Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

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In the 2013–14 Broadway production of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, directed by John Tiffany, the character Laura Wingfield is pulled out of the couch by her brother, Tom, during his opening monologue. Each of the four times I attended, the audience gasped at this emergence. The unusual entrance suggests strangeness and otherworldliness: it is the production's first reading of Laura's difference. This strangeness—figured in part as Laura's uncommon beauty—is in many ways the problem of *The Glass Menagerie*, creating anxiety in Amanda and making Tom feel trapped. On the page, Laura emerges more subtly, a young woman whose body and behavior do not conform to constructed notions of success and beauty. In the "Author's Production Notes" that precede the text of the play, Williams instructs readers that Laura's situation is "grave" because of a "crippling" illness that shortened one leg, the cause of her increasing separation: "she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf" (129). Laura's fragility has been read in varying ways—by the playwright, director, characters, audience, and critics—and the stakes are high: the conditions for female bodies in *The Glass Menagerie* are poisonous, if not fatal. The concept of a queer aesthetic, however, allows Laura—and the play itself—to be read as actively resisting heteronormative narratives of the good life and as conjuring alternative options for female desire and agency.

This particular Broadway run is over, but in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José E. Muñoz argues that it is not only possible but necessary to "push beyond the impasse of the present" in the

aftermath of the ephemeral performance (31)—specifically, in reconsidering what it means for a performance to be here—to see or sense the flickers of past encounters in a messy, heavy, dark present. For Muñoz, the "best performances do not disappear but instead linger in our memory, haunt our present, and illuminate our future" (104). This kind of illumination is crucial when imagining queer utopias in the here and now and recovering what has been lost to traditional methodologies and rigid understandings of what it means to be present (72). *The Glass Menagerie* is a play that attempts something like what Muñoz describes, by staging the coexistence of the past and the present. In his opening monologue, Tom tells audiences that this play "is memory" and is thus dimly lighted, sentimental, and not realistic (145). From this opening monologue on, *The Glass Menagerie* calls audiences to see, hear, feel, imagine, and recognize while attending to the failures of these sensibilities—the "dead end[s]" and "darkness" Jack Halberstam finds crucial to a queer aesthetic (96), an aesthetic Muñoz explores across his body of work.

The Glass Menagerie is blatant in its critique of what Sara Ahmed would call "happy objects," objects that are passed around because of a shared "orientation toward those objects as being good" regardless of whether or not happiness is, in fact, "the feeling that passes" (44). As Ahmed points out, these happy objects provide not happiness but the expectation of happiness and thus the "emotional setting for disappointment" (29). Of these normative inclinations, Ahmed argues that marriage is still considered the champion—the path that "maximizes happiness" (6). *The Glass Menagerie*, and responses to Laura within and outside of the play, may usefully be put in conversation with Ahmed's reading of marriage as a happy object—in particular, with Ahmed's examination of the danger of assuming it is possible to know what actions will or will not improve a life.

For the Wingfield family, the promise of happiness begins and ends in Jim, a gentleman caller, "a nice, ordinary, young man" (*Glass Menagerie* 129). Jim is folded into part 1 as the "sunrise" the Wingfields' world is waiting for, as the stage direction "*Dance music: 'The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise!'*" suggests (179). Amanda, particularly, anticipates his arrival as relieving her of Laura's dependency and Tom's unhappiness. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant calls this fantasy of happiness a "stupid" form of

optimism: "the faith that adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking—for example, the prospect of class mobility, the romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or a better sexual identity—will secure one's happiness" (126). *The Glass Menagerie* offers a narrative of this cultural paralysis—the inability to turn away from marriage in order to desire otherwise or better—and the devastation it causes.

This fantasy of marriage as a path to happiness is a problem because of Laura's relation to normative measures of female beauty and, consequently, marriage. Tiffany's choice of a surprising, surreal entrance for Laura points less to a grave situation, however, than to the simple fact of Laura's difference—and, I will argue, to the resistant nature of her uncommon beauty. Her beauty and its being uncommon are mentioned explicitly by other characters, but its resistance, also present in the play text, is implicit and easy to miss. The attribute of resistance is illuminated through an optic called for by Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*—one attuned to "the ways in which, through small gestures, particular intonations, and other ephemeral traces, queer energies and lives are laid bare [. . .] a queer optic that permits us to take in the queerness that is embedded in gesture" (72)—and through the work of Ahmed and Berlant. This essay puts *The Glass Menagerie* and these theorists in conversation in order to examine the dead ends of a pulverizing present for Laura and, more important, to reveal not only the presence of but also the possibilities offered by queer aesthetics—flames, flashes of light, smoke, vapors, and other interruptions that come out of the blue, revealing a loud, dark, dynamic world that defies crippling good-life scripts of normativity and success.

