 77). Yet in the nocturnal Act Three, she directly inquires whether “It is true you had forty lovers?” (110) in the hope of learning how to make up

for lost time and for her self-imposed sexual reticence, which Miranda ungenerously describes as a “spirit nested with the Tudor bat,/That sphincter rose that barnacled the groin” (9). Act Three projects Augusta’s rueful reparative wish that both mother and daughter might be “girls” again—that is, meet outside of destructive family ties—and that finally, now that “The boys asleep, and we are girls again/Nor need to think of them this part of the night,” she and Miranda can be “young again and tell us of our lives” (101). Yet this plea to revive herself through her already middle-aged daughter in the absence of men—abusive husbands, or bullying sons who have proven “to ape their father” (44)—is on the one hand tragically impossible, since already “the epilogue is over” (101), and on the other vampirical in a manner reminiscent of *The Dove*. In mournful speeches, she pleads with Miranda to assist her in experiencing what she never knew she already missed out on: “Do let’s pretend we’re girls; let’s play./ If dull at home, one may be skilled abroad./There must be ways to catch a world” (116), or for travelling where no woman of her generation could, especially since “In my day,” as she earlier protested to her children, “we did not leave our husbands” (73).<sup>33</sup> “Let’s go to Ostend, Monte Carlo, Brighton/.../Let’s catch/A Fairing at a stall; let’s dance a jig/.../Now we’re off for Maxime’s, only/Call in the caterers, the pigeons, larks and torches;/Let us join the gentlemen” (105). Yet while such repetitive and, from the point of view of dramatic necessity, excessive structures of lamentation effectively evoke a fallen world of loss and impossibility, they mercilessly reveal Augusta’s egoism: “Let’s not talk of irredeemable things,/Let’s talk of me. Could I love again? (104)

With Augusta’s self-centeredness, the play’s worldview of misunderstanding and abuse thus further deepens, and much more bleakly repeats *The Dove*’s indecisive stance

regarding women's liberties and desires—here framed as a generational issue inseparable from a family context in which all the men are undisputedly cunning and violent, with the possible exception of Miranda's uncle Jonathan. It is telling that he “studied for the ministry” (25) and thus plays no part in the play's “beastly” heterosexual economy that particularly marks women in insidious ways. According to Richard Epsley in the play's revised 1962 version, there are “some 300 instances of animal metaphor... much of this [...] disparagingly directed at female characters” (190). Elisha, for instance, instructs his mother that “There's only one kind inch on any woman,/Between her tot and tail” (58), legitimizing the women's status in the play as quickly disposable sexual commodity, as evinced in Titus' tireless philandering and polygamous household. Alternatively, if women are not cattle, they are victims, as depicted in Jack's doll house or “beast box” (91), a neologism gesturing at the root of bestial relations that more generally, in a Hobbesian free-for-all struggle, set the family members of this “Hobb's Ark” (91) up against each other. Augusta's bitter disappointment with married life and motherhood is particularly apparent where she observes the doll house's replica of her husband, “now tamed” and “[a]n imp” in a “size I could have jumped him/And been happily unacquainted with you all” (92). Yet more problematically, while *The Antiphon* grants a gender-specific importance to the mother-daughter relationship to investigate the asymmetrical positions occupied by women in Titus's household—and in that sense certainly in Act Three finally privileges female voices—, it offers no sustainable counter-position outside or within the discourse that equates womanhood with bestial sexuality. Perhaps not surprisingly, Augusta does not hesitate to confirm she is “happier in sons,” since “men are a pleasure. What's a woman?” (57). However, Miranda too, despite

having fended off a lifestyle not bound by sexual reproduction but stylized in and through art/artifice, disconcertingly scorns that “It has been remarked from advent to the terror/Woman is most beast familiar” (111). For Epsley here “Miranda is almost taking a patriarchal position herself...Her animal terminology increasingly reflects a confused and partially misogynist conception” (197).

Yet while I don’t disagree that this complicates scholarly “attempts to celebrate the play as brave rejoinder to patriarchal abuse and oppression” (190), it matters greatly that *The Antiphon* adamantly and—certainly from the point of view of dramatic necessity—in excessive detail shows the woeful contradictions and double binds that arise from it. In exactly that regard, the play’s long-winded, demonstrative speeches resonates with the hyperbolic (neo)baroque signification which for Monika Kaup organizes Barnes’s novels,<sup>34</sup> or with the allegorical designs that according to Katherine Biers underlie her social reform journalism.<sup>35</sup> Particularly in its combination of recitative excess, densely figural language and a self-reflexive stance that mourns a disintegrating world, *The Antiphon* calls to mind certain characteristics of Walter Benjamin’s discussion on seventeenth-century German baroque tragedy in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928). For Elin Diamond, Benjamin’s understanding of baroque allegory is as a “self-critical practice rooted in emblem, hieroglyph and gesture; that is, in signs pointing...to an expanded sense of their own materiality...that aim not to seduce the spectator into an illusory world but rather to demand her active decoding (78-79). Similarly, one might argue that the play’s particular pleasure and the frustration resides exactly in an incessant impetus for “active decoding”—imposed by the alluring, self-reflexive “materiality” of its verbal bravura—that yields only fragmentary, provisional insight.

Kannenstine in this regard usefully remarks that “Barnes discovered that what was missing in modern drama was a sense of contemplation, the ‘will-to-see-things-through with the mind’ that had been eventually sacrificed for action that was too often mere fumbling” (142).<sup>36</sup> Certainly, *The Antiphon* tests to the maximum a “will-to-see-thing-through with the mind” over the voyeuristic pleasures of full disclosure. Instead, it favors an allegorical vision which for Benjamin, according to Jeremy Tambling, “starts with the sense of dead fragments” (117) that are “collected” from history. It further “corresponds to a perception of the world in ruins, and is therefore the art of the fragment” (110), and often a politic choice to evoke “what cannot be represented, or has no identity that can be publicly validated” (94). Moreover, and as *The Antiphon* poignantly shows, allegory evacuates meaning, even as it relentlessly, and with a melancholic insufficiency,<sup>37</sup> begs more and more interpretation (more “emblem, hieroglyph and gesture”) without finding stable ground.

