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Chora in Hell: The Sewer Venus, Sexual Politics, and Williams's Improvisation "Rome" (1924)

Peter Schmidt

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

From Cristina Giorcelli and Maria Anita Stefanelli, eds., *The Rhetoric of Love in the Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* (Rome: Edzioni Associate, 1993).

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS wrote the Improvisation "Rome" sporadically while in France, Italy, Austria, and then back in New Jersey during and after his 1924 "sabbatical" to Europe. Yet it has drawn not nearly as much commentary as other better-known texts of Williams's that were influenced by his trip, *In the American Grain* (1925) and *A Voyage to Pagany* (1928). Indeed, "Rome" was not even in print until 1978.¹

I propose to discuss Williams's text by exploring four interrelated topics: 1) Williams's ideas about the complicated links between gender and genius, with help from the theorist Julia Kristeva; 2) the role Williams's study of Greek vs. Roman cultural traditions played in his developing theories of the purpose of his writing, especially the Improvisations; 3) the reason why Williams was so interested in the role Venus played in Roman mythology; and 4) the ways in which Williams used his text "Rome" to explore an understanding of the importance of New World history that may supplement the insights of *In the American Grain*. The most difficult task of the essay will be to show the connections between gender and geography—between Williams's meditations on genius and his investigation of the tension linking "centers" and "provinces" in culture in the Old World and the New.

Hysteria vs. Genius

We know from Mike Weaver's study of Williams that early in his career Williams was strongly influenced by Otto Weininger's book *Sex and Character*,² which was

published in the U.S. in 1906 during Williams's last year in medical school. Weininger made several claims about psychology, gender, and creativity that proved especially reassuring to Williams during his period of personal and professional uncertainty after he graduated from medical school. Following Nietzsche, especially *Thus Spake Zarathustra*,³ Weininger gave privileged roles to males in the creation of both science and art. His book must set some sort of record for gathering the most sexist clichés per page about the different intellectual capacities of men and women, based on their different experiences of their bodies and inherited differences in mental capacity. Women could not be “geniuses” because they lacked the capacity for abstract thought; their thought-processes were in Weininger’s view characterized by what he called “henids,” an undifferentiated mass of sense perception and emotion. Men, in contrast, had the power to abstract, reason, order, evaluate critically, and then—in a select few—shape works of genius.

Weaver argues that as Williams matured as a writer he retained Weininger’s belief that men and women had different psychologies but reversed Weininger’s categories and the values attached to them. In letters to the British periodical *The Egoist* in 1917, for example, Williams wrote:

Man is the vague generalizer, woman the concrete thinker, and not the reverse as he [Weininger] imagined. Man is the indulger in *henids*, and woman the enemy of *henids*, [...] Thus the male pursuit leads only to further pursuit, that is, not toward the earth, but away from it—not to concreteness, but to further hunting, to star-gazing, to idleness. [...] Female psychology, on the other hand, is characterized by a trend not away from, but toward the earth, toward concreteness, since by her experience the reality of fact is firmly established for her. [...] Woman is physically essential to the maintenance of a physical life by a complicated and long-drawn-out process.⁴

Weaver does not explain why Williams would have reversed Weininger’s evaluation of male and female psychologies, except to imply that perhaps a decade of work as a baby doctor between 1906 and 1917 influenced him. Of course, to a contemporary reader Williams’s position as stated above may very well only *appear* to be a reversal: in the above quotation Williams the pediatrician suggests that women’s thoughts are “concrete” and down-to-earth because their essential task is the continuance of the species. Williams’s praise of women, therefore, is problematic and still essentially Weiningerian. Women may be able

to think concretely, but they can do so because their primary experience is related to children and parenting. Men of genius, in contrast, were essential to the continuance of the life of the mind: their task was to impregnate the world of the arts and sciences with new thoughts, new discoveries, new forms. Where Williams does depart from Weininger is in his decision to make the “feminine” the foundation rather than the antithesis of male genius. It becomes the generative source of linguistic and cultural renewal, not merely of the reproduction of the species.

One literary form that Williams invented to recover the power of the generative “feminine” in language was the Improvisation, Williams’s term (borrowed from Wassily Kandinsky) for free-associative writing done rapidly and spontaneously, without revision. Thus Williams’s first Improvisations, written in 1917–1918, were called *Kora in Hell*, after one of the other Greek names for Persephone. In Weiningerian terms, in fact, Williams’s Improvisations were not merely quintessentially “female,” they were hysterical—composed of “henids,” undifferentiated sensation and feeling that rejected all the standards of rationality and abstraction that were for Weininger the identifying marks of masculine genius. By 1917–1918, however, “henids” had become for Williams not the negation of the forms that genius creates but their necessary foundation. Williams’s Improvisations display the breakdown of a masterful monologue into a host of cacophonous voices and multiple identities and the loss of a rational ordering of events in space and time and conceptual thought into hierarchies of importance; they also display a highly eroticized, tactile relation between language and feeling. Knowing Weininger’s theories as well as he did, Williams must have realized that he was endangering his own sense of the destiny of his masculine genius by willfully staging experiments (the original Improvisations that became *Kora*) in self-induced hysteria, a kind of auto-hypnosis and talking cure. But Williams’s revision of Weininger had made him conclude that male genius would become sterile and repetitive unless it perennially renewed contact with its “feminine” selves. Hence Williams had no choice but to cast his own identity in the form of a heroine, *Kora*, and allow himself to descend underground, into the “feminine.”⁵

Recently Julia Kristeva has provided powerful new modes of analysis that may help us understand the urge to dichotomize and purify in Weininger’s thought.⁶ Kristeva has had a strong influence on contemporary criticism in the 1980s, particularly since the publication of *The Kristeva Reader* in 1986,⁷ and her influence is beginning to make itself felt in Williams’s criticism as well,⁸ prepared because of prior analyses of Williams’s representation of women by Graham,⁹ Nay,¹⁰ Perloff,¹¹ Gilbert, Driscoll,¹² Marzán,¹³ Tapscott,¹⁴ Conrad, and others.

Two concepts of Kristeva’s, the *chora* and the *abject*, are particularly useful for

the reader of Williams's *Improvisations* and works such as *In the American Grain*. Chora is the young child's experience of the mother's womb and breast before it understands itself as a "self" separate from the mother. Its bodily energies (oral, anal, and sexual) are as yet not differentiated and regulated, and its experience of language is essentially as sound (the mother's and its own) accompanying sensation; these sounds have not yet been organized into minimal, stable linguistic units codifying meaning, much less been trained to conform to a particular culture's rules of speech. The chora may be also called the "mother" or womb tongue, a "body language" based in the sounds of maternal rhythms, intonations, and melody-murmuring, laughing, crying, other vocalizations made by mother and baby, and even the pulse of the mother's heartbeat. (Kristeva's other term for the concept is the "semiotic.") For Kristeva the chora is the generative source for all language. Once the child begins to understand itself to be separate from the mother and subject to induction into a culture outside of itself, it enters the realm that Lacan and Kristeva call the "symbolic," a "father tongue" of hierarchical and regulated sign systems that require the child to undergo a kind of "fall" and recognize an authority greater than itself or its mother. (It should be noted that although Kristeva, following Lacan, associates this realm of culture with the power of fathers and symbolic phalluses, other contemporary feminist intellectuals such as Nancy Chodorow have emphasized the central and paradoxical role that mothers play in training the child to regulate its body and to become acculturated into the father tongue.) As the child's various bodily functions and its linguistic and social identities are constructed within culture, however, its experience of the maternal chora or the semiotic is never fully repressed, and haunts the father tongue as "rhythms, intonation, melody accompanying all representation."¹⁵

