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Chinese Affection: Tennessee Williams's *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* in Hong Kong

At *this* point I will not go into my nervous and physical condition at *that* point except to say that I was recuperating much too gradually from a bout with London and /or Hong Kong flu…

(Williams, *Memoirs* xiii)

In this essay I will focus on one of Tennessee Williams's most loved, albeit lesser known plays, *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, and I will attempt to conjure up a dialogue between Williams and Hong Kong. Somewhere around the beginning of this experiment is an intellectually intriguing staging of this play by an established American director, David Kaplan, at the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre in 2003. By envisioning, and to some extent producing, this conversation between Williams's play and a location, with its audience and its social fabric, I hope to reveal some heretofore underexplored threads in the play itself, and in the very act of cultural trafficking which is embedded in much of globalized dramatic practice. While much of the first half of this essay will be devoted to an analysis of the play, its genealogy, and its critical history, in the second half I will attempt a few interpretative moves, which draw connections between Hong Kong contemporary society and David Kaplan's directorial decisions. I will argue that while a few dynamics staged in Williams's play may indeed resonate with the Hong Kong audience, Kaplan's Hong Kong production powerfully interpreted and developed some of the most significant threads running through it, namely a critique to gender conformity and to social propriety.

When trying to uncover some potential connection, a hidden relation between Williams and the former British colony, even the imaginative scholar is humbled by the scarcity of any significant evidence. The opening

quotation, in its apparent insignificance, is as much as one can hope to find: Williams is recalling a meeting with a class of Yale Drama students, and he is still affected by a disease originating from the capital of the kingdom and/or the exotic colony. While ideas of nervous conditions and affections will return soon in my argument, not much can be said about the playwright's view on the "pearl of the Orient." But certainly the idea of influence across boundaries and of contagion, so close to Hong Kong's history and its fantasmatic representations, is an apt metaphor to begin our investigation of this play and its many incarnations.

The Hong Kong Repertory Theatre

When Frederic Mao Chun-Fai decided, as the artistic director of the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre, to name "Chinese Affection" the 2002-03 program of performances, he had no idea how ironic that focus would have been in the year of the tragic SARS epidemic, which spread from Guangdong province in Southern China, through Hong Kong to much of Southeast Asia causing hundreds of deaths.[1] What Fredric Mao certainly knew, however, was that the title for that series of performances, which intended to establish collaborations with stage professionals in Mainland China and Taiwan, was far from univocal or, how should I put this, warm-heartedly conceived. The "affection" that he might have meant, on the surface, was a "tender attachment," the feeling or display of love or sympathy, but even in this sense one might wonder whether this attachment was felt *by* China or *towards* China, or if it was instead merely Chinese as taking place *in* China. None of these meanings is irrelevant to the deeply tense relationship between "the Mainland" and Hong Kong, and within Hong Kong itself. The other meaning is of course the one I evoked in the opening, which alludes to a bodily (or mental) condition, a disease, or the circumstance of being indirectly acted upon and influenced. In this sense, again, the title of Fredric Mao's program was painfully apt to the current political situation of Hong Kong.

While I cannot in this article do justice to Hong Kong's history or complex political allegiances, let me pause here for an elementary footnote

on its most significant event in recent history. In 1997 Hong Kong, a former British colony since 1842, was "handed over" (or "returned") to the People's Republic of China. The transfer of sovereignty was agreed upon by Margaret Thatcher and Deng Xiaoping in 1984, and it granted the "One Country, Two Systems" principle for the following 50 years, whereby the capitalist system and some degree of democratic governance would remain on the island and its territories. In the following decade – and noticeably until now – the Mainland has vastly influenced the economy, the demographics, and the politics of Hong Kong, despite a local resistance that has been at times courageous (e.g. massive candlelight rallies on June 4th in memory of the Tiananmen massacre) and at others spiteful (e.g. private media campaigns and internet memes addressing mainlanders as locusts that come to steal the island's resources).

In 1977 the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre (HK Rep) was founded, the "longest standing and largest professional theatre company in the city," devoted from the very beginning to local playwrights and translations of international drama.[2] In 2001, HK Rep turned from a government-run facility to an incorporated company. In that same year, Fredric Mao Chun-fai became its artistic director. Mao was born in Shanghai, China, but in his childhood he moved to Hong Kong. In his twenties, Mao moved to the United States to study at the University of Iowa and then to work as an actor and a director for the following 17 years. In 1985, at the foundation of the Academy for Performing Arts, he returned to Hong Kong for a position as the Head of Acting there. He is currently the program curator at the West Kowloon Bamboo Theatre. During his fairly well-received artistic direction at HK Rep, from 2001 to 2007, he aimed at "minimizing the space between the stage and the audience" (Cheung) and "encouraged and shaped original Hong Kong theatre" (Morin).