The dilapidated world of *The Antiphon* thus projects an allegorical field of vision, in which meaning—and with it the promise of redemption—fails, or is too brutish to be literally staged. For some critics, this opacity at the heart of *The Antiphon* may point to personal and even collective trauma. Julie Taylor, for instance, in a noticeable contribution reconsiders the play’s textual features of “obscurity and digression” (135) in light of “recent queer approaches to questions of incest, sexual abuse and trauma.” Yet while Taylor, avoiding literal biography, aligns Barnes’s ornate theatrical modernism with Ann Cvetkovich’s work on queer testimonial practices,<sup>38</sup> she has very little to say about the play’s disturbing and queer pleasures, which after the doll house’s dramatic

revelations—that is, after Jack’s plot has run its course—obliquely inform the center of attention.

In fact, I suggest that Act Three reveals a radically backward eros that crowns the play’s allegorical “collapse of history into nature—a nature, as Benjamin puts it, no longer in ‘bud and bloom, but in the overripeness and decay of her creations’” (qtd. in Diamond 79). While three decades earlier, *The Dove* ironized the Burgson sisters’ decadent fin-de-siècle attitude, Act Three of *The Antiphon* insists on a more radical sense of decadent decay that figures a “rip in nature” which will not mend, but heads, in Miranda’s chilling image, like a “Perambulator triumphant to the tomb—/Death with a baby in its mouth” (123). As I argue in the remainder of this section, Miranda’s perplexing fantasy of an “antiphonal” communion with the past cannot be severed from death, albeit least of all in a literal sense.

If *The Antiphon*, like *Hamlet* (1602), starts on the premise that “time is out joint,” it appears that Miranda, who at the end of Act Two re-orders the stage’s arrangement, has chosen to “set it right.” In Act Three, “the gryphon has been brought together” and is decorated with “tented curtains of lace clubbed in the carnival crown” (99), a carnivalesque detail up till then previously lying on the dinner table. The crown is Miranda’s who, as we have seen, is “fond of carnivals and all processions” (19) and has prepared what appears to be a bridal bed for a high mass of spiritual union with Augusta, conform with her plan to “make of this divided beast/An undivided bed” (98). Miranda soon beseeches her mother to join in for a religious deliverance at once exstatic and extinguishing, not unlike a well executed “compline,” an evening prayer to complete the day: “High in the honey of cathedrall walls,” Miranda observes,

There is the purchase, goverance and mercy.  
 Where careful sorrow and observed compline  
 Sweat their gums and mastics to the hive  
 Of whatsoever stall the head's heaved in—  
 There is the amber. As the high plucked banks  
 Of the viola rend the unplucked strings below—  
 There is the antiphon. (119)

Here, *The Antiphon* for the first time alludes to its title, which holds the promise a harmonious call-and-response structure between two choirs in worship. The liturgical nature of antiphony suggest that in joint-performance suffering can be stylized as an act of beauty and love that transcends life:

I've seen two loves so eat at each other's mouth  
 Till that the common clamour, co-intwined,  
 Wrung out the hidden singing in the tongue  
 Its chaste economy—there is the adoration.  
 So the day, day fit for dying in/Is the plucked accord. (119)

In overlaying the oral and aural pleasures of “two loves [that] eat at each other's mouth” with “hidden singing” in a “chaste economy,” the convoluted imagery equates bliss with the “plucked accord” that is “fit for dying.” In this eroticized union, Miranda with an apparanetly masochistic devotion longs for a love that cannot—not in literal actuality—exist in the mother-daughter bond. Consider Miranda's remarkable address to Augusta:

There was time when we were not related.  
 When I first loved thee—I say 'thee' as if  
 It were to use a lost endearment  
 That in the loss has lost the losing world—  
 When I first loved thee, thou wert grazing.  
 Carrion Eve, in the green stool, wading:  
 In the coarse lilies and the somber wood;  
 Before the tree was in the cross, the cradle, and the coffin,  
 The tragic head-board, and the victim door,  
 The weeper's banister, the cunning panel.  
 Yet when the salt unspilt, the bread broken,  
 The milk unquested, uncried and unsprung,



You came braying for a victim lover.  
 The cock crew, the spur struck, and Titus Adam  
 Had at you with his raping-hook  
 And you reared back, a belly of thumbs. (102)

In an idealized return to plenitude, Miranda imagines how she, still unborn, would lovingly gaze at her mother “in a time we were not related./When I first loved thee.” Miranda’s hyperbolic “loss” that “in the loss has lost the losing world” informs the baffling pre-maternal “primal scene” that sets the stage for an almost overtly amorous position outside of phallogentric circuits and before, she insists, “Titus Adam/Had at you with his raping-hook.” A radically “backwards”-oriented wish for undoing the conditions that engendered a violent past, Miranda’s reparative fantasy thrives on an impossible temporal disordering that queerly confounds her bonds with Augusta and the maternal. By pre-empting identification with her mother’s gender with, instead, a desire *for* her gender, Miranda imagines jamming the patriarchal machinery of socialization, and, as Nick Salvato observes, anarchically gestures to a lesbian eros. Arguing further for a lesbian reparative reading, Salvato argues that “As she likens her mother metaphorically to Eve in the Garden of Eden, Miranda imagines Augusta not as innocent—she is ‘braying’ for a ‘lover’—but as an erotic being, naked and ‘grazing’ among the vaginally ‘coarse lilies,’ who would, as yet undefiled by Titus, make an ideal partner for Miranda” (169).

Yet perhaps this states things too literally and too optimistically. While erotically charged, Miranda’s vision ultimately displaces her mother from the prenatal adoration she must have felt for her. Instead, she retrospectively sees only signs of violence and decay; from the “Carrion Eve,” already decomposing—in Baudelairean overtones<sup>39</sup>—in defecation (“green stool”), to “the somber wood” and the “tree” that goes into “head-

board” of her marital bed and into the “victim’s door” behind which Miranda will suffer sexual assault. More disturbingly, as a biblical counterpart to her “Titus Adam,” it is “Carrion Eve” who came “braying” (like a mule) “for a victim lover” to have intercourse with an “Unmuzzled bone/Drew down the hood of flesh, entombing laughter” (102) till it produced a “balking embryo” with a “hawser ‘round about its neck” (102). From the start “entombing” life, Miranda lyricizes a loss that starts even before “A door slammed on Eden...And I walked down your leg” (103) and hence a definitive disengagement from the fantasy of Augusta’s actual love and reparative care.