"Hello, Blue Roses!": The Privilege of Naming

Over the course of *The Glass Menagerie*, the female body—often explicitly linked to flowers—is pruned and cultivated by language and then deemed acceptable or unacceptable. Laura's mother, Amanda, for example, invests in Laura's likeness to a flower from the start of the play, urging her to stay "fresh and pretty" for gentlemen callers (149–50) and (initially, at least) vehemently rejecting the use of the word "crippled" to describe her daughter: "Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect—hardly noticeable, even!" (157). Through redescribing Laura's disability as a "little defect,"

Amanda upholds the power of such identifiers, still relying on standards of "normal" or common beauty in her desire to make her daughter acceptable and steer her toward the happy object Amanda has chosen for her.

Williams's production notes, which include directions on how audiences should read, see, and encounter Laura, cast her as a delicate, vulnerable beauty who lacks a place in the world. The notes point to the "lovely fragility of glass which is her image," remarking of glass that it is beautiful and easily broken. According to the notes, the lighting should distinguish Laura from the other characters, offering "peculiar pristine clarity." Williams uses a simile to describe the desired effect: "such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas" (133–34). The adjective "pristine" and the allusion to saintliness participate in long traditions of using religious terms to fix, even isolate or immobilize, female beauty by characterizing it as otherworldly or impossible. Audiences are consistently told that Laura is a young woman who, like the lovely but easily broken creatures of her glass menagerie, is silent, fragile, and unmoving. Viewed through the lens of a queer aesthetic, however, Laura may be read as escaping even her playwright and as less silent, fragile, and stationary than such images of saintliness, flowers, and glass suggest.

Scene 2, in particular, begins with the image of blue roses lighting an otherwise dark stage (151). The projected flowers appear just before Laura and Amanda discuss Rubicam's Business College (a path selected by Amanda because of Laura's lack of gentlemen callers) and the "fiasco" in which Laura suffered a panic attack, causing her to drop out without telling Amanda (159). Upon learning of Laura's failure at Rubicam's, Amanda returns to marriage as the last option for Laura to live a good, or at least sustainable, life. Laura responds to Amanda's inquiries about "boys" she might like with the following anecdote:

> He used to call me—Blue Roses. [. . .] When I had that attack of pleurosis—he asked me what was the matter when I came back. I said pleurosis—he thought that I said Blue Roses! So that's what he always called me after that. Whenever he saw me, he'd holler, "Hello, Blue Roses!" (157)

In the anecdote, the image of blue roses—generally read by critics and audiences alike as signifying her uncommon beauty—is attached to Laura

by Jim. Jim's act of naming Laura—equating her with a flower that does not exist in nature—can be read as a small version of what Tom Wingfield's narration does on a larger scale. Criticism largely posits the play as Tom's effort, through the art of playwriting, to rediscover or memorialize his beloved sister, casting her as a blue flower in human form. Georges-Michel Sarotte reads the nickname as a sickness metamorphosed into a flower, an extraordinarily—and extra-ordinarily—beautiful one (145). For Bert Cardullo, Jim's nickname for Laura signifies her affinity with the transcendent—blue roses do not occur naturally and thus come to symbolize "her yearning for both ideal or mystical beauty and spiritual or romantic love" (106). Jim's mishearing suggests to Cardullo that Laura's existence is oxymoronic: Laura is "a young woman of this world who simultaneously, like the lovely but easily broken creatures of her glass menagerie, seems physically unfit for or unadapted to an earthly life" (108).

These readings romanticize Laura's uncommon beauty and ultimately uphold the traditional aesthetics that render Laura not merely strange but also fragile and unable to navigate the possibilities she is allowed as a young woman. They find support in the fact that many scholars read Laura as inspired by Williams's sister, Rose, who struggled with mental illness, later exacerbated by a botched lobotomy. For these critics, Williams's sister—a real-world Rose, whose mind and body are literally pruned by surgery imposed on her in a quest for normalcy—haunts the metaphors used to characterize Laura (Leverich 149). Robert Bray writes that *The Glass Menagerie* reflects "the sadness of Rose's existence" in its commentary on the processes of taming, cultivation, and improvement enacted on bodies and landscapes in order to yield domestic, intelligible beings (xi). Interpretations that lean hard on the connection to Rose Williams posit Laura as a symbol of unmitigated—and powerless—difference, her "paralyzing shyness" (Williams, *Glass* 210) preventing her from any kind of normal relationship with those around her.[1]

