Williams’s texts do not defend gay experience noisily or reflect the politics of liberation movements. On the contrary, they work so quietly, so indirectly – even, on the face of it, negatively – that several critics have accused Williams of adopting a homophobic discourse. The same is broadly true of his treatment of race and race relations. Seldom given prominent positions, Williams’s non-Caucasian characters seem to confirm and accept a historical marginalization. They lack a dissenting voice, either as individuals or collectively, and their victimization seems irreversible. Most have no power base from which to disrupt or depose a white majority and, like Williams’s gay characters, no awareness of the social changes that have already been accomplished. In this sense, they are not stereotypes so much as characters caught in a historical specificity. Equally their presence is more than a token gesture of representation. For, whilst they lack political aspiration, their sexual potency is a source of fascination. It is here that Williams’s writing seems to celebrate those qualities that have been regarded with most suspicion by white males: sexual uninhibitedness and enhanced pleasure. As with the gay characters, the elevation of sexual fulfilment means a corresponding neglect of a more public life – here race relations. Inequalities can only be redressed in essentially private situations where power more frequently shifts towards those whose difference becomes a mark of strength, even of subversion.

Such power is, of course, temporal and normally finite. It also, as David Savran correctly states, amounts to a mythologizing of racial otherness, a straight reversal of power that is itself problematic: Following liberalism’s lead, many of Williams’s works attempt to combat hierarchizing strategies less by unpacking the principle of hierarchy than by inverting the scale and romanticizing an oppressed group. This ‘romanticizing’ creates one-dimensionality, not inclusiveness or the type of inversion that, domino-like, will set off other realignments. Interestingly, the sexual exuberance of the African-American male in particular has been read in the character
of Stanley Kowalski, with the result that his struggle with a Southern belle assumes racial proportions and addresses the desirability of miscegenation. Thus for George W. Crandell who reads Streetcar alongside some of the short stories – chiefly ‘Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll’ but also ‘Miss Coynte of Greene’, ‘Desire and the Black Masseur’ and ‘Ten Minute Stop’ – Williams’s writing ‘exhibits a fascination with the fearful and desirable prospect of miscegenation’.\(^2\) Once again extending greater creative freedom, the stories can, Crandell contends, tackle this issue directly; the plays take a less obvious ethnic route, Stanley’s Polishness being shorthand for the pejorative African-American characteristics Blanche attaches to him. Crandell tentatively suggests that ‘a sensitivity to the expectations of Broadway audiences in 1947 may have been responsible for the misrepresentation of miscegenation in the form of an ethnic rather than a racial liaison’.\(^3\)

To a greater degree, Rachel Van Duyvenbode expresses fears surrounding race as Williams’s own. Including Silva Vacarro from Baby Doll in her analysis of miscegenation and masquerade, she has no hesitation in describing what she sees as a ‘contradictory response to the survival of the South in the context of the fledgling Civil Rights movement of the 1950s’.\(^4\) For Williams, she goes on to say, miscegenation is ‘a frightful and an inevitable consequence of multiculturalism, exacerbated by the expansion of urban landscapes and a technological revolution’.\(^5\)

However, such pessimism is not borne out by Williams’s interview comments. Speaking to C. Robert Jennings in 1973, the writer’s only doubt about racial integration seemed to be the time it would take to accomplish, not the principle of it. The ‘most physically and spiritually beautiful race in the world’ that would emerge from the co-existence and inter-breeding of whites and African Americans clearly reflects an aspiration rather than a fear.\(^6\) Furthermore, the ‘easy intermingling of races’ described in Streetcar evokes celebration not concern, and whilst urban expansion may accommodate ethnic minorities, it is not led by them. America’s changing landscape and the new capitalistic values that determine it are usually laid at the door of white men in Williams’s work.

The paradox of fear and desire is not the only interpretational difficulty that Crandell and Van Duyvenbode identify. For, whilst there are these dual emotions, reactions to a racial other, the precise make-up of that other is fragmentary, its ethnic distinctiveness blurred by impersonation. The racial threat belies a more subtle questioning of its very identity. Put simply, darkness of skin is only a threat when its dilution is contemplated,
but this, paradoxically, destabilizes our certainties about race and calls into question its separateness.

On the one hand, then, Williams’s writing politically deconstructs racial binaries; on the other, it never quite dispels the doubts that cloud sexual encounters. It seems much more helpful to view these as white society’s anxieties than narrowly as Williams’s own, and it seems inevitable that sex determines the distribution of power in the general absence of a wider social and cultural frame of reference.

### RACE AS CONTEXT

There are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage. The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature.\(^8\)

The African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks laments that blackness all too often exists in opposition to whiteness. As a result, African Americans are trapped, she argues, in a ‘singular mode of expression’, one which deals with oppression and assumes a unified black experience.\(^9\) For her, the ‘black presence on stage is more than a sign or messenger of some political point; it should display ‘our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety’.\(^10\) We could not reasonably expect a white, mainstream playwright like Tennessee Williams (interestingly, cited by Parks as a significant influence) to present only black characters.\(^11\) Yet, in the plays where racial hatred is at its most intense, he is not so much seeking to define blackness as the anger stirred in whites. This is then transposed to dealings with other whites, with the result that ‘race crimes’ indirectly serve to spotlight a sadistic, riven and diseased society. This chapter first examines the way that racial bigotry is used as a backdrop to the main events of *Orpheus Descending* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. These are plays where gross retributive violence is meted out to white men for sexual transgressions, but where hostility is prefigured in acts of aggression against non-whites. The ageing white figureheads ultimately responsible, Jabe Torrance and Boss Finley, embody hate, of which racial intolerance is a significant part.

However, racism is a given, a historical injustice that continues unchecked and which serves essentially to create mood. These are bleak visions of a dark South, a country full of enmity far removed from the gentility eulogized by Blanche DuBois. Hence the importance of racial intolerance can be lost in dramas that do not ultimately foreground it, which forge links between white protagonists and African-American victims but that valorize white suffering in the main plots.
In *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1958) and *Orpheus Descending* (1957), desire is the main threat to small Southern societies bent on policing themselves according to a white supremacist law. African-American men are strictly forbidden any contact with white women and are denied alcohol for fear that it could make them dangerously out of control, uninhibited sexually. *Orpheus Descending*, the final version of *Battle of Angels* – a play Tennessee Williams had been struggling to get right for many years – is set in a small Southern town in Two River County. The locus of the dramatic action is Jabe Torrance’s mercantile store, part of which Lady Torrance (Jabe’s wife) will transform during the course of the play into a confectionery section. This is tenuously linked to the memory of her father, Papa Romano, who once had a wine garden on the shores of Moon Lake. Jabe is dying and is forced to live upstairs, but he can still summon support from his white neighbours. This is significant when a drifter, Val Xavier, begins work at the store and becomes involved with Lady. Val is a threat to the men but a potential saviour for the women of the town, principally Lady, Carol Cutrere and Vee Talbott, wife of the local sheriff. As the play builds to a characteristic climax of violent retribution, two important revelations are made: Jabe casually confesses that he was one of a party that set fire to Papa Romano’s garden; Lady reveals that she is pregnant by Val. This last discovery is a surprising one after so many barren years, but it links thematically with an abortion she decided to have after her relationship with Carol’s brother, David Cutrere, ended.

Papa Romano’s death and the burning of his wine garden establish a background of violence and revenge attacks which will resonate throughout the rest of the play. His crime was twofold: to create a garden of pleasure in which the young could liaise freely and secretly; to earn money in difficult Prohibition times from the illicit sale of alcohol, particularly to Negroes. For the second offence, he is visited by the ‘Mystic Crew’, an organization something like the Ku Klux Klan, the members of which raze his orchard. That the local community condones this action is evidenced by the absence of any help – not one fire engine appears to extinguish the fire and Romano perishes trying to save his property. He is not attacked personally, but, in Dolly and Beulah’s gossip, it is revealed that Jabe Torrance ‘burned [Lady’s] father up’ (p. 250).

*Sweet Bird of Youth* is similarly characterized by hatred and a fear of black unruliness. However, these emerge more slowly. Essentially a drama about youth and its frustrating transitoriness, the play embroils its fame-hungry protagonist, the ageing but still handsome Chance Wayne, in a distasteful political campaign led by Boss Finley, the father of his
former sweetheart, Heavenly. Finley’s agenda of racial hatred does not
directly affect Chance, but the violence he and his men have already
committed on an innocent African American means the threat of punitive
castration, first alluded to by a young doctor, George Scudder, is a real
one. Chance ultimately ignores the warnings of his travelling compa-
nion, a failed actress known as both Alexandra Del Lago and the Princess
Kosmonopolis. She correctly intuits: ‘There’s no one but me to hold you
back from destruction in this place.’

The play opens with Chance Wayne’s relationship with the Princess
Kosmonopolis, a strange interdependence of rejected monsters based on
prostitution and blackmail. Their mutual interest in youth and celebrity
only gives way to Boss Finley’s abhorrent politics in the second act. The
two plots, which Ima Honaker Herron labels the personal/sexual and the
social, appear to exist in something of a contrived tangle. Yet, whilst the
play is far more than just a study of bigotry, the South’s culture of intoler-
ance is equally as important to Chance’s fate as it is to Val Xavier’s in
Orpheus Descending. Anxious to maintain white order, with the authority
and backing of Scripture, Jabe Torrance and Boss Finley represent famil-
 iar studies in hypocrisy and mendacity as they adapt their racist discourse
and violence to fit the two fugitives. Indeed, the two white strangers who
create ‘the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop’ are treated in much the
same way as an offending non-white. Ironically, skin colour has almost
ceased to matter in the minds of their persecutors, for racism is presented
as part of a wider tyranny that extends to a hatred of promiscuity.

Val Xavier’s black credentials would appear to be underlined by a Negro
conjure man who heralds his entrance. As if presenting some mystical god,
the conjure man throws his head back and barks sounds which have a ‘wild
intensity’ (Orpheus Descending, p. 256); Val has a ‘wild beauty’ (p. 257) to
complement this, a quality that seems to promise unrestrained passion. Just
as the conjure man’s dress is a riot of different charms, bones and feathers, so
Val’s snakeskin jacket is ‘mottled white, black, and grey’ (ibid.). He eschews
the uniform of the modern rebel – Levis and a t-shirt – in favour of some-
thing at once symbolic of nature, evil/temptation and America’s indigenous
roots: the Native American Indian. Val’s very appearance, then, announces
the way in which he will be treated. He can be the white saviour suggested
by his surname, but his affiliations with both the African American and
Native American Indian ensure that he will be unfairly victimized, cau-
tioned not to let the sun rise on him by Sheriff Talbott.

Val’s earlier incarnation in Battle of Angels is more closely identified
with the plight of the black. He defends a vagrant Negro, Loon, not just
by pointing out the injustice of racial bigotry but also by establishing a mutual dislocation: Loon is Val’s ‘own kind of people’ because ‘we’re both of us dispossessed’. Val sees only economic need and rejection, not racial difference. Loon should be entitled to land because he works on it, but this is a claim the whites will not honour. His function is to confirm their stereotype of laziness and give them an excuse to send him to prison, hard labour, communist Russia or Africa. The projected punishments are various and overlapping, combining other targets of hate – Northern radicals and Jews – and ignorantly confusing countries of origin. The racism exposed in these few pages (the opening of act two, scene three) is more blatant than anything in the later *Orpheus Descending* and inseparable from a hard-nosed Southern capitalism. As Loon’s apologist, Val is quickly labelled a subversive and potential draft dodger by a chorus of white men.

Returning to the later play, we find wider associations. The guitar, little more than a lame excuse for giving Loon employment in *Battle of Angels*, becomes a distinct symbol in *Orpheus Descending*. It fuses Christianity (Val sings ‘Heavenly Grass’) with Greek mythology (Orpheus’ lyre) and Negro blues (the names inscribed on it). A sort of Everyman poet/musician, Val is, nonetheless, an ultimately indefinable wandering spirit, full of sexual charisma and yet kept pure by his music. The burden of so much cultural reference includes a responsibility to renounce the pure hedonism of youth. Echoing the short story ‘Two on a Party’ about the cruising adventures of Billy and Cora, Val declares that his riotous youth is over, that you cannot feel young at thirty ‘if you’ve been on a goddam party since you were fifteen!’ (*Orpheus Descending*, p. 262). This distances him from the young couples who had made love so innocently in Papa Romano’s garden. Val’s sexual initiation was sudden – ‘It didn’t take long for me to learn the score’ (p. 285) – and it has left him feeling corrupted. Unsurprisingly, his corruption has taken the form of acting as a gigolo, though, like Chance Wayne, he has been pursuing his own truth, not a craving for youth but a more general search for existential meaning.

Interestingly, Val depicts his sexual initiation as one more doubtful step towards a concept of himself and his place in the universe. His role as seducer is learnt from a siren in the appropriately named Witches Bayou who apparently ensnares him with her heavenly nakedness. He is cynical enough to feel sure that love is ‘the make-believe answer’ (p. 284) to life, a solution that fools accept whilst denying their own solipsism. In other words, Val’s attractiveness is all he has to define himself; he gives moments of pleasure to those who want intimacy but is sceptical of
anything nobler than this. His emotional life parallels the economics of supply and demand, keeping him on the road with little but the badges of his freedom and his artistry (the jacket and guitar). Working for Lady, he momentarily touches down, unlike the legless bird in a story he tells, and becomes a willing prisoner in Jabe Torrance’s store. He accepts his dual role as Lady’s stud and the re-creator of her father’s Eden.

