

ETKi	
ETKi: <i>Journal of Literature, Theatre and Culture Studies</i>	ETKi: <i>Edebiyat, Tiyatro ve Kültür İncelemeleri Dergisi</i>
e-ISSN: 2822-3950 Volume 4.2 ★ December 2024	e-ISSN: 2822-3950 Sayı 4.2 ★ Aralık 2024

Interrogating National Sentimentality: Disruptive Performances and Alternative Affects in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract

This article explores the affective politics and identity performance in Tennessee Williams's drama *A Streetcar Named Desire*, especially how the drama represents nonconformist characters' disruptive performances of gender, sexuality and affects to interrogate the national sentimentality of suburban happiness. Since the Second World War, American government has promoted the successful construction of a nuclear family in a suburban home as the essential method to obtain personal happiness, legitimate citizenship, and national belonging. Nevertheless, the suburban happiness has long been a fantasy exclusive to the white, middle-class family featured with conventional gender roles and patriarchal power relations. In *Streetcar*, Williams unsettles the national idealization of domesticated happiness, citizenship and belonging by representing the living predicament of working-class housewives, homeless Southern belle, and gay men, especially their desperate negotiation with the male-dominated structure of gender and power for love, safety, and stability. By staging Stella's femininity of domestication and confinement, Blanche's disruptive performances as Southern belle and femme fatale, and nonconformists' excessiveness in affects and imaginations, *Streetcar* creates an alternative affective sphere of confrontation and negotiation. In this sphere, Williams not merely reveals the affective, corporeal and psychological violence that nonconformists might encounter in a male-dominated, white heteronormative culture, but more importantly, explores the potential of nonconformists in enacting the complexity of human desire and subjectivity as well as in performing alternative modalities of feeling, being and becoming.

Keywords:

National sentimentality, domesticated citizenship, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, affective politics, identity performance.

Article History:

Received: 06.10.2024

Accepted: 10.12.2024

Citation Guide:

Zhang, Nadia. "Interrogating National Sentimentality: Disruptive Performances and Alternative Affects in *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *ETKi: Journal of Literature, Theatre and Culture Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1-17.

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ETKİ:
*Journal of Literature,
Theatre and Culture Studies*

ETKİ:
*Edebiyat, Tiyatro ve Kültür
İncelemeleri Dergisi*

e-ISSN: 2822-3950
Volume 4.2 ★ December 2024

e-ISSN: 2822-3950
Sayı 4.2 ★ Aralık 2024

Ulusal Duygusallığı Sorgulamak: *A Streetcar Named Desire*'da Yıkıcı Performanslar ve Alternatif Duygulanımlar

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Özet

Bu makale Tennessee Williams'ın *A Streetcar Named Desire* (*Arzu Tramvayı*) adlı dramadaki duygusal politikaları ve kimlik performanslarını, özellikle de dramanın banliyö mutluluğunun ulusal duygusallığını sorgulamak için konformist olmayan karakterlerin toplumsal cinsiyet, cinsellik ve duygulanımlara ilişkin yıkıcı performanslarını nasıl temsil ettiğini incelemektedir. İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan bu yana Amerikan hükümeti, banliyödeki bir evde çekirdek bir ailenin başarılı bir şekilde kurulmasını kişisel mutluluk, meşru vatandaşlık ve ulusal aidiyet elde etmenin temel yöntemi olarak teşvik etmiştir. Bununla birlikte, banliyö mutluluğu uzun zamandır geleneksel cinsiyet rolleri ve ataerkil güç ilişkileriyle öne çıkan beyaz, orta sınıf aileye özgü bir fantezi olmuştur. Williams, *Streetcar*'da işçi sınıfı ev kadınlarının, evsiz Güneyli güzel kadınların ve eşcinsel erkeklerin, özellikle de sevgi, güvenlik ve istikrar için erkek egemen toplumsal cinsiyet ve iktidar yapısıyla yaptıkları umutsuz müzakereleri temsil ederek, evcilleştirilmiş mutluluk, vatandaşlık ve aidiyete ilişkin ulusal idealleştirmeyi sarsar. Stella'nın evcilleştirme ve hapsedme kadınlığını, Blanche'ın Güneyli dilber ve femme fatale olarak yıkıcı performanslarını ve uyumsuzların duygulanım ve tahayyüllerindeki aşırılıklarını sahneleyerek, *Streetcar* alternatif bir duygusal yüzleşme ve müzakere alanı yaratır. Williams bu alanda, yalnızca uyumsuzların erkek egemen, beyaz heteronormatif bir kültürde karşılaşabilecekleri duygusal, bedensel ve psikolojik şiddeti ortaya koymakla kalmaz, daha da önemlisi, uyumsuzların insan arzusunun ve öznelliğinin karmaşıklığını canlandırmadaki ve alternatif hissetme, olma ve oluş biçimlerini gerçekleştirmedeki potansiyelini araştırır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Ulusal duygusallık,
evcilleştirilmiş vatandaşlık, *A
Streetcar Named Desire*,
duygusal politika, kimlik
performansı.