Kristeva's concept of the abject follows from such a rewriting of Freudian insights in terms of linguistics and sign systems. Revising concepts of Freud's such as those expressed in *Totem and Taboo*,¹⁶ Kristeva's abject is any object or mental state that an individual learns to make "taboo," to exclude in order to constitute either the individual ego or the collective social order. For an individual, the creation of the ego and the individual will require a primary repression of all that is seen to be threatening and uncontrollable by the ego, from bodily excrement to unconscious desires. For a society, what is defined as the proper forms for religion, art, law, the intellect, etc., are similarly created via a process of exclusion and purification. In John Palattella's words, paraphrasing Kristeva, "[s]ociety ceremoniously labels certain objects filthy—menstrual blood, disease, excrement—and jettisons them because, as objects lost from the body but still familiar, they cross boundaries and upset the symbolic and rational stability on which the social order

is based.¹⁷ Kristeva argues that this symbolic operation occurs most clearly in language, where what is “abject” is defined as the feared power of the unnameable, the force that undoes the power to name. Kristeva also pays particular attention in *Powers of Horror* to how what is defined as “female” and associated with procreation, gestation, and death must often be made “abject” and “defiled” in order to validate “male” forms of power and supposedly “pure” symbolic spaces from which women are excluded. “The ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women. [...] One of them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power.”¹⁸ Thus the chora gets shaped into the abject in order to be invalidated and left behind as immature.

If the abject is that which must be excluded in order to create culture, its suppression for Kristeva is always incomplete. This is because what is cast as being defiled always has an uncontrollable power to reverse itself and become purifying rather than polluting. Kristeva is particularly interested in what she terms the “ambivalence” that all “abject” objects and powers have: they cannot become fixedly identified by a cultural system; rather, they come to represent *both* pollution and reviving powers, defilement and genesis. In fact, the abject’s “powers of horror” derive from its refusal to allow these “positive” and “negative” qualities to be separated. When the abject is associated with a woman, as it often is, Kristeva notes, she becomes an Eros/Thanatos figure inspiring awe and fear as the generator and destroyer of all life.

Kristeva’s great predecessor in such a study of the abject, as she obliquely acknowledges several times in *Powers of Horror*, is of course Freud, whose work she also sees as “dualistic,” “dissolving” the networks of repressions necessary to shape both individual egos and civilizations.¹⁹ Williams was also influenced by Freud, particularly his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,²⁰ which he mentions several times in works from the 1920s (“Rome” 48, AG 176, VP 181). The thesis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that it will no longer be enough for psychoanalysis to study the myriad ways in which the fundamental desires of the Id, the pleasure principle or Eros, conflict with the desires of the Superego, the reality principle that seeks security rather than pleasure. On the basis of studying patients who desired to repeat traumatic experiences in the hope of restoring the earlier, pre-traumatic order of things,²¹ Freud posits a second primary cluster of instincts, the death or “Thanatos” instincts, counterbalancing Eros, the “life instincts.”

I have earlier termed Williams’s Improvisations willfully induced hysteria within the body of his work, an attempt to regain the strength of his genius by

descending into what Weininger would call the “feminine” in both the psyche and language. After a brief overview of Kristeva and Freud, it now appears that these two thinkers give us other equally useful and illuminating terms for Williams’s project. The Improvisations represent a descent into the “pagan” and the “abject,” into all that has been excluded by confining systems of proper language and culture. They also represent a “death instinct” of sorts, a willful endangerment of the powers of mastery and of genius that Williams so hoped would mark his career as a writer. But of course Williams’s experimental writing also hopes that such a descent into the abject will be like a descent into the underworld in Greek mythology, a recovery and a renewal, not an end or a mere repetition. Ultimately, the goal of all Williams’s Improvisations such as *Kora in Hell* and “Rome” is to recover “pleasure”—a term they repeatedly invoke—and, with it, linguistic renewal by returning to what he takes to be the origins of language and culture marked by rhythmic linguistic babble and metaphors that are as mixed and free-associative as Williams could make them. A pun inspired by Kristeva is irresistible: Williams descends into the abject (hell) in order to recover and release the creative powers of chora (Kora).

Rome vs. Greece

Despite Williams’s many allusions to Greek mythology throughout *Kora in Hell*, Williams in fact associated his experimental writing more with Rome than with Greece. As Williams’s Prologue to *Kora* makes clear, Rome for him equals the eroticized masculine, ungoverned, fecundative, achieving contact and fathering new rough-hewed forms, while Greece stands for what he calls the “Hellenic perfection of style” (l 13), a kind of cold perfectionism of form. Borrowing from Williams’s knowledge of Keats, we might call this a contrast between the cold pastoral of Greece and the hot, sexual pastoral of Rome. The function of Williams’s comparison of Greece and Rome in the Prologue to *Kora in Hell*, bluntly stated, is to place a male hero back at the heart of the story of the search for chora/Kora. (In the Greek myth, of course, there is a masculine villain, Hades, who kidnaps Persephone, but the primary characters remain Persephone and her mother Demeter. Williams also linked this myth with Orpheus’s descent into the underworld to rescue Eurydice.) Thus in the Prologue to *Kora in Hell* in 1918, Williams imagines an eternal conflict between Greece and Rome, perfection and creativity, and female and male:

I like better the Greeks setting their backs to Athens [and colonizing Italy]. The ferment was always richer in Rome, the dispersive explosion

was always nearer, the influence carried further and remained hot
longer. Hellenism, especially the modern sort, is too staid, too chilly, too
little fecundative to impregnate my world. (l 12)

Williams here emphasizes that the object of his search for a renewed language must be “fecund” enough to “impregnate my world,” placing his own psyche in a “female” position and Kora/chora in a “male” position, the impregnating force. But Williams also seeks to appropriate this fertilizing power of the female for the male hero of his writing—in short, to overturn the potentially threatening sexual reversal implied by giving the “feminine” too much power over the “masculine.” To do this, Williams turns to imagery derived from pagan Rome, stressing his search for a satyrlike “dispersive explosion” of creative energy, and seems leery of relying too thoroughly on allusions to Greek mythology.