Certainly, in asserting an impossible queer eroticism in a morbid world of sexual pessimism, *The Antiphon* appears to be “feeling backward” in Love’s sense. Yet at the same time, the obscuring excess of its convoluted aesthetic suggests a self-conscious enjoyment in dramatizing the impossibility Miranda bemoans. Or, as Love observes about the specific “structure of feelings” she discerns at the heart of a queer backward modernism, “many of the bad feelings under review here... are in fact bound up with pleasure” (161). Perhaps the confusion between objects of guilt, anger, pleasure and desire finally reveals, as Teresa de Lauretis argues about *Nightwood*, the workings of “sexuality as enigma without solution and trauma without resolution—sexuality as an unmanageable excess of affect that can find textual expression only in a figural, oracular language, in hybrid images and elaborate conceits” (“Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future” 245). In densely figural language, Act Three unravels as a phantasy of complete dissolution, driven by a dark eros that defies reasonable or literal understanding.<sup>40</sup> Yet, rather than “acting out” in the Ibsenite manner that *The Dove* parodies, *The Antiphon* self-reflexively upholds a presentational, meta-dramatic style that

ritualizes and manages its confusions. Even if probably Miranda does not achieve the longed for antiphony with her too dysfunctional family, she is determined to keep the ceremonial processions going:

wrapped in metric; hugged in discipline,  
Rehearsed in familiarity reproved;  
Grappled in the mortise of ritual,  
turning on the spirit of the play—  
Equilibrium else would be a fall,  
Paid for in estrangement, each from each. (118)

So rather than risking a false “Equilibrium,” Miranda already sees herself as one among “the martyrs in the catacombs” (97) who at the end of Act Two dissuades her uncle to prevent a “clocked encounter” (97) with death: “I think you must have heard the dead unpack/Their wings before, for here’s a clapping air” (97). For her, “Love is death, and death is maidenly” and “wrestles in the brasses and the rods/Of whatsoever trestle love lies on” (104), that is, behind the stage curtains and as a supportive “trestle”—perhaps the ephemeral ground to all figuration. Accordingly, and contrary to her perfidious brothers who “have come to hunt you down” (125), she pleads with her mother to “stay with me and uncle Jonathan/And do as I” (126), that is, stay in the ruined abbey, since “Your grave is also on a journey; join it:/ Save your death.” (125) There Miranda might cherish another queer maternal fantasy: to unite, after the world has finally fallen apart, with her mother in an erotic “metempsychosis” (117), the transitory passage of migrating souls in which, she avers, “I’d lay you in the journey of your bed,/ and un-bed you, and I could, in paradise” (126).

Of course, this invitation to stay and “un/bed” Augusta “in the journey” to death in the restored gryphon, which, Caselli thoughtfully points out, conjures a Dante-esque echo of Beatrice’s transport to paradise, goes in exactly the opposite direction of

Augusta's thirst for rejuvenation. She is deaf and blind to the allegorical pleasures of Miranda's gospel. Yet even in this final altercation, *The Antiphon*, like *The Dove*, is at its most complexly erotic where it refers to what is not and cannot be staged. "Then why," Augusta bitterly retorts, "did you let me grow so old?" (126) Perhaps it is too late to replenish her "brimmed breast...now bowling low in sag/Knock their withered acorns on my knee" (108), too late for being "in great joy, kissed on the mouth" (107). Yet Miranda's rapturous speeches indirectly echo (and respond to) Augusta's particularly fond memories of Victoria, the Hobbs family matriarch: "She was so tender and perfidious;/A faulty scholar, but a witty one:/And such a pair of transcendental eyes" (67) who "could cluck in anyone for a daughter. She whistled and the girls like thieves came running;/A ready and milking tongue could stroke/One out of store" (68). Woman, even before Mother, stands at the heart of original sin, yet she (not Man) is credited with an erotic presence that overflows the narrative of family longing that would "cluck in" Augusta "for a daughter."

All this stands as a crucial reminder of the play's ambivalence as "both a resource and problem for feminism" (Caselli 247). While *The Antiphon* ultimately does not explicitly redress the sexual politics it analyzes, it arguably recognizes sexual difference as a different gendered perspective and accordingly mines/mimes, in Luce Irigaray's sense, the "imposed mimesis" of its cultural image repertory in novel, "counterfeited" (Caselli's term) and decidedly queer ways.<sup>41</sup> While unrelenting in its clamor and ambivalence, *The Antiphon* allies its women with life, eros and death in unforeseeable ways that at the play's ending leave a flustered Jack wondering whether he could "know/Which would be brought to child-bed of the other?" (127). However, like

the Dove's military intervention in *The Dove*, this expletive seems exemplary for adding *on* meaning, but not necessarily clarity. While the "child-bed" offers a suggestive counterpoint to the literal fall to death after Augusta has knocked Miranda over the head with the curfew bell, Jack's final speech imposes no unity of meaning on the sudden, violent outburst that ends the fiery verbal duel. When action finally strikes, it seems either too late or beside the point; baroque allegorical vision, I have argued, resists definitive closure. Instead it leaves us with intimations of an imposing design that we (like Miranda) might finally fail to grasp.

Perhaps in that sense, as Taylor attempts, not hermeneutics but affect can open new ways of reading Barnes.<sup>42</sup> Yet what exactly is affect in *The Antiphon*? Certainly not an "emotion" in the fully psychologized sense, for this requires more room for empathy, identification and transparency than the textual difficulty allows. Still, instead of stopping short at an argument that posits how the play's verbal expenditure seals its fate as a closet drama, we might take serious its deliberation "to be read and heard" (Caselli 228) in an extravagantly affective manner that resonates with the double movement of a modernist queer visibility. Clearly, the play's self-reflexive incentive to look closer, from the "watchmaker" who with "his preying loupe debates" (10), and Jack's eye-patch which he, like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, wears "The better to see you with, Madame" (48), to Dudley, who wonders "If I saw myself, backward... what sort of beast I'd see" (22), is deliberately frustrated. Yet Miranda cannot stop desiring to know "when Oedipus grubbed out/The luggage of his sight upon a pin,/For what in-caverned vision then he mined?" (111) In this "in-caverned vision" that openly risks oedipal interpretation yet remains ahead of literalism and full disclosure, *The Antiphon* suggestively resonates with

Lorca's "theater beneath the sand" despite their apparently antithetical aesthetics. While *El público* more spectacularly destroys theater from the inside, *The Antiphon* no less radically "virtualizes"<sup>43</sup> the obsolete language of verse drama for unsettling and erotic queer figurative potential, conjured in the performative pleasures of a text that Barnes, despite her "contradictory statements on the matter" (Farfan 58-59), probably not incidentally imagined as a script for performance.