Makale Bilgileri:

Geliş : 06.12.2023

Kabul : 10.12.2023

Kaynak Gösterme Rehberi:

Naar Gada, Nadia. "The
Impact of the Turkish
Culture on Kateb Yacine's La
poudre d'intelligence, The
Intelligence Powder (1959)."
*ETKİ: Journal of Literature,
Theatre and Culture Studies*, vol.
4, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1-17.

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) is hailed as one of the most prominent plays in postwar America. In *Streetcar*, Williams first introduces a working-class couple, Stanley and Stella Kowalski, whose domestic life is filled with passion and violence. Stella, the former Southern belle married to Stanley as a working-class housewife, performs the ideal femininity of domestication in postwar America—young, beautiful, gentle, and submissive. Stella's performance of ideal femininity and her domestic life of stability are disrupted by the arrival of her elder sister, Blanche, a middle-aged Southern belle of pride, desire and manipulation. Williams particularly represents the power negotiation between Blanche's nonconformist femininity and Stanley's working-class masculinity. While Blanche represents the pride, gentle, and noble belle culture in the plantation South, Stanley epitomizes the vigor, vulgar, and violent masculine culture in the industrialized South. In depicting the power negotiation, Williams highlights the affective, corporeal, and psychological torments that Blanche goes through as she performs double femininities of Southern belle and femme fatale to pursuit sexual fulfillment, stability, and power in a patriarchal society.

Since Christopher Bigsby's contention of Williams's representation of Blanche's excessive affects and unstable psychological status as Williams's critique of the brutality of modernization, critics has shifted from viewing *Streetcar* as a highly personal play evoking no resonance and Williams as a highly subjective playwright of no social concern (Bigsby 2004). Scholarship has studied *Streetcar* from perspectives of modernity, gender, sexuality and race (Voss 2002; Paller 2005; Palmer and Bray; Saddik 2015), nevertheless, limited research examines *Streetcar* from the perspective of affect study, exploring how *Streetcar*, as a popular theatrical performance, creates an alternative affective sphere for the nonconformists, interrogating the national sentimentality of private citizenship in a conservative society.

In the immediate postwar America, American government endeavored to contain social anxiety and maintain national stability by re-orienting women's desire and passion towards the domestic sphere. Confronting the social anxieties about veteran maladjustment, female sexual emancipation, and communists' penetration, American government called for women's shifting from wartime laborer to domestic wives and mothers, hoping that the nuclear family of conventional gender roles could help rebuild veteran's manhood, contain women's sexuality, and maintain social stability (May 58-88). Women's returning to domestic sphere is thereby propagated by governments and media as their civic duty; the private home is promoted as the exclusive sphere suitable for women and they are supposed to obtain happiness and fulfillment from domesticity.

Laurent Berlant terms the government regulation of women's desires and affects as the national sentimentality of antipolitical politics. As Berlant explains, national sentimentality "makes citizenship into a category of feeling irrelevant to practices of hegemony or sociality in everyday life...it is sentimental because it is a politics that abjures politics, made on behalf of a private life protected from the harsh realities of power" (11). In postwar America, as postwar government attempted to achieve its political purpose through invoking and regulating women's desires and personal choices, women were supposed to obtain citizenship through their positive response to the national calling of returning home, their domestication of love, sexuality and labor, and their performance of conventional gender role and natural attachment to the domestic sphere. A female citizenship of domestication is thereby developed. Such citizenship, as Berlant explains, "renders... [itself] as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere" (5). However, not all women living within domestic sphere are happy and protected, and not all women are able to or willing to be housed in domestic sphere.

In *Streetcar*, Williams interrogates the national sentimentality of domesticated happiness, citizenship and belonging by representing the living predicament of working-class housewives, homeless Southern belle, and gay men, especially their desperate negotiation with the male-dominated structure of gender and power for love, safety, and stability. By staging Stella's femininity of domestication and confinement, Blanche's disruptive performances as Southern belle and femme fatale, and nonconformists' excessiveness in affects and imaginations, *Streetcar* creates an alternative affective sphere of confrontation and negotiation. In this sphere, Williams not merely reveals the affective, corporeal and psychological violence that nonconformists might encounter in the male-dominated, white heteronormative culture, but more importantly, explores the potential of nonconformists in enacting the complexity of human desire and subjectivity as well as in performing alternative modalities of feeling, being and becoming.