These cultural and gender conflicts in Williams’s work were not merely theoretical. By the “modern sort” of Hellenism Williams of course alludes to his fellow American poet H.D., Hilda Doolittle, who had published translations from Euripides and her first collection of poems, *Sea Gardens*,²² two years before (1916), and had already achieved renown (with some help from Ezra Pound) for the perfection of a classic style in modern free verse. For Williams, however, such terms of praise were extremely loaded, even more so when it turned out that this acclaimed new writer had the power to edit some of Williams’s own work for publication (the poem “March” CP1 137–41; 493–5). As Williams’s chronicles in his Prologue to *Kora*, H.D. as “assistant editor of the *Egoist*” edited out what Williams thought to be the most irreverent and manly passages of his poem “March” in order to achieve a purified whole. Williams included H.D.’s letter explaining her editorial decisions in his Prologue, calling her editing “friendly attentions” (l 12), and Williams in fact in the long run seems to have agreed with her, since he published the poem in *Sour Grapes* (1921) and thereafter substantially in the same form it was given by H.D. But the tone of Williams’s other comments on this little episode in his Prologue is very revealing of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have called the war between the sexes that is fundamental to modernism, the first literary movement in which women played a substantial role and were understood to be direct competitors with men for literary glory. By associating H.D.’s taste as a writer and editor with the “Hellenic perfections of style,” Williams is able to type her as an archaic modernist and to elevate himself as a more modern or Roman modernist, a creator of truly new forms, imperfect at present but part of the “dispersive explosion” fathering the new.²³

Roman culture had another crucial interest for Williams, one related not so much to sexual politics as to the relation between European and New World cul-

ture, the politics of a supposed cultural “center” vs. a supposed “periphery.” Rome’s importance for Williams in this regard lay not in its role as imitator and preserver of Greek traditions but as the vital provincial edge, the site where Greek forms could be renewed and reconceived with Rome’s raw energy. Such a reading of pagan Roman history had great interest for Williams, regardless of its accuracy, because it precisely captured his sense of the necessary relation between the United States and Europe. Europe for Williams was playing Greece to America’s Rome. Williams equated the founding of the American republic with the founding of the Roman republic, and like many Americans beginning with the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 and continuing through the victory of World War I and the 1920s, Williams hoped that he was living through an era in American history that would be an American Renaissance to compare with the Italian Renaissance in terms of national and artistic vitality. This line of argument Williams returns to not in *Kora in Hell* but in later texts from the 1920s, particularly *Spring and All*, “Rome,” and *In the American Grain*.

After publishing *Kora in Hell* in 1920, Williams went to Italy in 1924 and had the opportunity to rethink the meaning that Europe—especially “pagan” Italy—had for him while he worked on *In the American Grain*, a book that attempted to codify some of the insights of *Spring and All* (1923) into a theory of conflicting cultural traditions in the New World. Three texts were profoundly shaped by Williams’s European sabbatical: *In the American Grain* (1925), the unpublished and unfinished improvisation “Rome,” and Williams’s autobiographical novel about his trip, *A Voyage to Pagany* (1928).²⁴

Pagany is an interesting but comparatively conventional text with a thinly disguised character named Dr. Dev Evans on a heroic quest for the “ancient springs of purity and plenty” in Pagany (Europe)—especially Italy. Rome is depicted as an ancient source of creative renewal for an artist fleeing the repressive and puritanical United States during Prohibition. Williams projects onto the city all his fantasies linking sexual abandon and a life of creative freedom, personifying the city as Aphrodite/Venus (his Roman version of Kora). The male hero that is placed at the center of this quest narrative is a figure reminiscent of many heroes from mythology—including Orpheus, Dionysus, Priapus, Odysseus, and Praxiteles, the sculptor famous for his Venus. The following passage from the chapter “To Rome” in *Pagany* will give a sense of the overheated male romanticism of the text: “Panting with desire to possess it [Rome], he feels it slipping away nevertheless and calls it, strives to call it by a name, strives to fasten it in his sight. [...] Rome, undecieving, living—shedding fig leaves. Rome starting alive from the rock. He felt it, he could touch the fragments. There IS the Venus” (VP 109). It is as if Williams is

imagining himself as a sculptor striving to realize the image of Venus in marble. There is also the suggestion that if his genius is great enough he will be able to make this statue of a woman come to life, as in *Pygmalion*. Williams's fantasy repeats the Romantic truism linking masculine sexual freedom and artistic creativity: Rome produced great art because of a decadent, uninhibited, and "pagan" or satyrlike lifestyle. Such a mode of living was especially easy to idealize for a physician on vacation from his responsibilities as a doctor and a father.

The tourist's itinerary through Rome, which Williams dutifully undertook, left him curiously unmoved, however, and Williams's attempts to understand this reaction in *Pagany* are very revealing. After visiting the Trevi fountain, the Forum, the museums, and other sites, Williams sketches a distinction between creativity as living motion and as idea, versus creativity as form, stone, monument, and ruin. The Trevi fountain's light and movement become for Williams the pure source, the spring, from which all Rome's creative genius flows, whereas Williams finds himself surprisingly *unoverwhelmed* with the Forum and much of Rome's most famous ancient and Renaissance statuary.

To the Forum! All that morning he walked in a clear light, back and forth slowly on that anonymous ground—to which history has added nothing but its irony of lost stone. [...] The Forum left him cold. Not this—this wasn't it. It was not, then, the old, but something that goes on forever. A thing that goes on and never stops. Call it beauty, it is in the marble. It's not history—it's not stones. It goes on. [...] [Later] in the Vatican one day he came up quite suddenly cured, sick of the city, of museums and that white disease which makes the gods stone. (VP 126–7)

A fine passage—for me, the heart of *Pagany*. The contrast that Williams makes here is a well-known one, stressing the gap between the infinite powers of the imagination and the forms—no matter how "perfect"—that seek to embody them. After reading the Prologue to *Kora in Hell*, we can also see that Williams is here replaying his argument against the "Hellenic" perfections of H.D. in a different register, juxtaposing the cold "stone" of her art and its equivalents with the supposedly living vitality of his, a Venusian power of beauty and creativity that "goes on" beyond any attempt to capture it in a single image or a single site in Italy or Greece. All this makes the monuments and masterpieces of Rome less intimidating to Williams; he can convince himself that they are merely traces of a creative bounty that still lives and still may be tapped, even by a tourist from New Jersey. The full context of this passage, though, demonstrates that the champion of

Rome's Venusian beauty also felt threatened by it, as if it represented a challenge to his manhood and his strength as an artist. Especially interesting in this regard is a scene in which Williams describes visiting the fifth-century B.C. Greek reliefs in honor of Aphrodite/Venus in the *Museo Nazionale Romano* (the famous "Ludovisi Throne"). Williams kept a photograph of this Venus among his possessions: "he was afraid. It was that this reality that had once inspired these marbles, but now outside of experience, seemed more living than the living all about him, that unhorsed his wits. Before the two wings of the altar to Aphrodite, the seated figures of the women, he almost choked, between their beauty and anger at the world. [...] Between these feelings, the stonelike reality of ancient excellence and the pulpy worthlessness of every day, he wandered lost" (VP 117).²⁵ As a writer who felt he was doing important work but who as of 1924 had yet to publish a book with a major press, Williams was provoked and challenged by the monuments to artistic immortality he found everywhere he turned in Rome. Unlike the Trevi fountain, however, this Venus/Aphrodite figure in the *Museo Nazionale* for Williams is both inspiring and castrating; Williams feels first "afraid" and then "unhorsed." As he says elsewhere in *Pagany*, "[h]e sensed Rome as a trial that should cast him out with the refuse—or else it did live! and it would let him live" (VP 113). Williams eagerly sought out the "springs of purity and plenty" in Rome, personifying them as female, as a Venus whom he could bring to life if his manly genius were strong enough. But Williams also embodied in Venus the threat that Rome posed to him as an artist. In this latter scenario, the encounter between the sculptor and his Venus ends not with the sculptor bringing his Venus to life but with the Venus causing the sculptor's death: it may be "a trial that should cast him out with the refuse," a victim of his own failed quest narrative to capture the power of the feminine.