In fact, as Thomas Luk notes in his 2006 research, "in its twenty seven years of operation, Hong Kong Repertory Company has evolved from a translation dominated production company to one that celebrates Hong Kong featured productions as well as occasional production of translated western work."(Web) The choice of *what* to produce, whether Hong Kong playwrights, translated Western drama, or Chinese drama, is nothing but political in itself for a city that finds her own identity affiliations in the

intertwining and conflict between her Chinese heritage and her Western soul. Additionally, the very decision of translating international drama into Cantonese is indeed eloquent of a decisive selective choice in audience. Cantonese is the first language of Hong Kong, followed by English as a close second. Mandarin Chinese has become more common, but it is still predominantly used for economic interactions with mainland tourists and customers. Infamous was C. Y. Leung's, the current chief executive, decision in 2012 to deliver his inauguration speech in Mandarin, alienating and infuriating many Hong Kong residents while sending a strong signal of compliance and deference to Beijing's officials, who had played a crucial role in his election. In "Asia's World City," staging a play in Cantonese effectively excludes a slice of the inhabitants of the city it intends to open up to (most significantly the large population of European/American expatriates who rarely master the language, and non-Cantonese-speaking mainlanders, together with a massive population of immigrant workers from Southeast Asia) and maybe an even more significant slice of theater-goers. It therefore establishes a local conversation in a community theater, addressing some form of "nativist" Hong Kong resident spectatorship.

In the next few pages we will temporarily move away from the Hong Kong "scene," and back to Tennessee Williams and his play, as a necessary first step to an analysis that intends to investigate cultural translation across national boundaries.

"Look I'm Alma"

Eccentricities of a Nightingale has a complex genealogy, made of narrative inspirations, rewritings, developments across genres, and dramatic revisions. This is not unlike many other plays by Williams: as Drewey Wayne Gunn writes "Of the forty-two plays he has published since 1941, twenty have appeared in differing versions; only three of his seventeen full-length published plays have not been revised at some point in print" (368). These revisions and variants of texts can be as meaningful to the scholar as the chosen "final" text. Despite the fact that I will not deal extensively with the other texts, what I would like to suggest in the following paragraphs is

that the versions of/around *Eccentricities* constitute what John Bryant would term “a fluid text,” and that they enrich our critical understanding of the cultural operations and intentions behind a given text (Bryant, *The Fluid Text*).

Eccentricities was published in 1964, but probably its draft was completed as early as 1951. It opened on Broadway at the Morosco Theatre only several years later, in 1976, to cold reviews. As Mark Blakenship interestingly points out on *Variety* in a review of a recent staging, when the show opened on Broadway in 1976 “it bore a double burden: it was written by Tennessee Williams, by then labeled a has-been, and was a revision of ‘Summer and Smoke,’ an early work that cast a sizable shadow” (Web). The link between *Summer* and *Eccentricities* is an obvious one. Published in 1948, *Summer and Smoke* was relatively successful, and it was made into a movie in 1961 with the direction of Peter Glenville. The two plays are however, significantly divergent. As Williams himself acknowledges in the New Directions edition of 1971, when the latter play had not been produced on stage yet, “I think [*Eccentricities*] is a substantially different play from *Summer and Smoke*, and I prefer it. It is less conventional and melodramatic.” He finished it while the London production of *Summer* was under way: “I arrived [in London] with it too late, the original version of the play was already in rehearsal” (7). Some scholars argue, however, that the draft for *Eccentricities* actually predates the first published play. As Clum writes, “Williams’s one-time friend, collaborator, and correspondent Donald Windham claims that *Eccentricities* is not a revision, but an earlier draft of *Summer and Smoke*” (41).

Williams believed that *Eccentricities* was “a better work than the play from which it derived,” and famously he considered the protagonist, Alma, to be one of his favorite creations. In Donald Spoto’s popular biography of Williams, the author quotes producer Gloria Hope Sher’s memory of a rehearsal of the Broadway show of *Eccentricities* “I remember that he got to the stage to speak to the cast only once. He simply said, ‘Look, I’m Alma,’ and he acted out a long scene for Betsy Palmer. He then added that Alma was his favorite character” (Spoto 346-47, 353; see also Jennings).

