Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Restoring Tennessee Williams’s Production of the 1950s Primal Scene

Donald E. Pease

Williams understands lack in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, neither as a barrier to political recognition nor as the means of its deconstruction, but as a term that is inherent in definitions of masculinity.

—Kevin Arnold, “Masculinity and Fantasy in Post-war American Literature”

From its founding, psychoanalysis has appropriated terminology and subject matter from drama. Sigmund Freud obsessively borrowed characters, scenes, lines, and tropes from Hamlet, Oedipus, Ion, Antigone, Othello, and King Lear and recast them as striking anticipations of his most elusive theoretical scenarios. Freud also contributed dramatis personae, attitudes, and speech acts—ego-ideal, narcissism, defensive reaction, repression transference—to the dramatist’s craft. Examples abound of dramatists who have incorporated sundry psychoanalytic processes within their productions. In his case study of the character he assigned the stage name “Wolf Man,” Freud invented the term primal scene to explain an event
that brought about a transformation in his patient’s worldly orientation. ¹ Although Freud constructed his study of the Wolf Man as a speculative drama, the dramaturgical value of the primal scene in which he set the protagonist’s anagnorisis has not yet been satisfactorily ascertained.

In what follows, I hope to continue the productive exchanges between the domains of drama and psychoanalysis by removing the primal scene from its embeddedness within psychoanalytic theory and resituating it within a contemporary drama, Tennessee Williams’s Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, in which the playwright put the primal scene to the work of countering the dramaturgy of the Cold War state. Before I can do so, however, I need to explain the usages to which Freud put the primal scene in his dramatic rendering of the Wolf Man.

**The Primal Scene: What the Wolf Man Saw**

“In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up.”

Sergei Konstantinovitch Pankejeff, “the Wolf Man,” was born into an aristocratic family with estates in Odessa and St. Petersburg. After the 1905 Russian Revolution, he spent considerable time studying abroad. Twenty-three years old when he first arrived at Freud’s consulting room in Vienna, Pankejeff’s “nervous problems” included an enervating depression that “felt like a veil cutting him off from the world.”² Freud treated the Wolf Man from February 1910 to July 1914, at the outset of World War I, and on a second occasion from November 1919 until February 1920.

When his physician sent him to Freud in 1910, Pankejeff had already experienced the world-changing historical forces destined to result in the vanishing of his social class. After leaving Odessa in the midst of the revolution of 1905, Pankejeff felt uprooted from his ancestral home. In 1906, his sister Anne committed suicide. After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution dissevered the Russian aristocracy into which he was born from the historical continuum, Pankejeff took up the stateless condition Freud called Wolf Man.

Freud described his treatment of the Wolf Man in “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” as centering on a lucid dream Pankejeff had as a four-year-old:

2. Freud, An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, 7.
Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dogs, for they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up.3

After a series of consultations, Freud diagnosed the dream as a screen memory for the “primal scene”—Pankejeff’s parents engaged in coitus a tergo—that the Wolf Man ostensibly witnessed when he was eighteen months old. In “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” Freud defined the significance of Wolf Man’s primal scene as an encounter between an infant whose psychosomatic structures were situated predominantly at the level of its instinctual needs and the enigmatic injunctions emanating from his parents’ spectacularly animated sexual performance. Freud represented the event as having effected a decisive transfiguration of the Wolf Man’s instinctual needs into a human subject’s desires; it did so by forcibly interrupting the instinctual processes of a biological life form (zoe) and inserting it within an altogether different biosocial assemblage (bios). Freud’s effort to re-present the effect of this decisive rupture on the Wolf Man’s psyche inspired the construction of the primal scene.4

A blend of originariness and repetition, the primal scene was not something given in advance; it was something that Freud and his analysand put together collaboratively. Freud described the work of imaginative construction through which they accomplished this re-presentation a primal fantasy. According to Freud, the primal fantasy he constructed in collusion with the Wolf Man did not depict an already existing scenario. The primal fantasy produced a primal scene so as to mediate the nonsymbolizable force that had effected a complete shift in Wolf Man’s orientation. Since the biological creature who encountered this disruptive force lacked the requisite representations to integrate it, the primal fantasy might be described

4. According to Freud, the chief value in the collaborative construction of the primal scene inheres in its therapeutic impact rather than its faithful adherence to an actual empirical event. Freud insists that the construction, which is neither true nor false, be assessed in terms of the extent to which it leads to an alteration in Pankejeff’s symptoms. “Because the construction has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. It is a construction of analysis, but it is no less necessary on that account” (An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, 85).
as having delivered this fateful event from the Wolf Man’s subjective history into existence. Because it was constitutively repressed, the primal scene required such fantasy work to become imaginable.

Both object and medium of analysis, the primal scene supplied the psychic terrain interconnecting the Wolf Man’s psychic fantasies, sexuality, and desire to his subjective identity. Freud constructed the primal fantasy to act upon the Real rupture in Wolf Man’s psychotopography so as to effect a change in Wolf Man’s orientation within the symbolic order. It was precisely the role of primal fantasy to accomplish this work: primal fantasy discerned the coordinates of the subject’s desire, specified its object, and located the position the subject assumed in it.

A “fantasy” in one sense and the hard kernel of the Wolf Man’s psychic reality in another, the primal scene performed the double function of re-presenting the object cause of the Wolf Man’s desire and of structuring the figurative setting through which it became desirable. The coitus a tergo that Freud proposed the Wolf Man witnessed as an eighteen-month-old infant served as the “referent” for the fantasy.5 To explain how Wolf Infant translated this shockingly obscene event into a determinable subjective desire, subsequent analysts have assigned it an interior monologue: “Why are you telling me this? . . . What do you want from me?”6

Although this description of its workings makes the primal scene seem possessed of historical factuality, Freud’s construction of the Wolf Man’s primal scene, in fact, took place in between a motivated interpretation and speculative free play. An uncanny temporality haunted Freud’s construction of the primal scene. The time in which the scene “took place” had seemingly already occurred, yet it required the reconstructive powers of the subject of desire it subsequently brought into being before it could be recalled as having taken place. Because it happened in a past that exceeded the analysand’s present capacity to re-present, the primal scene implied the existence of a second event. The significance of the second event—the Wolf Man’s dream of the seven white wolves—resided in its power to evoke the first event retroactively by means of association, as what will have happened to Wolf Man as an eighteen-month-old infant.

Freud’s explanation of the libidinal drives that overtook Wolf Man

before he became a subject capable of sexual desire anticipated his model of “deferred action” at work in trauma. Like a trauma, the mode of eventuation of the Wolf Man’s primal scene obeyed the temporal logic of nachträglichkeit (deferred action) that makes things from the past appear “caused” by a present event. Because it materialized a transformative biopsychological event that radically shifted the ground of the Wolf Man’s experience, the primal scene could only be reconstructed after the Wolf Man took up the position of a desiring subject as a four-year-old who dreamed of the wolves straddling the walnut tree outside his bedroom window. The primal fantasy at once produced and was produced by the re-presentation that took place as the fantasy’s referent (parental coitus a tergo). Yet it was the second event (the Wolf Man’s dream) that turned the activity taking place on the primal scene into its referent. This referent was at once the starting point, yet that which was retroactively produced by the dream.