The Venus Cloacina

Williams's *Improvisation "Rome"* first assayed all these ideas and emotions about genius, gender, and the history of civilizations. But it does so with more vigor and urgency than *Pagany*, and the contradictions embedded within the sexual politics of Williams's quest narratives emerge more graphically and powerfully. In "Rome," as in *Kora* and *Pagany*, we see Williams working out his Weiningerian hypothesis of the connection between male genius and sexuality in the arts and sciences; and we see Williams's thesis that creativity is best captured in light and movement than in stone. But "Rome" represents the richest exploration in all of Williams's writing except for the Prologue to *Kora in Hell* of a theory of impro-

visatory writing as a descent into the “pagan,” the abject, and the Venusian. In effect, Williams recasts the feminine as chora, the generative source of culture, rather than as abject, that which needs to be excluded in order to create culture; and he bases his theories of improvisation upon this reversal of values. Due to Williams’s simultaneous composition of *In the American Grain* while he was writing “Rome,” however, “Rome” also represents the most provocative linkage in all of Williams’s work between his developing theories of improvisational language and his interest in discovering a new interpretation for the history of the New World. In fact, it can be argued that Williams confronts the radical implications of these ideas about culture most fully not in *In the American Grain* but in “Rome.”²⁶ In *In the American Grain* Williams sketches a theory of culture that argues that the strength of a civilization lies in its cultural mixing rather than its cultural purity. Williams attempts to use two Native American female characters in *In the American Grain*, the anonymous “She” in the de Soto chapter and “Jacataqua” (Williams’s invention) in the chapter on Aaron Burr, to personify this principle. But its most intriguing embodiment may very well be in “Rome,” in the person of the Venus Cloacina, or “sewer Venus.” This female generative source in “Rome” is immersed not in a “hell” or a New World Eden, but within the detritus of history itself, a Roman sewer, Williams’s own wry version of a wasteland.

The implications for such a change can only be worked out if “Rome” and *In the American Grain* are read in conjunction, as if “Rome” were the textual ruin upon which the completed structure of *American Grain* were built.

First, however, the sexual politics of Williams’s quest for Venus in “Rome” should be considered. “Rome” clearly demonstrates Williams’s fascination with Weininger’s idea that genius is male and that a brilliant man of science has as creative a role to play in civilization as the artistic genius. Williams’s European sabbatical in 1924 was of course not merely a visit to his artist friends and to the great cultural monuments of Rome and elsewhere; it was also a working vacation, in which Williams after the excursion in Italy attended lectures at the prestigious medical school in Vienna. Hence “Rome” intermixes notes from those Vienna lectures along with thoughts inspired by Rome. In the case of medicine, however, its female muse is not the body of Venus (as it had been in Rome) but the decaying body of a cadaver, and the role of the genius is not to create the body (as with Williams’s heroic male sculptors shaping Venus) but to understand the laws of disease. Great doctors and scientists should be understood to be artists too, however; “all reach an equality in great work” (“Rome” 24).

As well as greatly admiring his Vienna lecturers, Williams also mentions in “Rome” two other scientist-philosophers whom he associated with this tradition

of German and Austrian medicine—Freud and Weininger. Of Freud, Williams says that he made the “poor human body [...] into rose windows of learning” (“Rome” 26). Of Weininger, Williams links him with one of his most admired Vienna lecturers and says that Weininger’s work “can be summed in a word,” so great is its clarity and power (“Rome” 34). Williams does not undertake in “Rome” to say what that one-word summary would be, but his next comment linking Weininger to “[a]ny sheep breeder” (“Rome” 34) suggests that the magic word might be “sex” and that almost two decades after first reading him Williams still associates Weininger with the argument that the function of women is to perpetuate the species while the function of men—men of genius, at least—is to propagate great ideas.

In “Rome” Williams also develops a corollary argument for male genius in the arts, linking it to the prevention of decay in civilization.²⁷

so the words of poems. A light through: whose form is by itself:
(Irradiates)

[...]

But the result of too much modelling is not radiance but plaster
the thing lost is clarity or motion itself—better is a
complete confusion as in an improvisation—which is too an
attempt to separate the motion from the stultifying unity of
the thing.

[...]

[...] the making of the book is “things” striving together.
 (“Rome” 62, 60)

Note Williams’s Latin etymology here of the word “composition,” from *componere*, “to put together.” Instead of “unity,” a finished product, genius is best understood as thoughts in motion, striving in conflict, in process. Monuments and fragments of sculpture, etc., are merely the *traces* that thought in motion leaves behind. And it all—in writing, science, or architecture—is essentially male: “It must be clear and it must be a whole: like this book [“Rome”] which is clearly and wholly a motion: CLOACA: in which there is so perfect pleasure: perfect sex BALLS” (“Rome” 59). With such theory Williams not merely tries to turn a record of sexual anxiety and frustrated fantasy, his unfinished and chaotic manuscript “Rome,” into a monument to sexual and artistic braggadocio. He also attempts to shape his text into the sign of the passage of the power of genius—not waste or refuse but radiance (or semen?) in motion.

Williams's use of the Latin word *cloaca* in the above passage, however, demonstrates that his attempts to delineate a masculine notion of creative genius in "Rome" is unable to function without the very qualities that it seeks to abject from itself as being inimical to genius. *Cloaca* is Latin for sewer, as in the Cloaca Maxima, the main sewer in Rome that was constructed to drain a marsh so the Roman Forum could be created. The creative "motion" that Williams alludes to in the above passages hence refers not only to the light of the intellect and the physical activity of sexual intercourse but also to the contents of sewers, to bowel movements. It is as if Williams were implying that his Improvisation "Rome" were made out of shit as well as sperm—and that his Improvisations involve a theory of how to write the body, not just the mind, of masculine genius. In the Weiningerian terms that Williams knew, he is making the heretical suggestion that male genius will reveal itself not merely in the mental "clarity" and "light" that Williams continually seeks in "Rome," but also in what Weininger would call "henids," the free expression in writing of undifferentiated thought and feeling and bodily sensation all mixed together in "a complete confusion." *Cloaca* suggests not repression but expression, a venting and clearing of matter without which renewal would be impossible: "Cloaca Magna swept and the sun and an April rain blowing," as Williams puts it elsewhere. ("Rome" 18)

Such a credo is thoroughly consistent with Williams's original theories of the therapeutic function of improvisational writing, first sketched in 1917–1918 in the midst of thriving Dadaist activity in New York. Like Marcel Duchamp, whose sculpture entitled "Fountain" (really a hardware store urinal set on a sculptural pedestal) so disrupted the New York art world in 1917, Williams associated such Dadaist activities with what Duchamp called "relief," the removal of waste and blockage in the individual and collective psyche.²⁸ By 1924 Williams's trip to Rome allowed him to give this concept a Latin name, *cloaca*, and to link the rise of Rome not just with art and architecture and commerce but with its development of a system for draining water and removing sewage.

Yet the meaning of the word *cloaca* in Williams's text is even more complex. *Cloaca* is also an alternative name for Venus, the goddess whose son, Aeneas, was the founder of Roman civilization. Williams undoubtedly became interested in including references to Venus in his Rome journal because of his exploration of Roman art museums and his viewing of several of the most famous statues from classical antiquity, the Venus of Cnidus (a Roman copy after the work of Praxiteles) and the Venus "Capitolenus" (the Venus in the Capitoline Museum in Rome). Both are mentioned on the first page of "Rome." Later in "Rome" Williams refers to another Venus, the Venus Anadyomene of "Cyrene," which when discovered after being buried for centuries is "still new—the thing is new always." ("Rome"

45) [See also *A Voyage to Pagany*, where Williams adds that this statue was “dug from that sea-loosened bank of Africa” (VP 118)]. What unites all of these references to Venus is Williams’s belief that she represents the kind of immortal creative energy praised in the previously quoted passage about “radiance” in motion.