Val’s mythical complexity makes his character a mass of contradictions: he is the saviour temporarily rescued by Lady throwing her body in front of him; he is the freewheeling artist whose only real art is the personal redemption afforded by his guitar and the names inscribed on it by his spiritual black brothers. He is the protagonist of several stories, a catalyst for Lady’s sexual reawakening and Vee Talbott’s visionary painting. Whatever claim he has to the patterns of white Western myth, though, he cannot escape the vigilantes of the South, the punishments reserved for blacks or their apologists like ‘The Wop’ (Papa Romano). His death by blowtorch symbolically revenges a widely acknowledged sexual potency: the natural fire in his loins is destroyed by artificial fire, the weapon of
a sterile patriarchy. This is a fate that also connects him with the Italian father. Yet, as John M. Clum points out, Val is a ‘reluctant stud’ and ‘a relatively passive character’; his unconventional dress and physical beauty advertise sex but he does not aggressively pursue the frustrated wives of Two River County. Clum tentatively suggests that Val does not have to be heterosexual, that his sexuality is, at the very least, ambiguous. His explanation redirects us to the censorship of homosexuality in the theatre of the 1950s and before and the necessary encoding of behaviour. Anticipated audience reaction also has a bearing: as such an important onstage catalyst, Val must be seen to be straight; as an artistic creation, he is permitted to be cold (this adds to his mystery) but not camp.

Val’s remoteness can, though, be justified in two further ways. Firstly, as a Christian martyr appearing at Easter, he serves as a symbol of passivity and acceptance, providing happiness for others and an outlet for the hate of the ruling patriarchy. Secondly, as the figurative black outsider he instinctively understands the prohibition on initiating sexual relations with white women.

The paradox of Val is that he excites while acknowledging that what he offers will be transitory. Nothing provides lasting meaning. His consciousness of time is not as acute as Chance Wayne’s – the acknowledgement of his thirtieth birthday brings with it just an acceptance of maturity and some responsibility – but, having stayed too long, his actual time is limited. He ignores several warnings: stealing time (a Rolex Chronometer), he symbolically throws it away, ashamed that he should have taken anything unlawfully; he registers that Carol Cutrere, Cassandra-like, has come to give him a warning but cannot comprehend anything but an uneasy feeling that the place is not safe. Val’s desire to stay goes against his usual instincts of flight but he is part of the greater purpose of bringing life to Lady, of proving her fertility and revenging Jabe. His role is procreative (not just sexual) and ethnically inclusive. For, whilst the earlier ‘father’, David Cutrere, chose a society girl with whom to have ‘wellborn children’ (Orpheus Descending, p. 297) and denies ‘any connection with a Dago bootlegger’s daughter’ (p. 296), Val only notes, with gentle curiosity, that Lady’s skin is light and silky for an Italian.

Slipping their sexual selves, Val and Lady finally exist to fulfil destined roles. Having authenticated his existence by giving to others, Val cannot move forward, fly off; it is not so much that, like Orpheus, he actually looks back; rather, Lady hinders him, clips his wings and takes his guitar for security. His professions of love are met with scepticism and he is never able to explain his position, either to Lady or to the audience. Lady,
symbolically married to death, can only delay Val’s end. Their shared moment of life, the unborn child, would signify the cuckolding of Jabe and the coming together of Italian, white, black and Native American. The sexual and racial threats are clear if we bear in mind Val’s symbolic inheritance.

Val is not undone by a desire that cannot be self-regulated – though this is how the local townsmen see it – but by a commitment that attempts to rewrite history. Favoured by women, he passes his jacket on to Carol in a gesture that holds something back from his persecutors. Little
can be done, though, to oppose white male supremacy, a deeply unpalatable force in its reported bigotry but even more abhorrent in its treatment of non-conformity. Val has many cultural badges but the fact that he is finally white lessens the racial dimension of the play.

_Sweet Bird of Youth_ is, as its title hints, an all too painful reverie on the elusiveness of youth, a refutation of Jay Gatsby’s mantra that we can repeat the past, and a grudging acceptance of ‘the enemy, time, in us all’ (p. 111). However, behind an obsession with a culture of youthful celebrity is hidden a potent triangle of race, prostitution and death. The protagonist is again hunted down like an African American, attacked for contaminating a white girl with venereal disease and daring to return for her. The heckler at Boss Finley’s political rally in act two, scene two makes the parallel only too clear when he comments on an anticipated spectacle of family unity and WASP purity: ‘I don’t want to hurt his daughter. But he’s going to hold her up as the fair white virgin exposed to black lust in the South, and that’s his build-up, his lead into his Voice of God speech’ (p. 94).

White lust has robbed Heavenly of her innocence and potential motherhood (she has been ‘spayed like a dog’, p. 92). If Chance is to be believed, however, she was something more than complicit in the loss of her virginity. Much is made of the fact that Chance ‘had her’ (the crudity of this repeated sexual reference carries with it the notion of transaction and duplicity) when she was only fifteen and still a child, but, when he doubted the morality of his actions, Heavenly urged him to continue. Returning to salvage love’s dream, Chance, like Val, waits too long and fails to heed the warnings of Alexandra Del Lago who tries to save him. He represents a threat to the purity proclaimed on Heavenly’s behalf, the politico-religious campaign that adopts her as a prop. He is persona non grata as Heavenly’s social inferior, the man who corrupted her and the figure who would undermine the chastity at the heart of the patriarch’s bigotry. As such, he faces the same fate as an African American who has been randomly castrated by Finley’s men as a warning.

Williams’s most obvious parallel between Heavenly’s experience and her father’s political agenda is the age at which they both became different people. Heavenly ceased to be a ‘fair white virgin’ at fifteen; Boss Finley came down from the mountain fired with an evangelical zeal which has quickly dissolved into hatred and hypocrisy. In a play where all of the sexual relations are tainted by notions of procurement, Boss Finley’s politics amount to little more than a misplaced fear of widespread contamination or sexual anarchy. His objection to black culture is based
on its perceived sexual potency – a biological superiority combined with a cultural recklessness amongst its males. Chance’s observation confirms Finley’s agenda: ‘Sex-envy is what that is, and the revenge for sex-envy which is a widespread disease that I have run into personally too often for me to doubt its existence or any manifestation’ (p. 81).

There is no broader sense in which black freedoms are problematic. The black libido and miscegenation are the only reported fears, though they might of course be the cornerstones of others. To regulate those anxieties through random castration (denied by Boss Finley) is to control something that has not yet happened. It is to impose a discipline where self-control is assumed lacking. The views of Boss Finley and his supporters, which they would make representative of the South, reduce African-American men to animals that threaten young white virgins. They proceed not from external observation but internal sexual insecurities and the religious dogma that seems to legitimize them. Finley’s invective against ‘blood pollution’ (p. 95) is really directed against those who might be in danger of allowing their desire to be publicly known.

In addition, Boss Finley’s sexual envy stems from his own impotence, hinted at strongly by his unsatisfied mistress, Miss Lucy. This, in turn, may be accounted for by his unacknowledged feelings for Heavenly. Reading his motivations in this way, the early corruption of Heavenly was not agony for a parent so much as the jealousy of a frustrated lover. He has been preoccupied with purity because he wanted to be the first to enjoy her. That he could not creates another form of disease in an ever-widening circle: Chance spreads venereal disease, African-American men are seen as potential contaminators and Tom Finley’s fears spread an epidemic of hate against the North, intellectuals and the media, not just the blacks who are powerless to organize a campaign against him.

Boss Finley’s racism is, then, something of a smokescreen. He has nothing to love so he hates an easy target with what he thinks are the authority of Christianity and the just concerns of a parent. Again, this is a play where a virile white man is punished for contravening unwritten sexual laws. Both the act and its punishment are cross-referenced against the racist treatment of black men, with the result that the violence is intensified and the victim is even more of an outsider. At their shared interface of desire and race, *Orpheus Descending* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* indicate that the real power lies with those who are male, white and sexually impotent. Those who dare to parade their attractiveness, or assume a common identity with the racial other, face extinction.
Strange, savage, inarticulate

If the strong sexual desire attributed to African Americans is an unrealized threat in Orpheus Descending and Sweet Bird of Youth, it leads to a vivid moment in an early short story, ‘Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll’. A story written in Williams’s very early apprenticeship as a writer (1931–2), it has been revisited by critics because of its treatment of race (unusually the central character is African American) and its thematic concern with desire and its containment. The story invites us to consider the impact of white anxieties and violence on the black sensibility; it also, by implication, raises the question of whether the African-American male can transcend stereotypical notions of ungovernability, whether he can redress an assumption of wrongdoing in sexual encounters. Set in a symbolic hell south of Jackson, ‘Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll’ involves a black chain-gang but is principally about the lust the hard-working character of the title momentarily feels for a young white girl bathing in a nearby river. Shunning the company of the other men after work, Big Black searches out a cool, shaded place to rest his weary limbs. The naked girl offers a severe test to the physically powerful man trying to subdue a sexual desire that has been allowed no outlet.

Retribution is anticipated in two ways by Big Black. Firstly, Southern white culture has instilled self-loathing so that, at the point of violating the white girl in the river, Big Black is reminded of his own ugliness in the form of his hand spread across the white face like a giant spider. Secondly, even though he has withdrawn, Big Black realizes that he will be hunted down and so dives into the river to be borne away by the current. The story confounds the reader’s expectation that this is a successful act of suicide by repeating the opening in a different geographical location. Big Black’s life repeats itself and so the problem of controlling his will remains.

Obviously, by making a sexual encounter the heart of the story, Williams dispenses with broader questions of civil liberties. As part of a chain-gang, Big Black can make little contribution to society and his ambitions for his fellow African Americans are necessarily curtailed by his immediate servitude – both to the state and his libido. Freedom from his own doubts and the prodigious energies that seem to charge his body are all that he can hope for, so the story’s political struggle, if it can be termed such, is between Big Black and an expectation that he cannot be autonomous.
In a story of clichéd situations, desire is predictably instinctual, an appetite that demands to be fed. Ironically, a man of immense physical strength and presence like Big Black is almost paralyzed by watching the diminutive white girl. In the relatively brief period it takes to decide to strike, his body suffers a ‘feverish ache’, he is ‘cool and tense with excitement’, his breath is thick and loud and he is ‘sick with desire for her’. When he has hold of her ‘wet, struggling body’, he is further reduced to an animal trying to subdue its prey: ‘He swayed back and forth, clasping her, and uttered low, guttural sounds like a hungry animal tearing at a fresh kill’ (p. 30). Sounds rather than words communicate his experience and intentions, define the animal he has become under the sway of his desire. Like a slippery fish, his victim makes complete subjugation difficult: he cannot hold her physically or verbally. His desire, as he knows, cannot be expressed in meaningful articulation, even in private moments like these where seclusion tempts the will beyond voyeurism.

George W. Crandell lists the inability to communicate as one of five stereotypical characteristics Williams usually draws on for his black characters, and David Savran views Big Black’s inarticulacy as an example of the ‘estrangement of desire from speech’ encountered more widely in Williams’s work. The more intense the former, Savran argues, the more ‘unthinkable’ the latter becomes. Desire makes language largely redundant because it has assumed its place, communicating more immediately to the desirer and his (in this case) object. But the self-loathing that replaces desire is also virtually wordless: Big Black cannot say anything to the girl by way of apology or excuse and ‘bitterly’ mutters ‘you big black devil! You big – black – devil!’ (Collected Stories, p. 30). This sense of revulsion, rooted as it is in his own blackness and the capacity for evil that means to him, blunts the individual’s self-expression into exclamation and then fragmented exclamation. Defining who he is and what he does – the most fundamental employment of language – is abhorrent.

Before we assume that desire alone deprives Big Black of conventional language, we should bear in mind the booming cry that makes him instantly recognizable amongst his fellow workers. He is not known for using words as such, just ‘a huge, towering cry, beginning upon a deep growling note and veering flame-like into a [sic] ululating peak’ (p. 27). It is this guttural sound that unites and expresses the miseries of his race, here represented by the gang of black workers. Big Black is their spokesman, but their frustration and restlessness cannot be put into words. Language is both inappropriate and insufficient as a means of protest:
Strange, savage, inarticulate inappropriate because there is the latent threat of violent punishment from the Irish boss if anyone dares to speak out against him; and insufficient because their plight is both ‘elemental’ and ‘epical’ (p. 27). For Big Black is something more than a charismatic ringleader; he appears to be part of the earth itself, the hard, unforgiving land vocalized. In a sense, the circularity of the story symbolizes his ubiquitousness, not just his popularity (this is denied) or the temptations he may have to stave off again.