These readings of Laura often depend on the aesthetics of blue roses as uncommon, artificial, or otherworldly; indeed, a blue rose must be painted or dyed to exist outside of the imagination. Amy Stewart's *Flower Confidential*, an account of the cut-flower business, discusses the elusive blue rose at length in the chapter "Engineered to Perfection." Stewart

points out that blue roses do not exist in nature; they "are phonies, clearly artificial, entirely unnatural" (39). Red roses have a literary history as the flower of undying passion, enduring love, pleasure, and woman's beauty, and, similarly, the white rose has long been a symbol of purity, innocence, and faith—but a blue rose has "no history, no mythology, and therefore no meaning" (44–45). Stewart argues that blue roses are divorced from the symbolic lineage of their counterparts and, thus, less desirable. At one point, she describes a conversation with a florist in which she asks him doubtfully if he would even want a blue rose, should they be crossbred into existence: "I mean, do you look around your garden and say, 'What this place needs is a blue rose'?" (45).

Stewart's rejection of the blue rose aesthetic illuminates the larger structures dictating good and beautiful subjects in *The Glass Menagerie*. In being called by this nickname, by Jim, Laura is cast outside of an imagined natural world: because of her disability; because of her refusal to perform a productive, legible version of femininity; and because of her silence. Blue Roses is a name born of a word misheard: it is a homophone for Laura's bout with pleurosis, an inflammation of the thin membrane covering the lungs that causes difficult, painful breathing—a sickness that makes it difficult for her to speak. The name is then "holler[ed]" at Laura by Jim. The choice of the verb "holler" is interesting. Not only does it contrast sharply with Laura's silence and imply that his speech overrides hers, but the word's root in *hollo* also connects it to the word *hollow* ("Hollo"), suggesting that the gentleman caller's holler is hollow and that this name—however evocative—says more about how Laura (and, I argue, queer aesthetics) is narrated than it does about Laura's internal landscape.

Laura's anecdote about the nickname Blue Roses is commonly read as evidence of her affection for Jim and an image that romanticizes her otherworldly beauty, but these readings of Laura and blue roses, in both the play and the criticism on it, extinguish queer energies and histories. Of the sonics in the play, Robert Baker-White notes, "[T]he entire set of missed aural connections positions the play itself as a kind of slippage, or lost opportunity. That it surely is for the central characters—especially Laura and Amanda, who may never again, the ending seems to imply, have the opportunity for happiness that Jim's encounter promised, but failed to

deliver" (36–37). David Savran notes that the "audiovisual pun obliquely links Laura with her gentleman caller, her infirmity with her beauty. [. . .] A self-contradicting icon—simultaneously natural and unnatural, beautiful and grotesque, picture and spoken text—it does not belong to any one subject but, as a kind of collective hallucination, hovers above subjectivity and, indeed, above private property" (94). Such readings incorporate Laura and her beauty—and also Amanda, as I will argue later—into a privileged, heteronormative system of aesthetics and render the women dependent on that system.

Laura's anecdote, however, is not so easily contained. It can be read instead as her choice to claim irrational forms of naming and, in so doing, to step outside the heteronormative system of aesthetics that fails her and into a queer one. Her recounting of the anecdote invites the reader to place the discourse about her beauty in a larger context, one that reads her couch, her unicorn, her walks, and even her mother's illusions as attempts "to desire differently, to desire more, to desire better" (Muñoz, *Cruising* 189).

Cruel Optimism and the "Freakish" Unicorn

In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz describes his desire "for an alien who looks like an alien, who is odd and freakish, and reflects [his] own freakishness back." He includes a friend's "shiny painting" as signaling "a desire for another way of being in the world, another way of knowing the world, and this world is one gleaming with potentiality" (130). I argue that *The Glass Menagerie* depicts this kind of desire for another way of being in the world, depending on how Laura and her beauty are read.

Muñoz notes that "one's queerness will always render one lost to a world" (73). The lack of place—of a home—is key to Amanda's urgent obsession with finding Laura a husband and, implicitly, with instilling her own value system in her daughter. As Ahmed argues, "If parenting is about orienting the children in the right way, then children must place their hopes for happiness in the same things"—that is, the same happy objects (48). It is not Laura, however, who participates in Amanda's value system, but the audience members. The final scene of *The Glass Menagerie* is easily read and interpreted as Laura's first and last chance for true love

and happiness. It is hard for audiences not to share Amanda's desire for Laura to fit into conventional narratives of the good life and wish for her the only happiness offered by a poisonous, insolvent present. In wishing this happiness for Laura, however, audiences accept "the judgment about certain objects as being 'happy' [. . .] before they are even encountered" (Ahmed 28). More than seventy-five years after the play first premiered on Broadway, marriage, unfortunately, is still the happiest object and ending possible for Laura and audiences alike.