Before moving on to analyze a few differences between these two plays, and between them and a few other antecedents, let us introduce the play

itself. *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* is set in Glorious Hill, Mississippi, a few years before World War One. Alma Winemiller is a minister's daughter, in love since childhood with the local doctor's son, John Buchanan. Alma is known as the "nightingale of the Delta," because she loves to sing at most public events, "I swear there's nothing I don't sing at except the conception of infants!" (29), she ironically declares. As the audience comes to realize soon enough, the appellation may be sarcastic, since it seems that she tends to "dramatize [her] songs a bit too much" (31) attracting the mockery of the townspeople. Additionally, Alma talks and laughs too wildly (15), moves her hands and arms about without restraint when she performs, lacks a general sense of "composure" (13), and her "affectations and mannerism" make her seem, in the minister's words, "slightly peculiar to people" (32). She gives the impression of someone suffering from neurasthenia, and often she seems on the verge of exploding. The play opens with the return, after a successful university education, of Doctor John Buchanan to Glorious Hill, and it unfolds as Alma struggles with her attention/obsession towards him, in a timid series of encounters and dialogues between the two. While John is ambiguously interested or charmed by her "eccentricity," he does not seem to reciprocate her affection. Towards the end of the play, Alma convinces John to take her to a modest hotel room, and the anticlimax is inevitable. In the Epilogue, "an indefinite time later" (107), we see a different, more sexually confident Alma seducing a visiting salesman in the town square and inviting him to a nearby hotel room.

The trajectory of the characters can be easily framed as a set of binaries and a major reversal towards the end, the most apparent being the one between body and soul, and between sexual satisfaction and repression: "Alma" is "soul" in Spanish, while the physician in a powerful scene challenges the young woman to identify the "soul" on his anatomy chart. Her complete lack of experience in and denial of bodily pleasure make her idealize the romantic dimension of human affections, whereas John seems unaware that such things as affection and love really exist. The reversal will be completed in the end, when Alma seems to embrace her sexual personhood, whereas John seems to be navigating toward a more platonic version of romantic relations.

The earlier version, *Summer and Smoke* presents a sharper set of contrasts

and a more obvious reversal. John Buchanan is a charming womanizer, who is unabashedly manipulating and teasing Alma. He is a sexual predator, a dissolute bon vivant, who in a final moment of repentance cries out "I should have been castrated!" (212). On the other hand, *Eccentricities'* John Buchanan is a mama's boy, gentle and deferential, if rather naïve and malleable. Nothing in *Eccentricities* points towards John's sexual charisma. Furthermore, in *Summer and Smoke*, Alma's language is slightly more pompous and old-fashioned than in *Eccentricities.* There are a few subplots in the earlier play that work in the direction of enhancing the contrast between the two characters and John's transition from a carnal predator to a responsible and "repentant" young man: on the one hand, the awkward dialogues between Alma and her suitor Roger, and on the other John's affair with Rosa Gonzalez first, and with Alma's former pupil Nellie toward the end.

Mothers and Female Genealogy

The character of the mothers in *Eccentricities* are also crucial to a full understanding of Williams's cultural agenda in this play, particularly with regards to the evolution of his representation of gender roles vis á vis societal pressures. Alma's mother, Mrs. Winemiller, despite her acting as a mad woman from the very first scene, is thought by her husband to be mischievously playing a role: "your mother has *chosen* to be the way she is. She isn't out of her mind. It's all deliberate" (14). The reverend continues by saying that, just one week after their marriage, a look came into her eyes, a spiteful look towards him, as if he had done her some "injury" that "couldn't be mentioned" (15). While this injury could be understood to be (unpleasant?) sex itself (a prerogative of the newlywed at the time), one might suggest another interpretative line that frames the *injury* as the very limitation of female freedom traditionally inherent in the institution of marriage. Alma herself replies to her father that "there are women that feel that way about marriage" (15), suggesting that the problem is indeed marriage itself. In a barely veiled form of personal revenge, Mrs. Winemiller turned into her husband's "cross to bear" (as he

repeats constantly) to displace, if not redress, her frustration and rage for her marital captivity. In *Summer and Smoke* Mrs. Winemiller seems to be more aware of her own performance and is therefore a less painful portrait of patriarchal subjectification. The stage directions in that play read "[she] was a spoiled and selfish girl, who evaded the responsibilities of later life by slipping into a state of perverse childishness" (132), the author frames this woman's performance as an evasion from responsibility, thus effectively alienating the reader's (if not the audience's) sympathy towards her, an aspect I would argue is missing in *Eccentricities*.

