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The American Dream Conspiracy. Cultural Critique in Tennessee William's "A Streetcar Named Desire", Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman", and Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (1)

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PART 1: The False Promises of the American Dream

There was once a mythical and forgotten time in American history, when the U.S. government funded the arts, valued its writers and artists and dramatists, and allowed radical theaters like The Group Theater to flourish, and even, with difficulty, to bring forth union-based plays featuring the common worker, like Clifford Odets' "Waiting for Lefty."

In 1936, the Group Theater's production of the agit-prop union organizing drama, pitting ordinary workers against the powers of corporate and industrial wealth, celebrated the possibility of the drama's actually influencing its audience. It was a call to action.

Clifford Odets treated his audience as part of the union meeting that forms the play, with flashbacks to the lives of the embattled workers. With Brechtian audacity, Odets treats us to the stories of starving and harassed Depression-era workers, all of us waiting for news from their—and our—hopeful leader, aptly named "Lefty." Of course, Lefty, as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1958), never shows up—instead, he is beaten by company goons and left in the gutter. However, his fate energizes and angers the union members, and the audience as well so that we will go into the streets, strike, and organize, to create community, instead of isolation with "the common man." Though the message may be simple and obvious, and the workers' stories sentimental—Odets' basic idea of workers waiting for a force to deliver the "common man" from the conspiracies of their bosses and the corrupt politicians and corporations became a central trope of modern life. After the days of the 1930s and 40s government programs for the arts quickly gave way to new fears and new conspiracies: We are still waiting for Lefty.

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In the post-war period, Lefty gives way to Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman* in 1949, and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1962. These three well-known plays, bracketing the 1950s, were each made into strikingly successful films with major stars, and hundreds of productions depicting the beginnings and the finale of the fearful 1950s, sometimes known as the Dark Ages in American life. Of course, many other plays appeared inside the decade—many famous musicals that try to deflect the overwhelming odds lined up against the tragic and beaten characters in these three plays.

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Among them are *South Pacific*, *Call Me Madam*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Camelot*—popular powerhouses that forced tragedy from the Broadway stage by using romantic stories and happy endings, celebrating individual love and, at the same time, the global reach of the American Empire. Even as they dealt with serious racial, gang, and political questions, they simply relived the time of universal American conquest, asserting American hyper-individualism all over the globe, pasting on a Hollywood ending. Sentimentality was abroad in the land and exported widely, and only a few voices dared to present a contrarian view of the life of the common man—to examine the forces that conspired against him, and forced his consent to a system and way of life that made him conform or die, that threw him back on the personal rather than the political, that encouraged him to look inward, never beyond his domestic hearth.

When I grew up in the 50s, in a working class ghetto in Chicago, we lived in the hopes of achieving the American Dream, glorifying work in order to raise our social level, like Stanley Kowalski in Williams' play, like Willy Loman in Miller's play, and like George and Martha, those achieved successes in Albee's 1962 play.

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In Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George and Martha, a history professor and his wife, live in suburban comfort in their college town, free from the urban ghetto, competing ethnic groups, and the pit of poverty looming. They represent the hopes of the Kowalski's and the Loman's of my 1950s workers' world—educated, insightful, respected—yet they do lack the essentials for life that the 1950s generation was seeking.

Three stages of development operated in the 1950s and in these plays that represent US in that time: first, workers fought for family and love; then they needed work and security; and finally, they realized a desire for action and creation in their lives. Did the fat years of the 1950s, with its rules and regulations offer this development to the "common man," or did he remain stagnant and trapped like George and Martha by 1962?

In these three plays of Williams, Miller, and Albee, we see the swift deconstruction of the communities of artists and workers, unions and intellectuals that had begun in the 30s—the New Deal was already being challenged by a corporatist spirit, and new forces were re-shaping the future. When Eisenhower was elected in 1952, the old New Deal coalition was already being challenged: the values of community and cooperation were being replaced by isolation and fear, underlined by Ike's tolerance of McCarthyism and the weapons the US had unleashed on the world. We ritually pledged our allegiance to the flag, renewing our Loyalty Oaths daily, so as to reassure ourselves that Depression and War would not come again, if we were loyal and vigilant and above all, obedient and compliant workers—and of course, consumers.