The fear that drives Amanda to find a "gentleman caller" for her daughter (159)—even though her own marriage ended in Mr. Wingfield's escape—is born of what Berlant calls cruel optimism, a "relation [that] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing[, . . .] when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1). This optimism, reflected throughout *The Glass Menagerie*, is not only cruel but also, to use Berlant's word, "stupid," since our hopes for Laura's happiness are attached to marriage, an institution that failed Amanda horribly and created bleak conditions for the Wingfield family.

This failure is materialized and made prominent and visible in the portrait of Mr. Wingfield that is supposed to be hanging in the living room: "*A blown-up photograph of the father hangs on the wall of the living room, to the left of the archway.* [. . .] *He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say 'I will be smiling forever,'*" the stage directions tell the reader. Tom, in his opening narration for the audience, refers to it explicitly: "There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel. This is our father who left us a long time ago" (144–45). In the text of *The Glass Menagerie*, there is not a moment that this portrait is obscured. In the 2013–14 production, however, Mr. Wingfield's portrait is omitted, a choice that draws attention to how Tiffany's version of the play urges audience members to complicate their understanding of what it means to be absent or present. The theater critic Hilton Als writes of that choice, "Bob Crowley's stylish set doesn't feature the absent father's portrait, and that feels right. This is a memory play, and certain details are bound to get lost in memory, particularly when they carry a lot of weight, like a father one hardly knew."

The absence of the portrait points to a lost memory, one lost by Tom, Amanda, and the generations of audience members who hope Laura will marry. Tom, Amanda, and audiences alike are still cruelly optimistic that marriage will offer Laura—and themselves, since they will no longer have to worry about her—happiness.

In part 2 of the play, Jim calls upon Laura—makes the journey over, convenes the meeting, and, both in *calling* and in leaving, eerily alludes to Laura's absent father, a telephone operator who "skipped the light fantastic out of town . . ." (145). When Jim finally calls upon the Wingfields, he knocks, enters, and summons Laura to a legible world, rousing her from her absent state. Jim's investment in the art of public speaking as a path to success further reflects the kind of conversation necessary to be heard in the world—one that seems to revolve around plans for success, high school heroism, and diagnosing abnormalities, such as Laura's supposed inferiority complex. "Think of yourself as *superior* in some way!" Jim advises Laura. "Because other people are not such wonderful people. [. . .] They're common as—weeds, but—you—well, you're—Blue Roses!" (221, 227). The uncomfortable diagnosis and cure Jim offers Laura are riddled with irrational, contradictory statements of agency: Jim suggests that Laura need only think of herself as superior, that her perception of the world is, in fact, the problem, as opposed to the problem being the suffocating conditions of possibility offered to her. Jim's logic implies that, in order to be happy, Laura must participate in a pulverizing hierarchy—she is to learn to look at people as common weeds and to set herself above them, to isolate and reject those who would isolate and reject her.

The final scene of *The Glass Menagerie* offers audiences a glimpse of the familiar happy ending in which Jim seems interested in and attracted to Laura's strange, uncommon beauty. The happy, fairy-tale ending seems, for a moment, possible for strange, "crippled" women such as Laura, who can be made beautiful and superior by the right gaze—the right caller. When Jim arrives in the penultimate scene he has forgotten Laura; she is extinguished from his memory—invisible—until Laura reminds him of the nickname he gave her: "Aw, yes, I've *placed* you now!" (215; emphasis mine). Like the Wingfields and audiences, Jim is eager to place Laura and her beauty, when Laura is in fact narrating a more complicated version

of her own identity, as will be discussed below. When Jim knocks over Laura's beloved glass unicorn and breaks off its horn, Laura placates Jim by saying, "I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less—freakish! [. . .] Now he will feel more *at home* with the other horses" (226; emphasis mine). These final exchanges in *The Glass Menagerie* illuminate the cruel optimism of those who want married happiness for Laura: namely, the Wingfields and audiences alike. Our desire for Laura to be loved by Jim, for her trajectory to fit into our idea of a fairy-tale ending, becomes what Berlant might call an obstacle to her—and perhaps our—flourishing.