The other mother of the play is also an extremely fascinating character: Mrs. Buchanan is a controlling woman, who is constantly surveilling her son John as if he were a small child, to make sure he follows her advice toward successful adulthood – for example not wasting time talking with the town's "eccentrics," Alma and a few outcasts who have regular meetings discussing (and occasionally misquoting) poetry. Paradoxically, as John Clum's brilliantly puts it, Mrs. Buchanan herself is some kind of eccentric, walking around town on Christmas Eve dressed as Santa together with her adult son (Clum 42). In *Summer and Smoke* the character of Mrs. Buchanan is completely absent – the only attempt at curbing John's sexual prowess comes from his old father, who miserably fails to wield any control on his son. The character of John's father in *Eccentricities* is almost irrelevant: despite the fact that he is the admired doctor that his son is aspiring to become, he is a presence that sits silently upstairs in his room.

On a biographical level, there is some consensus that the play (together with *Summer and Smoke*) may be inspired by childhood stories of Williams's mother and his own youth (Kolin 80). Edwina Williams and her family lived, in 1916, with her parents in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the town that will become Glorious Hill and which inspired a few of Tennessee Williams's settings. Just like Alma's, Edwina's father, Rev. Dakin, was the Episcopal Minister of the town. But let us move now on to an investigation of a more fictional genealogical line, to uncover a different series of connections with previous works by Williams that we may consider as antecedents, or efforts, in the direction of *Eccentricities*.

The genealogy of Alma's story is generally traced back to a one-act play, "A Chart of Anatomy," written in 1945 about the unrequited love of

a spinster in the Mississippi delta with the local doctor (Harrison, web).[3] The same year sees the publication of a short story, "Something About Him," which stages the "eccentric" clerk Haskell, who is ostracized by the townspeople to the point that he is fired and forced to leave town (see also Clum). In this story Williams explores the theme of excess and incapacity to conform to social pressure, but at the same time he envisions the possibility of an oblique complicity, or at least fascination, between insiders and outcast (John and Alma, of course, but also in this case Haskell and the librarian Miss Rose). Gender non-conformity is at the center of another short story from 1945, "The Important Thing" which narrates the romance between John and Flora. "One Arm" is an acclaimed gay-themed short story by Williams centered on the hustler Oliver Winemiller and his life experience between sex and "spirit." Published in the same year that *Summer and Smoke* was produced, this story revolves around a character who shares the last name, and therefore a kinship, with Alma, as well as with the Reverend. A bond that seems to connect the ending of *Eccentricities* to the beginning of "One Arm," or one that entangles, certainly in a very Williams-ian fashion, the expression and development of subjectivity with the articulation of sexual desire (Williams *One Arm*).

The invisible power of kinship is instead at the center of another short story, often quoted as a major antecedent of *Eccentricities*. "The Yellow Bird" first published in 1947 then revised in 1954, is the story of the Tutwilers who go back to the first colonies and to the Salem witch trials. The first American progenitor's wife was accused of conspiring with the devil through the use of a yellow bird. The town accused her, and her husband was particularly vocal in denouncing her without any evidence. Centuries later, Alma Tutwiler, the reverend's daughter, has inherited a certain restlessness towards male authority, and through a few acts of open rebellion she achieves her sexual independence, adulthood, and finally economic success through a magic (diabolic?) intervention. Besides the names and basic plot outlines, there are a few lines that are repeated verbatim in *Eccentricities*. The stronger link this story has with *Eccentricities*, rather than with *Summer*, reinforces the reading that the repression/oppression these characters face is in fact larger than the individual, it is the by-product of societal constraints which may be connected with patriarchal society and

gender norms. To draw a genealogical line between these two texts also highlights that Alma's choice at the end of the play is a positive one, not a tragic, pathetic one as in the 1948 play. In *Eccentricities*, embracing sexual agency is part of the solution in the process towards a successful subject formation, not evidence of a failure, in which the young woman seems to be following her mother (or her ancestors) to social oblivion or death. This nightingale, instead, will finally sing her own tune.

Let us now move our attention now back to one of the productions of the "Chinese Affection" program by Hong Kong Repertory Theatre: David Kaplan's staging of *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*. Whereby in narrative or poetic translations the main agent of cultural adjustment is the translator herself, in dramatic production there seem to be at least a couple of additional "filters" that may claim agency and some degree of autonomy from the original script, before the play reaches the target audience. In addition to the translator, who is of course crucial in this genre as well, I am referring to the director, and the actors. In the following pages we will try to examine how a translated Western text would contribute to "minimizing the space between the stage and the audience," or even, paradoxically, to encouraging Hong Kong theater. How does Mao's choice of this director and Kaplan's choice of this play and its staging collaborate or interfere with the overall objectives of the Repertory Theater?