2. Stella's Femininity of Domestication and Confinement

In *Streetcar*, Stella and Stanley Kowalski represent one key family composition in postwar America, that is, the demobilized soldier, the gentle housewife, and the (approaching) child. As a newly married young couple dwelling in a working-class community, the Kowalski family is characterized by both poverty and vitality, passion and violence. The familial life delineated in *Streetcar* is to some degree different from the ideal represented in the popular narrative. In the canonical Hollywood depiction of veteran readjustment—*The Best Year of Our Lives* (1946)—the veteran Homer's military masculinity, demonstrated by his violent acts of playing with a gun or breaking the window, terrifies his fiancée Wilma. However, with Wilma's persistent love and tender care, Homer eventually regains his civic manhood. A sweet wedding at the end of the film indicates the happiness and fulfillment of both Wilma and Homer within marriage. In *Streetcar*, Williams

firstly interrogates the national fantasy of domesticated and fulfilled femininity by performing Stella's complex familial life of stability and confinement.

Stella, the housewife of a working-class veteran, Stanley Kowalski, basically undertakes all the domestic labor, such as food preparation, cleaning, and childbearing, and most likely, more childrearing in the future. Such domestic labor, as Lise Vogel notes, contributes to social reproduction in that the caring works "restore the energies of direct producers and enable them to return to work," and the reproduction of the next generation prepares for the renewal of "the labor force by replacing members of the subordinate classes who have died or no longer work" (157-170). Given the significant role that Stella's domestic labor plays in maintaining the operations of the house, by caring for Stanley and contributing to social reproduction, Stella gains legitimate citizenship in postwar America as a housewife and a mother.

However, as the housewife of a working-class veteran, her experience of domesticity differs from the popular myth of women achieving fulfillment through housework, childbearing, and childrearing. For Stella, housework functions more as a given and a necessity than as a source of happiness and fulfillment. Her house sometimes remains "sort of messed up" while she goes out to watch her husband bowl (4). Nevertheless, she cleans the mess when truly necessary, for example, after a meal or poker night. Although Stella is already pregnant when she appears in Scene One, no maternal happiness is staged during or after the pregnancy. In *Streetcar*, Stella's domestic labor, such as cooking, cleaning, childbearing, and childrearing, are not delineated as women's field of fulfillment but rather backgrounded as part of daily life. In her crowded working-class neighborhood, the housekeeping of small rooms and the bearing and raising of a child in a disadvantaged milieu could not sustain the fantasy of women's domesticity as a satisfying and fulfilling career.

With domestic labor as her only type of work, Stella is reduced to a disadvantaged position when conflicts emerge in her marriage because housewives' domestic labor has long been unwaged and undervalued (Vogel 162). She is economically dependent on Stanley and has no choice but to continue living with him despite his domestic violence and rape of her sister Blanche. As Stella doubts whether she is making the right decision to send Blanche to an asylum and continue living with Stanley, Eunice points to housewives' predicament responding, "What else could you do?" (99). Indeed, as a housewife herself, Eunice is in a similar predicament to Stella: economically dependent on her husband, she must also bear his domestic violence and betrayal. Eunice and Steve's chaotic conjugal life featured with betrayal, mockery, quarrel and fight indeed foreshadows Stella and Stanley's middle-aged marriage after their passion is eroded along with time, yet gender inequality and conflict remain.

Apart from performing the female gender roles of being a housekeeper and a reproducer, Stella also undertakes the affective labor in cultivating Stanley's male authority and consoling

Stanley's aggressive masculinity. In the play, Stanley is depicted as a working-class Polish American, who is empowered by his physical strength, sexual prowess, and military honors, yet disadvantaged by his class status, minor-ethnicity, and cultural incompetence. Stanley's marrying of a former upper-class Southern belle functions as an assertion of the attraction of his working-class masculinity. Stella also performs her intense admiration for Stanley's manhood to consolidate Stanley's pride and ascendancy as a husband. Nevertheless, Stanley's role as an authoritative husband is troubled as enhanced by his uncontrollable temper and violence. "Connected with desire and sexuality," Kolin remarks, "are heavy doses of violence, mostly the domestic variety, for which America has been vilified" ("Reflections on/of *A Streetcar Named Desire*" 1).

Stella's love and tolerance play a significant part in comforting Stanley's aggressiveness, inducing softness out of Stanley's strong masculinity. As Kolin notes, "in a number of scenes displaying Stanley's conjugal love," "a kinder, gentler side of Stella's husband" is demonstrated (*Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire* 28). In the scene that Stella leaves Stanley, who hits her violently, to Eunice's house, Stanley "breaks into sobs", "throws back his head like a baying hound," and "bellows his wife's name" downstairs: "Stella! Stella!, sweetheart! Stella!...I want my baby down here. Stella, Stella!" (37). When Stella comes down, Stanley displays his love, passion, and tenderness: "He falls to his knees on the steps and presses his face to her belly...He snatches the screen door open and lifts her off her feet and bears her into the dark flat" (38). In the character of Stanley, various dimensions of masculinities intermingle to constitute the figure of a husband that Stella lives with.