In light of these descriptions of its workings, the Wolf Man’s primal scene might be construed as a psychoanalytic pièce de théâtre whose value Freud appraised in terms of the extent to which it led to a change in Wolf Man’s psychic disposition. The Wolf Man may have lost his mandated position in the social order of postrevolutionary Russia, but Freud’s tethering him to the norms, rules, and concepts of the psychoanalytic field assigned him prominence in an alternative symbolic order. Following the publication of “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” in 1918, the Wolf Man was hailed as the protagonist of what was perhaps Freud’s most impressive theoretical performance. Freud’s invention of concepts for thinking what had happened to the Wolf Man as an infant turned the case into the mise-en-scène for the presentation of key figures (id, ego, superego, ego-ideal, ideal ego, primary repression, infantile sexuality, and primary narcissism) and the setting, as well, for the primal psychodramatic fantasies concerning the origin of the subject (Oedipus complex), the origin and sudden upsurge of sexuality (seduction fantasies), and the origin of the difference between the sexes (castration fantasies) foundational to the field of psychoanalysis. The case study acquired its status as a benchmark text through the dramatis personae, scenes, acts, actions, and agencies Freud’s heirs and rivals would subsequently ascribe to it.7

7. The significance of Freud’s theoretical scenario was not restricted to the field of psychoanalysis. Peter Brooks, Ned Lukacher, Stanley Fish, and numerous scholars in the literary humanities have found the primal scene a generative concept for the study of narrative, in particular. See Peter Brooks, “Fictions of the Wolfman,” Diacritics 9, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 75–76; Ned Lukacher, Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis

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Freud’s display of theatrical flourishes in the presentation of the case enhanced its dramatic impact. Rather than an orderly argument in thrall of epistemological constraints, the itinerary of Freud’s analysis obeyed the elliptical logic of an improvisational performance marked by self-dramatizing changes of focus and direction, detours, hesitations, and second thoughts. These seeming uncertainties inspired revisionists among Freud’s heirs and rivals to turn Wolf Man into the paradigmatic drama for their formulation of revisions or their staging of alternatives to Freud’s theorems. Psychoanalytic discourse has undergone historic changes through analysts’ differing accounts of the Wolf Man’s primal scene as well as their disparate primal fantasies of what took place upon it.

Adding ever-broadening ideological, linguistic, and ontological interpretive frames of analysis, recent commentators have suggested events more topsy-turvy than coitus a tergo as possible referents for the Wolf Man’s primal scene. Whereas Freud diagnosed the origins of Pankejeff’s neurosis in a childhood trauma, Muriel Gardiner, Karin Obholzer, and Sergei Pankejeff himself have characterized Freud’s diagnosis as a defensive reaction to uncontrollable historical events.

Wolf Man was the pet name Freud assigned the limit figure who emerged at the site where powerful biopolitical forces violently discontinued Pankejeff’s identification with a whole way of life. This historical

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12. Here and throughout, I am using the term *biopolitical* in the Foucauldian sense to
disconjunction also materialized a palpable break in the way the Russian people organized the relationship between their biopsychic processes and the political order. Freud recognized how the Wolf Man embodied incommensurate structures of historical identification, but his theoretical constructions cordoned off Wolf Man’s outer history from the inner story of infantile neurosis.\(^\text{13}\)

In “Freud, the Wolf Man and the Encrypted Dynamism of Revolutionary History,”\(^\text{14}\) Thomas Goodwin has summarized revisionist understandings of the case that bring in the historical processes Freud excluded. Rather than accepting Freud’s account of Wolf Man’s primal scene, Goodwin criticized Freud for reducing his patient’s lived experience of cataclysmic world historical forces to the dimensions of an obscene domestic spectacle. Describing the Wolf Man’s neuroses—latent homosexuality, identification with the feminine position, castration anxiety—as psychosomatic responses to the loss of his aristocratic lineage, Goodwin interpreted Pankejeff’s dream of wolves outside his bedroom window as a recoding of the traumatic historical events he lived through. Goodwin thereby resituated Wolf Man’s primal scene within the precincts of the zone of emergency that materialized when the Russian state, in forcibly separating Pankejeff from a survivable form of social life, behaved like a wolf to man.

Goodwin agreed with Freud’s fundamental claim that Pankejeff underwent a radical change in his biopolitical status. But Goodwin disagreed with Freud’s interpretation of the consequences of this transformation. Freud constructed the primal scene to represent the psychosomatic forces that changed Pankejeff from a biological creature who was immersed in instinctual processes into a human subject of desire. Goodwin positioned the primal scene within a setting that rendered imaginable the

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\(^{13}\) For an account of the rationale for this splitting, see Peter Brooks, “Fictions of the Wolf Man: Freud and Narrative Understanding,” in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 264–66.

force through which the Russian state disinterpellated Pankejeff from his legally mandated identity as a member of the Russian aristocracy and left him untethered to any secure mode of being other than the outcast life form Freud renamed the Wolf Man.

Goodwin's interpretation shifted the locus for Pankejeff's traumatic encounter from his parent's bedroom to the zone of the emergency state. Eric Santner has offered a Freudian justification for this change of venue by arguing that the familial scenario featured in Freud's primal scene “is only one rather concentrated instance of a much more general dynamic” that brought Pankejeff into a zone of psychic imperativity that resembled Goodwin's emergency-state setting.¹⁵ In Santner’s estimation, Freud's primal scene comprised a highly charged setting for his patient's traumatic encounter with the grammar of injunctions and imperative speech acts emanating from the revolutionary Russian state's biojuridical apparatus. Both Freud's and Goodwin's accounts of the primal scene engaged the disruptive forces that utterly changed Russia's rules and norms.

Freud named the psychic representative of the imperative dimension in which Pankejeff encountered the state's violent injunctions the *superego*. But in Santner’s view, the Freudian superego did not merely accompany state law. As its dangerous supplement, the superego supplied the public face of the law with an implacable authority. After shrewdly observing that, like the superego's mandates, the state’s sovereign exceptions did not represent the “rule of law” but materialized a “set of impossible demands holding the place of a void, of the missing foundations of such rule,” Santner designated the state's sovereign power to declare itself an exception to the rule of law the Real referent of the punitive superego.¹⁶

With Santner’s observation as warrant, I want to claim the site at which the social order underwent a violent transposition as crucial to an understanding of the dramaturgical significance of Freud's primal scene. Freud invented the primal scene as the psychic terrain upon which his patient encountered the disruptive forces that effected a decisive change in the order of things. The primal scene took place at the site where one structural state performative was undergoing discontinuation and another was emerging. But the primal scene did not name a place within the social


order; it located the rift produced through the violent desymbolization taking place within the order of things. The primal scene did not take place as an event within the newly forged social order; the primal scene engaged the forces that brought it about. Freud constructed the primal fantasy to re-present this structural performative as if it were a dramatic intrapsychic event. Through its restaging of this ontological rupture, Freud's primal scene fantasy suspended the efficacy of the state’s performative and introduced an alternative orientation.

Santner redescribed the primal scene as an individual’s encounter with the state of exception whose structural performatives effected these changes. But he did not explain how the state of exception harnessed its unruly forces to a state fantasy that effected a collective change in psychic orientation. Although she does not cite Freud’s terminology, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler has constructed a primal scene fantasy that renders imaginable the psychic topography upon which the state’s regulatory processes implicated the psyche in the production of a foundational state fantasy that inaugurated a transformation in the normative order.17 According to Butler, what gets communicated at the site where the state inaugurates a new order is imperative in the sense that it inculcates a set of norms; this inaugural site is performative in the sense that it is part of the process whereby those norms get taken up.