The city of Rome has been filled with temples to Venus and other goddesses throughout its history. Three sites in the Roman Forum in particular should be of interest to readers of Williams’s “Rome.” The Temple of Venus Genetrix was added to the Forum by Julius Caesar to mark the supposedly divine lineage of his family traced back to Aeneas and thus Venus; as the mother of Aeneas, Venus was the most important of all the goddesses in the Roman pantheon. Also in the Forum are the remains of a temple for Venus’s counterpart, Vesta, the goddess of the hearth and of purity, built at the center of the Forum near a spring. The priestesses who served this temple were chosen as children and required to remain virgins for thirty years while they offered sacrifices and performed rites in honor of Vesta.²⁹

Williams’s allusion to “CLOACA” several times in the “Rome” manuscript suggests that he may have become interested in this Latin word because he discovered the shrine to the Venus Cloacina marked in contemporary maps of the Roman Forum near the steps of the Basilica Aemilia. This unusual name is supposedly derived from the fact that, as mentioned in Livy, Pliny, and Plautus, an image of Venus was found in the excavation of the great sewer (Cloaca Maxima) of Rome and was set up by a Sabine King “in a temple near the forum.” Cloacina as a surname also apparently signifies how this goddess is supposed to preside over sexual intercourse in marriage, purifying it and assuring fertility.³⁰ Her site was described as follows by Rodolfo Lanciani in his 1910 study of the Forum:

In the middle of the street dividing the Forum from the Basilica Aemilia, and close to the steps of the latter, this round base was found in 1900. It has been connected by some with the shrine and altar of Cloacina, mentioned in Livy as the scene of the death of Virginia, and by Plautus as one of the landmarks of the Forum. Pliny records the tradition that the Romans and the Sabines, after fighting in the Forum itself, underwent purification at the *Signum Veneris Cluacinae*, because *cluere* in the old language signified “to purify.”³¹

Cloacina, derived from “sewer,” and *cluacina*, derived from to “purify”: the conflicting etymology of Venus’s surname here precisely captures the paradox that

Kristeva names the *abject*, which is both the opposite of purity and yet its very source. Williams's own conception of Venus is similarly conflicted. Venus is allied both with the abject and with the exalted, with waste and with genius, with darkness and with light.

In short, Williams cannot decide whether the protagonist of his text "Rome" is a hero like Praxiteles, a male genius creating eternal beauty in perfected form, or a heroine like his sewer Venus, a creative source that Williams associates not with perfection in stone but with *movement*—the movement of water, light, the intellect, sexuality, and even bowel waste. By the time of "Rome" the Weiningerian dichotomies and value-judgments with which Williams began are so thoroughly reversed and intermixed as to become oxymoronic—as oxymoronic as the phrase Venus Cloacina itself. Williams's engendering of genius here seems first male, then female, then female-in-male, then male-in-female. Williams still seems to desire to be the male poetic hero appropriating the "feminine" in order to renew his own creative power. But it is rarely clear whether this process involves Williams inscripting the "feminine" or the "feminine" inscripting Williams. And even more importantly, what is codified as masculine and feminine in Williams's text begins to seem a binary opposition in which no one term can remain the superior or primary term for long.

The Venus and the Dynamo

A final topic concerning "Rome," involving geographical as well as sexual politics. Williams used his visit to Europe to study parallels between European and American culture and to reconsider his theories of what causes cultural growth and decay. His conclusions are often dated but also occasionally very prescient for contemporary studies of postcolonial literatures and "multicultural" theory. To excavate these features of "Rome" requires tracing several links in the text of "Rome" to Henry and Brooks Adams and to Freud and then linking the cultural theories of "Rome" with those in *In the American Grain*, published a year later.

Henry Adams's own midlife pilgrimage to the monuments of Europe was much on Williams's mind in 1924. Williams became as obsessed with images of the Venus in Rome as Henry Adams was with images of the Virgin in France, and for largely the same reasons—they both seemed to provide an alternative to American materialism and modernist sterility. Without such an alternative, Williams believed, American civilization would atrophy, following what Brooks Adams defined as the law of how civilizations and races decay. Williams never mentions either of the Adamses directly in "Rome," but we know³² that he owned

the 1918 edition of Henry Adams's *Education*³³ as well as Brooks Adams's *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1896).³⁴ The following passages from "Rome" do seem to respond to the famous chapter in *The Education* on "The Virgin and the Dynamo": "There is a great cultural discovery, far more significant than a machine (where the superficial American genius lies) immanent—that will shoot out rays into EVERY department of life [...]—rearranging it into CLARITY—so that its complications will grow plain" and "[...] the dynamo spinning—MONEY [...] The dynamos of America are gay" ("Rome" 24, 50). The American genius for Williams is essentially the genius of machinemaking and moneymaking, both of which were symbolized in Adams's fascination with the kind of dynamo that provided the electricity that drove the American economy. And like Adams Williams deplored the American inability to understand the role of the artist in such a culture, other than as a feminized and elitist connoisseur of beautiful objects nostalgic of the preindustrial era. But instead of turning to an idealized medieval Virgin, image of a spiritual counter to the Dynamo, as Adams did, Williams advocated the pagan Venus, symbol of all that is made illicit in a machine age, an answer to Adams's just observation in the same chapter of the *Education* that American culture was "as far as possible sexless."³⁵ "This is the social function of the artist and thinkers of all sorts," Williams argues: "they frequent the flower, and breed life, keep it at high pitch. [...] America coming into its own will attract genius of all sorts to its freedom—fertilizing agents. [...] There must be a change, or America as a world influence will remain a purely mechanical one, a world coal and food base, with gradual descent to sordidness, greater banality and supplanting by a readier race from inside or out" ("Rome" 63). America must become the new Rome by valuing its male artists—its "fertilizing agents"—in the same way as did ancient Rome and the city-states of the Italian Renaissance.

Otherwise, Brooks Adams's law of decay would take over. Brooks Adams held that a civilization's vital force became inbred and atrophied unless periodically regenerated with fresh transfusions from the lower classes and from cultures outside of the civilization's "center" of power. Brooks Adams's theories, moreover, dovetailed precisely in Williams's mind with Freud's concept of the death instinct in individuals and civilizations, as outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In Freudian terms, Brooks Adams's law could be restated thus: a civilization's drive to purity is its "death instinct," countered by a "pleasure principle" that sees civilization strengthened rather than weakened by regular sexual and cultural interbreeding with "outsiders." The implication of such a theory was perhaps most forcefully stated by the black historian J. A. Rogers in the 1940s and 1950s, as a

refutation of Nazi and American theories of Aryan and Anglo-Saxon supremacy: “Race-mixing [...] has been one of the functions of empire. Egypt, Persia, Macedonia, Rome, brought hordes of whites, browns, and blacks and amalgamated them. All great empires seem to begin with race-mixing, and die when they become too pure.”³⁶