Stella's complex response to Stanley's working-class masculinity indicates the complexity of female desires. She is certainly attracted by the charming side of Stanley's manhood, that of being strong, manly and tender. Yet when confronted with Stanley's aggressiveness, Stella's reactions are much more complicated. She is excited by some of Stanley's violent behaviors. For example, she is actually "sort of—thrilled" by Stanley's "smash[ing] all the light-bulbs with the heel of [her] slipper" on their wedding night (41–42). For Stella, Stanley's violent deed is actually his way of expressing his tremendous excitement about their marriage, instead of a pure manifestation of violence. However, as Stanley's aggressive masculinity extends into domestic violence, Stella demonstrates her fear and indignation at the violence by running away from Stanley to Eunice's home. Nevertheless, she is constantly pulled back to Stanley as he passionately and desperately declares his love and desire for her after the domestic violence.

Stella's fascination with Stanley's passionate love and sex ensues from the fact that she possesses a female desire similar to Stanley's. As Stella says, "I can hardly stand it when he is away for a night" and "when he's away from a week I nearly go wild!" (10). From this statement, it can be seen that Stella has "much the same desires as men" (Reumann 86). Indeed, wives have long been constructed as "good" women whose sexuality, in contrast to the sexually active "whore," is usually portrayed as "passive" and "quiescent" (Reumann 86–67). By delineating Stella's vehement

desire for love and sex in *Streetcar*, Williams challenges the stereotype of good women as sexually passive, as well as the dichotomy between good wives and whores.

Indeed, in postwar America, there is a heated debate about women's sexuality, especially after the publication of Kinsey's report, *Sexual Behaviors in the Human Female* (1953). The study, based on interviews with 5,940 women from all over the US, revealed that "approximately half had experienced premarital coitus and more than ten had engaged in either coitus or petting to orgasm outside of marriage" (Reumann 94). The biggest shock of this report, Reumann notes, is its disputation of the "long held myths about women," who are depicted as "less interested in sex than men" (94). The publication of this report prompted an acknowledgment of women's right to sexual pleasure and a positive view on such pleasure being confined within marriage and being helpful to cement marital relationships. However, there was also unprecedented anxiety about the dangerous force of women's sexuality in destroying family stability and social morality. Women's sexual passion is thereby only acknowledged and encouraged when it is confined within domestic sphere. In this sense, Stella's performance of sexual desire for Stanley consolidates, rather than disrupts her image as an ideal housewife in postwar America.

As a former Southern belle of class and cultural superiority, Stella transforms herself into an idealized housewife in the industrialized South of male superiority. Performing the conventional gender role as a supportive housewife and immanent mother, and the idealized sexual role of passion and domestication, Stella gains herself the protection and citizenship that Blanche, a middle-aged Southern belle of pride, desire and manipulation, could not acquire. Williams, nevertheless, also attends to the ambiguous force of domesticated femininity and sexuality. Stella's unpaid labor and vehement sexuality constitute the fundamental elements of her marriage and her citizenship, yet they simultaneously bind her to the concomitant side of the domestic stability and passionate sex that she enjoys: Stanley's domestic violence.

2. Blanche's Disruptive Performance as Southern Belle and Femme Fatale

In *Streetcar*, Blanche, as a middle-aged, single, jobless Southern belle, performs double femininities—Southern belle and femme fatale. Although Blanche's enactment of a belle image that does not fit with her physical realities is criticized by some scholars as a demonstration of her hypocrisy and her disorder in self-awareness, this chapter argues that Blanche's performance as a Southern belle, as well as a femme fatale functions as a survival strategy in the postwar South of industrialization and patriarchy. Southern belle is idealized by the Southern culture of plantation and aristocracy as a female image epitomizing purity, elegance, and order. As Kathryn Lee Seidel defines, the belle is "the young, unmarried daughter of a landed (and thus aristocratic) family, who lives on a great plantation. She is of marriageable age, ready to be courted" (3). "Protected from reality, championed, and wooed as befits a princess in her realm," the young belle "had few tasks other than to be obedient, to ride, to sew, and perhaps to learn reading and writing" (6). The ideal

belle is further constructed as an epitome of Southern civilization, nobility, and order as the South was “corrupted” by Industrial Revolution with “materialism, greed, poverty and prostitution” (Seidel 4).

In *Streetcar*, Blanche enacts herself as a Southern belle through gestures, clothes, makeup, language, and tastes. “The effect of gender,” Judith Butler suggests, “is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (191). Blanche shows herself in Elysian Fields, a working-class community with incongruous elegance and delicate beauty: “She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district” (3). Blanche’s white dress serves as a demonstration of her purity and innocence, so does her coverage of age through makeup and sexual experience through lies. A sense of nobility and superiority is also delivered by her exquisite language, “If you will excuse me, I’m just about to drop” (5), her disdain for Stella’s shabby room, “Explain this place to me! What are you doing in a place like this” (6), and her exhibition of highbrow cultivation in manner, literature, and music. Although Blanche could no longer be qualified as a belle, concerning the fading of her youth, her loss of the plantation house, Belle Reve, and her ‘indecent’ intimacy with strangers, Blanche nevertheless attempts to sustain the belle illusion with a series of gender performances.