‘Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll’ is, then, a story of intriguing contradictions. Williams’s narrator is at pains to emphasize the protagonist’s ugliness, his beast-like temperament, but also depicts his self-correcting behaviour, his talismanic qualities and his earthiness. The vivid description of an infernal landscape at the start of the story, in which the white boss drives his fellow demons on to ever-greater toil, would seem to point to a tale of disaffection and possible rebellion. The stereotyping of Irishman and black could have produced a story of different ethnic dimensions.

Big Black is more at home on the ‘parched ground’, amidst the ‘groans and curses from the rock-breakers’ (p. 26) than in the reviving water where he faces the other demons within. Indeed, before we reach his temptation, Big Black appears to have sublimated his sexual desires in an appetite for work. He visibly prides himself on his lifting powers, labours with unstinting effort because ‘work was Big Black’s meat’, because he ‘gorged work as though he were famished for it’ (p. 27). Consistent with other Williams characters, Big Black takes physical activity to the point of near insatiability. Here, work is a means of exercising and testing his giant frame, a justification for his abnormal size and strength. It also redeems him in the eyes of the boss who would otherwise find the combination of his size and blackness intimidating.

Patently, Big Black’s sublimation serves only to intensify his desire. His work ethic is complemented by both abstemiousness and solitude: he does not join the other men on their Saturday outings to town to drink, gamble and visit prostitutes; he does not tell ‘vastly Rabelaisian jokes’ (p. 28). Already, at a very early stage in his writing career, Williams is sketching the paradoxically charismatic but unpopular outsider that would become a central figure in his work. That he is black and defined by his ugliness suggests obvious stereotyping; that he has a conscience and an affinity with the land rescues his characterization from predictability and Williams’s story from naivety. The title, too, deflects some of the negative connotations and suggests a harmonious scene.

Accepting this, the story is still problematic in its idealization of white pubescent beauty and the demeaning inseparability of blackness and
ugliness. It is tempting to read Big Black’s plight symbolically as the real innocence of black men’s involvement with white women; conversely, the threat is there and black desire seems formidable. Taking a historicist approach, Philip C. Kolin argues the possible relevance of the Scottsboro case. Williams’s portrayal of Big Black, he contends, could be an expression of sympathy for the nine black youths famously put on trial for allegedly raping two white women on a freight train from Chattanooga to Memphis in 1931. Kolin also points to the quantity of writing done on black life for various literary competitions at the University of Missouri (Williams had submitted his story for the Mahan Story Contest in 1932) and Williams’s departure from contemporary stereotyping in a narrative that ‘weaves the socio-political with the psycho-sexual’.

Actually, the psycho-sexual is the more pressing concern. The heart of the story presents Big Black wrestling with himself, not the girl or any white vigilantes who might come after him. Though we cannot divorce them entirely, Williams is more interested in the compulsive and debilitating effects of desire (as he would be later on) than related questions of race and social discrimination. It is no accident that his protagonist is black but, equally, blackness is a symbol of potency and not part of a dialogue on white/black relations. Kolin can only speculate on both the relevance of Scottsboro and any sympathy embedded in ‘Big Black’. The case was certainly still topical and widely chronicled, but, although Williams’s character restrains himself, he shows intent where he has not been provoked.

‘Big Black: A Mississippi Idyll’ uses the conventional framework of the black man’s attack on the vulnerable white girl only to defuse both a sexual crime and the white retaliation scenario. The socio-political is largely avoided because Williams is able to internalize, and the omniscient narrator allows just enough sympathy for a man struggling with his libido and low self-esteem. The story is unusual in dealing with an African-American character so prominently, but his visibility is problematic and not an enhancement of his status.

**Desiring Annihilation**

Another story that ultimately shirks engagement with the socio-political is ‘Desire and the Black Masseur’, despite the allegorical possibilities of its denouement. One of Williams’s most sensational and enigmatic stories, it manages to foreground blackness but make its protagonist white. In fact, that central character, Anthony Burns, is no more than the unleashed
urge of the story’s title. His counterpart/saviour/consumer is never referred to as anything more than a racial type: the Negro. And yet he has central importance as a facilitator, as the catalyst for the white man’s atonement. For this is a story about Burns’s journey towards a desired annihilation, the consumption of his physical self. He has been sent to the local Turkish baths to help clear up a persistent ache at the base of his spine. When there, the child-like Burns is happy to be directed by his black master, almost as if he were in a dream or trance. Pain, the deliberately heavy blows inflicted by the masseur, leads to desire, but violent atonement is the ultimate goal understood by both men. The story’s final act of cannibalism takes place against a background of religious fervour and conflagration in a black ghetto.

Existing in a clinical underworld of endless white compartments, the black masseur is elevated to the status of a god: ‘they swept the white hangings aside with great black palms that you felt might just as easily have seized bolts of lightning and thrown them back at the clouds’. 22 The purpose, strength and confidence suggested here recall Big Black’s physical presence without the nagging inferiority and revulsion. Clearly, Burns and the other patrons submit themselves to a subterranean black authority, an ethnic reversal of the external world. Burns is instructed, propelled from room to room; he offers no resistance to the increasing violence of the massages, both because he masochistically craves pain and because he must accept black domination. This supremacy is never questioned by Burns but, for the reader, it is qualified in two important respects: firstly, the manager of the bathhouse (almost certainly white) has authority over the masseur and dismisses him when he realizes what is happening; secondly, the black masseur’s power is linked to pleasure and arousal. The pain he inflicts gives him the satisfaction he requires to continue with ever greater force, associated as it is in his mind with a basic biological struggle and the defence of his ethnicity: ‘He hated white-skinned bodies because they abused his pride. He loved to have their white skin prone beneath him, to bring his fist or the palm of his hand down hard on its passive surface’ (p. 209).

The word ‘love’ is used a second time in the next sentence (this time as a noun) to express the masseur’s enthusiasm for his job. Payment is insignificant, sadistic violence everything. And yet hatred has been turned into love, a transmutation that appears paradoxical but which is necessary for the relationship between Burns and the masseur to develop and reach its inexorable conclusion. Williams implies an inverted correspondence: as Burns moves from orgasmic pleasure to pain and complete surrender,
so the masseur channels his antipathy into love and final gratification. As each comes to understand the purpose of the other, the unlikely coupling acquires trust and ritualistic forms consistent with the church service against which it will be ironically juxtaposed later on. Whilst both men intuitively serve each other, they both fulfil their own destinies and exemplify Val Xavier’s credo that we are ‘under a life-long sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins’ (Orpheus Descending, p. 284). Their love is not so much for each other as for what bodily contact achieves: self-fulfilment.

We could reasonably conclude, if we think again in terms of allegory, that the story is somehow prophesying a black insurrection, the expansion of an ever more vengeful African-American ghetto – a warning or simply justice for years of inequality. However, two features serve to contradict this. Firstly, Anthony Burns courts his own death, for with death comes the meaning of sacrifice. He is a diminutive and unremarkable figure, comfortable with his own anonymity, happy to be engulfed as a repeated oral motif anticipating the story’s climax reminds us. His story evokes a metaphysical experience about the nature and purpose of existence, not a racial struggle. This point is made more obvious in one of the 1942 drafts held at the Harry Ransom Center in Texas where the narrator talks extensively about man’s incompleteness, ‘his limited senses’, in a form of prologue which he ends with the falsely dismissive ‘so much for these metaphysical speculations’. In the same draft Burns is the masseur’s ‘man-bride’ and the masseur becomes ‘the complete black lover’, not the white man’s nemesis.

Secondly, the conclusion of the story appears to reformulate the racial differences in metaphysical terms so that night and day assume the roles of masseur and prone victim working together for the ‘perfection’ which is ‘slowly evolved through torture’ (Collected Stories, p. 212). Characteristically, violence and pain force a resolution and sex is seen as serving some other (here higher) end. Essentially, though, this is not sex: Anthony Burns goes to the baths to cure a back pain and, by chance, unlocks his own desire. This Freudian perversion might lead to more predictable sexual relations and power struggles were it not the case that sexual satisfaction is only a means of cementing a bond between two men; Burns’s erection and ejaculation are just preliminaries.

The title of Williams’s short story seems to promise something titillating, a homoerotic fantasy glorifying black sexuality; in fact, sex and reality are largely cast aside. Apart from a briefly stated motive, the politics of race seems inconsequential, as indeed do human lives finally. What
we can say is that in the space of fourteen or so years, between the writing of ‘Big Black’ and ‘Desire and the Black Masseur’ (April 1946, but published in 1948), Williams has retained the physically imposing figure of the black man, whilst emphasizing a new authority and control. His libido no longer under examination, the Negro is amused by Burns’s defenceless arousal. Such increased freedom and assertiveness is probably attributable, in part, to geography. Whilst no precise location is given in the later story, it seems likely to be urban and more ethnically progressive. According to Donald Spoto, Williams weaved the improbable narrative around ‘two bizarre people at the Athletic Club’ and so a New Orleans setting is possible.\(^\text{24}\) However, the story’s impreciseness is entirely consistent with its allegory. Be they representations of heaven and hell, or parodies of them, the bathhouse and the ghetto help to suggest dreamy ritual rather than faithful naturalism. This is a story about the unsatisfactoriness of our lives, the guilt and Original Sin that appear to burden the Western mind, or at least the unforgiving Christianity that believes in pain and denial. Burns’s spiritual journey, always towards immolation (as his name would suggest), need not be limited by real locations.

**Ow nership and decolonization**

From the examples we have seen so far, Williams has not attempted to explore race relations meaningfully. On the stage, Val and Chance are treated like black offenders but only after they have been given the choice of leaving town. The plays in which they appear employ racist hatred to create an atmosphere of intolerance and imminent violence, not turn the spotlight on individual black victims. The only African American represented in *Sweet Bird of Youth* is Fly, a black waiter who has accepted his position serving whites, whose first words are, appropriately enough, ‘Yes, suh’ (*Sweet Bird of Youth*, p. 17). And even in the more significant characterization in the short stories, status is of less concern than desire and its consequences.

Perhaps influenced by the headway achieved by the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties – the Montgomery Bus Boycott, lunch-counter sit-ins and the Voting Rights Act (1965), for example – Williams seems more inclined to question black disempowerment in *Kingdom of Earth* (1968). This is a play that, as Philip C. Kolin notes, offers the only major role for a character of colour within his entire corpus.\(^\text{25}\) That character is Chicken, the mulatto half-brother of Lot, a tubercular transvestite. The two men are locked in a fight for survival, a battle for ownership of
the family house in the Mississippi Delta, around which flood waters are perilously rising at the start of the play. Drawing on his own short story of the same title published in 1954, Williams makes Myrtle, Lot’s new wife, crucial to Chicken’s success. For the marriage would appear to invalidate Chicken’s claims to the property, claims legitimized by Lot when he needed his brother’s help to keep the place going before the action of the play starts. Seducing and influencing Myrtle becomes Chicken’s mission, and it is made all the more interesting by the racial dimension. Thus, on sexual politics – the treatment of Myrtle by both men but particularly Chicken – hinges the question of inheritance and black rights. This is atypical but sex and the relationships forged around it still take priority and, as we shall see, the manner in which Chicken wrestles his entitlement away from Lot is problematic.

Much is made of Chicken’s blackness in the second act, not least by himself as he tries to explain ‘the setup’ to both Myrtle and the audience. Acutely conscious of his position in society, the basic rights withheld from him, he has become a survivor, a man bent on self-preservation and fulfillment. As we have seen already, racial otherness in Williams’s writing usually denotes enhanced sexual potency and a struggle to tame sexual and aggressive urges. These are certainly real enough for the white woman of the story. At one point, the stage directions inform us that ‘Myrtle has the typical Southern lower-class dread and awe of Negroes’. Myrtle’s reaction is somewhat more understandable than this note would suggest, however. Yes, her close contact with black men has probably been limited and she has a typically unreasonable wariness and sense of excitement in the Negro’s presence, but Chicken is also happy to capitalize on this notion with talk of drowning and by playing with his knife in a way which is menacing for a woman of a nervous disposition. In addition, Myrtle finds herself with an invalid, a man who resembles Jabe Torrance in being on the point of death but, unlike him, cannot summon any form of defence. Lot’s effeminacy and identification with his mother also leave Myrtle powerless, though her role is supposed to be that of a surrogate mother.

Myrtle is, then, caught in the middle of a struggle for inheritance, a vulgar grappling for money and property that preceded her visit and which will have new implications with Lot’s death. Of course, this is a common enough situation in the plays and partly explains why so many critics have chosen to see Kingdom of Earth as a parody of earlier works. Like Stella Kowalski, Myrtle shows little interest in the documentation of ownership, preferring instead to appease both her husband and Chicken, later realizing that ‘the only refined man in my life’ (Williams’s italics,
p. 135) must make way for shameless masculinity. Unable to assume the role of the mother, she surrenders that position to Lot whose transvestism has a ‘sexless passion’ (p. 212). Delicacy and ethereality cannot resist the oncoming tide of death, the hungry materialism and rampant heterosexuality symbolized by the flood itself and Chicken’s confident survival of it. As with Stanley Kowalski, the abused outsider finds strength in the odds against his success. Native wit outmanoeuvres sophistication and education; resourcefulness and sexual energy are an irresistible force. It is little surprise that, like Maggie Pollitt, Myrtle thinks of her own preservation and that this comes at the expense of sensitivity to Lot; like Stella, she needs a refuge from the truth of her situation. She finds it in domesticity, the kitchen so long identified with Chicken and his struggle for kinship and property. The abandonment of Lot signifies the end of imagination and artistry, just as it did with Blanche DuBois. It appears callous when represented on the stage, but even more insensitive in the original 1954 short story of the same title. Life, it seems, involves invidious choices and compromises, and, in Myrtle’s case, going against initial instincts and ingrained prejudices. To what extent Myrtle revises her opinion of Chicken and willingly accepts a multi-racial future will determine Williams’s own representation of race in this play. Is he seriously interested in racial conflicts and discrimination or just using Chicken’s exoticism as yet another case of the body displacing the spirit?