For Williams, such biological theories of the strength of the hybrid were the most powerful arguments he knew to counteract theories of the proper Aryan or Anglo-Saxon cultural purity of the United States, in contrast to other countries in the New World such as Mexico or Brazil. In *the American Grain, Spring and All* (1923), and a story such as “The Colored Girls of Passenack—Old and New” indicate that Williams was thoroughly interested in sexual as well as cultural interbreeding, often using one as a metaphor for the other. In “Rome” such a theory is sketched—the argument is very rough—via Williams’s examination of pagan and Christian Roman history. Rather than simply contrasting the two cultures, however, Williams finds at least two provocative parallels between them. He suggests that a Freudian death instinct dominated the behavior of Nero, Rome’s most notoriously decadent emperor, *and* of the first Christian martyrs: both Nero’s self-indulgence and the martyrs’ asceticism were motivated by extremes of self-hate and sadism (“Rome” 54–5, 66). Williams also argues that Christianity after it came to power in Rome was ironically dominated by the pagan sexuality that it sought to repress, so that pagan energies played around the edges of all the “proper” new images the Church sanctioned, but now in an atrophied and perverted form: “christianity a bastardization of paganism but essentially the same [...] sucking the cock of art clandestinely” (“Rome” 45). In Williams’s version of Freud’s and Brooks Adams’s laws, the repressed always returns, and any project seeking to impose a dominant and “purer” culture upon an abject culture is doomed to repeating clandestinely what it most seeks to erase. As an alternative, Williams proposes Venus, the goddess of illicit mixture. He finds her virtues most embodied in two classes in Rome, her artists and her peasants.

But Rome I love, its abandon to the whole waste of flesh swimming through its idleness with a rush that threw stones like a volcano—and they settled about the ruin of their go [sic. God? gods? egos?] building up their life with an intensity of stone—that belied their fall and disappearance as men (“Rome” 58)³⁷

Peasants: [...] religion springs from it satyrs, pan joy dances pictures frescos the sacrifice beasts girdled in state for the rostrum pig sheep and steer. They took it all in, all—till their weak town melted with it crum-

pled to bits and the wild free campagna reasserts its ancient power
 ("Rome" 66–7)

In "Rome" Williams also argues that westward the course of empire wends its way: America in the twentieth century has become the most vital edge of European civilization, while its older "centers" in Europe have weakened: "It is America, cracking the seed, a way that will make the other ways dead," whereas the French "don't want to be a province of something else [...] [b]ut they will" ("Rome" 25).

The text in which Williams most fully outlines his reading of the history of interaction between the Old World and the New World is of course *In the American Grain*. Recently Williams scholarship has begun to redefine Williams's cultural project in this text. Bryce Conrad has argued that "a protean female figure [...] stands at the center of *In the American Grain* as surely as Venus dominates Rome for Evans" in *Pagany*, and that Williams's interpretation of the early history of the New World is dependent upon his understanding of the history of Rome stressing pagan sources he personifies in Venus. In Conrad's words, "with the discovery of the New World, Europe confronted the very thing from which it had sought to distance itself: the naked pagan ground. Europe met that confrontation with terror and denial, the urge to destroy, to subjugate."³⁸ Williams's great contribution in *In the American Grain* for Conrad is his interpretation of American history as a battle between those elements which sought to keep imported European culture free from contamination with native "pagan" culture and those energies that were driven to mix the two, to create a new and unprecedented culture that was neither native nor European, a culture that overthrew any hierarchy separating true vs. pagan religion or developed vs. primitive civilization. Conrad also stresses the gender politics of this encounter, building on the insights of earlier scholars—particularly Annette Kolodny³⁹—who have studied the ways in which Europeans personified both nature and the cultures of the New World as a female to be either destroyed or assimilated: in Williams's terms, a "flower" to be fertilized by an active male agent ("Rome" 63).

Williams's text primarily depicts the ways in which men justified their power in the New World—often at the expense of women, who were usually cast as abject and demonic, as in Williams's chapter on Cotton Mather's witch trials. Hence it is no accident that many of Williams's women in *In the American Grain* portray figures of temptation and challenge to male supremacy: the revengeful Freydis in Williams's retelling of Eric the Red's story, the temptress "She" in his chronicle of de Soto's death, the Indian woman Jacataqua who challenges Aaron

Burr to a hunting contest, and Diada, the “Daughter of Discord” in a popular romance cited in the “Advent of the Slaves” chapter. For Williams, American history is primarily a tragedy in which European culture’s drive to reproduce itself in the New World becomes an obsessive need to maintain its (fictional) “purity.” Williams’s villains in *In the American Grain* are indeed governed by a death instinct, a fetish for cultural purity and control: first the Puritans, then their secular heirs Franklin and Hamilton, and then those that followed. As Vera Kutzinski and Bryce Conrad have shown, American culture as it is depicted in *In the American Grain* becomes increasingly homogeneous and neurotic as it moves from the Revolution to the Civil War, repressing alternatives to the Puritan xenophobic and materialist strains that became dominant. Thus Williams in *In the American Grain* depicts the destruction of Aaron Burr and of Jacataqua’s world in the chapter “Jacataqua” and its supplements, one tellingly entitled “The Virtue of History” (the most ironic chapter title in the text) and the others “The Advent of the Slaves” and “Lincoln.” As Williams’s last lines conclude, “The age-old torture reached a disastrous climax in Lincoln,” whom Williams startlingly sees as having many of the “feminine” traits that his culture takes to be a threat. Williams interprets Lincoln’s assassination as follows: “failing of relief or expression, the place tormented itself into a convulsion of bewilderment and pain” (AG 234). Kutzinski dubs such symptoms of repression as being in the “grain” of Eurocentric American culture, and argues that the goal of Williams’s book is to explore the alternatives that may go *against* this grain.

A reader coming to *In the American Grain* from Williams’s *Improvisations*, including “Rome,” is compelled to add that the theory of cultural provinces being more vital than cultural centers that Williams works out in the *Kora* Prologue and “Rome” is also crucial for *In the American Grain*. For if the *Improvisations* juxtapose “Roman” experimentation and heterogeneity with “Hellenic” purity and perfection, *In the American Grain* gives this principle historical grounding in the New World. It argues that the story of the New World is the story of how European notions of cultural and racial superiority over the non-European were constantly challenged in the New World, though they repeatedly tried to reassert mastery via the process that historian Richard Slotkin has called “regeneration through violence.”⁴⁰ *In the American Grain*’s thesis is thus that cultural “centers” and cultural “purity” are dangerous and repressive illusions; further, it tries to demonstrate that a study of cultural provinces—whether in early Rome or in the history of the colonies and the early United States—shows that frontiers and provinces give us alternative definitions of culture as impure, heterogeneous, and healthy only when constantly evolving and intermixing influences. In doing so,

the cultural theories of Williams's *Improvisations* and *In the American Grain* may be compared with work by other theorists of the role of the frontier in American history, especially the historian Frederick Jackson Turner (whose essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" [1893] was especially popular in the 1920s)⁴¹ in order to counter the claims of rival American modernists such as Eliot and Pound, who in Williams's eyes stressed the centrality of European cultural tradition.

Weininger's influence on Williams's early theories of culture and psychohistory seems predominantly reactionary, for his theories stress the need for male superiority and (by implication) the inherent superiority of certain cultural forms—and therefore cultures—over others. Williams's meditations on American history, the works of the Adamses and Freud, plus his own literary experiments in poetry and prose, led him in a different direction, however, towards a theory and practice of New World culture that has at least the rudiments of a more democratic and multicultural understanding of the meaning of New World history.