The unicorn Jim breaks in this scene is an extension of the blue rose—another otherworldly, utopian, magical figure. It is Laura's unicorn—*her* favorite. In this final scene, *The Glass Menagerie* pleads for, at the very least, skepticism that, as Laura suggests, her unicorn is better off being "just like all the other horses" (226). The violent "operation" Jim causes in this scene reflects previous attempts by Amanda and Tom, in arranging for Jim as caller, to help Laura fit into the box created by heteronormative expectations. After kissing Laura to make her "proud instead of shy," Jim expresses his regret and conjures his fiancée, Betty, "a home-girl" like Laura, and notes that love is "something that—changes the whole world" (228–30). In a sense, Jim's lines work to obscure the portrait of Mr. Wingfield: they attempt to convince audience members that love and marriage are still paths that maximize happiness for young women like Laura.

In attending to this dystopia, I am reminded of Muñoz's passionate demand for desiring better—demanding better—instead of erasing difference and reproducing old, unimaginative ways of knowing and being that do not allow female productivity and possibility to exist outside of marriage and common beauty. I argue that Laura's speech about her broken unicorn calls audience members and readers to yearn for difference, the uncommon beauty that Laura, her unicorn, and blue roses represent. When audiences cannot desire better than Jim, who desires a conventional path of happiness for Laura—despite the histories of the play's characters, despite the lived experiences of the bodies in the space of the playhouse that narrate broken promises of happiness—therein lies tragedy. In breaking off

horns, in pruning and plucking and cultivating bodies, the world simply gets smaller, sadder, and increasingly silent.

Laura as Resisting Female Subject

Although the collection of images attached to Laura is particularly instructive when it comes to how audiences should read, see, and encounter her, this essay keeps in mind that the "act of naming" has traditionally been "a male prerogative" (Rich 35). There are three male speakers in *The Glass Menagerie*: the playwright, the narrator, and the gentleman caller. Each of these callers reads Laura's silence as an invitation to narrate a more pleasing, intelligible narrative of femininity, one that is fragile, vulnerable, and dependent. Although men undeniably name and narrate throughout the play, Laura and Amanda articulate memories and cast worlds that reenvision flowers, glass, and other pretty objects, desiring a world that does not depend on being desired.

Laura's likeness to blue roses, in fact, is a point of entry into a collective of "small gestures, particular intonations, and other ephemeral traces" that reveal "queer energies" in the play (Muñoz, *Cruising* 72), energies that resist prophecies and narratives of the good life that promise happiness but never deliver. These moments in *The Glass Menagerie* are thrilling in the possibilities they posit; they are interruptions that willfully reject productivity and rationality; they are lively, greedy consumptions of beauty; they are moments when the female Wingfields dare to desire differently, to desire more, to desire better. Attending to these marginal moments reveals what Muñoz deems the "then and there of queer futurity"—"venues for performances that allow the spectator access to minoritarian lifeworlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present" (*Cruising* 56), conditions of possibility that defy supposedly natural beauty, goodness, desire, and happiness.

One such ephemeral trace of resistance to traditional narratives of the good life is the value Laura places on sincerity. In recounting her high school memory of Jim, she observes, "I didn't care for the girl that he went out with. [. . .] She never struck me [. . .] as being sincere" (157), suggesting that Laura is well aware that the mere act of entering a heteronormative relationship is not sufficient for happiness. This knowledge and her own

sincerity are part of what sustain her resistance to Amanda's plans and provisions. In the opening scene of the play, when Amanda imagines a flood or tornado must have kept Laura's gentlemen callers away, Laura assures her: "It isn't a flood, it's not a tornado, Mother. I'm just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain" (150). Laura tells Amanda, and audiences, very clearly that they need not have anxiety over the lack of gentlemen calling—for her, it's not a disaster. She is simply not popular like her mother used to be, and for all the things she fears, she does not fear unpopularity. Of note is the fact that Amanda's "confused vitality," her frantic "clinging to another place and time," as well as her memories, her jonquils, her endurance and heroism, originate in Blue Mountain (129). Amanda and Laura's having in common a link to the color blue points to an affinity between their ways of desiring. Although the color blue has associative roots in sickness, sadness, and pained, dying bodies, it also symbolizes unknown horizons, utopias that are out of contact, just beyond reach.