In interviews, Williams championed the civil rights movement and spoke positively about black forbearance. He also responded to criticism that his writing did not tackle such issues by claiming subtle indirection: ‘I always try to write obliquely.’ Race is not completely ignored but its foregrounding by some Southern writers is not Williams’s approach. The obliqueness that he talks about could be seen as a convenient excuse for bypassing social commentary; alternatively, it could be an honest admission that writing about another ethnic group has to be circumspect (‘I don’t know the blacks that way’). Only in ‘Big Black’ have we seen Williams trying to empathize with a black character and even there we have no exploration of the character’s background or critique of the society that has created his self-hatred. Williams commented that Orpheus Descending was his most searching play about race but this was before writing Kingdom of Earth.

Philip C. Kolin’s radical rereading of Kingdom of Earth challenges previous assumptions that Williams is not much interested in race, that he just uses coloured characters arbitrarily or in their customary roles as servants. Pointing to important contemporaneous moments in the civil rights
movement and Williams’s decision to change the ethnicity of Chicken from the original short story, Kolin prioritizes racial themes and defends the portrayal of a mulatto as a central character. His post-colonialist interpretation views Chicken as a marginalized figure abused and manipulated by his colonial master/half-brother, losing privileges and claims to property because of his colour and suffering from a conspiracy to remove him after his hard work was necessary to hold on to the estate. According to Kolin, Chicken legitimately pursues his rights in an effort to resist white oppression: ‘Chicken is not the rebellious outsider threatening disorder but, rather, a consummate man of the law an audience is urged to support in his quest to regain possessions a dominant white culture would steal.’ Like Stanley Kowalski, Chicken has enough guile to be aware of his legal position and realizes that he must defend himself – draw up his own rough legal contracts – against his unscrupulous half-brother and, by extension, the white majority in America. In an ideology that nurtures initiative and ownership but discriminates by race, Chicken and Stanley naturally take an interest in what could be rightfully theirs at the risk of appearing materialistic and insensitive. This last point is reinforced by the fact that both men are faced with disinterested females: Stella is more concerned with her sister’s wellbeing than the proceeds of the dissolution of the family estate; Myrtle, as we have already seen, is too scared by Chicken and the forthcoming flood to be deeply troubled by the legality of ownership.

It seems somewhat overstating the case to call Chicken ‘a consummate man of the law’. After all, part of the play’s comedy stems from his unschooled legalese and its part in the hoodwinking of the ignorant ex-showgirl, Myrtle. However, the injustice of Chicken’s position is all too clear and we can see that his status becomes a burning issue later in the play (and not just in Chicken’s mind) in a way that it had not been in the earlier story. He is a wronged Caliban as Kolin suggests. Lot’s unreasonable antagonism – he states unequivocally: ‘I hate and despise him’ (Kingdom of Earth, p. 178) – is obviously racial. He and his mother would not be able to ‘rest in peace in Old Gray Cemetery’ (ibid.) because notions of refinement inherent in whiteness would be offended. And yet, although essential to the plot, Chicken’s displacement does not elicit great sympathy because of the disengagement we feel for all of the characters. If Lot invites criticism for the way he tries to manipulate and deny a blood relation, for his attempts to renege on earlier promises (Kolin refers to the ruse of getting Chicken drunk as bearing ‘the stench of all colonializing white men’), then Chicken and Myrtle are heartless in their bid for...
survival, in their talk of assuming the roles of protector, domestic and child-bearer while Lot lies dead in the parlour.\textsuperscript{32}

It is precisely the relationship of \textit{Kingdom of Earth} to the earlier \textit{Streetcar} that makes us question the notion of sympathy for Chicken. Whilst Stanley begins as something of a wronged man, mocked for his primitivism and the paucity of his home, he soon reveals the mentality of the pillager and destroyer. In trying to assert his legal rights, Chicken goes beyond the claims of the dispossessed to assert a Darwinian supremacy and assume Stanley’s political battle cry of ‘I’m the king around here.’\textsuperscript{33} In the campaign against Lot, he fails to turn the other cheek, firstly making Myrtle a co-conspirator and, secondly, ignoring Lot in his death scene. His crass statement of belief in a land of carnal pleasure just before this is also unlikely to increase the audience’s respect, not least because it reiterates the passive role of women dramatized in the play’s most notorious scene.

Chicken’s sexual possession of Myrtle is key to his overthrow of Lot and subsequent instatement as landlord. Aware of both his sexual powers and the white woman’s programmed revulsion, he uses a kiss as the prelude to fellatio, thus breaking the taboo of physical contact with a black man shortly before enslaving her to his phallus. That it is an act of enslavement is clear from Chicken’s ‘\textit{slow, savage grin}’ and Lot’s reflection that he has ‘brought home a whore for Chicken that he don’t have to pay’ (\textit{Kingdom of Earth}, p. 202). Chicken’s assumed ugliness (contradicted by the stage directions which describe him as ‘\textit{remarkably good looking}’, p. 126) belies a confidence in the prowess of his phallus: ‘Why’re you cryin? You don’t have to cry fo’it, it’s what you want and it’s yours!’ (p. 202). Ignoring Myrtle’s child-like vulnerability, Chicken presumes to tell her what she wants, cunningly suggesting that the act is wholly for her pleasure when clearly it is another example of Chicken imposing his masterdom by imitating a white patriarchal model. To some extent, he makes the legal position irrelevant: controlling Myrtle, he can ensure an interest in the property without completely overriding her claim. He obviously needs Lot to die but this is already an inevitability, another example of the old order fading from the South.

Chicken’s growing self-importance is intimated in the next scene when he claims God-like status: ‘Let there be light. That’s what they say that God said on the first day of creation’ (p. 203). Chicken has not actually created anything – he has been a passive sexual partner – but the pleasure Myrtle is able to take from her ‘terrific attraction’ empowers Chicken. Kolin is surely wrong to detect a religious quality in the sexual experience;\textsuperscript{34}
for Chicken, it is more about establishing a power base, reversing years of slavery and subjugation. Yes, he wants to create a new order but one that his blackness can control. He immediately turns the conversation to race, betraying the hypocrisy of Myrtle’s (and society’s) attitude. His ethnic origin is so indeterminate, his blackness so diluted that Myrtle has to be told about his mother’s coloured blood before she can feel the expected abhorrence. Chicken tests Myrtle, reminds her that other women have scorned him on account of his race. We realize that his sexual conquest is but the first (though most important) stage in securing her allegiance; he goes on to ridicule Lot’s sexuality and prove himself a worthy saviour. Defining himself against the words of a preacher, Chicken reinforces the importance of salvation through action and sexual honesty: with high libidos, it would be hard to deny the suitability of Chicken and Myrtle and futile to live a life of self-denial where you have to ‘haul down your spiritual gates’ (p. 211). As in so much of Williams’s writing, the sex versus religion debate is presented in absolute terms: the kingdom of Earth wholly rejects the kingdom of God. Any sense of compromise is dismissed by both Chicken and the preacher, and so the outsider cannot (and does not want to) refute the easy stereotype conflating ethnicity and sexual appetite.

Rather than make a profound statement about the marginalization of minorities and celebrate ‘a new decolonized union’, Williams has simply resurrected the familiar binaries of frail/strong, artist/materialist, white/other.35 The play’s second sexual moment, though paradoxically sexless, crystallizes these distinctions and questions the optimism of the mixed-race union. Lot’s descent is both a resignation to his death and a triumphant declaration of his sexuality. With no need to keep up the farce of a pretended heterosexuality in front of Myrtle, he is able, like Blanche, to create a little magic before surrendering mother, wife and property.

In his final moments, Lot embodies his mother’s intolerance and instinct for social betterment but also, more sympathetically, society’s rejection of the (drag) artist. It is easy for Chicken to ignore him/her in this trance-like state and leave the way clear to a fitting final resting place which is the parlour. However, he has already belittled his half-brother’s Oedipal perversion in retaliation for Lot/Lottie’s bigotry: ‘I’ll tell you what her son does to amuse himself here. He gits in his dead mother’s clothes – panties, brassiere, slippers, dress. Ask any dawg in the street!’ (p. 206). Carefully inserted in the examples of injustice against Chicken, this is clearly tit for tat, one minority attacking another. The insinuation that Lot’s transvestism is public knowledge implies an unfair (to Chicken’s mind) acceptance
of sexual decadence. Robbed of certain crucial freedoms, Chicken resents the permissiveness accorded Lot’s behaviour.

It could be argued that Chicken’s decision to leave his brother at the point of death and not call a doctor is no more than expedient in light of the rising floodwaters. Yet, the cool detachment with which he states that Lot ‘isn’t’ (p. 213) and his talk of always wanting a white woman to bear his child points to an insensitivity that problematizes his otherwise laudable victory. Chicken has lost all sense of humanity in his determination to become king. This is even more the case in the original story where, almost surreally, the couple continue to have sex while the tubercular Lot cries out in anguish.

There is little doubt that Williams is more concerned with racial injustices in Kingdom of Earth than we have become accustomed to seeing, but such considerations are still secondary to the sexual dynamic. Chicken’s keynote speech is not about black solidarity or redressing wrongs; it concerns the primacy of lust, sex as sustenance. Everything else is ultimately irrelevant and valueless (‘crap’), especially the rhetoric of religion. Perhaps Williams’s boldest suggestion about race here is that blackness is not a biological classification so much as a state of mind, a manipulation of language and thought processes by those with most power, a ‘dangerous trope’ as Henry Louis Gates, Jr has referred to it. Hence Chicken’s blackness is almost invisible to those who have not been initiated into the conspiracy against him. It is surely significant that his mother ‘wasn’t black but she wasn’t white neither’ so that he is just ‘dark-complexed’ (Kingdom of Earth, p. 205) – difficult to place ethnically except for those determined to undermine him. The same point is made in the short story where local rumours about ‘a mother with part nigger blood’ are corrected by the narrator who claims to be ‘one eight Cherokee and the rest is white’. These are wilful mistakes, a plot by the powerful majority to deny Chicken his white ancestry.

We have seen, then, that Chicken’s sexual possession of Myrtle immediately precedes his acquisition of Lot’s property and that this fulfils the twofold ambition of owning property and impregnating a white woman. His triumph at the expense of two disadvantaged people, the sexual deviant and the woman, promises a future on his terms, not a rosy new order revoking past tensions.

The revenging outsider is also a feature of three related works that involve the cuckolding of inadequate white males: the story ‘Twenty-Seventy Wagons Full of Cotton’, the one-act play of the same title and the screenplay Baby Doll. The plot common to all three focuses on a cotton-gin
Desiring others

owner’s wife and her interest in / desire for her husband’s business rival, the manager of the local syndicate. Having fallen on hard times, the husband starts a fire at the syndicate gin and then gets the twenty-seven wagons’ worth of business. The syndicate manager, Italian in all but the short story where his nationality is not referred to, determines to use the wife as part of his revenge whilst also finding her desirable.

Here again a projected sexual conquest is linked with economic success, though the two are not simultaneous. As a representative of the Syndicate Plantation, Silva Vi(a)carro (Vicarro in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Vacarro in Baby Doll) has already, we presume, achieved some degree of personal advancement in an organization which is swallowing up smaller outfits like that of Jake/Archie Lee Meighan.

There are some interesting comparisons to be made across the three works, primarily regarding race and the nature of the sexual tension rather than use of genre. For example, Williams increases Vacarro’s responsibility in direct proportion to his Italianness. In the short story, he is nameless and only once referred to as the manager of the plantation; his ethnicity is kept vague, the only hints being his short stature and his arm ‘hairy and dark as a monkey’s’ (Collected Stories, p. 45). In both the play and the screenplay, he is unquestionably the superintendent of the plantation/gin and Italianate. The stage directions for the former describe ‘a rather small and wiry man of dark Latin looks and nature’. He tells Flora that he has an Italian name but is a native of New Orleans, as if to at once account for his appearance and justify his citizenship. His Italian background and professional success are so inextricably linked in Baby Doll, where he proudly asserts that he is a Sicilian, that he has adopted the insulting sobriquet used by those hostile to him: ‘I’m known as the wop that runs the Syndicate Plantation.’ Even Archie Lee recognizes this, though his comment – ‘Don’t call yourself names. Let other folks call you names!’ – attempts to wrest back the advantage he believes name-calling confers.