Butler argues that social normativity is not thinkable apart from the state fantasy that is the instrument and source of its social efficacy, and that individuals normalize the state’s fantasy through the active complicity of their psychic processes. The social norms that work on a subject to produce its desires and restrict its behavior are not simply imposed and internalized in a given form; these norms are sustained by the idealizations furnished by fantasy. No norm can operate on a subject without the incitement of fantasmatic attachments that are at once psychic and social.

Santner and Butler make evident the dramaturgical significance of the fantasmatic events affecting Wolf Man’s psychopolitical orientation by highlighting their relationship to the state of exception. And Freud devised a primal fantasy to change the scene within which the Wolf Man came to terms with this hiatus. Freud imagined the primal scene as what accomplished the analysand’s separation from one environment and his attachment to another. The Wolf Man might also be understood to name the null

position an individual inhabits after being forcibly dissociated from one set of interiorized networks of self-regulation before the internalization of an alternative. Included as what an emerging order must exclude in order to differentiate itself from the prior order of things, Wolf Man names the extraneous body through which the individual’s desubjectification takes place.

Freud devised the primal scene as a theoretical scenario in which to explore the psychosomatic site at which the Wolf Man experienced the structural shift that discontinued his social class. The primal scene specifically revealed the way in which Wolf Man’s consciousness of this structural shift got condensed and displaced. Although they seem worlds apart, the Russian-Revolution setting of the Wolf Man’s case and the Cold War context of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* effected comparably traumatic changes in the social symbolic order. Freud located the Wolf Man’s primal scene at the matrix of a structural shift that resulted in the elimination of the aristocracy from postrevolutionary Russia. Williams situated *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* at the site of the Cold War state’s violent replacement of New Deal liberalism with Cold War anti-Communism. The tactics the Bolsheviks deployed to remove aristocrats from the Russian Communist state differed significantly from the strategies Cold War liberals deployed in excluding Communists from the American political order. But Russian Bolsheviks and Cold War anti-Communists both used the accusation of homosexuality in their campaigns against the members of these targeted constituencies. Becoming homosexual was one of the psychic fantasies that Freud ascribed to Wolf Man in response to Russian Communism’s violent exclusion of his aristocratic lineage; the Cold War state justified its violent exclusion of Communists from the political order by rendering becoming Communist virtually indistinguishable from becoming homosexual.

The United States’ epochal shift to the Cold War was publicly acted out rather than collectively deliberated over and reflected upon. The terms

18. Dan Healey records the transformation in the Bolsheviks’ attitude toward homosexuality, and carefully lays out the social and juridical mechanisms that enabled them to remove prerevolutionary antihomosexual laws early in the revolution. But he also indicates the usage to which “homosexualization” was put in the castigation and subsequent elimination of the Russian aristocracy. See *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24–49.

of the Cold War settlement were brought into spectacular theatrical display through well-publicized government raids and police round-ups and televised as show trials at the House Un-American Activities Committee and the McCarthy Hearings. Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* provided the setting for exploring heretofore unrepresented aspects of this conjunctural event. In the remarks that follow, I intend to argue that in the published version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams constructed a primal scene as the site upon which he engaged the foundational state fantasy that naturalized this structural transposition.

Williams created *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to change the audience’s relationship to the state’s foundational fantasy. He specifically attempted to reconfigure the structure of the state fantasy by isolating the fantasmatic object at its core. By intervening in the state fantasy that circulated around homophobia, Williams sought to act on the Real of the state fantasy that undergirded the dominant symbolic order, so as to change the primal fantasmatic scenario that organized and regulated 1950s US culture.

This discussion is organized around three claims: (1) that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* suspended the performative efficacy of the foundational state fantasy at the site where an exemplary Cold War male experienced the crisis of reproduction of the norms and rules of 1950s culture; (2) that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* brought the audience face-to-face with this ontological shift so as to change their relationship to the foundational fantasy of the Cold War state; and (3) that in rendering the impossibly contradictory social logic of this 1950s state fantasy imaginable, Williams’s play staged events and transactions that subjected the existing social order to conditions of creative disruption and revision. I have divided the observations that follow into sections organized around the key elements—the Cold War state fantasy, the site of the structural shift, and the primal scene—informing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*’s dramatic action.

**Arthur Schlesinger, Billy Graham, Joseph McCarthy:**

**The 1950s Dramaturgy of the Cold War State**

“If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker.”

After World War II, the United States entered into a superpower rivalry with the Soviet Union that led to the reorganization of the world economic system. This global restructuring required changing the domestic rules and norms that fostered the New Deal’s alliance between capital
and labor that had resulted in favorable trade union agreements as well as the expansion of social welfare, unemployment, and economic security networks. To accomplish this change, the United States government installed a permanent state of exception that distinguished a pre–Cold War political order, in which Communism was included as one of the legitimate ideological positions a United States citizen could take up in expressing a political standpoint, and a post–Cold War political order, whose coherence depended on the exclusion of Communists. Opposition to Communism began much earlier in the twentieth century.20

The Cold War state projected the antagonism between labor and capital onto world Communism externally. But the state architects of the Cold War settlement mystified the antagonism between capital and labor within the domestic sphere by displacing its cause onto the complex figure of the “Communist-homosexual.”21 The Cold War state’s effort to disavow the class antagonism internal to the US political economy involved the construction of this psychopolitical hybrid as the fantasmatic object that threatened the entire social order.

The characterization of the homosocial bonds between laborers and liberal progressive elites as homosexual elevated homophobia into a regulatory ideal. The Communist-homosexual was thereafter made to stand in for the external threat internal to the social order. In being made to stand as a fetishistic denial of the class antagonism, the conflation of Communists and homosexuals prevented the possibility of an alliance between classes that would not always already be castigated as homosexual.

The Cold War state of exception was able to reach across a broad scale of social belonging because it was accompanied by a fantasy that extended into the most intimate recesses of its subjects’ psyches. The state fantasy reworked many of the psychological processes from the Wolf Man’s psychosomatic disorder—fear of castration, identification with women, obsession with seduction, adoption of a “passive” homosexual dis-

20. Numerous historians have indicated the role anti-Communism played in the pre-war consensus formation, one that included in the prewar period a strong dose of anti-Communism. See, for example, Wendy Wall’s Inventing the American Way: The Politics of Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). But there is an ontological difference between a social order in which Communism was included as a legal partisan stance and a symbolic system whose coherence depended on the exclusion of Communism.

position—into core elements of this foundational state fantasy. The fantasy mystified the antagonism between capital and labor by displacing its external cause onto Russian Communists. Homosexuals were made to personify the antagonism within the domestic order.

Progressive liberal elites from the New Deal era were the real target of the state’s fantasy. The Communist-homosexual was introduced to break down the lines of affiliation interconnecting New Deal liberals to working-class causes. The state fantasy subjected this class alliance to the psychic conditions of nonreproducibility that in the 1950s was understood to involve its homosexualization. The Cold War state fantasy promoted the conjoining of homophobia and Communism so as to demonize the New Deal progressive liberals adjudged responsible for the capital-labor entente. Homophobia was the displaced and distorted form of a class war targeting New Deal liberal elites, as if they were the chief means of introducing Communism into America.