Scene 2 also shows Laura actively resisting the happy objects pushed on her and offers audiences a glimpse into a utopian world already here for her. After dropping out of business school, Laura goes walking in winter to "[a]ll sorts of places," a daily routine she describes as "the lesser of two evils" (154–55). Amanda is flabbergasted that Laura walks around for six weeks in winter from seven a.m. to four p.m. ("Deliberately courting pneumonia in that light coat?") and reads this choice as one made only to deceive her mother (155). Reactions such as these suggest Laura's family is used to narrating her experience as one of a child, vulnerable and defiant. Laura addresses her mother's concern, however, as follows:

> It wasn't as bad as it sounds. I went inside places to get warmed up. [. . .] I went in the art museum and the bird houses at the Zoo. I visited the penguins every day! Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel Box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers. (155)

Although the visible brace Laura must wear draws attention to her disability in a way that is, in and of itself, disabling (in scene 7, she describes the uncomfortable experience of walking into class—and the loud noise

her brace made [215]), once she is away from Amanda's gaze and that of her peers, Laura is comfortable walking.[2] Before confronting Laura at the beginning of scene 2, Amanda "*stares*" as her. Laura begs, "Please don't stare at me, Mother." Of this "look," she says, "I couldn't face it" (152, 155). Unwatched by anyone, including the audience, who does not see her on her wanderings, Laura walks in and out of menageries—homes for animals, plants, and art objects—for weeks. These spaces offer venues for performances that allow Laura access to worlds that interrupt normative narratives of the good life. The enjoyable hours Laura spends walking, at her own pace and leisure, suggest that her physical disability is also an aesthetic construction, that she is "crippled" by the constructs of good and beautiful. The above account, then, is a lived experience of utopia, an opening of doors to a queer "then and there"—spaces that exist beyond the realm of possibility her mother can imagine. These welcoming, unassuming, silent homes and objects are tucked away in rooms and menageries made accessible to Laura only through heretical wandering.

One such space is the greenhouse called the Jewel Box. The structure is a glass house with a warm, inviting climate and is home to precious, valuable ornaments: tropical flowers that display and create colorful patterns and designs. Like the bird houses at the zoo Laura visits, the Jewel Box is also a menagerie, a collection, an exhibition—of flowers. The etymology of *menagerie* is rooted in the "administration of a house and [especially] a farm"—a place in which one dwells, stays, manages, and keeps ("Menagerie"). By seeking out this space, Laura might be read as placing herself as a blue rose, unaccounted for and absent from supposedly natural worlds. Housing flowers out of place, the Jewel Box calls audiences to do the hard work of creating blueprints for utopias, worlds warm and inviting to women like Laura.

Laura's ability to elude Amanda's, Tom's, Jim's, and the audience's gaze extends into part 2 of the play. After collapsing when forced to accept Jim's call, for example, Laura lies on the couch while Tom, Amanda, and Jim eat dinner. She is "*huddled*" on the sofa, a verb that denotes a secret conference or consultation, often when a player considers his or her next move (207). This stage direction might be put in conversation with Laura's entrance

and exit through the couch in the 2013–14 production. The couch is an almost archetypal symbol of the heteronormative home, but, in this scene, Laura takes refuge in this object—using it in heretical ways of resisting.

On the couch, Laura is described as gazing out the window at a storm with wide, watchful eyes (207). The storms that move in and out of the play come on "abruptly," causing the curtains to billow into the Wingfields' home and emitting "*a sorrowful murmur from the deep blue dusk*" (205). Just as blue roses are a strange, incoherent aesthetic, the murmuring dusk is a landscape of liquid and air, continuous in its indirection. The "deep blue" of the dusk is opaque and fluid in its resistance and giving over. Her fainting renders Laura incapable of progressing in a relationship with Jim over dinner and creates for her a moment of contemplation that interrupts straight time, a kind of temporality that Muñoz describes as having a "stranglehold" on far too many queer people (*Cruising* 32).

Laura chooses to walk to these sites, spaces that offer comfort to her, as well as to the uprooted and ornamental. These ornamental aesthetics reveal a "crashing wave of potentiality" (185), as Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia*:

> Silver clouds, swirls of camouflage, mirrors, a stack of white sheets of paper, and painted flowers are passports allowing us entry to a utopian path, a route that should lead us to heaven or, better yet, to something just like it. [. . .] And this conjured reality instructs us that the "here and now" is simply not enough. (146, 171)

The path Muñoz describes above is similar to the path of sensual excess and extravagance Laura describes to Amanda in scene 2. Resisting those who seek to place her, Laura devours common and uncommon beauty—she desires a world beyond the here and now, beyond business school and gentlemen callers, and instructs audiences through her conjured realities that our happy objects are "simply not enough" (171). In attending to these strange objects, objects not commonly held to be happy, as opposed to success and marriage, Laura refuses to dwell in, to take root in, this "poisonous and insolvent" present (30). In this way, she might be turned to as a failed visionary, oddball, or freak who Muñoz proposes "remind[s] queers

that indeed they always live out of step with straight time" (149), instead of having her difference continually romanticized as otherworldly beauty.