Williams Meets Hong Kong

David Kaplan is an established theatre director, he has been a lecturer in many universities – Bard, Clark, Hofstra, NYU, Columbia, Rutgers, among others – the curator and co-founder of the *Tennessee Williams Provincetown Festival* (now in its 9th year of activity), the author of several books on acting, Shakespeare, and Tennessee Williams, and finally the editor of the centennial collection of essays *Tenn at One Hundred* (Hansen Publishing Group 2011). He has widely collaborated with international companies and theaters, and has often directed plays in international productions: from Jean Genet's *The Maids* in Mongolia, to a *King Lear* in Uzbekistan, to several productions in Russia and Hong Kong (besides *Eccentricities* he also

staged Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* for Hong Kong Repertory Theatre in 2014).

In 2003 (May 17-June 1) David Kaplan directed for the Hong Kong company Tennessee Williams's *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*. In a private email correspondence, he offered this anecdote as an answer to my question on what led him to choose this play for the Hong Kong performance:

> I was given the option to choose a play by Tennessee Williams and immediately took out *Glass Menagerie* and *Streetcar* because I felt I had little new to say about them. The request came while I was touring in the state of Mississippi (where Williams was born) and I bought the two-volume Library of America collection and read them all in the backseat of the van as we drove from town to town. When I got to certain passages I liked I would ask the actress, Brenda Currin, who was sitting in the front seat to read aloud to me. This is what she read from *Eccentricities*:
>
> "I'm marked to be different, it's stamped on me in big letters so people can read from a distance: 'This Person is Strange.' … Well, I may be eccentric but not so eccentric that I don't have the ordinary human need for love. I have that need, and I must satisfy it, in whatever way my good or bad fortune will make possible for me."
>
> It was as if the god had descended into the car. I knew this was the play I had to do. It spoke so directly of the need for love as part of being human in any culture or language.[4]

While the "need for love" was to him a strong, immediate bond shared by any national culture, he was not oblivious of the other facets for which *Eccentricities* could resonate with the Hong Kong audience. When I asked Kaplan if he felt intimidated by a script in a language he did not master, he replied:

> I've directed *Suddenly Last Summer* in Russian and *Camino Real* in Rioplatanese Spanish. The language is never a difficulty. The words of a play are a recipe to create relationships, if the play or rehearsal works it's because that's what's

> happening no matter what the language. The musicality of Cantonese fit the lyricism of Williams in English very nicely, I thought.

Kaplan has indeed directed many acting workshops around the world, and at least one in Italy with Italian actors (see Francabandera). Despite the fact that different cultures articulate relations in inherently different ways, he may have developed an expertise, through his transnational career, that enables him to read across cultural differences looking for the veracity of a relationship, or whether it "works" or not, "no matter what the language." In his choice of a play he also displayed a sensibility for the target audience, in addition to his own artistic agenda.

> What attracted me was that the sexual need of Alma at the end of *Eccentricities* was a positive thing, not vaguely pathetic as in *Summer and Smoke*. There are formal differences, of course, between later and earlier Williams, but there are also thematic differences and the value of sexual satisfaction as a force for beauty and strength (rather than weakness or failure) is one of them….
>
> I was very aware that keeping face is an essential part of Chinese culture, and in Hong Kong in particular, so I knew the Hong Kong audience would understand Alma's shame with her family and in her community – not to mention the attempt to keep her face with John. (Kaplan)

The concept of face (面子), as is widely known, is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. It clearly points to a sense of appearance rather than inner being, an idea of external respectability and propriety, and ultimately prestige. It creates a sort of double standard (certainly not unique to Chinese culture) about what happens within closed walls (or inside a person's mind/heart) and what is displayed to the community. It truly works in complicity with social conformity. A good face is nothing but what is allowed for a face to be, strictly within the limits of the socially sanctioned behavior. Losing one's face (丟面子) may discredit not just the individual in the eyes of the community, but the entire group or family as well: therefore the members of a close group are worried as much about their own face as they are about

the face of each one of their fellow members. To keep face means therefore to maintain an acceptable, proper persona in social interactions.

Williams was working precisely on the privileges and the benefits of social conformity in this play, especially if we contextualize it within the social anxieties both of the Cold War consensus of the late 40s and 50s in the United States and with the playwright's own sexuality – "Have you thought how it might look to people" (33) asks worriedly the Reverend, echoing one too many concerns of the young Williams at the peak of his success. The story of Alma (with a few of its antecedents) is even more dramatic because her position as the reverend's daughter demands even stricter standards of propriety, which she first fails to fulfill, and at last defies openly: "I've had to bite my tongue so much it's a wonder I have one left" (29).

Alma's mother, on the other hand, is not willing to bite her tongue and with her embarrassing interruptions and incursions into the living room is a precursor of the eponymous character of the 1979 volume by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a classic reading of feminism, rage, repression, and the female writer (inspired, as is well known, by the character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*). Unlocking the madwoman from the attic is to some extent a strategy that Williams is performing in this play, with regards to both Mrs. Winemiller and Alma herself, especially through these two characters' belligerent attitude towards traditional patriarchal society and marriage ideals.