In The Vital Center, Arthur Schlesinger articulated this fantasy to Freudian psychoanalytic discourse and aligned it with its intended political target when he diagnosed the cause of New Deal liberals’ “neurosis” in their “feminine fascination with the rude and muscular power of the proletariat.” Given this “fatal weakness,” Schlesinger elaborated this etiology, it is no wonder that they are “softened up” for “Communist permeation and conquest.” In Schlesinger’s iteration of the Cold War state fantasy, sadomasochistic homoeroticism replaced Communism as the ethos whose spreading power had to be rooted out: “The whole thrust of totalitarian indoctrination” requires that its followers assume the feminine, submissive

22. Robert J. Corber has explored this psychosomatic construction in Homosexuality in Cold War America (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997). Corber has also demonstrated how the “Cold War femme” was crucial to consolidating a heterosexual ethos throughout the Cold War epoch in Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).


role so as to yield to the “thrust” of totalitarianism’s “deep and driving faith” in its “exercises in penetration and manipulation.” After fashioning this lurid spectacle that positioned American men within the fantasmatic space of catastrophic abduction, homosexual predation, and castration, he located its historical origins in boys’ schools. Communism “perverts politics into something secret, sweaty and furtive like nothing so much, in the phrase of one wise observer of modern Russia, as homosexuality in a boys’ school; many practicing it, but all those caught to be caned by the headmaster.” Schlesinger’s fantasmatic construction of progressive liberals as homosexuals desirous of Communist “penetration” consolidated the scattered elements of the foundational state fantasy into a coherent and widely disseminated public drama.25

The state played the key role in this shift of the ruling coordinates of the social order, but the “Communist as homosexual” supplied the state with a structuring performative that transformed the normative assumptions of the entire social order. “Communist as homosexual” was a term, as well as a symbolic exchange, that facilitated the translation of a series of preexisting social antagonisms into more or less synonymous expressions of this general equivalent. The antagonism between labor and capital lay condensed in the figure of the “Communist as homosexual.” This antagonism was the absent cause that at once inscribed and occulted itself through this displacement that animated the structural performative overdetermining how other social antagonisms were represented and articulated as chains of equivalences across the symbolic field.

Despite their contiguity, the fantasy of the Communist as a homosexual and the fantasy of a homosexual becoming Communist stood in a nonequivalent and asymmetrical relation. However, the image of the homosexual becoming Communist soon achieved dominance as the general semiotic operator that made overcoming homosexuality appear more or less equivalent to defeating the Communist threat. After the homosexual becoming Communist was made to represent the external threat internal to the social order, anti-Communism was promoted and sustained through this phobic identification of an enemy ideology with a prohibited object attachment. The dissemination of the state fantasy representing Communism as a homosexual menace enjoined American men to liberate themselves from Communist tyranny through the homophobic regulation of their sexual identity.

By linking homosexuals’ “abnormal” pathogenic energies as a threat to the American way of life inherent to Communism, the Cold War state fantasy regulated unruly erotic components of the homosocial bonds US soldiers and civilians had forged during World War II. George Chauncey has observed that the systematic exclusion of gays from the Cold War public sphere worked to elide and annul the vital role homosexual communities had historically played in American culture.26 Billy Graham endowed this project with a theological calling when he thanked God for the normal American men who “go loyally on in their own work of exposing the pinks, the lavenders and the reds who have sought refuge behind the wings of the American eagle.”27

The Cold War state’s delimitation of the boundaries deciding the terms of exclusion from the membership in the national community of citizens thereafter depended upon a shared homophobic social bond united against Communism’s homoerotic sociality. Homophobia also operated as a form of masculinist self-regulation. American men opposed Communist homosociality through their ongoing repudiation of homosexuality.

It was the Cold War state’s change of the nation’s rules and laws that instantiated the structural shift, but the state fantasy projected the responsibility for this ultimate transgression onto a figure—the homosexual as Communist—that threatened the subject’s masculine identity with catastrophic loss. As an enemy who posed a threat to an American man’s entire way of being, the homosexual became a constitutive aspect of American manhood. The foundational state fantasy encouraged the belief that the proper path to manhood entailed overcoming this enemy within.

In explaining the political economy of this social fantasy, Robert Corber has demonstrated how the construction of homosexuals as security risks guaranteed that gender and nationality functioned as mutually reenforcing categorizations.28 Representing homosexuals as posing a psychic threat to masculine identity rendered gay men the embodiment of the psychojuridical force that distinguished loyal Americans from enemies of state. The foreclosure of homosexuality within the American male’s psyche and the violent expulsion of Communists and homosexuals from the polis became coordinated psychopolitical practices.

28. Corber, Homosexuality in Cold War America.
The creation of the Communist as homosexual presented the state with a virtual cornucopia of tactics and mechanisms of governance. Targeting homosexuality as potentially endangering every element of the life process, the state constructed an ever-shifting network of possible targets to justify its exercise of biopower to supervise and manage the domains of birth and death, reproduction and longevity. The inventive permutations of connections and disconnections enacted by the figure of the homosexual becoming Communist extended the subterranean hold of the Cold War mentality along preexisting networks of social, political, and cultural as well as economic relations.

The structural shift was hegemonized through the ongoing crisis of masculinity through which it reproduced its rules and norms. The psychosexual panic effected by this foundational state fantasy was signally at work in the House Un-American Activities Committee and the McCarthy Hearings, whose mind-set Senator Joseph McCarthy expressed succinctly when he informed a room of reporters, “If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker.”

The state’s regulation of Americans’ homosocial bonds by setting them in opposition to Communism’s homoerotic sociality also animated the state’s representation of its ethicopolitical universals with a psychosexual vitality. The violence evidenced in the Cold War state’s prohibition of (Communist) homosexuality installed a homoerotic cathexis within the homosocial bond. Individuals who imagined themselves subjectivized within this foundational state fantasy were confronted with two incompatible processes of identification: an “ideal identification” with the heterosexual American anti-Communist and the citizen’s “fantasmatic identification” with the homosexual-Communist enemy. Both were necessary: the foreclosure of the fantasmatic homosexual identity served as the necessary precondition for taking up the ideal national identification.

The fantasy through which the state disseminated homophobia as a prevailing social norm presupposed that women and sexuality existed mainly for the purposes of biological reproduction and that heterosexuality and the reproduction of the family constituted biological imperatives as well as social norms. Perceived as the limit to naturalized heterosexual norms,

30. For an elaboration of the distinction between an ideal and a fantasmatic identification, see Donald E. Pease, The New American Exceptionalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 18–20.
31. See Corber’s Homosexuality in Cold War America and Cold War Femme.
homosexuals were compelled to embody this threat to the reproduction of the social order.

**At the Structural Rift**

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* contained so many of the elements that figured in men’s self-regulation throughout the 1950s—Brick’s paranoid exclusion of what was taken to be homoerotic in his relationship with Skipper; Maggie’s construction of herself as a figure of exchange between men in a homosocial bond; the closet as the space for the surveillance and the self-scrutinizing of Brick Pollitt for signs of the socially contaminative figure of the homosexual menace—that it has been described as the prototypical site for the construction of Cold War masculinity.\(^{32}\) Indeed, the second-act conversation between Brick and his father, Big Daddy Pollitt, which culminated in Big Daddy’s demanding that his son “out” himself as a homosexual and thereby break from the path of self-destruction that continues to bind Brick to his dead friend, has become a virtual model for the formulation of this mentality.\(^{33}\)

The play itself became a literal event within 1950s Cold War culture when Elia Kazan, the play’s director, demanded that Williams change his third act so that it might more clearly corroborate the imperatives of Cold War masculinity than had Williams’s initial version of the play’s conclusion. Williams distilled Kazan’s reservations into three demands: (1) don’t reduce Big Daddy to an offstage cry of pain; (2) stage a change in Brick’s character after the confrontation with Big Daddy in act 2; and (3) make Maggie more sympathetic to the audience.\(^{34}\)

The response he devised to meet Kazan’s demand led Williams in

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34. Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: Signet, 1955), 93. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically.
his Memoirs to describe the published version of Cat as the most satisfying: “When asked which is my favorite, I succumb to my instinct for the truth and I say ‘I suppose it is the published version of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.’ That play comes closest to being both a work of art and a work of craft” (75).