"I'll Hold Them Myself": Amanda's Jonquils

Williams's opening character descriptions mention that Amanda is "unwittingly cruel at times" (129), an attribute particularly visible in her treatment of Laura, as traced in this essay. In scene 6, however, moments before the gentleman caller arrives, Amanda and Laura share a rare moment that is not charged with cruelty or anxiety. Significantly, this moment of their connection features both the color blue and flowers. Amanda asks Laura to "look" at her, emerging onstage with a blue silk sash and carrying a bunch of jonquils. Upon her entrance, the stage directions note that "*the legend of her youth is nearly revived*" and that her tone is feverish (193). At first, Amanda organizes this feverish world around events and spaces in which she wore the dress she has on:

> This is the dress in which I led the cotillion. Won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, wore one Spring to the Governor's Ball in Jackson! See how I sashayed around the ballroom, Laura*? (She raises her skirt and does a mincing step around the room.)* I wore it on Sundays for my gentlemen callers! I had it on the day I met your father. . . . I had malaria fever all that Spring. (193)

In recollecting various dances and balls, Amanda steps, sashays, twirls, and dances—gestures Muñoz describes as queer in their resistance to endings and permanency (*Cruising*, ch. 9). Amanda's joy is interrupted, however, by "your father"; indeed, the dances Amanda evokes are dances that feature a caller who must loudly announce the figures. The space between meeting Mr. Wingfield and a spring of malaria fever, evidenced by an ellipsis, is pregnant with loss. There is no way of knowing this space, but the sudden interruption of Amanda's husband chokes the dance, the gestures, and the memory.

In this space, however, there is perhaps a realization of the illusory promises of happiness. Shortly after the pregnant pause, Amanda's narrative shifts unexpectedly, away from other suitors or callers to a description of a landscape "flooded" with jonquils (194). Amanda gathers and gathers these flowers with urgency. Jonquils are part of the genus *Narcissus*,

a botanical link to the mythological character often claimed as a queer figure. Often the first flowers to bloom in the spring, they are highly perfumed, emitting a heady, sensual fragrance. Amanda remembers:

> Jonquils became an absolute obsession. Mother said, "Honey, there's no more room for jonquils." And still I kept on bringing in more jonquils. Whenever, wherever I saw them, I'd say, "Stop! Stop! I see jonquils!" [. . .] Finally there were no more vases to hold them, every available space was filled with jonquils. No vases to hold them? All right, I'll hold them myself! (194)

Such beauty, here, in Amanda's description of her "craze" for jonquils, provides relief from "the art of conversation" and the "going, going" that characterize success, the crushing heteronormative tide, in the world of *The Glass Menagerie* (194, 148, 193). To imagine "every available space" filled with jonquils, filled with excessive, indulgent beauty; to stop in the middle of something, "whenever, wherever"; to turn away from the happy object of the gentleman caller in order to indulge, instead, in this lovely, lacy, all-consuming aesthetic, is to take her own version of Laura's walks. This famous monologue is easily read as a delusional retreat into another place and time but might also be read as a moment of desiring otherwise, for both herself and her daughter. However fraught and feverish, Amanda casts a world that moves from gentlemen callers to jonquils, from being beautiful to being with beauty, and shares this narrative with her daughter in a way that conjures and legitimizes, if only for a moment, Laura's own way of desiring. Laura says of her visits to the art museum and to the displays of exotic flowers, time spent gazing at and being with beauty (as opposed to being the object of the gaze), that "[i]t wasn't as bad as it sounds" (155); those visits have much in common with Amanda's memory of Blue Mountain, the illusion in which, as the playwright's notes describe, Amanda continues to "live vitally" (129). The worlds of jonquils and glass unicorns may not be considered viable futures, but this kind of joyous living is loud with excitement, with exclamations—these queer ways of being, knowing, and living aren't as bad as they sound.

A World Lit by Lightning: Ephemeral, Residual Energies and Gestures

At the end of the 2013–14 production, Laura exits through the same couch from which she emerged, sinking down into it as if pulled by an invisible presence below, leaving Tom alone onstage. The play text famously has a future, narrating Tom instruct Laura to blow out the three-branched candelabrum, but in the Tiffany production, Tom blows the candles out himself. For some critics, this divergence from Williams's text took too much poetic license. In a review in the *New Yorker*, "A Misstep in *The Glass Menagerie*," John Lahr argues that the script's image of Tom instructing Laura to blow out her candles is crucial, as it demonstrates Tom's ability to "extinguish pain with his poetic power." He describes the 2013–14 production as one in which Laura "slither[s]" back into the couch and Tom says his line "to no one in particular." According to Lahr, the audience gets "poetry, but without the point or the prophecy."