By choosing *Eccentricities*, Kaplan is articulating a fascinating cultural intervention in the target audience. While gender (in)equality in Hong Kong, in terms of education, employment, income and opportunities for leadership, seems to be certainly comparable to the standards in Europe or North America, ("Gender Equality") the contemporary society of Hong Kong is still generally invested in the idea of traditional Chinese wedding – which has its roots in Confucian values such as filial piety. Marriage is still a goal, a necessary step towards adulthood, and the habit of giving a dowry, from the groom to the bride's parents, which is still relatively common, is a problematic reminder of the traditional commoditization of a woman's life and her reduction into a property to be exchanged among men. Needless to say, the dowry system also functions as a guarantee of

class purity: a lower class groom would not be able to pay for a higher class bride's dowry. The oblique critique that Williams is moving to the institution of marriage may certainly resonate with a Hong Kong audience, and the fact that Alma is not dreaming of a married life with John at the end of the play, but becomes an unapologetic "spinster" who learns to pursue her sexual gratification, has the potential both to alienate the sympathy for this character by a part of the audience and to be embraced as a positive model by another part, stirring possible conversation.

A similar conflicting reception may develop from the character of the controlling mother that we have analyzed in Mrs. Buchanan, who surveils every step of her overachieving (and now *outgrown*) child. She embodies a very familiar image in the contemporary popular debate in Hong Kong. Since the publication of Amy Chua's article on the *Wall Street Journal* "Why Chinese Mothers are Superior" in January 2011, and her bestselling if controversial book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* in the same year, Hongkongers (and certainly non-Chinese families) have become particularly self-aware of the difference in the practices of children's education that are widely adopted in some prosperous Asian societies and that would be generally considered unusual in western societies. Amy Chua writes, with some degree of mock haughtiness, of how she turned her daughters into overachievers through hard rules and discipline, forbidding any pursuit of pleasure (or any personal interest unsanctioned by herself) and exercising an obsessive control over her daughters' every step. "Tiger Mom" is such a common phrase in Hong Kong that people use it in their everyday conversation, either when the speaker wants to denounce somebody's flaws, or with fervent pride. Mrs. Buchanan is very close to a caricature of a tiger mom, obsessed with her son's achievement and willing to devour anything that may threaten to arrest it. As Alma over-excitedly tells her father: "She was determined that John should make the right kind of marriage for a young doctor to make, a girl with beauty and wealth and social position somewhere in the East! The Orient where the sun rises!" (15-16). Rather than being an improbable reference to an emerging Asia, Williams here is signaling the (North) East coast as a primary source of status and wealth, especially in the perspective of a Mississippian in the early twentieth century.

Possibly because of its double heritage as Chinese and British, with

their own traditions of strongly stratified hierarchical societies, the contemporary world metropolis of Hong Kong feels deeply the fascination for displays of status and propriety. It is a sharply classist society, obsessed with the face of success, a society whose ruling classes compulsively produce a thick line between power and powerlessness, success and failure, leaders and followers, us and them. And it is fiercely invested (as a society, with its educational and cultural apparatuses) in policing that boundary, now more so than in most other places in the West. In this perspective, to have a child like Alma is a disgrace in Hong Kong as much as it is in Glorious Hill, and not just because of her defiance, but for the hopelessness of her integration within the ranks of the good people of the town. As the Reverend reminds his daughter, "Eccentric people are not happy, they are not happy people, Alma" (34).

Eccentric Romances

The Cantonese translation, as we have seen, is but the latest of the transformations this play underwent, both after and before the publication of *Eccentricities* in 1964. The Cantonese title reads 請愛我一小時, "[Please] Love Me for an Hour" and it refers to a conversation, toward the end of the play, between Alma and John, when she is convincing him to take her to the Motel:

> ALMA: "I know that you don't love me."
> JOHN: "No. No, I'm not in love with you."
> ALMA: "I wasn't counting on that tonight or ever."
> JOHN: "God. Yes, God. You talk as straight as a man and you look right into my eyes and say you're expecting *nothing?!*"
> ALMA: I'm looking into your eyes but I'm not saying that. I expect a great deal. But for tonight only. Afterward nothing, nothing! Nothing at all.... give me the hour and I'll make a lifetime of it."