What, for instance, if we thought of the play's revenge themes as a long-winding, what Roland Barthes calls, "space of alibis" (56) for Barnes to elaborate a "Figuration... in which the erotic body appears... in the profile of the text" (55-56). While this may seem an outrageous statement for a play that ostensibly revisits trauma, I have suggested that Miranda's queer eros is a troubled and confusing center that *The Antiphon* mediates by encircling and allegorizing, rather than literally naming and disclosing. To infuse queer visibility in the play's fallen world is from the start a compromised scenario; drawing on misogynistic and animalistic imagery from a cultural past that spectrally haunts a present that is literally and figuratively trapped in its ruins, *The Antiphon* cannot avoid, but still acknowledges the difficulty of queering a desire specific to women from within, what de Lauretis calls, the paradoxes of "sexual (in)difference."<sup>44</sup> While trapped within "the metaphor of the female beast" (Espley 190), its convoluted figural chains conjure up erotic meaning that is contrarian and like "Queerness is structured by this central turn; it is both abject and exalted" (Love 2-3).

No doubt, Caselli's observation that "the coexistence of all-meaningfulness and impenetrability" in Barnes's oeuvre "is linked not only to the larger issue of femininity, but also to the difficult legibility of her sexuality" (34) is pertinent to both *The Dove* and

*The Antiphon*, although particularly the latter complicates the “legibility” and hence the very meaning of sexual subjectivity. Here, queer visibility makes an only fleeting appearance, not per se because it is “closeted” but because it cannot actually take place; it is fantasized, circulated in allegorical conceits, and ritualistically enshrined in and through sexual meaning. Because queer visibility in *The Antiphon* is predicated on a baroque—image-laden, fragmentary and mournful—worldview that evacuates a coherent vision, its “queerness” seems at once symptomatic of a debilitating encounter with the world it stages, and a source of exalted, barely locatable pleasures. As such, it defies binary understandings of identity, of desire in agency, and, Caselli suggests, of theatrical performance: “The play jars, grates, and unsettles... staging a grandiose failure” (227) as “it queers dramatic conventions by... estranging familiarity and familiarizing estrangement” (227). But if this makes Barnes’s magnum opus exemplary of, what Judith Halberstam calls, the “queer art of failure,”<sup>45</sup> it is not because it fails the dramatic standards of the well-made play, but rather because it basks in its ardent refusal to give up the challenging pleasures of its obliquely queer, backward modernist vision for the stage.

<sup>1</sup> “Its purpose,” this critic of the *New York Tribune* continued, “may be only to convey a dream—and if so, one emerges from it in the same state of mild exasperation as out a dream to which one has lost the clue.” (qtd. in Clark 115). The comparison to a clueless “dream” reminds us of the era’s generally quizzical reception of Freudian psychoanalysis, as famously lampooned some years earlier in Susan Glaspell and George Cook’s play *Suppressed Desires* (1915). For the reception of Freudian psychoanalysis in the arts and criticism of the day, see Adele Heller and Lois Palken Rudnick’s edited collection *1915, The Cultural Moment: The New Politics, the New Woman, the New Psychology, the New Art and the New Theatre in America*. For the cultural climate of the Provincetown Players more generally, see Brenda Murphy’s *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity*.

<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding a small number of European productions, *The Antiphon* has never been fully staged in the US, besides being read out at an event organized by T.S. Eliot at Harvard in 1956.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, *Nightwood* stand as the exemplary “queer modernist” novel. Responding to new critical trends, the nineties’ emphasis on the novel’s carnivalesque and queer-identified subversions (for instance, in Jane Marcus’s influential reading, as a festive “Woman’s Circus Epic,” that reflects, for Joseph Allen Boone, a cosmopolitan atmosphere that affirmatively links urban centers like New York, Paris and Berlin as liberal “queer sites in modernism”) has now shifted to attention for its features of melancholia, ambivalence and representational skepticism. See Jane Marcus, “Laughing at Leviticus: *Nightwood* as Woman’s Circus Epic,” in Mary Lynn Broe, *Silence and Power: A Revaluation of Djuna Barnes* (221-250), and Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (especially “Queer Sites in Modernism: Harlem/The Left Bank/Greenwich Village in the 1920s and 1930s,” 204-286). Particularly well-suited to fit the paradigm of a queer “backward” modernism, Heather Love cites from Barnes’s novel in *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*.

<sup>4</sup> See Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater*, in particular pages 3-39.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the many years that separate *The Dove* and *The Antiphon*, both Susan Clark and Nick Salvato in their respective ways give each play full consideration in their discussion of Barnes as a queer dramatist. Particularly Salvato’s suggestion that these plays enact incestuous desires has informed my reading of the mother/daughter-relationship in *The Antiphon* from the vantage point of a “backward” queer eros.

<sup>6</sup> Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* argues that the Symbolic self-identifies as masculine and “imposes” a mimetic order that assumes Sameness at the expense of Difference. As a result, women are denied conceptual presence in the Real, which they can only accede to by assuming the “imposes mimesis” of a Sameness that erases gender-specific Difference.

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Plumb offers one of the first substantial attempts to place Barnes in an international context of symbolism in *Fancy’s Craft: Art and Identity in the Early Works of Djuna Barnes*.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of a “decadent” style was initially waged by the nineteenth-century French critic Désiré Nisard as an attack on the anti-classicist, fragmentary and highly emotional properties of romantic poetry, which he compared to the “decadence” of late Roman antiquity in his *Études de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834). Several decades later in Huysmans’s *Against the Grain* (1884) Des Esseintes self-consciously revels in the “decadent” qualities of late Roman prose, preferring the lapidary, inorganic and unusual syntax of Petronius over the classical Latin by Vergil. David Weir in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* argues that while the decadent style and sensibility by the beginning of the twentieth century became an easy target for parody, its attunement to past styles continued to be a resource for modernist prose. See also, more recently, Vincent Sherry’s *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, particularly for the influence of decadence in the poetry of Barnes’s contemporaries T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In that regard, see Eliot’s iconic essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921).