Admittedly the implications of this theory of culture are not spelled out clearly in either *In the American Grain* or "Rome"—they are only incoherently suggested. And Williams's primary personifications of his ideal of cultural interbreeding as a female—a New World Jacataqua, an Old World Venus—are of course deeply problematic, since the narratives of interaction that they suggest remains primarily male- and European-centered, a kind of updated Pocahontas fantasy for the avant-garde of the 1920s in which a European and Native American "marriage" (almost always with the European male in charge) seemed more progressive than Puritan sexual repression and ethnocentrism. [Thus *Spring and All* as well ends with such a vision of a "dark woman" as the source—the Spring—for all of Williams's poetry (CPI 236).]⁴² Moreover, Williams in "Rome" demonstrates little understanding of or curiosity about the actual racial and cultural heterogeneity of Rome—its links with a wide variety of Mediterranean cultures beyond Greece, including those of Egypt and North Africa. Personifying Rome's creative energy as a Venus, a Roman artist, or a peasant in the campagna mystifies rather than illuminates Williams's intuitive understanding of how Roman history can help him understand the history of the New World. It romanticizes these forces of history, taking them outside of history and making them transcendental, abstract forces of energy, light, and motion—despite Williams's *cloaca* analogy. Williams in "Rome" shows little interest in exploring the *layering* of Roman history—the many ways in which Rome's cross-cultural influences could have provided interesting parallels and contrasts with events in the New World. Williams's image in *In the American Grain* of the New World as an American Venus—an "orchidean

beauty" (AG 27) who tempts the Europeans and then is ravaged by them—similarly mystifies his story. Williams shows no interest in undertaking research about the diversity and complexity of Native American cultures or the many ways in which they interacted with the European invaders beyond military violence or the occasional act of interracial sex, despite his text's depiction of Père Sebastian Rasles as an alternative American hero who tried to learn as much as he could about Native American cultures instead of destroying them. Similarly, the chapter "The Advent of the Slaves" is neither concerned with the economic and racist underpinnings of the slave system nor with the heterogeneous new American culture that the Africans in the New World constructed in order to survive—an example of new world multiculturalism that could have served as a model for Williams's cultural project. Instead, we get a series of cameo portraits of the virtues of blacks whom Williams has known personally, along with the claim that such strengths of personality are part of Negro "racial character" (like rhythm?) that the dominant culture in the United States has repressed.

The paradox of Williams's Venus is the paradox of all these attempts by Williams to personify women and cultural "Others" as a way of writing their history into the American story so that they will no longer be "Others." Like Diada, Jacataqua, "She," Freydis, and others, Venus is a powerful figure because she eludes all such attempts to inscribe her as a flower and a victim in history—even as Williams so inscribes her in his texts. She is for Williams the vital area of growth where two cultures clash—their generative source, their energy of revision. If this paradox is accurately stated, then Williams's "Venus" may also be the source of new writing that could perhaps radically revise European- and male-centered narratives of conquest and open them to new interpretations of their own history as well as the histories of other cultures. Hence Venus for Williams should ultimately be understood to be the energy needed to shift the direction of the very *grain* of culture.

In the end, however, both "Rome" and *In the American Grain* finally seem radically incomplete texts, texts whose generative sources remain hidden and whose project of cultural criticism remains deeply conflicted—partly reminiscent of Turner's paean to the manifest destiny of European cultures in the New World and partly prescient of the new non-Eurocentric history that in the 1990s is being called postcolonial or cultural studies. Williams also intuitively understood that revising the history of the New World would entail a revision of the history of "Western" civilization, and that is precisely what is occurring today in cultural studies, in anthologies like *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*⁴³ and *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?*⁴⁴ as well

as in the scholarship of Diop,⁴⁵ Bernal,⁴⁶ Mudimbe,⁴⁷ Kutzinski, and many others. As Williams himself in pride and frustration scrawled across the top of the first page of his “Rome” manuscript after giving up work on it, “*The thing is not finished but goes on*” (“Rome” 15).

Notes

1. William Carlos Williams, “Rome,” *William Carlos Williams Review* 26.2 (Fall 2006): 15–68.

2. Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character*, trans. Anonymous (New York: Putnam’s [1906]). Henceforth, page references to this book will be given within parentheses.

3. Friederich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (New York: Boni & Liveright, [1917]).

4. *The Egoist* 4.7, ed. Dora Marsden (1917): 110–11, rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint, 1967. See also Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (London: Cambridge UP, 1971) 25–6.

5. Weininger had warned of such a feminization of the male, a fact that Williams surely remembered, given that he was still quoting enthusiastically from Weininger’s book a decade after first reading it. I should note here that Weininger’s position regarding effeminized males exposes the contradictions that are rife throughout his text, despite his repeated attempts to dichotomize the female and the male. Weininger repeatedly argues that males desire “unity” while women represent multiplicity: “the male has a central nucleus of his being which has no parts, and cannot be divided; the female is composite, and so can be dissociated and cleft” (211). Yet Weininger simultaneously argues that “the man of genius possesses, like everything else, the complete female in himself” (189)—as if the man of genius could be both unitary and multiple at once! Not surprisingly, in passages in *Sex and Character* very close to this one Weininger worries obsessively about the problem of masculine women and “female men,” men who have regressed psychologically and are dominated by “feminine” mental states (188–9). Any writing done by such men will exhibit the classic symptoms of female hysteria, which occurs when the superficially unified female self breaks down into its component parts. Weininger also repeatedly hints that he sees such symptoms multiplying disturbingly in “modern” art and literature. For discussions of the perceived dangers of male “hysteria” see especially: Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 167–94—who stresses the different ways in which the medical profession treated male vs. female hysteria; Wayne Koestenbaum, “The Wasteland: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound’s Collaboration on Hysteria,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 34.2 (1988): 113–39; John Palattella, “‘In the Midst of a Living Hell’: The Great War, Masculinity, and Maternity in Williams’s *Kora in Hell: Improvisations and Three Professional Studies*,” *William Carlos Williams Review* 17.2 (Fall 1991): 13–38, who focuses also on Dora Marsden’s linguistic theories (see *The Egoist*) and Williams’s inscription of the “feminine.” Also relevant for this entire discussion are: Sandra

M. Gilbert, "Purloined Letters: William Carlos Williams and 'Cress'," *William Carlos Williams Review* 11.2 (Fall 1985): 5–14; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's works (*The War of the Words: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1 [New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1988] and *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2 [New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1988]) and Susan Stanford Friedman's fine survey of the differences in how male and female writers use metaphors linking childbirth and creativity (Susan Stanford Friedman, "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse," *Speaking of Gender*, ed. Elaine Showalter [New York: Routledge, 1989]: 73–100).

6. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982); and also by Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, introd. Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

7. Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986).

8. The works of four Williams critics have been of particular help to me in reading Kristeva and Williams in conjunction: Bryce Conrad (both *Refiguring America: A Study of William Carlos Williams' 'In the American Grain'* [Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1990] and "Engendering History: The Sexual Structure of William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 35.3 [Fall 1989]: 254–78); Terence Diggory (*William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991]); Palattella ("'In the Midst of a Living Hell': The Great War, Masculinity, and Maternity in Williams' *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* and 'Three Professional Studies'"); and Anne L. Bower ("Williams' *A Voyage to Paganry*: The Impossible Search for 'It,'" *William Carlos Williams Review* 17.2 [Fall 1991]: 39–51).

9. Theodora R. Graham, "'Her Heigh Compleynte': The Cress Letters of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*," *Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams: The University of Pennsylvania Conference Papers*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Philadelphia, PA: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983) 164–93.