Despite the tone of the play, the translated title seems to evoke a romantic comedy, probably the most popular and omnipresent genre in Cantonese

cinema and television. And while it clearly suggests the cliché theme of unrequited love, it possibly brings to mind the image of a clueless woman in need of "the man's" love, begging for it and willing to be satisfied by an hour, a man's crumbs that will mean the world to her. As a plot outline this is not even too foreign to many Cantonese and Chinese romantic comedies, on TV or in the theaters, which become blockbusters in Hong Kong. In the face of some clear analogy, the truth of what is happening in that scene of the play is radically different.

In that dialogue Alma is acting nothing like the stereotypical submissive female character that traditionally inhabits romantic comedies. She is "awkwardly" aggressive and is trying to manipulate the conversation with John, with burning honesty, to reach her (sexual) goal. John, possibly like the audience in both the U.S. and Hong Kong, is surprised by her attitude, in contrast with her previously performed fragility, mixed with bursts of uncontrolled displays of emotion. To John her behavior now is only comparable to a masculine attitude of sexual conquest, precisely after he has allegedly given her the sad news that should have made her sob for the next few minutes ("I'm not in love with you"). However, elsewhere in the play, though to some extent unlike this scene, her gender non conformity, as Clum notices, does not lie in her masculinity nor is it so much a lack of femininity, but it seems instead "an excess of effeminacy" (Clum 10). What Clum suggests is that Alma's eccentricity seems to function precisely like the gender non-conformity of *gay men*. But how do we get there?

In 1953, critic Stanley Edgar Hyman coined the phrase "Albertine Strategy" to designate "the writing of stories of homosexual love in the guise of heterosexual love" (418). The label coined by Hyman was inspired by Proust's character in *In Search of Lost Time*, but the "strategy" is a camouflage technique rather known today (to gay readers) and probably has been for centuries until the late twentieth century, which allowed writers to bypass censorship and moral taboo while at the same time signaling to the "inside" readership that this story was for them to enjoy (but where it ends, and where strategies of queer appropriation of mainstream plots begin, is up to the critic to interpret). Hyman was focusing specifically on Proust, but referring also to Tennessee Williams and William Inge as American practitioners of the strategy. As Clum suggests, Tennessee Williams may

be winking at the gay audience, while providing the possibility for an alternative gay reading to some of the crucial passages of the play (Clum 43).

As we have seen, there are several moments in the play in which Alma acts in what may be read as "masculine" ways. Let me just focus on a couple of passages to illustrate this point. In doing this I would use a first example borrowed by Clum's argument, and the following ones are additional evidences that Clum may have overlooked. Clum cites a scene in which Alma recounts of her night out with John: "'Didn't you feel the pressure of my – knee? – Tonight? – In the movies?' (*The audience may laugh at this question. Take a count of ten)*" (*Eccentricities* 94, Clum 43). Before Stonewall, the movie theater was traditionally a sexually charged arena where gay people cruised for sexual encounters. In that recalling of a scene we couldn't see on stage, Alma is acting like an aggressive gay man. The time of pause that Williams includes in his stage direction, a long time in theater, is there to allow for laughter at the ironic position of Alma, the playwright envisions the audience laughing *at* Alma for her being pathetically unfeminine and inappropriate.

In a later passage, in the hotel room, when John praises Alma's sincerity, she replies "If I had had the beauty and desirability of a woman, it would not have been necessary for me to be honest" (104). The wording of this line is clearly suspect, and besides conflating womanhood with desirability and beauty, it may also be read as her attempt to calling herself out of the gender identity visible on her skin. To go back to Tennessee Williams's passion for and identification with Alma, we also notice that he is referring to her, in a famous interview with *Playboy*, in terms that can be applied to a gay male subject: "Alma of *Summer and Smoke* is my favorite – because I came out so late and so did Alma, and she had the greatest struggle, you know?" (Jennings 81) To "come out" is clearly the term applied to a pivotal moment/ritual in LGBT lives when one's own sexuality is revealed to others. Williams here is referring to Alma's acceptance of her own sexual desires, as an integral part of her own subjectivity rather than an unpleasant burden to carry through adulthood and wifehood.