<sup>9</sup> See Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890-1926*, in particular the chapter on “The Decadent Revival” (151- 189).

<sup>10</sup> See Heller and Rudnick, *1915: The Cultural Moment*.

<sup>11</sup> Clearly, this portrait of Barnes served Bruno’s own cause as the self-appointed publicist of the 1910s New York decadent movement. Bruno published Barnes’s first collections of poems, *The Book of Repulsive Women*.

<sup>12</sup> An unpublished three-act play from the mid-1920s, *Biography of July van Bartmann* further attests to Barnes’s interest in “biography” as a genre for dramatic fiction. See Nick Salvato’s discussion of the manuscript in *Uncloseting Drama: American Modernism and Queer Performance*.

<sup>13</sup> All citations from *At the Roots of the Stars: The Short Plays*.



<sup>14</sup> See Heller and Rudnick, 1915: *The Cultural Moment*. For scholarship on how women writers associated with the Provincetown Players responded to these issues, see Judith Barlow, ed., *Women Writers of the Provincetown Players* (in particular "Introduction" 1-23), and Peggy Farfan, *Women, Modernism and Performance*. The latter study deals substantively with the importance of Ibsen's work to the era's women dramatists, and includes an insightful account on *The Dove* ("Staging the ob/scene" 65-88).

<sup>15</sup> None are mentioned, but Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) or Charles Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* (1860) readily come to mind in the play's fin-de-siècle context.

<sup>16</sup> Ann Larabee argues for the rebellious spirit of anarchy in all of Barnes's early plays in "The Early Attic Stage of Djuna Barnes."

<sup>17</sup> As we have seen before in José González Castillo's *Los invertidos*, vampirism is a late-romantic trope for queerness. See Sue-Ellen case, "Tracking the Vampire" in *Feminist and Queer Performance Strategies*, in particular pages 67-74.

<sup>18</sup> See "Forced Exile: Walter Pater's Backward Modernism" in Love, *Feeling Backward*.

<sup>19</sup> We now know the painting, which hangs at the Museo Correr in Venice, Italy, was in fact the lower part of a larger panel that higher up represents men in small vessels hunting birds in a lagoon. This, however, was unknown at the time Barnes wrote *The Dove*. See "Two Venetian Ladies on a Terrace, Carpaccio (c1475)" <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/aug/10/art>

<sup>20</sup> See Shoshana Felman, *What does a Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference*.

<sup>21</sup> For Caselli, the "camp" quality of Barnes's writing lies in her ability to make words pass "for a number of things, on its overt protean and equivocal character, on its potential to camp things up" (*Improper Modernism* 20). For Taylor, *The Antiphon* "Rather than a vulnerable turning-inwards," shows us that a "testimony about the past might look more like a rather camp piece of theater, where stylish performance precedes values such as sincerity, honesty and solemnity" (*Affective Modernism* 139). Nick Salvato suggestively draws on Heather Love's understanding of camp as a "backward art" of queer attachment (*Feeling Backward* 7) to argue that the play "in its queer renegotiation of the revenge tropes from Jacobean and Romantic drama to which it is ambivalently attached, discloses a dimension... of the camp sensibility" (*Uncloseting Drama* 180-181).

<sup>22</sup> In particular Louise A. DeSalvo's piece "'To Make her Mutton at Sixteen': Rape, Incest, and Child Abuse in the *The Antiphon*," which calls the play "an early and extremely overt and courageous example of the literary exploration of a girl's victimization by incest" (300) remains a point of reference, and of contention, for recent scholarship. Sexual politics also continue to inform the study of the play's textual history. In that regard, scholarship generally refers and responds to Lynda Curry's "'Tom, Take Mercy': Djuna Barnes' Drafts of *The Antiphon*," which presents T.S. Eliot's editorial advice in a rather antagonistic daylight. For both pieces, see Mary Lynn Broe, ed., *Silence and Power: A Revaluation of Djuna Barnes*.

<sup>23</sup> This, Barnes scholarship of the past decade avows, is a direct of outcome changing critical trends and sensibilities. While the first wave of Barnes scholarship was firmly rooted in New Criticism, the past three decades of feminist (and lesbian, followed by queer and all kinds of cultural) criticism have changed the parameters to read Barnes's work and have assured significant visibility for Barnes in modernist studies more generally. See Diane Warren's overview in "The Critical Context" of *Djuna Barnes's Consuming Fictions* (1-21) and Julie Taylor's *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* for recent developments, next to the first coherent statement on the meaning of the "affective turn" for reading Barnes.

<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer proposed a "seduction theory" in *Studies in Hysteria* (1985) to explain the origins of sexual subjectivity, but soon neglected this in favor of "oedipal theory." However, Jean Pontalis and J.B. Laplace in "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" argue for remaining importance of Freud's earlier speculations for understanding "the imaginary world and its contents, the imaginings or fantasies into which the poet or the neurotic so willingly withdraws" (1). While I will argue that *The Antiphon*'s ornate and anti-illusionist aesthetic resists Freudian or symptomatic reading in a conventional (Ibsenite) way, the play's Act Three self-consciously stages a particularly queer fantasy that re-imagines the Freudian scene of seduction against the background of original sin and decay.

<sup>25</sup> See Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*.

<sup>26</sup> The reference is to Carolyn Allen, *Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss*.

<sup>27</sup> All citations are from the 1958 edition from Farrer, Strauss and Cudahy.

<sup>28</sup> Coincidentally or not, 1939 is the same year in which T.S. Eliot published *The Family Reunion*, one of several American postwar verse dramas that Barnes would have known. In other words, notwithstanding its idiosyncrasy, *The Antiphon* is not an isolated artifact, but implicitly dialogues with a select circle of writers

of its time (particularly Eliot). For an overview of shared themes and formal features of American poetic postwar drama, see Sarah Bay-Cheng, "The Transcendental Realism of American Verse Drama."