It seems clear, then, that Williams intended an Italian adversary for Meighan from the outset, even if he does not make this explicit. As with Chicken’s blackness, Vicarro’s real identity as an American citizen is obscured by how others wish to label him. As a ‘foreigner’, locals can be doubly resentful of his success, critical of an invading force in their community. Williams only develops this idea with the larger cast and wider scope of the screenplay. In a scene reminiscent of Boss Finley’s interrupted speech in Sweet Bird of Youth, ‘the old boy’ attempts to justify Vacarro’s ruthless capitalism amidst an unconvinced and volatile
Ownership and decolonization

crowd: ‘Natchually, a thing that is profitable to some is unprofitable to others. We all know that some people in this county have suffered some financial losses due in some measure to the success of the Syndicate Plantation’ (Baby Doll, p. 26).

The opposition to Vacarro is built on envy, the failure of those like Archie Lee to compete, to even furnish his rundown home. Vacarro’s achievement (Rock, Vacarro’s right-hand man, implies that he built and started operating his gin single-handedly) is a victory for the enterprising spirit of an alien. He is someone who asserts his separateness – he talks about his ‘ancient race’ (p. 66) – whilst adopting the business ethics of the new country. Williams’s immigrants often struggle for survival or, like Lady Torrance’s father and Rosario (The Rose Tattoo), risk breaking the law to prosper. Meighan is the lawbreaker here and the immorality of Vacarro’s behaviour is cancelled out by the act of sabotage and Meighan’s treatment of his own wife.

Whilst Williams moves towards a sense of an evolving Southern economy within a broader federal politics (Roosevelt’s good-neighbour policy validates retaliation), Baby Doll, like the source story, turns on the seduction of the wife with its suggestion of sado-masochistic pleasure. In other words, the economic/political/racist agenda once more frames, but ultimately makes way for, the erotic. The play’s epigraph from Sappho telegraphs Williams’s intentions: Eros shaking the soul points to a violent sexual awakening. The simplicity of the short story, with its focus solely on Mrs Jake Meighan and the unnamed syndicate man, elevates the sexual power struggle over the economic one that has already been resolved. For, although cognisant of the offence against him (he is able to give a precise, legalistic definition of arson when required), the syndicate man also realizes that his recourse to law will probably be fruitless. Even in Baby Doll, where, like Chicken, Vacarro is resourceful enough to draw up a rough affidavit, the sexual retaliation appears to offer more certain success, given the indifference of the local firemen and the marshal. As with other works, though, the motivation of the sexual aggressor is problematic. Chicken, Stanley and Vacarro enjoy sex or the foreplay that might substitute for it. There are four distinct, but also interconnected, reasons for this: they are sexual beings defined by the pleasure they can take and bring (in that order); they feel aggrieved materially and sex partly redresses this; they have been insulted racially and sex inverts that prejudice; sex represents real possession (of a woman) and a symbolic colonization. All three characters have a confident masculinity, in spite of a diminutive stature in Vacarro’s case.
She sank back into a voluptuous passivity, feeling only the afternoon’s limpid heat and the fingers of the little man pressed almost painfully against her throbbing pulse.41

Of the three versions of the story, the earliest dwells most on the disparity in size between the syndicate man and Mrs Meighan. This obvious difference is visually comic, a repeated point of attraction and a source of anxiety to Mrs Meighan. Williams furthers the easy stereotypes of the small European male and the overweight, poor white American female, adding the tentative suggestion that the old-world settler could lose himself in America’s tempting vastness. Mrs Meighan’s size is attractive and a handicap to her resistance. The heat of the afternoon induces lassitude but also offers an excuse for her enjoyment of the situation: she can tell herself that the weather has befuddled her mind and so disarmed her. In reality, the narrator gives us enough hints of her willing participation, or at least the thrill of her inadequate resistance being overcome. Mrs Meighan’s doubts are a bogus concern for her safety or a vague worry that having sex with such a small man might represent the corruption of a child – an idea that Williams would use but reverse the gender for in the screenplay. Mrs Meighan’s relationship with her husband is not the concern of the short story. She obeys his instructions to entertain the syndicate man, and he may be responsible for the self-consciousness she feels about her size, though in the play he is at pains to explain how he likes big women. There is no definite sense of the frustration of her married life or cruel treatment by her husband, and yet her loyalty easily crumbles into the resigned ‘and what difference did it make’ (p. 45). The story focuses on the spontaneity of a stranger overcome with lust and realizing his dominance. He may be motivated by revenge but the narrative does not make this plain, only his aesthetic appreciation of Mrs Meighan’s size. He, his riding crop and the heat all contribute to wearing Mrs Meighan down to a point at which his own desire gets under her skin: ‘But she could feel, it seemed, through the very pores of her skin what the little man’s eyes were doing. She felt their desire trickling over her huge body as warm and liquid as her own trickling sweat’ (p. 44).

Mrs Meighan feels attacked, invaded, but the man’s liquid desire is as natural as her bodily functions. He is both an outside force bidding for control of her flagging self and figuratively already inside her before the consummation of their flirtation. He uses force, his riding crop, to preserve his prize from the gathering flies (he licks his lips when he eyes her
Retribution

up, as if she is a delicacy he does not want spoilt) and to corral her into the house, the site of his conquest and her infidelity. Symbolically, the syndicate man supplants Jake Meighan. He takes over his home and gins his wife who has ‘reached her September season’ (p. 46). A correlation can be made between the syndicate man’s success sexually, the sado-masochistic coupling that is left to the reader’s imagination, and the mechanical process of ginning the cotton, the ‘pumping’ gin stands and the ‘sucking’ (p. 43) pneumatic pipes.

Breaking down Mrs Meighan’s defences partly represents assimilation, racial integration. Like Stanley Kowalski and Chicken before him, the original syndicate manager has the raw sexuality of a primate, a primitivism which is irrepressible and which actually brands Mrs Meighan: the dark arm resembling a monkey’s ‘burned with a sharp animal heat into her flesh’ (p. 43). It is the story’s elision of dark skin with sexual violence that confirms David Savran’s observation that ‘differences in ethnicity and race prove to be almost unfailingly the most potent, inflexible, and explosive sources of desire’.\footnote{42} But, as with Stanley who is also labelled un-American, it is the additional suggestion of simian qualities that makes the encounter truly explosive. Mrs Meighan will be dominated, punished by a man whose exotic, hirsute appearance evokes an earlier evolutionary order. Her ‘expected flagellation’ (‘Twenty-seven Wagons’, p. 48) is an acceptance of a journey into bestiality and anarchy, punctuated by tears and whimpering because these will heighten her vulnerability and so maintain the terms of the couple’s role play. By the end of the story, her appeals to God thinly mask a readiness to be tortured, a preference for the pleasure of pain over neglect. Characteristically, Williams fuses Greek and Christian so that the pitiful appeals come from ‘a tremendous, sobbing Persephone’ (p. 48) about to be trapped in the Underworld of her own home.

When Williams returned to the 1936 story (first written in 1935), he took the decision to expand/alter the plot in two important respects: Vicarro’s primary motivation would be revenge after the first mention of the good neighbour policy, and Mrs Meighan’s attractiveness would be a later consideration; her simplicity would be reconfigured as that of a woman-child so that her sexuality would carry with it notions of taboo and her role as unwitting pawn would be more understandable.

retribution

Yes, I’m foreign but I’m not revengeful, Meighan, at least not more than is rightful.\footnote{45}
In *Baby Doll*, Vacarro tries to distance himself from two stereotypes: the wronged foreigner trying to bypass the law and getting more than even; and the sexual predator using his Latin looks and charm to destroy a white marriage. In a departure from the one-act play, where the husband is blissfully unaware of any sexual plot, Archie Lee employs his own revenge tactics. Eager to prove that he is not the naïve cuckold, he is overly vengeful and hunts down Vacarro and Baby Doll as if about to Lynch a Negro for interfering with a white woman. Parodying this, Vacarro and Baby Doll seek refuge in a tree, so often the gibbet from which innocent African Americans have swung but now a place where the characters can continue their adult game of hide-and-seek.

Ironically, Meighan’s jealousy is in inverse proportion to the syndicate man’s sexual intentions. Vacarro finds Baby Doll different after their rest, ‘suddenly grown up!’ (p. 78), but, at the moment she effectively offers herself to him, he has to remind her that they have been playing childish games. Unlike Archie Lee, the husband who must wait until she reaches maturity but who is compelled by his own frustrated urges to watch her voyeuristically in the first scene, Vacarro can reject the child to the point where the pragmatic woman finally emerges. Even then the screenplay steadfastly refuses to consummate the relationship. Vacarro, able to unlock the sexuality of a woman by dint of his unfamiliar (and therefore exciting) ethnicity and the assumed connection between economic success and sexual mastery, can become child-like himself. He happily sleeps in the crib sucking his thumb, and his pursuit of Baby Doll through the nursery mutually becomes ‘a wild romp of children’ (p. 64). So, he appears to reconstruct the sadomasochistic scenarios of the earlier short story and one-act play, but, at a pivotal moment, those are defused as he assumes the responsibility of an adult and the text seems to anticipate moral outrage at the sexual corruption of a minor. That Williams was unable to prevent consternation when the filmed version appeared is testimony to just how strong this taboo is.

David Savran points to two interesting, interlinked features the *Baby Doll* film shares with Williams’s other works. Firstly, the ‘phallic male’, as he labels Vacarro, does not fit the ‘white Protestant bourgeois paradigm’ accepted in 1950s America. Secondly, Baby Doll is both object of desire but also, more unusually and controversially, the desiring subject. In all three versions of the story, she is pursued, hunted down in her own home. She is vulnerable as both sexual quarry and legal witness, able to expose her husband’s false alibi and help indict him for arson. On each occasion, the reader/viewer is made aware of her complicity and enjoyment. Privacy
ensures the chase reaches its conclusion. Each time she must appear as a vulnerable female unable to assert boldly what she feels or reverse the roles of hunter and prey.

Paradoxically, she comes closest to articulating her needs in Baby Doll, the work which restates her immaturity just at the point where she wants to be recognized as a woman. Baby Doll fends off Silva Vacarro in the crumbling attic of a house which is symbolic of her inadequate marriage and the archaic Southern economy that Archie Lee is trying to sustain. She needs something beyond the end of the game – a playmate for more hide-and-seek or a man to unlock her sexuality. Savran refers to ‘the figure of inexpressibility’, the language ‘incapable of carrying the freight of her desire’, in her incomplete ‘I want to – ’ (Baby Doll, p. 68). He rightly points to the shared ground between this gap and Williams’s writing about homosexuality throughout the forties and fifties. Baby Doll’s desires are similarly inadmissible, culturally forbidden.

However, Savran tends to miss the complex interplay of child/woman/parent roles in this section of the text, perhaps because he is more
concerned with the celluloid interpretation of the screenplay. He glosses over Baby Doll’s forgetfulness because the film itself seems to ignore it, transforming the moment instead into one of subtextual longing. And yet Baby Doll’s temporary amnesia is part of her make-up; it is the safety valve which protects her innocence and signals the flitting mind of a child. Confronted with the prospect of Vacarro’s departure, Baby Doll is simultaneously the denied lover and the sulky infant trying to hold on to her playmate. One minute, her eyelids are fluttering as she sizes up his manly figure; the next, she turns away ‘like a shy child, serious-faced’ (p. 68). Treated as a child for so long and accepting that role to stave off the grotesquely lecherous Archie Lee, Baby Doll reverts to it automatically. As she constantly crisscrosses the adult/child boundary, she invites Vacarro to express his sexual feelings (‘Was that all you wanted …?’) and then to sleep over. The latter invitation gives her the chance to become a mother – the same role Flora Meighan chooses at the end of 27 Wagons Full of Cotton – singing a lullaby to the now child-like Vacarro. Exercising the restraint of a responsible adult, Vacarro is also able to slip in and out of roles, but he is always the watchful adult underneath any childishness, guarding the signed affidavit whilst curled up in the crib.

Although there is clearly a sexual attraction between Baby Doll and Vacarro (as there is in each version of the story), it is not overstated. Baby Doll has the same dishevelled, post-coital look about her as Flora Meighan in the play, but her experience has been sexless, despite what Archie Lee and the film’s detractors might think. Sex is kept at the level of voyeurism – the fantasies and self-doubts buzzing around the frustrated and jealous husband. What replaces the suggestion of the act itself is not economic or racial enquiry but a preoccupation with contracts. Vacarro’s affidavit obviates sexual revenge, and Baby Doll is kept from Archie Lee’s designs by a curious contract that forbids him to have sex with her until her twentieth birthday and only then if he is supporting her properly. For all the differences that make him attractive to wife and audience alike – his Sicilian roots, his strength compared to Archie Lee’s ill health, his honest achievement – Vacarro does not unseat the husband sexually but proves his superiority by being able to obtain a legal document. It is all Archie Lee can do to meet the conditions of the one imposed on him.

Afraid of defeat in the only thing he has come to care about – possessing Baby Doll sexually – Archie Lee finally becomes a gun-toting madman, about to be picked up by the police at the end of the screenplay. His wife is with Vacarro but in precisely what sense is left unclear. They have fallen back on innocent games, perhaps confirming the script’s resistance
to Baby Doll’s sexual initiation. Archie Lee cannot finally banish the alien invader he brands a coward (‘you yellowbelly wop’, p. 88) in a last racist salvo, but, like other characters before him, Vacarro actually has little sense of belonging or purpose: ‘Does anyone know where to go, or what to do?’ (ibid.).