Williams’s craft included his artful negotiations with Kazan over the provenance of the play’s third act. In the New Directions publication of the play, Williams staged his encounter with Kazan as a reenactment of the disagreement between Brick and Big Daddy in the second act.

But their disagreement was more than a rehearsal. It rendered the conditions of the performance of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof part of the real violence upon which the Cold War state order was based. Williams depended upon Kazan as a kind of front. Having named names before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Kazan possessed the authority to effect the correlation between Communism and homosexuality upon which the reproduction of Cold War masculinity depended. When Kazan demanded that Williams show how Big Daddy brought about a transformation in Brick’s masculinity, he personified the Cold War state’s regulatory powers. Williams’s refusal to meet Kazan’s demand might have brought his career to an end.

Williams craftily evaded Kazan’s demand with the following stage direction he added to the published version of the second act of the play Kazan refused to direct:

The thing they’re discussing, timidly and painfully on the side of Big Daddy, fiercely, violently on Brick’s side, is the inadmissible thing that Skipper died to disavow between them. The fact that if it existed, it had to be disavowed to “keep face” in the world they lived in, may be at the heart of the “mendacity” that Brick drinks to kill his disgust with. It may be the root of his collapse. Or maybe it is only a manifestation of it, not even the most important. The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man’s psychological problem. I’m trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, the cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis. Some mystery should be left in the revelation of a character in a play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of a character in life, even in one’s own character to himself. This does not absolve the playwright of his duty to observe and probe as clearly and deeply as he legitimately can: but it should
steer him away from “pat” conclusions, facile definitions which make a play just a play, not a snare for the truth of human experience. (85)

A discussion of the distinctions between Williams’s and Kazan’s third act would require a separate essay. But Kazan’s objections are quite pertinent in that they index quite literally the play’s proximity to this structural rift in the order of things. What’s revolutionary about Williams involves his open staging of the psychopolitical stakes of this structural shift. The play literalizes this rift as a generalized crisis in the reproduction of the social order.

When it is not overridden with crises, the symbolic order forms the taken-for-granted backdrop that tacitly informs everyday behavior. But during times of crisis, inconsistencies within the symbolic order open up momentary breaks with that order’s determinations that can pose occasions to separate from its foundational fantasies. Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opened onto a generalized crisis in reproduction that covered the entire social field.

Williams’s play opens onto a setting in which one social order is undergoing discontinuation and another has not yet emerged to replace it. In suspending the transmission of the Cold War’s rules, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* enacts and reflects upon a generalized crisis in reproducibility. Each of the play’s three acts revolves around questions of reproduction. All of the characters, in fact, have either already been removed from conditions of social reproducibility or feel that they have: Big Daddy is dying of cancer; Brick, his chosen heir, who feels utterly disconnected from the social order, refuses to have sex with his wife, Maggie, and wants to die; Maggie can’t survive Brick’s death unless she gives birth to a child Brick will not father; Brick’s brother, Gooper, and his sister-in-law, Mae, have produced six children, but they would rather sell the land than reproduce the structure of relations on Big Daddy’s plantation, which was itself made possible by and originated out of the relationship between two gay men, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, who passed on their estate to Big Daddy.

The first two acts of the play transpose aspects of the surveillance state into backdrops for Maggie’s and Big Daddy’s intimidation tactics. Maggie, Brick, and Big Daddy frequently refer to Gooper and Mae, who want to out Brick so as to delegitimate his right to inherit Big Daddy’s estate as part of the state surveillance apparatus. Big Daddy and Maggie employ the same tactics of interrogation and intimidation that Senator Joseph McCarthy and members of the House Un-American Activities Committee trafficked in. A trace of the New Deal–labor alliance that the Cold War fan-
tasy dismantled is evidenced in the affiliation Straw and Ochello formed with Big Daddy Pollitt. When Big Daddy could not find employment anywhere else, this homosexual couple hired Big Daddy as a field-worker on their plantation. Brick set his homosocial bond with Skipper in a relation of opposition to Jack and Peter's homoerotic sociality. In addition to Skipper, it was Jack and Peter’s relationship that was forcibly removed from ontological viability.35

The generalized crisis of social reproduction is explicitly linked to the question of homosexuality, which Brick’s homosocial relationship to Skipper is made to represent. Brick’s putative inability to perform the repudiation of homosexuality becomes the foundation stone of this crisis of social reproduction. But Brick’s crisis includes the entire ensemble of characters. This crisis interconnects the characters with one another, with Brick and Skipper, as well as with Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, the gay couple at the origin of Big Daddy Pollitt’s patrimony.

Jack and Peter’s enigmatic relationship supplies an excess of signification that cannot be incorporated or assimilated within its spoken discourse or its visual representations. The play does not revolve around the truth of their relationship; it demands its subtraction—as a traumatized gap. Kevin Arnold has called attention to the import of this traumatized gap for the construction of US masculine identity in the passage I cited in the epigraph to this essay: “Williams understands lack in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, neither as a barrier to political recognition nor as the means of its deconstruction, but as a term that is inherent in definitions of masculinity.”36 Regardless of what we think we know about Straw and Ochello’s relationship, it remains unknowable. Their bond, which locates the foreclosed basis for all the other relationships, can neither be thought nor openly discussed. An arcane sense of the affective significance of their relationship endures nonetheless—through its unrepresentability.

This inassimilable bit of the Real also locates a kind of agitated visual desire to see Straw and Ochello. We feel their presence more than Skipper’s. The desire to visualize what Straw and Ochello are doing establishes

36. This observation appears on page 15 of Kevin Arnold’s unpublished dissertation, “Masculinity and Fantasy in Post-war American Literature” (University at Buffalo, SUNY, 2013), which includes the most incisive account of Williams’s attitude toward the state’s masculinist fantasy in print.
the conditions of spectatorship. We desire to see more and more of these apparitional characters; we want to know what they are doing. Although Jack and Peter’s historically factual relationship was excluded from Cold War representations, it becomes hypervisible in the setting in which the play’s first two acts take place. In the notes to the stage design, Williams described “the bed sitting room of the Plantation home” as a space in which private intimacy and public sociability converged and overlapped: “It hasn’t changed much since it was occupied by the original owners of the place, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. In other words, the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon” (xiii).

The play’s setting serves as a constant reminder that Straw and Ochello’s legacy includes an alternative mode of structuring relationships. Their excluded homosexual bond constitutes the nonthematizable normative condition for the formation of the other relations. The estimate condition of Jack and Peter’s belonging adheres to every one of the play’s bonds. Their relationship locates the unacknowledged basis for the evaluation of other interactions. Jack and Peter stand between Brick and Skipper, and Brick and Maggie, and inflect Brick’s relations with his father, brother, and Big Mama.