<sup>29</sup> See Alex Goody, "'High and Aloof': Verse, Violence, and the Audience in Djuna Barnes's *The Antiphon*." Next to stimulating intertextual connections to buttress an argument regarding Barnes's serious (not mock-) attempt "to utilize the relevance of Renaissance drama for a modern world" (346), Goody makes an interesting case for the influence of T.S. Eliot's essays on Elizabethan theater on *The Antiphon*.

<sup>30</sup> Augusta for instance, who has not been at Burley Hall for many years, at the start of Act Two takes a seat "on the prow end of the gryphon," recalling only moments later that she used to sit in it facing at her now deceased husband Titus Hobbs: "Isn't this the beast I sat upon/Staring at his father—that dead man.../Old man, where I sit, I rotted out such a play" (38). She then further remembers the "bras curfew bell" belonged to her "cousin Pegamont" who used it "To call his needy pensioners" who lived on the Burley estate (38). Like the gryphon and the curfew bell, every stage prop elicits self-conscious commentary and underscores the precisely arranged set-design in which, Jack quips at the outset of the drama, "The scene is set but it seems the actor gone" (8).

<sup>31</sup> Philip Herring quotes Barnes's letter to Nathalie Barney in which she proclaims to be "the most famous unknown of the century" (348).

<sup>32</sup> For instance, when Jonathan does not understand Jack's lengthy digressions ("Why all this?"), Jack snubs him for being "literal of mind! O earth-bound!/You'd snap a rubber band around an eagle!" (28) Jack's pompous style thwarts literal reading, offering instead figural meaning that strikes out like "an eagle" and that self-consciously reflects on the play's archaizing aesthetic, in his observation that "They say soliloquy is out of fashion./It being a kind of talking to your betters" (17).

<sup>33</sup> Here as in other passages, Augusta insists that she too was a naïve victim of Titus's good looks, who with "love locks that then did fret his cheeks" (65) and a conviction that "he was a stud to breed a kingdom" (74) ultimately seduced and fooled "story-book Augusta/Feather-headed,/fairy-tale Augusta" (75).

<sup>34</sup> See Monika Kaup, "The Neobaroque in Djuna Barnes."

<sup>35</sup> See Katherine Biers, "Wonder and Decay: Djuna Barnes's New York," *Virtual Modernism: Writing and Technology in the Progressive Era* (139-172).

<sup>36</sup> "Without mind," Kannenstine concludes, "Barnes perceived the stage becomes an arena of noise and clatter, and the spectator is driven to the silence of the cinema for the experience of reflection that once provided the theater" (142). The reference is to Barnes's essay "Hamlet's Custard Pie," published in the *Theatre Guild Magazine* in July 1930 under the pseudonym of Lady Lydia Steptoe.

<sup>37</sup> See similarly Monika Kaup, who in "The Neobaroque in Djuna Barnes: Melancholia and the Language of Abundance and Insufficiency" situates Barnes's aesthetic in an international modernist context that sought to repurpose baroque forms and sensibilities across the Americas; in Kaup, *Neobaroque in the Americas: Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film* (67-120). In the Spanish-speaking world particularly the work of baroque poet Luis de Góngora (1561-627)—the subject of Lorca's essay "La imagen poética de Don Luis de Góngora" (1928)—informed modernist discussions on both sides of the Atlantic. For a specifically queer invocation of the neo-baroque, see Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui, "On the Homo-Baroque: Queering Sarduy's Baroque Genealogies," *The Avowal of Difference: Queer Latino American Narratives* (173-194).

<sup>38</sup> See Anne Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*.

<sup>39</sup> Compare to the opening lines of Baudelaire's poem "Carrion": "Recall, my soul, the thing we saw that fine summer morning: there at a bend in the path, a loathsome carrion on a bed sown with cobbles, legs in the air leg a lewd woman, scorching and sweating poisons, reeking belly split open nonchalantly, cynically" (*The Flowers of Evil* 42, translation by Keith Waldrop). Barnes certainly knew Baudelaire's work and many years before included an epigraph in his name in her first published play *The Death of Life* (1916).

<sup>40</sup> One might think here of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922), which more generally marks a moment of particular interest in death, aggression and trauma in the modernist context that informed Barnes's oeuvre. In particular Melanie Klein's understanding of depression has been productive for recent scholarship on modernist affect. See, for instance, Esther Sánchez-Pardo, *Modernist Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia*, which includes a chapter on Barnes's novel *Ryder*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, particularly the essay on "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (123-151), which in passing references Barnes's complex

style as a productive ground for analyzing queer and Kleinian modes of “reparative knowing” (149), fit for a subject in fear that “the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture” (149).

<sup>41</sup> See Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (54). Recent scholarship generally questions the effectiveness of *The Antiphon* as a feminist or queer critique of representation. Penny Farfan, for instance, argues that the piece parodies the literary tradition as part of “Barnes’s ongoing feminist critique of the male-dominated literary tradition” (46), but insists that her “modernist commitment to textual difficulty” finally undercuts the “feminist revisionist project” (46). See Farfan, “*The Antiphon* as Parody: Djuna Barnes and the Literary Tradition.” More drastically, albeit closer to my understanding, Caselli calls *The Antiphon* an entirely skeptical “counterfeit” genealogy that illustrates the general propensity of Barnes’s language to promise meaning that is “ready-made but never delivered” (11). For Caselli, the play thus only *postures* with tradition, instead adulterating and travestying literary conventions in a totally “camp” (see note 21) intertextual performance that flaunts, and deliberately fails as a “counterfeit” revenge tragedy (See “Anatomies of Revenge” in *Improper Modernism*, in particular 215-256). This notion of genealogy for Caselli indicates the play’s ineradicable “queerness” vis-à-vis “authentic” or verifiable meaning on the one hand, and tradition or history on the other. Drawing of Eve Sedgwick’s notion of “queer” as “a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*” (“Queer and Now” xii), Caselli drastically strips queer of identity and agency, insisting that the play’s “queerness cannot be located in time and space but emerges from the interplay between the impossibility between the past and the present” (223). This provocatively resonates with recent work on queer temporality, yet I think Caselli’s deployment of “queer” as an essentially negative displacement in *The Antiphon* too rapidly forecloses on some of the play’s subtleties.