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The two seminal plays of the late 40s—Williams' *Streetcar* and Miller's *Salesman*—seemed to put forth common man—and common woman—as heroes who simply were baffled by the new era emerging around them. They are tied to old values and mythical versions of so-called American Dream, living in a fantasy world, bedeviled by false consciousness, and living in myths that will sooner or later conspire to destroy them. In their willing acquiescence to the exploitive labor—the American Nightmare of self-righteous conformity, Willy Loman and Linda, Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski and even pregnant, abused Stella, all adopt an alien ethic designed to destroy them. We are driven to ask, as a more recent writer has asked: Why Does Kansas Vote against its own Interests? For these plays and these characters, we must ask: Why do these workers, salesmen, teachers—Kansans—join in their own disempowerment? Why do they consent to be part of conspiracies of exploitation, conformity, silence, and war?

The conspiracy of fear looms large these plays: Stanley Kowalski's fear of being usurped by Blanche DuBois' outdated and old-fashioned, aesthetic values, and Willy Loman's pervasive fear of losing his job, after working beyond his abilities and beyond his years. Beginning with Stanley, we see a budding salesman who has consented—assertively, with masculine vigor—to play his role as salesman in the American Dream, which he has fully adopted as his own, hitching his wagon to a star, like his wife—called Stella—with the passionate intensity of husband and lover. Stanley asserts his leadership among his poker-playing, beer-drinking buddies and the self-theatricalizing interloper, Blanche. The play's working title, "The Poker Night," indicates the setting that Tennessee Williams' has chosen: a mélange of workers—Black, Mexican, Polish—immigrants, women, a bowling tournament, a poker game—to represent the shabby working class neighborhood in New Orleans, poor, run down and cramped, ironically "named Elysian Fields ... between the L & N tracks and the river."

In what amounts to a parody of the capitalist conspiracy that he imitates and embodies, Stanley seems to be a primal force of Nature, crying out for his mate and protecting his tiny lair in the heart of the French Quarter.

Williams' Indeed, the French Quarter of the 1940s emerges as a locus of poverty, violence, and exploitation, long before it was celebrated as New Orleans' Mardi Gras tourist attraction and, in our time, drowned under tons of mud because the Conspirators in Washington and Louisiana provided no decent public works and levees to protect ordinary people from the conspiracy of hurricane and political corruption. Stanley works on, ignorant of his real

enemies, living inside the Belly of the Beast, as a succession of governments refuse to protect him from any natural or economic disasters they are causing by inattention, neglect, and profit-taking. The Conspiracy against the Common Man, re-branding it The Dream works to enjoin his consent from the 1940s onwards. And we forget the dream of collective action, community projects, and common cause that once animated at least some of Stanley's forbearers: the melting pot is melting them all to a common isolation, pitting the Poles and French, Irish and Mexican against each other at the poker table at the center of Tennessee Williams' play—seven card stud is the name of the game they play at the end. They gamble with their lives every day at the plain wood table in the French Quarter.

Williams' first title, "The Poker Night," used the gambling metaphor to stand for the losing proposition in which they are all engaged, Stanley and Blanche both doomed to lose, playing against the house's tremendous odds. They cannot win. Even Mitch and Stella, the average people in the story, are doomed to consent to destruction in the game they are playing. Williams' versions of the common man and woman play against each other, but they are all losing to the house, attacking and debasing each other within the closed unit of history. They are history as artifact of the Old South, and history of desire doomed to fail.

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Blanche is deeply narcissistic in a narcissistic culture. Often seen as Williams' heroine, and representing aesthetic and feminine forces, actually she destroys others by buying into the conspiracy of beauty, artifice, theatricality, and myth. She demands acquiescence in the myth she has inherited of the Old South. The affairs with boys and with her gay husband mark out her own cruelty and debasement of sexuality. The myth encloses Blanche until she can no longer touch reality—closed in by the dream she has bought into, there's nothing left but to "depend on the kindness of strangers"—a strange social throwback that cannot work in the land of Stanley. Her ritual re-enactment of her own oblivion—the oblivion of the South—does not remove the sting of her destruction, but only seals it.