10. Joan Nay, "William Carlos Williams and the Singular Woman," *William Carlos Williams Review* 11.2 (Fall 1985): 45–54.

11. Marjorie Perloff, "The Man Who Loved Women: The Medical Fictions of William Carlos Williams," *The Georgia Review* 34 (Winter 1989): 840–53.

12. Kerry Driscoll, *William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1987).

13. Julio Marzán, "Mrs. Williams's William Carlos," *Reinventing the Americas: Comparative Studies of Literature of the United States and Spanish America*, eds. Bell Gale Chévinny and Gari Laguardia (London: Cambridge UP, 1986) 106–21.

14. Stephen Tapscott, "Williams, Sappho, and the Woman-as-Other," *William Carlos Williams Review* 11.2 (Fall 1985): 30–44.

15. Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sidney, Austral.: Allen & Unwin, 1989).

16. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Vintage, 1946).

17. Palattella, "In the Midst of a Living Hell': The Great War, Masculinity, and Maternity in Williams' *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* and 'Three Professional Studies,'" 25–6.

18. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 70.

19. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 30; see also 32–55.

20. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Bantam, 1959).

21. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 32–8, 100, etc.

22. Hilda Doolittle [H.D.], *Sea Garden* (London: Constable, 1916).

23. For this reason Williams claims that the passages edited out of his ode to March by H.D. were the "prototype" of his Improvisations. For this reason too, Williams was delighted with the original cover of his first book of Improvisations, which featured Stuart Davis's drawing of a human ovum surrounded by spermatozoa (I 30). As if to further intertwine the masculine and the Italian energies of the Improvisations, Williams at the end of his Prologue notes that he borrowed the idea of arranging the book into improvisations and commentary from a small volume by the Venetian poet Pietro Metastasio given to him by Ezra Pound (I 28).

24. Vera Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicholas Guillen* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987). Kutzinski's and Conrad's books are the best discussions of the critical issues raised by *In the American Grain*; Conrad tends to analyze the conflicted nature of Williams's project more than Kutzinski does, who stresses its radicalism. Bower's recent essay is a good introduction to *A Voyage to Pagany*.

25. For one discussion of Williams's interest in classical culture, plus a reproduction of the illustration of the Ludovisi Throne that Williams owned, see Emily Mitchell Wallace, "A Musing in the Highlands and Valleys: The Poetry of Gratwick Farm," *William Carlos Williams Review* 8.1 (Spring 1982): 15.

26. Further parallels between *In the American Grain* and *Pagany* suggest themselves. If the heart of *Pagany* is the deleted chapter on the hero's most sustained encounter with a European Venus, the heart of *In the American Grain*, the site where its implied theories of cultural development receive their most provocative foundation, is in "Rome," the suppressed text on which Williams was simultaneously working in 1924. It is as if the key to both texts were "supplementary" material edited out, or never included. For more details and background on the circumstances of the composition of *Pagany* and the deletion of the "Venus" chapter, see Bower; the deleted chapter from *Voyage to Pagany* is reprinted in *Imaginations* (324–33), and in the 1970 New Directions reissue of *Pagany*. For details on Williams's work on "Rome" in the context of the composition of *In the American Grain*, see Bryce Conrad's book and articles.

27. Williams simultaneously gives some time in "Rome" to a discussion of genius in architecture, his way of paying tribute to the grandeur of Roman architecture, which he appreciated even more fully in 1924 than he did on his first trip to Italy in 1910 with his brother Ed. But Williams's discussion of architecture in "Rome" reveals that Williams's return to Rome involved a return to his rivalry with his brother and a new attempt to differentiate his aesthetic and philosophical thought from his brother's conservatism. In 1910

William Carlos was very much the student to his older brother the teacher, for Ed in 1910 had not only studied architecture first in the States and then in the Academy of Rome but had a career in the field off to a splendid start. By 1924, however, things were different. While still on friendly terms, the Williams brothers were decidedly at odds over the value of William Carlos's publications of modernist free verse and experimental prose; Ed thought of his brother's work as that of an *enfant terrible* having little value, while his work was classical and sober and rational. (See Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981], 87–8; and William Marling, *William Carlos Williams and the Painters, 1909–1923* [Athens: Ohio UP, 1982], 15–21.) Lisa Steinman delivered a paper on architecture, William Carlos Williams, and his brother Edward Williams at William Paterson College in 1988. The paper is unpublished.

In "Rome" we can see William Carlos revising the "education" in art and architecture that Rome and his brother originally gave him in order to make it consistent with his romantic and rebellious modernism. Williams contrasts a notion of architecture that is essentially the dry study of "stones" formed into a "unity" with the idea that architecture, like other arts and sciences, is about sensuousness, motion, light, intellect, and what today would be called "complexity and contradiction": "the object of architecture is mistaken to be unity, it is really a light cast through stones for the intelligence to see them simply but in multitude" ("Rome" 58–9). Williams then goes on in "Rome" to equate such architectural principles with writing.

28. Peter Schmidt, *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988) 136–40.

29. Christopher Hibbert, *Rome: The Biography of a City* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985) 11.

30. Robert E. Bell, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1982) 217.

31. Rodolfo Lanciani, *The Roman Forum* (Rome: Frank, 1910) 62.

32. "A Descriptive List of Works from Williams' Library Now at Fairleigh Dickinson University," ed. Peter Schmidt et al., *William Carlos Williams Review* 10.2 (Fall 1984): 42.

33. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

34. Brooks Adams, *The Law of Civilization and Decay: An Essay on History* (New York: Macmillan, 1895).

35. Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, 385.

36. J. A. Rogers, *Sex and Race*, vol. 1: *The Old World* (New York: privately printed, 1940) 108.

37. Emendation is the editor Loevy's.

38. Bryce Conrad, "Williams in Rome," unpublished Modern Language Association paper, 1990, 3.

39. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1975).

40. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973).

41. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921). Turner's claim that it is the presence of the frontier that makes U.S. history and culture unique both is and is not consistent with Williams's view of history in *In the American Grain*. Turner's "frontier hypothesis" largely validates the ideology of cultural superiority that undergirds earlier theories of manifest destiny, seeking to show Americans in 1893 how to transfer that empowering sense of cultural destiny to the new urban American culture that must emerge as the frontier closes. *In the American Grain* also identifies America's cultural uniqueness with the frontier, but Williams's chapters dramatize Turner's frontier hypothesis in action in ways that make its premises rather problematic. For more on this complex matter, see Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicholas Guillén* and Conrad, *Refiguring America: A Study of William Carlos Williams's 'In the American Grain'*; much more so than Kutzinski, Conrad sees Williams being thoroughly enmeshed within the rhetorical traditions he is attempting to critique.

42. For more on the matter of Williams's representation of people of color in *Spring and All* and other works, see especially Aldon L. Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: Georgia UP, 1988). Julio Marzán's essay on Williams's relation to his mother and her Caribbean roots has also shown how much more work has to be done on the relationship between African and Hispanic culture in the Caribbean and the work of modernist poets in the United States, including Williams. See also Peter Schmidt. "Introduction to 'Letter to an Australian Editor' (1946)," *William Carlos Williams Review* 17.2 (Fall 1991): 4–7.

43. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

44. Gustavo Perez Firmat, ed., *Do the Americas Have a Common Language?* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1990).

45. Cheika Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, trans. Yaa-lengi Meema Ngemi, eds. Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn de Jager (Brooklyn, NY: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991).

46. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1987).

47. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988).