Lahr's review sees the original play as one in which "[i]magination is dramatized as salvation": in his reading, Tom's becoming an artist and "the newfound power of the author" are key to the play's trajectory. For Lahr, Tiffany's choice demonstrates only the "inventive power of the director" and keeps the revival from "being great." This reading of Tiffany's production extinguishes the possibility that Laura might have a trajectory that eludes Tom, even in his attempts as magician to conjure Laura from memory. The couch is undoubtedly a symbol of domesticity but also, perhaps, a portal to some other utopian space not yet here. Whereas Laura's entrance depended on her narrating brother to pull her out of the couch, her exit is her choice: she heads toward the couch herself, after the devastating final exchanges between Tom and Amanda, which barely mention her. Just as the blue rose literally and figuratively escapes the intent of those who want to engineer and explain it, Laura's disappearance at the end of the 2013–14 production demonstrates uncontainable difference. These queer energies—blue roses, the unicorn, the Jewel Box, jonquils, the couch—spill over into sashes adorning Amanda's old dresses, the blue bodies of water that murmur and sigh, and the lightning that illuminates Tom's world in jagged, fleeting moments.

In his final speech, Tom has done all he was dreaming of—obtained his happy objects—yet is pursued by something always catching him "unawares, taking [him] altogether by surprise" (237). These interruptions include music, transparent glass, and tiny transparent bottles, "like bits of a shattered rainbow"; these objects "c[o]me upon him" and, "all at once," Laura "touches" his shoulder (237). Although Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review of the production posits a "fatally divided kingdom," there is still what Muñoz calls a "compresence," a "touching [of the] the limits of one another's being" among the Wingfields ("Gimme" 106). When, at the end of the play, Tom tells Laura to blow out her candles, because "nowadays the world is lit by lightning" (237), he knows that Laura's candles will not remain extinguished but will continually relight. In Tiffany's production, Laura retreats back into the couch before Tom delivers his instruction, leaving Tom, audiences, and scholars alike reaching out for her.

After outlining the failure of happy objects in *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed turns toward a new definition of happiness, one that includes "sharp intensities of joy" that are momentary, "like a bolt of lightning that interrupts the night sky, only to be gone again, or the calm slow sigh of reflecting on something that has gone well. Happiness can be the beginning or end of a story, or can be what interrupts a life narrative, arriving in a moment, only to be gone again" (202). The world "lit by lightning" that Tom describes at the end of *The Glass Menagerie* is a world that is in need of change, but also a world containing the possibility, the potentiality, of queer utopias. These bolts of lightning, these interruptions, pervade the play and seem to be saying, things must change, they must rupture, they must move. This imagery lends itself to Muñoz's queer optic and hope for utopian collectivity as opposed to fatal division. The ending of the 2013–14 production of *The Glass Menagerie* is, thus, a gesture toward Laura's agency and Tom's inability to contain her memory, her presence in the present. As if by the magic Tom promises in his opening monologue, *The Glass Menagerie* continues to offer us the truth of how badly the present fails queer ways of being and knowing, while also providing audiences with glimpses of better worlds, queer utopias, that make the labor of remapping a poisonous present seem possible.

Notes

[1] One such reading of Laura can be found in Clay Morton's 2012 article, "Not Like All the Other Horses: Neurodiversity and the Case of Rose Williams." Morton notes Williams's sister was diagnosed with "dementia praecox, mixed type, paranoid predominating—in other words, schizophrenia" (par. 1) and that the word *schizophrenia* was originally used to denote a way of being similar to autism: those "who were disengaged from all but their own internal worlds" (par. 3). He begins his reading of Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* by describing her as "the most clearly autistic" of all of Williams's characters inspired by Rose (par. 10). Morton describes Laura's blowing out her candles as signifying her "ultimate descent into psychic oblivion" and asserts that "[l]ower-functioning people, the play tells us, must rely on higher-functioning people to take care of them, and it is shameful for higher-functioning people to neglect this responsibility" (par. 13).

[2] Readings of Williams's representation of Laura's disability vary widely. For example, Deborah Kent posits that Laura adheres "precisely to the stereotype of the disabled woman as helpless, pathetic, and unqualified as a prize for males to pursue. She is a constant worry to her family" (98). Alternatively, Ann M. Fox notes, "Williams's work as a precursor to contemporary plays that explore the intersection of disability and queerness as both social constructions and lived identities [. . .] reimagine depictions of disabled characters that seem, at first glance, extremely problematic" (247).

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