We should not leave our consideration of Baby Doll without mentioning the further comment on race relations provided by the chorus of African-American characters, especially in the film itself. Philip C. Kolin devotes an article to the way in which these apparently minor figures provide an ironic commentary on Archie Lee’s parlous situation. Picking up on a comment made by Karl Malden (the actor playing Archie Lee) about the revolutionary nature of a film where African Americans are repeatedly mocking a white man, Kolin claims that, in their collaborative venture, Williams and Kazan produced a film that was ‘as politically radical as it was cinematically challenging’. Blacks, he goes on, are ‘enfranchised into privileged, even judicial, voices’.

Extensively illustrated, Kolin’s argument is irrefutable, but, for our purposes, we need to consider Williams’s role more closely. In his notes for this article, Kolin concedes that Williams’s screenplay only includes three references to black bystanders; the rest crept into the film at Kazan’s instigation. Williams did not remain for much of the filming in Benoit, Mississippi, so his input on set was limited; and his attitude to the project was inconsistent. Interestingly, Kazan himself has supplied different comments on the film that cast a measure of doubt over the true significance of race. Whilst he professes himself pleased with the motif of sardonic African Americans in Richard Schickel’s biography, he also played down any serious moral purpose to the film in an interview with Jeff Young: ‘It’s like a fairy tale. It’s ridiculous, improbable, unrealistic.’

The essential elements of Williams’s story, retained in each version, have a racial dimension, but it seems difficult to be certain that Williams’s own undoubted compassion for the African American is evident in the film, even if the screenplay is attributed solely to him.

**Sicilian American**

Up to this point, we have considered the impact of African-American and Italian characters on predominantly white communities. Some of the works discussed have used racism to create hostile backgrounds to the main dramatic action; others, characterized by occasional racist outbursts, reveal the threat that can be posed by those who are dispossessed.
Skin tone is a barely concealed factor in citizenship and property ownership alike. It also heightens the anticipation of sexual relations. Vilified for embodying or arousing excessive desire, the racial other appears to interest Williams as both liberator and atoner.

Of course, Williams’s abused individuals are not the extent of his interest in different races, cultures and nationalities. Whole works – plays and prose fiction – are set in other countries or apparently autonomous communities transplanted to America. Williams’s biography is of relevance here. His frequent travels to Italy and his relationship with Frank Merlo inform The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone and The Rose Tattoo. His relationship with Pancho Rodriguez y Gonzalez colours ‘Rubio y Morena’, and his appreciation of the Spanish poet and playwright, Federico García Lorca, is evident in The Purification. Whilst it would be unfair to imply that this material is solely used to exoticize and eroticize plots, the broader culture and politics of these nations or enclaves are normally left unquestioned. Even religion, so strictly observed by Serafina in The Rose Tattoo, is defined in relation to her sexual life and that of her daughter.

Williams refers to 27 Wagons Full of Cotton as ‘A Mississippi Delta Comedy’, a subtitle which ought to highlight the humour of a situation – that nevertheless deals with serious issues like race and arson – rather more than the individual comic creations. The syndicate manager is no comic performer, just a wily man who can discredit and ridicule his white inferior in a way which meets with our approval. As we have seen, he trades on his looks and his economic power and these are more than a match for the Meighans. Alvaro in The Rose Tattoo is quite a different character. His body receives the by now customary glances of a woman, but his face, his family life and his ancestry render him a figure of fun.

First performed in 1950, The Rose Tattoo offers a lively and affectionately comic treatment of its Sicilian village community situated somewhere between New Orleans and Mobile. Serafina, the female protagonist, is a seamstress devoted to her truck-driver husband, Rosario. Their marriage, and in particular their active sex life, has become something sacred to Serafina. She wrongly assumes that they can remain devoted, renewing their first sexual experience every day of their married lives, little suspecting that Rosario is having an affair. His mistress, Estelle Hohengarten, is known by the whole community, but she appears to be just another customer to Serafina when she requests that a piece of rose-coloured silk be made into a man’s shirt. The shirt is, of course, for Rosario but becomes the property of the local women at the end of the play when they pass it between them tauntingly. Its colour has a pervasive symbolism.
throughout the play, the rose obviously signifying passion and warmth whilst also being the playwright’s personal homage to Rose, the sister Williams often wrote into his work in one form or other.

The play’s well-integrated sub-plot brings another rose, Rosa, into conflict with her mother’s sexual morality. Celebrating her enduring sexual appetite very publicly, Serafina is equally outspoken in wishing to curb Rosa’s sexual development, especially her burgeoning relationship with a sailor, Jack. However, the appearance of the aforementioned Alvaro and the shattering of the urn containing Rosario’s ashes would seem to mellow her attitude.

Clown-like in appearance and descended from a village idiot, Alvaro appears the antithesis of Sicilian machismo. He cries soon after his first entrance, suffers comments about his protruding ears and is unable to prevent the local children from stealing the bananas from his lorry. Moreover, he is not able to offer Serafina a secure financial base; on the contrary, he is looking for a woman with a flourishing business who can support him. Williams’s usual model of masculinity is, then, subverted or, as Bigsby asserts, ‘reconstructed’. Alvaro reawakens the desire in Serafina and successfully fulfils his role as seed-bearer, but he is in the shadow of the husband who never appears: Rosario. Alvaro must exist through his ghostly predecessor, be dressed in the shirt that was a symbol of his infidelity and be tattooed with the rose that is a mark of procreative love.

Williams’s choice of setting and nationality is essential to the mood of the play. Combined, they generate a sense of displacement, an underlying friction between the imported values of honour and loyalty, the Italian passion for lovemaking and God, and a less intense, more permissive American society. We experience a foreign community almost hermetically sealed from its host nation. Jibes about Wops and their behaviour, about primitive Sicilians living in caves, seem to bounce off the thick-skinned characters. Serafina is convinced of her superior ways, even detects a moral laxity in American education, and, although her views are extreme and her judgement of the respectful Jack Hunter is proved wrong, the author’s production notes recommend ‘sentiment and humour in equal measure’ and discourage ridicule and irreverence. The play captures the spirit of Mediterranean life, not least in its many Italian interjections and the contributions of the Sicilian folk-singer, but, equally, Williams wants to scrutinize sexual relationships with American eyes in a hybridized setting. So, the mistaken elevation of sex to the purity of faith by the appropriately named Serafina is debunked by the choric Americans, Bessie and Flora, who point to the Sicilian husband’s temptation by the Texas blackjack
Desiring others

dealer, Estelle Hohengarten. Though not the steamy Mississippi Delta, the Gulf Coast setting combines the exotic with the mundane, so that the tropical palm trees and pampas grass offset the dilapidated frame cottage, just as the carnivalesque interior contrasts with the natural beauty of *prima sera*. The heart of the play is Italian, just as the interior of Serafina’s cottage is meant to be ‘the projection of a woman’s heart passionately in love’ (p. 17), but there are timely reminders of the harsh reality facing immigrants, of Rosario’s attempts to achieve security in a foreign land by smuggling drugs and the pressure on Serafina to produce satisfactory work as a seamstress.

Like the other plays discussed in this chapter, *The Rose Tattoo* does not dwell long on economic realities but builds to a problematic sexual encounter. Alvaro is not the kind of drifter we have already seen who must steer clear of the authorities, but his presence in Serafina’s house contradicts her devotion to the one love of her life and indicates that she has now accepted what she had previously taken to be the ‘lies’ of her neighbours. Hence he must go through the charade of leaving very publicly and then returning silently. The comic mode allows the play’s pivotal sex scene to be technically onstage, albeit unseen at the back of the cottage, but it is something more than just an ironic counterpoint to the conversation between Rosa and Jack. It will enable Rosa to be released from her mother’s strictures and, combined with the dispersal of the husband’s ashes, it could make Serafina a free woman, a mother for the second time. The farce of the noisy sex scene becomes the slapstick of its aftermath – the imagined violation of the daughter and the beating by the protective but also envious mother. Rosa’s sexual maturity is subsequently accepted and we are left with the widow’s questionable emancipation from the memory of her husband. As a result of these developments, symbolic unity is forged through the rejuvenating power of sex, replacing the stale fidelity and chastity advocated by Serafina earlier on.

The release of Alvaro’s seed facilitates other freedoms, rendering Serafina’s cottage a site of pleasure and not the inhibiting prison or mausoleum it seemed earlier. Sexual intercourse fuels the play’s discussions and determines its structure. For the Sicilians in the play, desire is an easy, natural subject of conversation, but this liberating readiness to talk about it does not imply promiscuity. Equally, the longevity and regularity of Serafina’s sexual relationship is unrealistic: we can infer from the text that sex cannot be a single act of devotion or take on the gravitas of religion. The ubiquitous rose imagery is an attempt to unite love and sex, so often mutually exclusive in Williams’s universe, but it is so insistent that
the connection seems false, disingenuous. Bigsby calls it ‘naïve symbolism’ and ‘an artificial focus for dramatic attention’, and we might speculate that Williams’s warm feelings for both his sister and Frank Merlo have led to the creation of a motif that fails to command our attention precisely because of its universality.\(^2\)

Nevertheless, the tattoo of the play’s title has a significant role in simultaneously glorifying and demystifying the sexual act. Whilst Serafina is convinced it is a badge of loyalty unique to Rosario and a holy sign blessing their union with a child, in reality it seems a common, easily acquired adornment. Flora explains that the earthy Estelle got one done in racy Bourbon Street and, aware that he has to play on his physical resemblance to Rosario to have any chance of satisfying his lust, Alvaro is similarly tattooed. This singular tattoo draws attention to the body, marks it out as a territory of conflicting passions, of wildness and devotion, of restless travel and settlement.

What starts as a story of Serafina’s body and its perfect compatibility with Rosario’s – the daily reliving of their first sexual experience – soon branches out into the story of his infidelity and the politics of her response. Rosario, object of desire within marriage and desiring subject outside it, successfully re-inscribes himself so that the body remains a focus of both physical attention and metaphysical speculation. His body, which holds its own narrative, is never seen on stage but the tattoo that marks it draws together the play’s rose imagery and generates new narratives. It tells of a barely tameable man, ‘wild like a Gipsy’ (Rose Tattoo, p. 25), who, contrary to Serafina’s proud claims, roams freely. Indeed, Estelle Hohengarten muses: ‘A man that’s wild is hard for a woman to hold, huh? But if he was tame – would the woman want to hold him?’ (ibid.). The play avoids showing us Rosario’s feelings for his wife because, although his apparent devotion is a lie, there is then sufficient mystery to make Serafina’s resistance to the truth plausible and to sustain her infatuation through Alvaro.

The image of the gipsy is important in two further respects: it hints at a dark and unconventional outsider, a free spirit unlikely to find marriage comfortable; restlessness and travel form a subtle parallel with Jack Hunter. Jack has an earring, a sign of his untrustworthiness as far as Serafina is concerned, which shares the tattoo’s contradictory associations because it is also a symbol of commitment (an improvised wedding ring). As Jack explains his forthcoming South American itinerary, Rosa becomes desperate to consummate their relationship as a lure to marriage and the child she is now capable of bearing. However, Jack’s repeated objections – he is worried about under-age sex amongst other things – indicate that
Hunter might be a fitting appellation after all. He is capable of keeping a promise but his interest in Rosa is driven by sexual frustration. Were he not to see her again he would happily visit a prostitute, and, when she suggests risking everything to wait for him at the Greyhound bus station, all he can talk about is the touch of her body. Furthermore, the stage direction as he exits for the final time conveys both their entrapment by circumstances and his pent-up energies: ‘From the foot of the steps he glares fiercely back at her like a tiger through the bars of a cage’ (p. 106). Struggling with the promise he has been sworn to keep, his relationship with Rosa is only saved by Serafina’s sudden understanding of her daughter’s beauty and sexual maturity in the context of her own hypocrisy.

The tattoo is, then, the badge of the wanderer but also a sacred imprint or stigmata. A preoccupation with the flesh and the spirit, the puritan legacy that hangs over Williams’s American characters, is most naturally explored in the Sicilian community. For here the adoration of the body co-exists with the vivid and tangible statuary of Catholicism. Instead of contrasting the potent Italian male with his enfeebled American counterpart, Williams’s comedy softens the image of young masculinity to create Alvaro, a foolish stud. Italian machismo assumes a tenderer, self-mocking aspect and, consequently, sex becomes a warmer, funnier experience detached from the edgy sado-masochism of other encounters. The conflict between American and Italian temperaments is not manifested in the same economic and sexual struggles of Baby Doll. Members of both communities are simply bemused by cultural differences and express this as catty disapproval. The underlying politics of integration matter little here, and so bringing Sicily to America does not imply a reshaping of American values in the same way that Stanley Kowalski’s immigrant working-class background appropriates and destroys the old South. The nationalities remain discrete and even the liaison between Rosa and Jack promises little prospect of cultural reconciliation.