Williams represents the relationship between Straw and Ochello as the negative precedent for the relationship between Brick and Skipper. We are invited to recognize the state’s foundational fantasy at the site of their foreclosed relationship. The intimacy between Straw and Ochello materialized what the Cold War state had forcibly subtracted from the visual field. Indeed, the homoerotic enjoyment at the core of their relationship served as the object cause of the state’s surveillance. Designated as what could not become representable within the visual order regulated by the state’s mandates, scenes of gay jouissance named what the state needed to search out and forcibly remove from the visual field. This primordially foreclosed scene of homoerotic intimacy supplied the surveillance apparatus with the drive to see what it was prohibited from seeing.37

37. The homoerotic relation between Jack and Peter had to be effaced before Brick and Maggie could appear as themselves. It was their relegation to the status of negative hallucinations (Freud described a negative hallucination as not seeing what is factually there—as opposed to, in fact, seeing what is not there)—that constituted the figural conditions for the representations of Brick and Maggie. When visualized from this perspective, the figures of Brick and Maggie are construable as secondary repressions of the relationship between Jack and Peter.
The “uncommon tenderness” between Straw and Ochello referenced a past that could be neither symbolized nor endowed with historical factuality within Cold War culture, whose coherence was constituted out of the exclusion of such intimacy between men. This actually existing historical past nevertheless retroactively produced the foreclosed precedent for the relationship between Brick and Skipper; it also constituted the disavowed aspect of what was lacking from the relationship between Brick and Maggie.

What was constitutively lacking in Cold War culture becomes overpresent in this stage setting. The bedroom that Maggie and Brick now share was preoccupied by the erotic intimacy of Straw and Ochello. Their bed is constructed around an emptiness formed out of the exclusion of this intimacy from the social order. The place opened up by this foreclosure is the void around which the kinship structure of the Pollitt family gets articulated.

The Production of the 1950s Primal Scene

“Something’s left out of that story. What did you leave out?”

When a state undertakes a radical change in its ruling norms, it undergoes a crisis in social reproduction. Just as Freud had done for Pankejef, the play literalizes the site of the structural shift in the form of the crisis in the reproduction of the social order. Freud constructed the primal scene to bear witness to the site at which one structuring performative was discontinued and another taken up. The witnessing of the primal scene required the construction of a primal fantasy that suspended the performative process whereby an individual took up the new norms by imagining an individual’s overproximity to the state of exception’s injunctions and demands that changed the order. In the first two acts of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams adapted Freud’s scenario to disrupt the state’s structural event and reconfigure the Cold War’s foundational fantasy.

The first and the second act turn around sites of imperativity that bring Brick into the zone of emergency that effected this structural rift. Act 1 and act 2 of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are also organized around the temporal logic of the primal scene. Acts 1 and 2 refer to events that are organized in a relationship of “deferred action.”

Brick’s confrontation with Big Daddy, the core action of the second act, chronologically followed the events presented in act 1. But Brick’s first-act encounter with Maggie triggered an event that “will have happened” in his second-act dialogue with Big Daddy. Both acts revolve around con-
conflicting interpretations of Brick's relationship with Skipper. Whereas Maggie restricted her account to her triangulation of Brick's relationship with Skipper, Big Daddy brought Brick's bond with Skipper into proximity to the relationship between Jack and Peter, out of whose exclusion the Cold War state was constituted.

The first-act dialogue between Maggie and Brick specifically revolves around Maggie's unilateral decision to change the rules governing the relationship between Brick and Skipper. Brick assigned Maggie these quasi-juridical powers when he explained that, in the summer following his college graduation, “Maggie, she laid the law down to me, said, Now or never, and so I married Maggie” (90). But the violent consequences of Maggie's decision brings Brick into the realm of injunctions and demands responsible for the structural rift in the social order. Maggie personified and acted upon the power of the law that inaugurated the Cold War rules with her pronouncement of the demand: “SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN' MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE'S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!” (45; the passage is capitalized in the text).

In demanding that Skipper either stop loving Brick or acknowledge the homoerotic basis of his relationship to Brick (“ADMIT IT TO HIM!”), Maggie has left Skipper no option for the denial of the premise (that he is, in fact, homosexual) underpinning the demand. After Maggie confronted Skipper with this impossible choice, she left him no socially mandated identity to take up. Maggie's injunction conveyed an immense psychic force that Skipper did not survive. Maggie herself explained the devastating consequences of her dictum: “In this way, I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told him could not be told. From then on, Skipper was nothing at all but a receptacle for liquor and drugs” (45).

When Maggie issued this ultimatum, she changed the rules that had formerly governed the triangular relations that Maggie put in place when she and Gladys Fitzgerald double-dated Brick and Skipper: “it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if it was necessary to chaperone you!—to make a good public impression—” (44).

It was Maggie rather than Brick or Skipper who eroticized the triangle. Maggie knew that Brick's relationship with Skipper at once structured and regulated Brick's sexual relationship with Maggie. Prior to Maggie's decision to change the rules regulating his relationships with Skipper and Maggie, Brick personified the exemplary 1950s man. Perhaps because
Brick’s sexual behavior with Maggie strictly conformed to the norms of heterosexual propriety, however, it seemed voided of intimacy. Maggie told Brick that his lovemaking was “more like opening a door for a lady or seating her at a table than giving expression to any longing for her” (25).

Maggie’s decision to break up Brick’s friendship with Skipper may have been in part motivated by her jealousy over what she suspected was the homoerotic basis of Skipper’s attraction to Brick. Maggie also knew that if she could get Skipper to confess to Brick the “truth” of her suspicion, the admission would cause her husband to end the relationship. Maggie’s efforts to realize that aim led to her devising a strategy that would trap Skipper into an admission of his love for Brick. When Maggie explained the rationale for this ploy to Brick in the first act, she asked for his exoneration:

You see, you son of a bitch, you asked too much of people, of me, of him, of all the unlucky poor damned sons of bitches that happen to love you, and there was a whole pack of them, yes, there was a pack of them besides me and Skipper, you asked too goddam much of people that loved you, you—superior creature!—you god-like being!—And so we made love to each other to dream it was you, both of us! Yes, yes, yes! Truth, truth! What’s so awful about it? I like it, I think the truth is—yeah! I shouldn’t have told you. . . . (43)

Maggie’s report that she and Skipper had made love to each other to dream it was Brick made it impossible for Skipper to deny the homosexual inflection that Maggie had added to their lovemaking. Although the explicit details of the scene are difficult to imagine, its consequences are not. Maggie has trapped Skipper into the admission of a homosexual object choice—he dreamed he was doing it with Brick—by involving him in a heterosexual tryst.

After Maggie got rid of Skipper, she went about using his absence to change the rules of her relationship with Brick. Maggie oscillated between the reparative and the paranoid as she attempted to salvage her marriage to Brick out of the havoc she had wreaked on Brick’s friendship.

It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in the Greek legends, it couldn’t be anything else, you being you, and that’s what made it so sad, that’s what made it so awful, because it was love that could never be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly. Brick, I tell you, you got to believe me, Brick, I do understand all about it. . . . Can’t you tell I’m sincere when I say I respect it? My only point, the only point that I’m making, is life has
got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life is—all—over. . . . I know, believe me I know, that it was only Skipper that harbored even any unconscious desire for anything not perfectly pure between you two! (43–44)

Rather than feeling flattered or appeased by these protestations, Brick responded with implacable indignation: “One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true!—I had friendship with Skipper.—You are naming it dirty” (44).