<sup>42</sup> See the introduction to *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*, “Broken Hearts and Bleeding Wounds – Traumatic Modernism?” (1-35).

<sup>43</sup> This term is borrowed from Katherine Biers, who in relation to Barnes’s reform journalism argues that “Baroque allegory and baroque style allow her... to potentialize or virtualize the subjects of her articles, capturing their, and thereby her own, capacity to become something entirely—even obscenely—other” (*Virtual Modernism* 142).

<sup>44</sup> Following Irigaray’s argument that the Symbolic self-identifies as masculine and imposes a mimetic order of Sameness that disavows woman’s Difference, Teresa de Lauretis in “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation” observes the particular ontological difficulty of lesbian representation, which highlights the patriarchal confusion whether “women are or want something different from men” or whether “women are or want the same as men” (155).

<sup>45</sup> See Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, perhaps particularly, in light of Miranda’s masochistic passivity, “Shadow Feminisms: Queer Negativity and Radical Passivity” (123-145).

## Conclusion

In my dissertation, “Queer Visibility on the Transatlantic Modernist Stage,” I have tried to argue that the formal techniques, themes and sensibilities for staging of queer plots and persons in modern drama are part of a transatlantic history of circulation and dissemination. This dissertation attempted to start a conversation about conditions under which queer sexuality became visible in modern drama—conditions informed by, in Edward Said’s sense, “traveling” influences. In doing so, the aim was to conduct a theater history that is also a history of sexuality, assuming that the theater plays its own part in the dissemination and imagination of sexuality.

In analyzing selected works by the Argentinean José González Castillo (1885-1937), the Spaniard Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), and the Americans Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) and Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), I have attempted to set up new, surprising connections between various geographies and theatrical cultures to offer new angles on what it means to stage, what I called, queer visibility—an essentially descriptive term which I chose for two reasons; one the one hand, to keep in line with the formal and ethical deconstructions of queer theory; one the other, to acknowledge that queer experience and queer identities are part of the history of modern dramatic literature and the theater. This double emphasis, resonant with recent—mostly Anglophone—work on queer modernism (with its attention for modernist textualities that oftentimes reveal proto-deconstructionist sensibilities), informs the conceptual movement between revelation and disturbance that I place at the heart of staging queer visibility; a double movement that makes queer themes “visible” but also renders the visible “queer.” In

other words, the plays I selected treat queer visibility not as a given, but —to varying degrees of explicitness—as a problem for dramatic representation that is explored strategically and with an experimental spirit. The term queer visibility thus seemed capable of acknowledging both 1) the visual orientation of the theater apparatus (particularly important to the development of modern drama), 2) the generally modern(ist) attitude of skepticism and self-reflexivity, and 3) what I think of as a scholarly tension between the demand for history (that is, for contextualizing, description, biographical anecdote, etc.) and the demand for theory (that is, for abstraction, meta-reflection, and a self-aware historicizing).

In terms of disciplinary orientation, my dissertation first of all aimed to contribute to modern drama scholarship and to modernist literary studies; I tried to combine textual analysis—with particular attention to style, figures and rhetoric—with directed attention for my selected texts' status as scripts for performance, or at least as products of the dramatic imagination. Although I spent considerably less attention to actual performance research, where possible I tried to integrate relevant performance reviews. As a self-declared history of queer drama, this dissertation certainly takes questions raised by the theater (such as the techniques and properties of its apparatus, the nature of performance as an event, audience reception, etc.) to heart. Yet, and equally important, this dissertation was conducted precisely with the belief in mind that performance does not occur in a historical vacuum: we cannot properly understand queer visibility (either in writing or on stage!) if we do not first acknowledge how an international, modern(ist) culture has influenced queer theater and performance since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, positivistic discourses on sexual subjectivity have explicitly

contributed to the novelty of staging queer themes, as we have seen in González Castillo's *Los invertidos*, but also in Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* and Barnes's *The Dove*. However, I have argued that each of my playwrights were self-conscious modernists who experimented with queer visibility in a manner that exceeds positivistic naturalism. In that regard, Heather Love's understanding of a formally experimental queer modernism—punctuated by “backward” structures of feeling—extends disciplinary demarcations of Anglophone modernism. Both *Los invertidos* and García Lorca's *El público*, in their respective manner and Spanish-language contexts, suggest that in staging queer visibility, experimentation and ambivalence go hand in hand. Similarly, the postmodern pastiche of Williams's *Kirche Küche Kinder* and the early modern-style verse form of Barnes's *The Antiphon* exceed Anglophone “high modernism” and expand the meaning of “feeling backward.”

In doing so, I have made the most of “traveling theory” as a term that points to both conventional, or empirical history (for instance, in the sense of a reception history of specific dramatic models in given cultural context) and a capacious, in Carla Freccero's sense, “figural historiography” that tracks migrating meanings that inform queer visibility across time and space. By investigating the conditions in which queer visibility comes into modern drama (and, as such, into history), I expected to encounter archives of “traveling” influences and local iterations—a confluence of transnational and translocal histories that are as much rhetorical as deeply material, grounded in practices of the stage and in the contradictions of lived reality.

Besides arguing for its historical importance as possibly the first in its kind to appropriate “sexual inversion” as a plot for modern drama, I proposed that González

Castillo's *Los invertidos* offers an exemplary case for empirical and figural "traveling" ideas about queer sexuality and the nature of modern drama. Self-consciously inscribing itself in a vogue for "realist" theater, I argued that the play offers a catalogue of themes and techniques meant to self-evidently render queer characters visible, referencing sexologist and medical (*higienista*) terminology alongside French decadence and popular culture. Yet unable to settle between popular entertainment, melodramatic sensationalism and farcical laughter, the play's generic hybridity reflects a confused understanding of the politics of staging queer sexual identities. Crucially, because *Los invertidos* relates queer sexuality to symptoms of decadence and degeneracy, and thus stamps it as a pathology that is contrarian to modernity, this remarkable play points to a, in Love's sense, "temporal split in modernism" that overdetermines queer meaning as an aberration, impossibility or contradiction.