Apart from enacting belle femininity of purity and nobility, Blanche also presents herself as a femme fatale, the erogenous, seductive, and manipulative woman of danger and attraction. The typical image of femme fatale originates from the classical Hollywood noir of 1940s. Women in the film noir are represented as combinations of “mystery and deception,” “manipulative sexual allure and danger,” and “power and agency” (Farrimond 1). Femme fatale’s popularization in the 1940s’ Hollywood as a female icon reflects American mainstream’s fascination with as well as anxiety about women’s sexuality and power unleashed during war times. In *Streetcar*, Blanche enacts certain attributes of femme fatale, such as mystery, seductiveness, and manipulation. For instance, in the poker night, after taking off the blouse in the bedroom, Blanche stands intentionally in the light in her pink silk brassiere and white skirt, exposing her body in a seductive way to Mitch outside.

Femme fatale’s seductiveness and manipulation, indeed, constitute an essential part of Southern belle’s femininity, as long as the sexual desire is curbed. As Seidel remarks, “the belle is asked to exhibit herself as sexually desirable to the appropriate males, yet she must not herself respond sexually. She must be as alluring as the Dark Lady, yet as pure as the White Maiden” (xvi). Therefore, the ideal woman is expected to be an alluring Southern belle, a curbed femme fatale, or eventually a passionate housewife. Nevertheless, what makes such woman an ideal is that not all Southern belle is alluring, femme fatale curbed, and housewife passionate. Women who perform no sexual passion in marriage are stereotyped as cold and rigid; women who seek sexual fulfillment

out of domestic sphere are denigrated as “whore” of immorality and danger. What makes Blanche’s position complicated is that as a woman of desire living out of the ideal heterosexual marriage, she could not acquire sexual satisfaction and material protection in domestic sphere like Stella does.

Blanche displays double femininities so as to gain attraction, satisfaction, and protection from strangers, especially after the death of her young husband, Allen, a closet gay, and her loss of job and income. In *Elysian Field*, desiring to acquire the similar stability that Stella enjoys through marriage, Blanche targets Mitch as a potential gentleman caller and attracts him by enacting, on the one hand, the belle identity of beauty, purity, and cultivation. She only meets Mitch at night and with full makeup so that her age will not be exposed. The highbrow cultures, such as poem and music, are brought up by Blanche as topics of discussion and demonstrations of her cultivation. Blanche also demonstrates her sexual seductiveness by displaying her body and gestures to Mitch in a suggestive way, while at the same time asserting her purity and conventionality in terms of sex. For instance, in Scene 6, Blanche warns Mitch to “behave like a gentleman” after arousing him through a series of acts, such as taking his coat off or asking him to lift her (61-62). Blanche’s demonstration of beauty, cultivation, and seductiveness constitutes the essential elements of women’s attraction towards men—the privileged material possessor and women’s supposed protector. Blanche’s performance as a seductive femme fatale as well as a pure Southern belle is her survival strategy of seeking belonging and protection in a society of gender conformity and male dominance.

However, Blanche’s ambivalent femininities are eventually degraded by Mitch to that of prostitute after he has learnt her former intimacy with strangers. In a society of sexual conservatism, women’s undomesticated sexuality is denigrated as illegitimate and immoral. With sexual purity as the underpinning element of an ideal housewife, the other femininities of a sexual nonconformist, such as the “beauty of the mind and the richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart” that Blanches claims to herself (93,) are denied and overlooked. In performing Blanche’s nuanced femininities, Williams explores the complexity of women’s subjectivity beyond the essentialized dichotomy of ideal housewife and abject prostitute. However, the entrenchment of gender/sexual binarism is also revealed given Mitch’s denigration of Blanche to the position of prostitute.

The double identities of Southern belle and femme fatale are also enacted by Blanche as tools of power negotiation with Stanley and the male authority he represents. Before Blanche’s arrival, Stanley is the king in *Elysian Field*. Nevertheless, Blanche attempts to assert her Southern superiority in Stanley’s territory. A fight between Blanche and Stanley, with Stella as the reward, begins. As Ponte notes, Blanche and Stanley are “natural enemy and ultimate nemesis” (55) given their difference in gender, culture, and class, and their similarities in sexual force and power manipulation.