THE EXPATRIATE DILEMMA

He was beginning to suffer from the expatriate’s dilemma. He was moving away from his own native material. How could he use the new backgrounds and the new people? Like most wandering writers, he had to compromise.33

Taking The Rose Tattoo and The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone (1950) as examples, Dakin Williams, Tennessee’s brother, suggests that other cultures could only be realized, or partly observed, through American eyes. Some mediation avoids the necessity to empathize completely with an
adopted culture. Karen Stone illustrates this perspective. Additionally, her Italian experience, the Roman spring of the title, coincides with three seminal personal events: coming to terms with the death of her husband; the end of her career on the stage; the menopause. These amount to what she describes as ‘an almost posthumous existence’, a fitting label for life in a city weighed down by its past.54

The playwright’s first novel is less about the dark exoticism of the other, or the relaxed but heightened sexual relations characteristic of Mediterranean countries, than the calculated bartering of youth, beauty and money. Karen Stone’s brief fantasies are rarely allowed to break through her defences, and we see nothing of the edgy, violent sexual desire almost expected in such encounters. Her relationship with a young Italian, Paolo, which is at the heart of the novel, finally turns on the indignity of their age gap and the liberties he is able to take. Williams chooses Italy, and specifically Rome, because it enhances the sense of time already passed and the imminence of death. It is also known for its established ring of male prostitutes, marchettas, servicing the needs of older foreigners (usually female here). The city unites sex and death and yet neither quite applies to the protagonist. Karen Stone’s death was a professional one on stage as a ludicrously aged Juliet in America. Sexually, she is slow to take advantage of Paolo’s charms in a novel that is oddly sexless. If her spiritually dead body is to be picked to pieces by Rome’s young and grasping scavengers, she also contradicts this by being like a bird eyeing street life from her lofty eyrie. Karen is drifting in a vacuum of antiquity, cruelly but necessarily populated by the young and the beautiful. Her abandonment is, though, misleading in that she still retains political control, dictating the nature of her relationships. It is not that, as another character, the Contessa, presumes, she rejects those she does not find desirable so much that sex itself has ceased to be the concern expected of a woman of her maturity.

Karen Stone’s interest in Paolo and the other gigolos is the familiar lure of youth, the rejuvenation that can only come from being accompanied by, and being seen with, young suitors. And yet for a woman with her inherited fortune, these boys do not so much offer a means of protection as a way of authenticating her existence, stopping ‘the drift’ as she refers to it (The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone, p. 21). As she was formerly an actress, they appropriately provide a leading man, someone with whom to occupy the stage of life, provided, of course, they do not steal the limelight. Thus, the novel’s passionless, sexless quality is explained by the power that comes from physical and emotional detachment, by egotism.
With a psychoanalytic exactness, Williams traces the strength of Karen Stone’s self-control to the collapse of her parents’ marriage and a testing time at boarding school where circumstances dictated that she should lose her precocity and toughen up to become ‘the most tenacious holder of the citadel’ (p. 82) in a game called King On The Mountain. This combined survival instinct and need to be in the ascendancy has determined the course of her life, affecting her public and private relationships with men. Her very name symbolizes an unyielding hardness and the novel’s abundant water imagery hints at those, like Karen Stone, who are claiming (much as Chicken and Myrtle) the high ground to escape a flood.

Mrs Stone’s politics are the art of self-promotion, the little concessions and acts of consideration she makes to those receiving her in cities around America on her theatrical tour. In her Roman spring they amount to the preservation of dignity in the face of beauty. When Paolo becomes indiscreet, it is time to move on to a more anonymous lover, the down-at-heel man who has been pursuing her throughout the novel. Williams’s narrator is at pains to explain that Mrs Stone has no interest in a broader politics. The cataclysmic events of recent history have passed her by, and she has no intellectual interests worthy of mention to fall back on. Rome is a political battleground where the stakes are sex, money and youthful beauty. Far from the backwater she might have supposed, the city proves to be a goldfish bowl, a microscope slide scrutinized by Italians and American tourists alike, the most vindictive of whom appears to be the mannish Meg Bishop at the start of the novel.

Worse than these critical eyes, though, is Karen Stone’s self-scrutiny, her fear of collapsing into a meaningless drift now that her orbit, her round of continuous appointments, has been removed. The novel’s many mirrors and reflective glass surfaces most obviously convey the menace of the lurking stranger; they also allude to vanity and introspection. Karen’s only preparation for the years she did not expect to live is a photograph she has inscribed on the back with ‘This is how I look now!’ (p. 115) – an attempt to chronicle an empty history and her only defence against time’s progress.

It is clear that Karen’s self-absorption has made it difficult for her to concede power, sexual or otherwise. Whilst she may have the gaze of the lustful woman, re-establishing contact with youth is more important than a sex drive. She seems representative of the decadent artist whose work is ultimately unimportant except in publicizing herself or providing a routine. Meg Bishop goes further by holding that Karen is a symbol of decay.
and corruption, an archetype of an imploding culture. She is ‘the basic principle of a society and an age which had wandered through blindness into decay’ (p. 18). Karen comes to understand her own myopia but, at the start of the novel anyway, she believes Rome’s beauty and its lovers offer a refuge.

If Karen’s situation is symptomatic of an age, this creeping corruption is not limited to either America or Italy. However, Italian life is specifically not the warm celebration of Dionysus found in *The Rose Tattoo*; nor is it represented by the dynamism of Vacarro. In this novel, Roman males are preening peacocks luxuriating in ritualistic, homoerotic pampering. Thus, when Karen Stone gives in to Paolo’s expectation that she will require sex and not just companionship, the description is abrupt and metaphorical, but Paolo’s daily late-afternoon visit to the barber is languidly recounted over several pages. The sensual ministrations of Renato’s (the barber) fingers are supposedly a prelude to the ongoing discussion of Paolo’s sexual conquests. Actually, this foreplay is far more intimate and erotic than anything Paolo has felt obliged to do for his women. Meg Bishop condemns the Italian male’s effeminacy in her attack on the decadence of the city, labelling Karen’s male guests ‘epicene dandies’ (pp. 17–18). This insinuated androgyny masks her own frustrated lesbianism but points to some interesting gender inversions which are also part of the novel’s sexual politics.

David Savran accounts for this ‘gender transposition’ in the context of the critical vogue for reading Williams’s heroines as homosexuals in drag. The author, he explains, creates a ‘complexly gendered network’ that is difficult to read or invites more than one likely reading. A fluidity of gender results in emasculating women controlling, or trying to control, apparently bisexual men. But, like the sexual act itself, orientation is not as important as perceived power. It is merely a role, an identity assumed or easily imposed. Karen’s acting parts have prepared her for the dissimulation, the shifting guises required in later life. Although this is a novel, we are nonetheless preoccupied with theatrical roles, the parts we create for ourselves and the masquerades performed for society. It is not just, as Dakin Williams has noted, that a new genre for Williams has a recognizably dramatic structure, but that gender and sexuality have the light interchangeability of costume.

Our ultimate indifference to Karen Stone’s plight comes from the knowledge that she sustains Rome’s brutal sexual economy and is as culpable as its parasites. Unable to step out of the circle, to retreat gracefully into obscurity, she merely dispenses with her procuress, the
Contessa, and provides for herself. She deceives herself that this is an act of liberation while perpetuating a politics of supply and demand. The novel may outwardly chart her mid-life sexual awakening – its very title indicating rejuvenation – but, more broadly, it is about the problem of controlling destiny. With career, husband and the ability to harness time gone, Karen Stone firmly believes that she summons the stranger with a wave of her handkerchief at the close of the novel. In reality, she is enslaving herself to the phallus (crudely symbolized by an Egyptian obelisk beneath her terrace) for what can only be temporary respite. Moreover, the man’s indecent exposure and public urination earlier in the book, crude attempts to get Karen’s attention, serve to measure her final debasement: she may have granted him admission, but this ‘something’ (*The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone*, p. 117) is the lowly vagrant who has already insulted her.

**Border Crossings**

Karen Stone’s final lover is not typical of the Italians portrayed in Williams’s writing. His indigence and apparent independence from organized prostitution mean that any sexual arrangement forged will be likely to satisfy both parties. He will be kept off the streets and Karen can ensure his discretion free from the intervention of an intermediary like the Contessa. The American’s apparently irreversible drift takes her to the gutter, Rome at its basest level, from which she can nurture and elevate her latest Romeo.

Sex as a method of integration, even a route to immigration, is more of a feature of the myriad Hispanic characters in Williams’s plays and stories. Casual, unsuspecting drifters, often seeking illegal admittance to America, offer sex to secure citizenship or avoid detection. We think of Pablo Gonzales in ‘The Mysteries of the Joy Rio’ or Amada in ‘Rubio y Morena’. Even in *The Night of the Iguana*, a play set in the Puerto Barrio of 1940, the Mexicans earn their right to serve the international clientele, and so live at the hotel (a surprising cultural melting-pot given its out-of-the-way location), by sleeping with Maxine, the proprietor. Sex is a currency quickly recognized, exchanged freely but with a concomitant responsibility which might form the basis of something beyond mere transaction.

*The Night of the Iguana* (1961) takes its location, but little of its plot, from a short story Williams had written in 1948. Where the story concentrates on the ‘outing’ of two homosexual writers and the aborted sexual
initiation of its protagonist, Edith Jelkes, the play focuses on the ongoing disintegration of Lawrence T. Shannon, a former priest who has lost his faith and his way. Alcoholism and sexual liaisons, allegedly with minors, have brought his downfall and continue to undermine his position throughout the play. Working on probation as a representative for the downmarket company, Blake Tours, Shannon encounters two familiar Williams types: the sensual proprietor of the Costa Verde, Maxine, and the more spiritual Hannah Jelkes. Sick of Maxine’s rapacity, Shannon is drawn to the spinster who is travelling with her grandfather. Unlike her partial namesake in the story, Hannah is not inclined to be judgemental, yet she finds physical contact difficult and will not permit Shannon to entertain the thought of their travelling together. In part, Shannon (like the iguana of the title) is granted a release from his unenviable situation by Hannah’s generous and humane disposition.

If they can be separated, Williams’s privileged few experience love beyond sex, in effect a connection which takes them across the border of desire. For others, desire is an end in itself, lying beyond repression and both within and outside American borders. The exotic stranger unleashes a drive in others and may be him/herself a highly libidinous subject. The transgression of geographical and emotional/sexual borders, jointly and severally, marks a departure from a stasis of isolation and frustration. Unsurprisingly, given its geographical proximity, the preoccupation with borders arises in connection with Mexico or Mexican characters. Maxine Faulk, for example, greets Shannon with a knowledge of his recent movements: ‘My spies told me that you were back under the border!’ As Maxine, ‘rapaciously lusty’ (p. 229), is in a state of dishabille and followed closely by Pedro, her employee and casual lover, the act of welcoming the defrocked priest back to a foreign country also carries with it a renewed sexual liberation, an expected surrender to the libido (‘under’ what has been contained). Indeed, Maxine’s opening conversation focuses on Shannon’s energy and promiscuity. Her all too knowing ‘How many you laid so far?’ (p. 229) highlights his reputation south of the border but is also a transference of her own sexual energies and longings. As the end of the play makes clear, she wants a partner to assuage her loneliness but also to share and keep pace with the sexual services she intends to provide for her guests.

Like the tethered iguana, Maxine is cut loose (by the death of her sexually inadequate husband, Fred). Yet she is re-imprisoned by a prodigious lust that, atypically, the local Mexicans are unable to satisfy, in part because they are just employees taking too many liberties. To Shannon,
her attitude seems callous, debasing and stultifying (‘I don’t want to rot’, p. 290), but she is both pragmatic and insightful. She understands that he is governed by similar drives that have brought him back to a sort of prelapsarian Eden. He is trying to throw off the matriarchal-Christian prudery (his mother stopped him masturbating so as not to displease God) symbolized by the burdensome tour party of Baptist schoolteachers he is supposed to be leading.

Shannon will finally accept Maxine’s practical philosophy, perhaps because it is not so very far from Hannah Jelkes’s remark that ‘we all end up with something or someone, and if it’s someone instead of just something, we’re lucky, perhaps … unusually lucky’ (p. 319). For him, though, there will be no love and sex will be a duty performed in the knowledge that he will outlive Maxine. He will inherit property rather than the capacity for love, exchange flight for settlement in a foreign country that, as Maxine implies, is more suited to his temperament.

The Mexican setting in The Night of the Iguana does not mean (as it does in Summer and Smoke) a straightforward equation of foreignness with the body. Shannon conducts women through tropical countries where the steamy climate brings about ‘fast decay’ (p. 323), accelerates his seduction of young American girls. Although he departs from the official itinerary to show them ‘the underworlds of all places’ (p. 297), giving them the ‘priceless chance to feel and be touched’ (ibid.), there is no suggestion of desire for the native inhabitants. Shannon is happier abusing his position of trust with an under-age white girl because he can subsequently enforce penitence. This kind of sex is palatable because of the violent denial that can be extracted: ‘Larry, you struck me in the face, and you twisted my arm to make me kneel on the floor and pray with you for forgiveness’ (p. 264). Is sex a guilty pleasure or is guilt the real pleasure? Shannon cannot help himself and, whether he enjoys a ‘voluptuous kind of crucifixion’ (as Hannah Jelkes claims, p. 302) in the hammock or not, pleasure, whether self-gratification or shared with someone else, is linked to some form of retribution. His disparaging remarks to the naturalized Maxine indicate that, for all his forays into lesser-known interiors, he bears the uptight attitude of his culture.