In this "Albertine" light, Alma's mannerisms and affectations may acquire a different twist. If we assume that Williams was well aware of

Hyman's article, we realize that the name Albertine is actually repeatedly used in *Eccentricities* (and not once in *Summer*). Aunt Albertine, Alma's aunt, was a well known outcast figure in town after she fell in love with a Mr. Schwarzkopf, and together opened the Musée Mechanique in New Orleans. It was filled with technological wonders that he himself had built, most famously the "bird girl," which attracted her creator most. The museum was confiscated after a bad investment (a boa constrictor that eventually dies swallowing a blanket), and Albertine's lover left her behind and burnt the museum down. The poor Albertine died in the flames. Alma's mother, in her insanity, keeps telling everyone that she needs to go to the Museum, in denial about its destruction and her sister's death. Even in this sketched summary, we see that there is "something" about these women, something that runs in the blood, so to speak, which squeezes them between a fire within and a birdcage without. The bird, again, makes her symbolic appearance (the play is rich with Williams's abundant symbolism). This insistence on "Albertine" as a word, and the hints about Alma's gender defiance, may lead us into thinking that the playwright was playing, more or less ironically, precisely Hyman's game, and was well aware of doing it, and it suggests the analogy between Alma's story and a same sex version of its tensions. As Clum acknowledges, however, these evidences do not "just" turn Alma into a gay man, but they rather stress her queerness (Clum 43), the analogy of a queer subject affirming herself in a society that appreciates "straightness" over eccentricity. My borrowing Clum's reading is therefore a univocal way to stabilize the interpretation of the story as "gay": instead, it is an attempt to acknowledge that this story applies equally to a woman and to a gay man, and more widely to point out that it reads as an allegory of social conformity and defiance.

David Kaplan was, one might imagine, well aware of the multiple subtexts and genealogies of the play. His Hong Kong production, in fact, had two casts:

> Bobby Lau played Alma in one cast, with his own John, Mother and Father. Priscilla Poon played Alma in another cast, with her own John, Mother and Father. Mrs. Buchanan was the same for both casts, as were the other roles, though with somewhat different interpretations, especially in the last scene

with the traveling salesman. With Priscilla the salesman was timid and virginal, with Bobby the salesman was aggressive and took charge....

Q: *What made you envision this opportunity, and how did it play out in performance?*
I had done a workshop about a year before with the company where we worked on the first two acts of Hedda Gabler, For that workshop every member of the company played each of the characters. Everyone took turns playing Hedda, Lovborg, Tesman, Aunt Juju, the Judge. As a result I wanted to work with everyone again – and Bobby Lau was a sensational Hedda, very pure. So we had two companies.
From the beginning we knew Bobby would not be in drag, but dressed as a young man, so that it would be clear he was playing the soul of the character (which is after all the name of the character). Even so, the resonance of having a young man play the role was very strong. The scene when the Reverend reprimands his child for extravagant hand gestures resulted in weeping from both Almas, but the sight of a son being told this by a father to tone down his gestures made people themselves weep. Again, I stress he wasn't playing a gay man, but the double-exposure of meaning was unavoidable. Priscilla was particularly moving in this scene, too.

By opening up the Augustine "code" of the play, Kaplan turns one of the two versions of his staging into an openly gay story, apparently despite his own intentions. The choice of not having Bobby Lau (Lau Shau Ching) perform in drag in effect reinforces the gay theme. His interpretation of this choice, however, fails to convince me completely. Surely Alma is the "soul," but to gender this soul in a masculine body carries with it a heavy burden of signification and history, especially because the core of the play is about gender conformity and sexual desire. How the scene of a male Alma seducing a male John would be read as a non-gay scene exceeds my capacity for imagination, and so happens with regards to the readability of Alma as a non-gay man. Kaplan, on the other hand, acknowledges the "double exposure of meaning" and its effects on the audience.

The director's decision to multiply the possible readings and to give them both equal status on stage goes in the direction of embracing the twofold directions in which this play develops, let's call them the feminist and the gay one. It must be said, however, that the strategy of unlocking

a (gay) code and confronting the audience with a decisive directorial (and actorial) interpretation of the play could have been performed in other locations as well – it has to do with Hong Kong only insofar it originated by a workshop practice by Kaplan and the actors of the HK Rep. The main thread that I have attempted to reveal in both the genealogical investigation of the play and in its Hong Kong production has been the theme of the privileges and benefits of social conformity, those a subject renounces when she gives up compliance and deference to embrace her eccentricity in the face of social pressure. This may well be the story of the eccentric children of Hong Kong in a fiercely competitive and extremely intense socio-political conjuncture, but it certainly bears a universal resonance that exceeds any given specificity of location and history.

Notes

[1] It is a common practice to "title," which is also to suggest a thematic unity to, theater seasons in Hong Kong, The current artistic director of the HK Rep, Anthony Chan, titled the 2013 season "Old Hong Kong Sentiment" and the 2014 season "Survival in Hardship."

[2] See also <http://www.hkrep.com/en/about-us-en/>

[3] "A Chart of Anatomy" will also be the first pre-production title for *Summer and Smoke*, which instead alludes to a poem by Hart Crane "Emblems of Conduct."

[4] David Kaplan, private email correspondence with the author, April 22, 2014. All quotation from Kaplan henceforth are taken from this email conversation.

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