While Blanche claims her ascendancy over Stanley by performing her cultural and class superiority, Stanley defends the authority of his working-class masculinity by enacting physical strength and violence. For instance, Blanche mocks in front of Stella Stanley's Polish ethnicity as a race of not so "highbrow" (21) and civilized in comparison with the Southern aristocracy culture that she and Stella inherit. While Stanley "pulled" Stella "down off" the aristocracy "columns" (81) to be a working-class housewife (81), Blanche recasts the "colored lights" (125) of Southern gentility back to Stella with her refined clothes, manners, decorations, and her mocking jokes on Stanley. Offended and threatened by the cultural superiority demonstrated by Blanche and Stella, Stanley defends his pride and authority through demonstrating his physical strength and threat. For instance, in Blanche's birthday night, when Blanche and Stella make fun of Stanley's expressions as "vulgar," eating style as pig-like, and fingers as "disgustingly greasy" (77), Stanley "hurls a plate to the floor" to display his anger and force:

Don't ever talk that way to me! 'Pig-Polack-disgusting-vulgar-greasy!'—them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here! What do you two think your sister's too much around here! What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what Huey Long said—'Every Man is a King!' And I am the king around here, so don't forget it! (77)

Stanley's manhood to a large degree builds on his demonstration of physical strength. As Carla McDonough remarks, "Although Stanley calls Blanche's bluff concerning her performance as a chaste [noble] lady...Stanley has his own costumes, particularly the sweaty T-shirt and the gaudy silk pajamas...Blanche cringes from lights and plays up her physical delicacy. Stanley smashes lights (and tables and bottles) and plays up his physical strength" (25). Staging Blanche's and Stanley's power negotiations, Williams points to the fragility of any gendered superiority and the instability of power relation contingent on performances of gender, class, culture, or physical strength.

Confronted with Stanley's working-class masculinity of passionate sexuality, physical strength, and economic stability, Blanche's femininity of seductiveness, cultivation, and gentility fails. Such failure is, on the one hand, epitomized by Blanche's incapacity to convince Stella to leave Stanley after domestic violence. Blanche says to Stella: "You can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella...There's something downright—bestial—about him!...There even something—subhuman—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet!" (47). However, for Stella, Stanley's "bestial" masculinity is still a better choice than the solutions Blanche envisions: an imagined gentle or an unstable job in some remote shop. Blanche's feminine power is further overthrown by Stanley's raping. In raping Blanche, Stanley makes Blanche submit to his physical violence and sexual power, reducing Blanche to a helpless, submissive, and humiliated prey. The power

ascendancy that Blanche once negotiates over Stanley is thereby overthrown. Stanley eventually regains his place as the king and the dominant in Elysian Field. Stanley's destroy of Blanche declares the male-dominated society's intolerance on Blanche's ambivalent, manipulative, and unsettling femininities.

In *Streetcar*, Williams attends to the complexity of women's subjectivity by staging Blanche's performances as a pure belle and a seductive femme fatale, a woman of pride, desire, manipulation, and vulnerability. Williams, as Savran points out, produces "far more nuanced, complex, and sympathetic" female characters than most of his contemporaries do. Not only "an object of the desire of others", Williams's heroine is also an "actively striving" and desiring subject. Moreover, the desire of Williams's heroine is set in a paradoxical status: because of "her position in the narrative structure, she must desire" and "because of various social (i.e., contextual) proscriptions, she is not allowed to act on her desires authoritatively or to articulate them completely" (Savran 124). For Blanche, Williams highlights her predicament, that is, how to find protection, fulfillment, and belonging for her illegitimate female body and desire in a conservative society. Blanche's double performances of gender and sexuality echoes with the surviving strategy of other nonconformists in the 1950s, such as gay and lesbian, who attempt to protect and settle themselves down through performing a "normative" identity, yet at the same time, seek sexual satisfaction and fulfillment through nonconventional lifestyles.

2. Nonconformists' Excessiveness in Affects and Imaginations

In Blanche's performance of double identities for sexual fulfillment, shelter, and power, Blanche undergoes emotional instability, especially when her enacted image of Southern belle is jeopardized by her aging body and her unruly sexual desire. Blanche slides into the fantasy of gentleman approaching and noble selfhood when her last hope of rest through marriage is destroyed by Stanley's exposure of her sexual encounters and his reducing of Blanche's identity to that of prostitute through rape and insult. As Brenda A. Murphy notes, the play is "an eloquent visualization of the progress of Blanche DuBois's mind, from 'hysteria' and 'neurasthenia' to psychosis" (180). Blanche's emotional and psychological breakdown tend to be read by scholars as resulting from Blanche's inability to adapt her belle subjectivity of cultivation and gentility to accommodate a bestial modern Southern. In representing Blanche's madness, Williams uncovers the cruelty of both an idealized past and an industrialized present. As Bigsby notes, "Williams acknowledges the impossibility of recovering the past. Indeed he accepts the equivocal nature of that past, stained, as it is, by cruelty and corruption. But the future is worse: power without charity, passion without tenderness" (*Modern American Drama* 32). Williams's depiction of Blanche's emotional instability, this chapter argues, also attends to the affective structure of nonconformity in postwar America, and Blanche's madness is a manifestation of her desperate cry for love, respect, and security.