In light of this "temporal split," we might read García Lorca's *El público* as a queer drama that uses a relentlessly metatheatrical design to seek an impossible middle ground between "feeling backwards" and avant-gardist enthusiasm. More self-consciously perplexing than *Los invertidos*, *El público* does not decide whether homoerotic passion and fantasy are ultimately viable subjects for a modernized theater. However, it projects a dazzling and disorienting queer visibility: an "impossible" theater "beneath the sand" that draws on "traveling" international avant-gardist iconoclasms, innovative modern visual regimes (such as dream-logic and microscopic vision), and a dazzling array of intertextual references (particularly to the early modern stage). Further, I held that queer visibility in *El público* emerges as a formal experiment that projects visual shock and affective ambivalence, but also proposed that the play gestures to

unbound imaginative directions, and hence—or perhaps, as remains to be seen—a future model for queer performance. Finally, we saw that the play hints at the possibility of a theater in which the audience encounters itself; Lorca’s radical experiment for a future theater self-consciously raises the question of the spectator’s fears and desire.

Lorca’s attempt to imagine a theater that is like a “mirror of the audience” has no doubt informed my choice of words, in Chapter Three, that Williams’s plays present the audience with a distorted mirror of what it would rather disavow. Queer visibility in *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Kirche, Küche, Kinder* is a function of the playwright’s penchant for grotesque distortion: it operates as a scandalous interruption. Both pieces in their respective manner project sexual meaning in an atmosphere of scandal and perversity, surpassing concerns with identity politics. In other words, the “temporal split” that codifies queer sexuality as backward, perverse, and even dangerous has lost none of its rhetorical sway in Williams’s oeuvre. I compared the visual logic of Williams’s theater to that of an alluring, but distorted mirror that with grotesque—and, in the later plays, with increasingly camp or carnivalesque—exaggeration refracts the changing trends and “figural histories” it registers. Not accidentally, dissonance thus informs Williams’s presentational aesthetic, which incorporated a number of international influences—ranging from “plastic” and “epic” theater to bawdy farce—to bring queerness home to the American stage. I further argued that the playwright’s knack for combining parody with representational self-reflexivity resists easy resolution; the cacophony of sexual confusion in Williams’s plays has a queer effect that is un-cathartic and un-redemptive, always restive and unsettling.



The difficulty to pinpoint meaning and intention is also at the forefront in the concluding chapter on Barnes's early one-act *The Dove* and the late verse drama *The Antiphon*, two plays that self-consciously flaunt and circulate queer meaning in an ornate, convoluted dramatic prose that borders on opacity. I argued that queer visibility in Barnes operates almost entirely on the level of figural language and allegorical vision, and that her plays emphasize the aural, gestural and imaginative pleasure of stylization over plotted action and naturalistic explication. Crucially, in trying to make the most of Barnes's increasingly archaic aesthetic (evident in *The Antiphon*, but also at work in the turn-of-the-century atmosphere of *The Dove*), I argued that her dramas gradually abandon modernist innovation to instead claim a drastically "backward" aesthetic as a model for queer visibility. The foreign expatriate settings of these plays thus invokes a repository of deliberately outdated, anachronistic styles and sensibilities (particularly borrowed from French decadence and early modern baroque) to create queer meaning. Not surprisingly, I found the opacity of Barnes's style of plotting and writing resonant with the de-emphasizing of visibility in Lorca's theater "beneath the sand," although her use of meta-theatrical ploys may, in retrospect, throw new light on all the previous chapters.

Each chapter in its respective manner suggests that staging queer visibility, however varied its forms and meanings, is accompanied by a high degree of self-reflexivity: from González Castillo's hybridizing of "realistic" melodrama with farce and satire and onward, these plays acknowledge the illusionistic—and thus experimental, or crafty—nature of the theater, and the theatricality of life more generally. To point to "the truth" of sexual subjectivity, each of my selected plays with varying exactitude self-consciously rely on the artifice of the theater. In other words, to talk about sexuality

(whether or not tied to a discreet sexual identity) requires a form of mediation—a specific language to indicate what is often ultimately revealed as ephemeral, contradictory and incongruous. In that sense, “queer”—as opposed to, or at least different from, “gay” or “lesbian”—aligns well with theatrical techniques that enhance doubt and self-reflexivity, such as meta-theatrical framing, hybridizing genres, the use of anti-naturalist language and settings, of allegorical conceits, etc. Queer visibility in this dissertation may thus not have a clearly directed—for instance political—agenda, but certainly suggest a self-conscious politics of representation.

Of course, this conclusion is not entirely surprising: after all, the critical orientation of this dissertation—starting with its set of terms, such as “queer” and “modernism”—is grounded in a tradition of Euro-American literature and scholarship that valorizes experiment and formal difficulty. In that regard, one might also argue that, besides the “traveling” paradigms of modern drama and literary modernism, the individual chapters do not appear to have a lot in common. Figures and discourses certainly “travel” between the chapters, but a logical, systematic approach—other than chronology—seems to lack. I have no remedy or justification for these limitations, other than this: in their respective ways, I intended the chapters to show resonances and constellations that invite us to imagine a different kind of transatlantic theater history, one that includes, but also exceeds the scope of traditional influence studies. However, from the point of view of empirical historiography, this dissertation might certainly benefit from an expanded geographical scope and a broader list of influential literary figures; another history of dissemination and circulation might appear when looking at, for instance, the dramatic imagination of Gertrude Stein, Jane Bowles, Jean Cocteau and

Jean Genet, or at the resonance of Lorca's figure and theater in Latin America. Even so, an emphasis on (historical, biographical, empirical, etc.) influence might still remain embedded in a largely Euro-American perspective. Broadening the archive beyond esteemed ("highbrow") canonical playwrights and dominant performance traditions will be a first and indispensable step to conduct a more inclusive history, and a non-teleological genealogy of transatlantic influences and relations that have informed queer visibility in modern drama.

Ideally, the dissertation will thus be the start of a more elaborate, and more sophisticated conversation. For instance, I have not extensively theorized the implications of the concepts I have proposed, nor what future these might have for modern drama scholarship and the history of sexuality. One particular area of theoretical investigation that I would amplify and specify more definitively in the future involves the role of the spectator and his or her relationship of *desire* to the spectacle of queer visibility, or to what Jacqueline Rose calls "the field of vision." By mapping out new transatlantic histories of exchange, we might further expand the range of terms to historicize the spectatorial desire for queer visibility, and the position of the queer spectator.

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