Like many of Williams’s characters, Shannon is making two simultaneous journeys: exploring God’s world, he is running from a disgraced past of lapsed faith, women, alcoholism and lunacy; locked out of his church, his flight is at first legitimized as a tour leader but then scandalized by his lack of professionalism with an itinerant flock. His inward journey to the ‘shadowy side’ (p. 309) is an attempt to exorcize the spooks or blue
devils that haunt his lonely existence, though he does not recognize his own isolation until Hannah points out that the busloads of tourists and the intimate connections serve only to highlight his solitary course. The play’s quiet denouement, its severing of ties, brings rest for the troubled protagonist. There is to be no more foreseeable travel and certainly no violent expulsion or death; Shannon will escape punishment for his sexual transgressions.

Glenn Embrey’s provocative reading of *The Night of the Iguana* unequivocally attributes Shannon’s fallen state to sex and desire. In the grip of a fatal instinct, the defrocked priest is apparently appalled by an activity that is ‘corrosive and obscene’. This explains the distaste he feels for Maxine’s open sexuality and the fear he has that she will devour him. It also accounts for his attraction to a woman, Hannah, who has ‘clearly never accepted or enjoyed her own sexuality’. And yet, if Shannon really is one of Williams’s ‘sensitive idealists’, then he must learn Hannah Jelkes’s tolerance towards sexual peccadilloes. Making a personal choice not to respond to the advances of others, she nevertheless understands human needs and relationships perfectly. Her own experiences may initially ‘add to the suspicion that sex is degrading’, but she is so thoroughly non-judgmental that her own abstinence is not a result of morality or repression. The implication is that sex is only destructive if viewed negatively as some kind of guilty passion.

Embrey’s conclusion that Shannon comes to accept Maxine because she assumes the stoicism of Eastern philosophy seems rather tenuous, and, in fairness, he does find the play’s calm optimism ‘naïve and unjustified’. For her final entrance, the stage directions describe Maxine’s smile as being ‘suggestive of those cool, impersonal, all-comprehending smiles on the carved heads of Egyptian or Oriental deities’ (*The Night of the Iguana*, p. 326). As indicated earlier, Shannon has other motives for resigning himself to life with the widow. A subtle stage direction, which may be difficult to enact and almost impossible to detect for the audience, seems a flimsy transformation.

If *The Night of Iguana* removes American sexual hang-ups to a quiet corner of Mexico without attempting much contrast with local attitudes, the short story ‘Rubio y Morena’ presents desire as mystery and, by extension, the darkness of that mystery leaves desire behind in favour of the light of a fleeting love corrupted by the poverty gap between America and Mexico. This is the story of Kamrowski, a fairly anonymous writer whose unlikely relationship with a Mexican girl, Amada, ignites his own desire and sexual confidence. Gluttoning himself on other women when his
companion begins to pall on him, he discovers that ‘the circus-trapeze’
(‘Rubio y Morena’, Collected Stories, p. 265) of his longing is no substitute
for Amada’s quiet, steady presence. Kamrowski’s realization comes too
late: Amada, ill, leaves him and she is close to death and surrounded by
her family when he tracks her down.

All too often limited in interpretation by the autobiography of
Williams’s relationship with Pancho Rodriguez y Gonzales, ‘Rubio y
Morena’ presents the most intriguing analysis of desire for the racial
other outside of ‘Desire and the Black Masseur’. It is encrypted in the
Spanish title where the characters are reduced to their colourings, a
simple statement of contrast, but, nevertheless, one which is repeatedly trans-
lated by the narrator with a building lyricism. We might be reminded of
Sebastian’s changing tastes in Suddenly Last Summer, his declaration that
he will pursue Nordic blonds having surfeited on the dark-skinned boys,
but the lonely writer of this story does not want to consume Amada’s
otherness or even be swallowed up by her darkness. The narrator is at
great pains to stress Kamrowski’s failure with women at the start of the
story. Emasculated by their sexual advances, he is stirred by their ensu-
ing passivity. In other words, he has to be able to dominate, and it is the
combination of Amada’s unconventional looks – she is both mannish and
equine – and her silent gratitude and cooperation that makes Kamrowski
feel comfortable, that dissolves the ‘nervous block’ (p. 261). Sex is akin to
his writing: the two proceed awkwardly and test Kamrowski’s inadequate
powers of communication. He is ‘not an especially good writer’ (p. 258)
and, therefore, it comes as no surprise that he cannot tell Amada how he
feels; he must speak to her with his body.

The love that he comes to feel for her (Amada literally means beloved)
is not just attributable to loyal companionship and a sexual awakening.
For Kamrowski, Amada’s looks and personality are reducible to one alien
quality: ‘That’s all she was. Something dark. Dark of skin, dark of hair,
dark of eyes. But mystery can be loved as well as knowledge and there
could be little doubt that Kamrowski loved her’ (p. 261).

She is not a person so much as an absence – of light and fairness.
He loves her because he cannot explain her, because she will be forever
a mystery, a presence beyond his grasp. This is noticeably different to
Mr Kroger’s attachment to Pablo Gonzales in ‘The Mysteries of the Joy
Rio’ where the early attraction is for ‘a lustrous dark grace’ (Collected
Stories, p. 99) that proves so bewitching that the Mexican breaks Kroger’s
world of ‘regularities’ (ibid.). Pablo succeeds in becoming Kroger, even
down to his physical proportions; Kamrowski finds ‘male dominance’ (‘Rubio y Morena’, p. 261) through Amada but she remains just a catalyst, repeatedly cast aside as an object of desire. Kamrowski’s ill treatment of Amada is not confined to sexual rejection, though. Just as he cannot desire her, so he cannot stomach her deathbed embrace. At the end of the story, mystery leads to the briefest moment of elucidation and freedom: Kamrowski is offered release, not from the tiresome attentions of Amada, but from ‘the encrusted shell of his ego’ (p. 267). Amada’s sudden violence – the pressure of her gaunt arms and Indian cheekbones – feebly echoes the black masseur’s tremendous force bearing down on Anthony Burns, but her energies only succeed in momentarily disclosing ‘a space of bewildering dark and immensity’ (p. 267). Kamrowski cannot cope with her weakened condition or her ethnic otherness; least of all can he allow himself to be absorbed by her darkness or surrender his isolation and life of self-sufficiency. He glimpses it only to retire in horror.

As he crawls back to a position of safety (effectively his solipsism), we comprehend Kamrowski’s double betrayal: of the woman who has given him companionship and uncomplicated sex; and of his own better instincts which, no sooner alluded to by the narrator, vanish instantly. In the anonymous district of Laredo, a ‘Mexican border town’ (actually in Texas) where the story is partly set and where Kamrowski is detained while his identity and citizenship are checked, the writer is left with nothing but death. The affirmation of sexual desire still matters to Amada in her last moments with Kamrowski, but for him sex and work have been subsumed in guilt. It is evidently regret on a personal level. However, Kamrowski’s actions at the end of the story almost allegorize cultural recriminations. Having failed to interest himself in Amada’s affairs, Kamrowski only realizes that money she has stolen from him has been for her poor relations when the angry women confront him. He has not been able to imagine her life in Mexico or put her prostitution into any economic context. Worse than this is his arrogation of a souvenir, a child’s doll that seems to suggest Amada. He needs space to grieve for the dead woman and the effigy is preferable to the ‘now intolerable mystery’ (p. 268) of Amada’s face. Yet his memento marks him out as a tourist, taking and not giving to the local economy.

The final scene, in which the women of Amada’s family descend on the writer ‘like a wolf pack’ (p. 269), anticipates the band of naked children attacking Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo but also recalls the climax to a short story by D. H. Lawrence, ‘Tickets, Please’. There John Thomas (his
Desiring others

desire and desirability crudely reflected in his name) pays for his indiscreet womanizing, finding himself cornered and beaten by the women he has played off against each other. Kamrowski is not punished for his infidelities, just turned on for his inattention to Amada’s family. He will only offer money to Amada, to pay for his neglect and to re-establish the contractual premise of their relationship. No longer desiring her, he equally cannot let her slip away, realizing the aching absence of love without her.

Whilst ‘Rubio y Morena’ does not openly pretend to look beyond sexual politics, there is a possible subtext in which Mexican immigration and acculturation appear to fail. Ethnic difference, perhaps at its greatest here, exceeds heightened desire and leads to physical surrender. Unusually in Williams’s writing, the exotic other is female (admittedly without any recognizable femininity) and incapable of arousing desire beyond the first meeting. Amada may be loved but she stirs desire elsewhere – vicariously through other lovers or for ownership of the doll, that ‘grotesque plaything’ (p. 269) that seems a crude but adequate (for Kamrowski) representation of her. Her empowering darkness is complemented by the dimly lit rooms in which she has most influence: those of the Texas Star Hotel where Kamrowski first meets her, the residence in a large Southern city where they settle and the dilapidated family home. It almost seems that Kamrowski’s ‘trip through the Mexican interior’ (p. 258) prior to meeting Amada establishes a pattern of destabilizing experiences. Isolation and companionship are alternately light and dark, safe and a source of bewilderment. As Williams’s narrator remarks, ‘light is really the darker side of the sphere’ (p. 267).

According to Mario T. García, the 1930s marked a change in attitude on the part of Mexicans about settlement in America. Up to this point, there was a definite intention to return to the homeland after a period of residence for a people who ‘ethnically, culturally and intellectually … formed an extension of Mexico’. After 1930, though, the accepted philosophy, particularly for those who had been born in America, was a cultural pluralism that still clung strongly to Mexican roots. It is, perhaps, this gradual assimilation that Williams indirectly refers to in ‘The Mysteries of the Joy Rio’. Generally, however, it is the way Hispanic attitudes influence Americans that most occupies Williams’s writing. Sexual relationships and politics command immediate attention, but, more so than with any other ethnic types, libidinal considerations are either eclipsed by other interests or they become the subject of debate. For example, Rosa in Summer and Smoke is an obvious Mexican siren conveniently used to alternately discredit and celebrate the body:
Alma Those Latins all dream in the sun – and indulge their senses.

John Well, it’s yet to be proven that anyone on this earth is crowned with so much glory as the one that uses his senses to get all he can in the way of – satisfaction.⁶⁶

Alma’s sweeping ‘all’ draws attention to Williams’s conscious stereotyping. The criticism of Rosa’s lethargy and fantasizing precedes a vague remark about pleasure: ‘indulge their senses’. John’s retort is also unspecific – ‘the one’ and, after a deliberate pause, ‘satisfaction’. As white Americans, neither fully understands Rosa’s outlook, but the play draws each character to physical pleasure at different points. Rosa, an object of scorn and envy and briefly a figure of temptation, helps to dramatize a discourse about the soul and the body, one which is particularly important for women, as the next chapter will make clear.

Whether heightening physical experiences, liberating the solipsistic self or reshaping an unsustainable asceticism, the foreign body instantly permits desire and places it at the centre of communication and negotiation. Here, as we have seen David Savran and George W. Crandell note, words are replaced by actions. It is as if both parties have effortlessly reached an instinctual understanding or the white American has been drained of the power of speech, reduced to the same voiceless marginality as the ethnic counterpart. This verbal impotence heralds the incursion of the sexual/ethnic other and the disruption of the individual’s previously sterile, static existence. That this is not usually recoverable is itself naturally desirable. Interestingly, though, the desireless state can also be characterized by physical contortion and darkness. As the judge remarks in Williams’s verse play, The Purification (1944), ‘It is the lack of what he desires most keenly / that twists a man out of nature’.⁶⁷ Left to fester, the unfulfilled writhe like those who flinch from the sexual brutality they most crave and create a personal ‘cellar into which blackness’ drips with ‘a slow, corrosive seepage’ (ibid.). Curiously, the darkness of frustrated isolation and emptiness appears at times little different from that which denotes the excitement and mystery of sex with an outsider.

There is little evidence that the levelling brought about by the sexual encounters described in the plays and stories is intended to bring with it political or social harmonization. Prejudice may be an acknowledged social ill; equally, questions of racial discrimination may be overlooked in the increased pleasure of interracial coupling. Williams redraws sexual boundaries pertaining to race and nationality, extracting a principle of pleasure and little beyond it. No invariable pattern of power emerges in private situations to redress the disparities between whites and non-whites.
because, in Williams’s best writing about race, there is an ebb and flow, a constant inversion of assumptions. This, in ‘Rubio y Morena’ and ‘Desire and the Black Masseur’, also amounts to a partial dissolution of ethnicity, to its abstraction as that which both stimulates and perplexes. As Annette Saddik shows with Anthony Burns and Sebastian Venable, those drawn both to the idea of otherness and destruction are themselves unstable, merely the ‘fragmented consequence’ of their desires.⁶⁸