The Elysian Field's working-class atmosphere of vulgarity and vitality is an interrogation of white-middle gentility and stability. In *Streetcar*, Williams presents Elysian Field as a community featured with poverty and violence, yet at the same time, energy and euphoria. Off work, Stanley carries a "red-stained package" (10) of meat and bellows to his young, gentle wife, Stella to catch it. Stella "laughs breathlessly" (10) after catching the meat in surprise and then goes happily to watch these working-class men's after-hours entertainment: bowling. Though inhabiting in a shabby house, Stanley and Stella show enormous passion for life. The chaos and dangers of a working-class community are also revealed by Williams through scenes of rapping, attacking, and stealing. In the night Stanley humiliates Blanche, Elysian Field is described as "filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle" (95). In the sidewalk of Stanley's house, "A prostitute has rolled a drunkard. He pursues her along with walk, overtakes her, and there is a struggle...Some moments later the NEGRO WOMEN appears around the corner with a sequined bag which the prostitute had dropped on the walk" (95). In portraying these scenes of disorder, Williams attends to affective, corporeal, and material insecurity that women might encounter in a working-class community.

Blanche, as a nonconformist in gender and sexuality, also goes through emotional instability. For many of those who are unable to conform to the idealized American way of life, "beneath their desire to assimilate loomed an uneasiness, a sense of possibility mixed with fear" (Bérubé 257). Blanche's affective performance of nervousness, fear, and shame illuminate the gender/sexual nonconformists' embodiment of and negotiation with the national anxiety about the deviant. Blanche is physically sickened in her first conversation with Stanley, as Stanley cross-examines her past with a series of questions: "Where are you from, Blanche?" "You're a teacher, aren't you?" "You were married once, weren't you?" (14-15). These questions are seemingly casual, yet extremely sensitive for Blanche given their answers' association with her sexual experiences: Blanche loses her job due to her intimacy with a student; she depends on her intimacy with strangers for a living in Laurel; and her marriage breaks down due to her exposure of her husband's homosexuality and his suicide. Stanley's questioning, as William Kleb suggests, is "quiet, casual, but increasingly charged interrogation that ends minutes later with "Blanche about to be 'sick,' forced to speak of the central, agonizing event of her past, the death of her boy-husband Allan Grey" (30).

The death of Allan reminds Blanche the shame and fear that sexual nonconformists—homosexual men and women of excessive desire for instance—might undergo in a conservative society. Blanche indeed shares similar position with Allan and echoes with his predicament given that they are both rejected by mainstream society because of their nonconventional sexual desire. Therefore, Blanche's sickness is linked with the fear of her own exposure as a "sexual pervert" and the violence that she might thereby encounter. *Streetcar*, as David A. Richard notes: "The Sodomy Cases: *Bowers v.* recalls, "touches sympathetically on gay issues and brilliantly showed, in Blanche DuBois, the plight of a highly sexual straight woman whose life challenged dominant stereotypes of women's sexuality in the same way the lives of gay men challenged stereotypes of male

sexuality” (18-19). In presenting Blanche’s nervousness, fear and sickness on stage, Williams makes visible nonconformists’ emotional sufferings, thereby disrupting the national ideal of middle-class happiness.

Unlike Allan who internalizes the mainstream’s denigration of his homosexuality, Blanche struggles to be strong, living with and interrogating the social stigmatization of nonconventional gender and sexuality. As Blanche asserts to Stanley, “I hurt him the way that you would like to hurt me, but you can’t! I’m not young and vulnerable any more” (23). In Scene 9, Stanley reveals to Stella Blanche’s “hypocrisy” in terms of her purity and nobility. According to the investigation of Stanley’s supply-man, Blanche is indeed a libidinous and dangerous woman who is expelled out of the school and the Laurel town due to her seduction of a seventeen-year-old student and other strangers as her victim. Blanche’s excessive sexuality is further othered by Stanley as that of lesbians, given that lesbians has long been stereotyped as sexually aggressive and seductive to young boys. Stanley’s investigation and denigration of Blanche’s excessive sexuality predicate the 1950s’ witch hunt of sexual nonconformists as abnormal, deviant, and dangerous.

Confronting Stanley’s accusations, Blanche proclaims the phoniness of the world and the sincerity of her desires and affects. The world, as suggested in Blanche’s song, “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” is “a Barnum and Baily world. Just as phony as it can be—But it wouldn’t be make-believe if you believed in me” (71). When Mitch interrogates Blanche as a liar concerning her age, purity, and sexual orientation, Blanche interprets her gender/sexual performance as a re-presentation of social expectations and ideals: “I don’t tell the truth. I tell what *ought to be* truth” (86). Here Blanche points out the fakeness of an ideal female image and her compulsory enactment of an illusive identity so as to seek social belongings. Simultaneously, Blanche asserts the sincerity of her heart in desiring Mitch as a potential protector and her yearning for security and stability. As she puts it, “You said you needed somebody. Well, I needed somebody, too. I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle—a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in!” (88). Through Blanche’s speech of a phony world and an authentic desire, Williams exposes the mainstream’s construction of identity as idealized and acknowledges non-conformists’ desire for belonging and protection behind their performance of double identity.