Maggie’s change of the rules that structured and regulated their relationship resulted in Brick’s offering his own conditions for the continuation of their marriage. Brick’s chief rule forbids Maggie even mentioning Skipper’s name. Brick’s insistence on the foreclosure of Skipper is important because it discloses the difference in Brick’s attitude toward Skipper and Maggie’s relationship.

Although Brick described their friendship as the “one . . . true thing” in his life, Brick’s relationship with Skipper was as void of erotic intimacy as was his relationship with Maggie. Brick never used affectionate phrases to refer to Skipper, never recalled the personal traits in Skipper that inspired Brick’s devotion to their friendship. When he mentions Skipper, Brick does not mourn his death. It is not Skipper but the absence of their “true,” “clean” relationship that Brick resents.

Brick may have reacted with indignation, but Brick pointedly did not contradict Maggie’s conclusion that “it was only Skipper that harbored even any unconscious desire for anything not perfectly pure between you two!” Brick and Maggie both seem to know something about Skipper’s sexual desires that Skipper did not. If Skipper did, in fact, “love” Brick, did Brick enjoy Skipper’s repression of the homoerotic desire Brick has prohibited? Has Brick displaced the possibility of erotic reciprocation with Skipper onto his sexual performances with Maggie? Does an uncanny jouissance—the carnal enjoyment of the substitution of the homosocial bond voided of erotic enjoyment—serve as the basis of his heterosexual performances with Maggie?

No matter how we respond to these and other questions to which his relationship with Skipper gives rise, Brick has made one thing quite clear to Maggie and the audience: his friendship with Skipper was not founded upon a mutual avowal of love; it was based on their shared disavowal of homosexuality. Maggie discontinued Brick’s powers of repudiation by turning Skipper, the figure through whom Brick reciprocally performed this dis-
avowal, into an actual homosexual man. In doing so, Maggie dismantled the structuring performative—the foreclosure of homosexuality—organizing Brick’s identity. Without Skipper to reciprocate the acts of repudiation they shared, Brick relegated Skipper himself to foreclosure. Since the act of repudiating homosexual desire stood in as the object cause of Brick’s heterosexual desire, Brick could not have sex with Maggie in the absence of the figure through whom he accomplished this act.

After Maggie says she knows that Brick did not share Skipper’s erotic desire, what exactly does she think constituted the basis of Brick’s relation-ship with either Skipper or herself? The erotic deficit Brick has displayed in his relationships with Maggie and Skipper cannot be stably represented as heterosexual or homosexual or even bisexual. Given Maggie’s description of him as the “godlike” ideal love object of men and women, Brick’s relationships with Skipper and Maggie might best be described as metanormal. Brick’s relationship with Skipper might be construed as metanormal in two senses: it exceeded the imperatives of the hegemonic masculinity that Brick exemplified, and, as Brick explained in the following exchange with Big Daddy, it was taken up from a subject position that was extraneous to any subjective practice through which it would be normalized as either heterosexual or homosexual.

BRICK: Skipper and me had a clean, true thing between us!—had a clean friendship, practically all our lives, till Maggie got the idea you’re talking about. Normal? No!—It was too rare to be normal, any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal. Oh, once in a while he put his hand on my shoulder or I’d put mine on his, oh, maybe even, when we were touring the country in pro-football an’ shared hotel-rooms we’d reach across the space between the two beds and shake hands to say goodnight, yeah, one or two times, we—

BIG DADDY: Brick, nobody thinks that that’s not normal!

BRICK: Well, they’re mistaken, it was! It was a pure an’ true thing an’ that’s not normal. (89–90)

Brick is Williams’s means of exposing the incoherence at the core of the Cold War’s gender logic. Throughout act 1, Maggie celebrates Brick’s having followed the Cold War state’s rules to the letter: he successfully repudiated homosexuality and organized his homosocial bond with Skipper out of the homophobia he and Skipper shared. Brick Pollitt is the exemplary Cold War male. Which is to say that, as its ego-ideal, Brick personi-
fied the repudiation of homosexuality that regulated Cold War masculinity. Although a half century of critics have interpreted Brick as the prototype of the Cold War’s “closeted homosexual,” Williams, in fact, specified the cause of Brick’s refusal of biological and social reproduction in the breakdown of his homophobic bond with Skipper. But if Brick Pollitt personifies the ego-ideal of Cold War masculinity, why are the other characters in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (and many members of its audience) intent on making Brick stand in for the figure of the homosexual out of whose exclusion Brick constituted his identity?

Brick Pollitt and the Wolf Man might initially appear to share nothing in common. A varsity athlete and fraternity man who followed the rules and norms of the social order, Brick bears a closer resemblance to Paul Newman, who played opposite Elizabeth Taylor in the Hollywood version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, than to Sergei Pankejeff, whose socially mandated identity unraveled along with the aristocratic social class in which he practiced it. But at the conclusion of the first act, Brick would appear to have fallen under the shadow of the Wolf Man’s veil. Brick wants nothing to do with the social prerogatives of the culture into which he was born—he has rejected social property, inheritance, patrimony, class position, and biological as well as social reproduction.

Before agreeing to the Wolf Man as Brick’s ancestor, however, we should not forget that Brick was not utterly disconnected from his mandated social role. What truly distinguished Brick from all the other characters Williams afforded bodily representation on the stage was the state-sanctioned homophobia to which he gave wholehearted expression. After he found himself unable to repudiate homosexuality through the homophobic bond he shared with Skipper, Brick repudiated Skipper himself. It was Brick’s homophobic response, rather than Maggie’s dictum or the state surveillance apparatus, that quite literally cut Skipper out of the realm of social viability. Unlike the Wolf Man, Brick assumed the state’s power of behaving as a Wolf to man.

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In the first act of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams correlated Brick’s homophobia with Maggie’s violation of Brick’s homosocial bond with Skipper. That event triggered the events of the second act that installed Brick in the primal scene of the 1950s where Brick’s homophobia will have encountered its absent cause.
The play’s second act culminated in a confrontation in which Big Daddy got Brick to admit that it was his inability to face his disgust at Skipper’s admission of his homosexuality that led Skipper to take his life:

BRICK: Yes!—I left out a long-distance call which I had from Skipper, in which he made a drunken confession to me, and on which I hung up!—last time we spoke to each other in our lives. . . .

BIG DADDY: Anyhow now!—we have tracked down the lie with which you’re disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself. You!—dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!—before you’d face truth with him! (92)

Big Daddy apparently hoped his recognition of this “truth” would lead Brick to reform his life. Having just been told that he was not dying of cancer, Big Daddy wanted to deliver Brick from living death by persuading him to acknowledge that his relationship with Skipper was a replication of Jack Straw’s with Peter Ochello.

In his conversation with Brick, Big Daddy restored a scenario from the past—in which Big Daddy wandered the rails as a hobo, and the social order was as tolerant of homosexuals as it was of Communists—that was forcibly subtracted from representation within the 1950s social order.

BIG DADDY: Now hold on, hold on a minute, son.—I knocked around in my time.

BRICK: What’s that got to do with—

BIG DADDY: I said ‘hold on!’—I bummed, I bummed this country till I was—

BRICK: Whose suggestion, who else’s suggestion is it?

BIG DADDY: Slept in hobo jungles and railroad Y’s and flophouses in all cities before I—

BRICK: Oh, you think so, too, you call me your son and a queer. Oh! Maybe that’s why you put Maggie and me in this room that was Jack Straw’s and Peter Ochello’s, in which that pair of old sisters slept in a double bed where both of ‘em died.

BIG DADDY: Now just don’t go throwing rocks at—. . . —I seen all things and understood a lot of them, till 1910. Christ the year that—I had worn my shoes through, hocked my—I hopped off a yellow dog freight car half a mile down the road, slept in a wagon of cotton outside the gin—Jack Straw an’ Peter Ochello took me in. Hired me
to manage this place which grew into this one.—When Jack Straw died—why, old Peter Ochello quit eatin’ like a dog does when its master’s dead, and died, too.

BRICK: Christ!
BIG DADDY: I’m just saying I understand such—
BRICK: Skipper is dead. I have not quit eating!
BIG DADDY: No, but you started drinking. (85–87)

When Big Daddy aligned homosexual episodes from his personal past to his association with Jack and Peter, Big Daddy clearly sought to form a new and altered relationship with Brick out of this archaic resource. When he explicitly recalled the history of his affiliations with Jack and Peter, Big Daddy opened up a space in between the physical death that he feared and these figures whose relationship the Cold War state of exception had violently excluded. Daddy’s recollection of this pre–Cold War past also brought Brick into the vicinity of the structural rift that regulated Brick’s masculinity. In doing so, Big Daddy effectively interrupted the temporality that sustained the coherence of Brick’s sexual identity and situated another temporal disposition in the ellipses punctuating Brick’s account of the breakup in his relationship with Skipper.

The historical temporality Big Daddy restored operated according to a social logic that was nonsynchronous with the 1950s present. It took place within the untimely time and place of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, in which homosociality and homosexuality coexisted within an unbroken continuum. Big Daddy recalled Brick to this site in an effort to help him work through what Big Daddy took to be Brick’s guilt and remorse over the death of Skipper.

Just as had Freud’s primal scene for the Wolf Man, this moment in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has literalized the site of the scission where one structuring social performative was discontinued and another taken up. Instead of recognizing the applicability of this site to his present circumstances, Brick’s violent separation from Skipper reperformed the state’s violent exclusion. Brick directed his exclusionary loathing at Big Daddy’s recollection of the moment Jack and Peter rescue him from poverty, offer him a position as field laborer, and love him enough to bequeath him their estate in a semipermanent alliance of capital and labor.

BRICK: Big Daddy, you shock me, Big Daddy, you, you—*shock* me! Talkin’ so—casually!—about a—thing like that . . . —Don’t you know how people *feel* about things like that? How, how *disgusted* they
are by things like that? Why, at Ole Miss when it was discovered a pledge to our fraternity, Skipper's and mine, did a, attempted to do a, unnatural thing with—We not only dropped him like a hot rock!—We told him to git off the campus, and he did, he got!—All the way to—

BIG DADDY: Where?

BRICK: North Africa, last I heard!

BIG DADDY: Well, I came back from further away than that. I have just now returned from the other side of the moon, death's country, son, and I'm not easy to shock by anything here. Always, anyhow, lived with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton!—is tolerance!—I grown it. (88–89)

Jack and Peter's past is palpably at work here structuring and animating the turns of Brick's and Big Daddy's transferential relations. Brick cannot become who Jack and Peter were because Brick will have played an active part in the obliteration of Jack and Peter's way of life. After Big Daddy characterizes heterosexuality and homosexuality as mutually constitutive and commensurate forms of subjectivization, Brick reminds Big Daddy of the law homophobia enforces. In doing so, Brick constructs the primal scene of the forcible exclusion of homosexuals from the social order within the very temporal schema Big Daddy has retrieved. Rather than becoming subjectivized in the terms of Big Daddy's recollection, Brick reinstitutes the Cold War state's foundational homophobic fantasy within the historical period marked by sexual tolerance to which Big Daddy recalls him.

The transference at work in this scene is too much to be either responded to or accounted for. As the psychic material of the transference, Brick and Big Daddy occupy positions that are both more and less than themselves. The dis-location that both Brick and Big Daddy undergo opens into the primal scene where we encounter what neither Brick nor Big Daddy could either possess or own up to. Each character is dispossessed from the social order through the demand each poses to the other. In staging this excess, the primal scene sustains the persistent and opaque afterlife of that excess.

When Brick and Skipper threw rocks at their gay frat brother at Ole Miss, they acted with the sovereign performative power of the Cold War state's official homophobia. Brick reperformed the state's sovereign homophobic power when he slammed down the receiver on Skipper. Big Daddy may have wanted to pull Brick out of living death when he accused Brick
of having dug Skipper’s grave “and kicked him in it.” But Brick, who felt no
remorse for Skipper’s death, responded by pulling Big Daddy into the grave
Big Daddy had just dug: “How about these birthday congratulations, these
many, many happy returns of the day, when ev’rybody but you knows there
won’t be any!” (92).

In the scene with Big Daddy, Brick encountered the structuring inco-
herence in the Cold War state performative. Big Daddy has hailed Brick to
the site of the structural rift that structurally decompleted the order. After
having been dislocated from his place within the social order, Brick found
himself in a previously unimaginable space in between the force through
which the state tethered individuals to their mandated identities and not yet
realized alternatives. Skipper’s admission of his love for Brick reproduced
the relation between Jack and Peter that founded the Pollitts’ kinship net-
work. As a revenant of Jack Straw, Skipper reinstated the temporal rup-
ture of Big Daddy’s kinship network.

Upon hearing Skipper’s confession, Brick was seized up by the dis-
ruptive force that demanded Skipper’s foreclosure. At this site, Brick did not
mourn Skipper as a lost love object. He became fastened to the force of
the structural performative itself that enacted loss as if it were a love object.
Rather than with a mode of being, Brick has identified with the traumatic
object-cause of his desire and undergone a process of deontologization
that cleared the way for an alternative configuration of the entire network of
significations that preceded it.

By intervening in the state fantasy that circulated around homopho-
bia, Williams has acted on the Real of the state fantasy that undergirded
the dominant symbolic order and reconfigured the primal fantasmatic sce-
nario that organized and limited culture. The primal scene itself worked
as a kind of transformational object. As its ego-ideal, Brick Pollitt became
Williams’s means of disrupting the foundational fantasy through which the
hegemonic representation of male identity was reproduced. The primal
scene disclosed the force that disconnected Brick from his mandated iden-
tity by producing the event that accomplished it. By drawing the ego-ideal
of the Cold War state into an encounter with the absent cause of its desire,
the primal scene disrupted the state’s structuring performative and reori-
ten ted its subject within its own fantasy.

It was the demands they posed to one another from the center of the
social order that brought Brick’s and Big Daddy’s identities to their limits.
Because there was no subject to perform it and no preexisting activity to
reperform, the encounter materialized the noniterability of the order. This
absent place did not take place within the theater, or within the field of American culture, nor did it take place altogether outside of these locations. It took place at the limit that holds the site of the difference between the within and its exterior. This limit has, in the passage I just cited, taken place, as such, at but also through the primal scene Brick has just acted out with Big Daddy. Here, where there was neither an already constituted subject position nor an activity that can be (re)performed as a felicitous performative among the others within the US culture, the limits of that order took place.