Nevertheless, Blanche’s confession of her hope and anxiety as a single, homeless, and penniless woman is prone to be pathologized as mad and morbid. Blanche once explains to Stella why she has to put on the color of seductiveness and softness so as to “pay for one night’s shelter” (53). “People don’t see you...*men* don’t...don’t even admit your existence,” Blanche says, “unless they are making love to you. And you’ve got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you’ve going to have someone’s protection” (53). In this speech, Blanche points out male-dominated society’s sexualization of women’s existence and the subjugated position women experience in a society where their existence is supposed to depend on men’s support and protection. Nevertheless, Blanche’s anxiety is interpreted by Stella as demonstration of her

“morbid” condition and thereby should be overlooked (53). As Stella puts it: “I don’t listen to you when you are being morbid!” (53). Women’s emotional performance, as Yannick Ripa notes, tends to be regarded as “pathological phenomena,” instead of as embodiment of their living anxieties and predicaments (132). In *Streetcar*, Williams interrogates the mainstream’s pathologization of women’s affects by representing the interplay of Blanche’s nervousness, fear and anxiety with the plight she faces as a woman with unconventional desires.

Blanche’s fabrication of a rich, gentleman Shep Huntleigh indicates her aspiration for being wanted, safe, and financially secure. After witnessing Stanley’s domestic violence towards Stella, Blanche realizes that she is also threatened by Stanley’s physical and sexual brutality and must leave for safety. As she asserts to Stella: “how could I stay here with him, after last night, with just those curtains between us?...the only way to live with such a man is to—go to bed with him! And that’s your job—not mine” (45). Nevertheless, Blanche has no place to go and the fabricated Shep gives her a sense of narcotic hope to withstand the current feeling of insecurity. Blanche thus sticks to the illusion although she realizes the fictionality of Shep. As Blanche says to herself, “I’ve got to get hold of bromo!” (45). In *Streetcar*, Williams does not link Blanche’s self-aware fantasy with women’s insanity. Instead, through performing Blanche’s creation of a fictional rescuer as source of hope, Williams addresses the bitterness of Blanche who has no immediate capacity to change her precarious situation.

Blanche, however, lost her sanity as her complex femininities are reduced by Stanley, who rapes her and reduces her status similar to that of a prostitute. Confronted with physical violence and spiritual humiliation, Blanche adopts identify imagination—her envision of herself as an elegant belle rescued by a gentleman instead of a degraded woman taken away by a doctor from asylum—as a strategy to resist mainstream society’s denigration of female desire, although she could not escape the tragedy of being confined as a mad woman. In *Streetcar*, both Blanche and Stanley transgress the normative sexual role, however, it is Blanche who is expelled out of society into asylum as a dangerous and mad woman. As Jacqueline O’Connor analyzes, *Streetcar* presents the situation “in which the structures of power deal inconsistently with transgression, providing protection for certain types of sexual criminals while exposing other kinds to criminal action” (43). In contrasting Blanche’s madness and confinement to Stanley’s violence and freedom, Williams addresses the inequality of gendered power in a male-dominated society and the affective, spiritual, and material plight that women, especially those diverting from gender/sexual norms, might go through due to their excessive desires, unstable emotions, and dependency status.

2. Conclusion

In *Streetcar*, Williams attends to drama’s potential in interrogating the affective politics of domesticated citizenship and suburban happiness in postwar America. *Streetcar*’s representation of the ambiguous affects that Stella embodies as a dependent housewife, such as passion, love, anger

and resignation, demonstrates the complexity of domestic sphere. It is not merely a sphere of love and happiness, but could also be a place of violence and oppression if the domestic and affective labor of housewives is neglected or undervalued in comparison to the social and economic labor that is often undertaken by men. *Streetcar* also explores the affective potential of nonconformists in disrupting the hegemonic discourse of feeling and enacting, but such disruption is not necessarily a heroic resistance, but more likely a compelled negotiation for survival. Blanche yearns for the love, passion, and stability that Stella enjoys as a housewife, nevertheless, her identity as a decaying, middle-aged widow disqualified herself as an ideal housewife. Besides, Blanche rejects to compromise with the inequality, violence and insult that Stella stands in a male-dominated family. Blanche's performances as Southern belle or femme fatale to trap and manipulate gentlemen callers function as her strategy of survival with power and control in a patriarchal society. In representing Blanche's nonconformist desires and gender performances, *Streetcar* unsettles the national homogenization of women as submissive and family-oriented housewives and highlights women's alternative desire and subjectivity in terms of gender, sexuality, and power relations. *Streetcar* also uncovers the affective, corporeal, and psychological sufferings that nonconformists like Blanche might undergoes as they negotiate with the national sentimentality of domesticated citizenship for survival, respect and power. By *Streetcar*, Williams creates an alternative affective sphere of confrontation and negotiation, within which alternative performances of gender, sexuality and affect can be recognized, if not legitimized, within a US postwar culture. The affective lens of power manipulation and gender negotiation is manifested in the alternative performances to uncover the elusive mechanism of gender oppression and the embodied capacity of gender interruption.

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