By using sexuality as the key event of the play, Williams is throwing his own marginalization, his own gay and rejected status in the face of the audience—saying that he spoke from a position outside of the accepted norms of his time, that he was bringing audiences a struggle for life between a past ideal and a present brutality that most Americans had not yet discovered. On the stage, Williams' world of New Orleans with its repeated cry of "flores para los muertos," weaves a musical image of a thriving sensual world engaged in its own destructive myth—gambling, dreaming, self-indulgence, a long ride to oblivion on a Streetcar named Consumerism, the desire for the object beyond the object—the object that can never fulfill our wants, the line with no terminus, running from the champs elysees, the elysian fields, to nowhere, Williams gives us a Doomed America, enmeshed in an inconsolable nightmare vision.

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Where *the street car named Desire* runs out to the land, there Stanley rides, and he wants to move up and out into the land of desire, American Dream. While Stanley wants to get on that car, get some old family land, he finds out that Blanche has sold them all to lawyers and law suits and predatory legal machinations. He's been swindled, he thinks, by the old French traditions in the South. Blanche represents the more human, old fashioned, more literary, educated, sedate and destroyed, tarnished old southern way of thinking that no longer has any wealth and very little morality. Only pretension, theater and a trunk full of old silks and beads are left. There is something attractively sick about Blanche. She tried to seduce the newspaper boy, yet she's very hot, she's the older, rowdier, more romantic America. She is the artistic, humane, and traditional side, with all its beauty and corruption, while Stanley K. is the more efficient, modern, industrialized northerner of wealth, wars and terror. He lives the life of conspiratorial fears and terror to which the modern worker must subscribe and consent.

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Only the cry of the patriarchal male for his mate, Linda, or STELLA! Or Martha can temporarily assuage his pain. The

social pain, the deprivation, the humiliation, constant humiliation of the worker, turns against his mate where he seeks succor and where he inflicts further pain, reenacting the humiliation of the workplace, the factory floor, or cubicle. Willie takes out his frustrations on Linda, Stanley actually strikes Stella and insults her, George is constantly one-upping and goading Martha to greater heights of insult and injury. This capitalist pattern of taking out the hierarchical frustrations at work back home on wives and children harks back to James Joyce's *Dubliners* story, *Counterparts*, and persists in the capitalist world in most art forms. But in the drama, we get violence in front of us—we see Willie Loman abusing his children and his wife, taking out his fears on them. Succumbing completely to the pressures of being emasculated, he practices the masculine powers on women and offspring—trying to raise his two sons in his own decadent image, preaching the same values to them, even while he consents to his own emasculation by the conspiratorial powers and ideas that he has incorporated.

From dire poverty in New Orleans to the degraded decades of Willie's life—the force and beauty of Stanley's sexuality has been tamed into rote monotony and mere oblivion, driven like Virginia Woolf, herself, to suicide. Madness haunts Willie from the opening scene—he fantasizes that he is in a car he owned in the 1920s with a moveable windshield, he dreams aloud for us about his brother Ben who went into the wilderness of Alaska or Africa and found diamonds—he went in a pauper and came out a rich man—and Willie takes the Oath of that Old Conspiracy—the American Dream—believing like Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway before him, that he can compete, that he can become part of the conspiracy if only he serves it loyally and well, decade after decade, that there is gold in “them thar hills,” that anyone—even he—can grasp it. In and out of the dream nightmare, Willie cannot give up in mid-stream—he has only a few payments to go on that house, which is shadowed on both sides by looming apartment complexes, casting darkness on his crusty garden, his dreams of being a builder, a carpenter, of giving something to his sons.

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And his sons, they embody the painful split, the schizophrenia of the conspiracy. Happy, the most unhappy businessman, is trying to fulfill his father's business dreams, but he is frustrated by a self-destructive urge—feeling that he has to wreak sexual conquests of his boss's fiancée, in order to win against a system he knows is corrupted, and he conspires to steal his life and his labor. Even knowing that he is the victim, he still consents to believe in the system, and takes out his frustrations on women and on himself.

While the hopeful and idealistic son, the one who tried to escape by breaking the rules, stealing the football, undermining his sporting success when he found out that his father had other women on the road—Biff, the battling son, with the upwardly mobile name, the one who refuses to consent to the salesman's fate, who runs off to join the wild west, to live, finally, Nature, to appreciate the fresh winds and the newly-born colts in the field—he, too, is thrown into panic by his father's self-degradation, by his father's petty tyrannies, by his father's domineering over the ever-faithful Linda. Biff, too, is torn between the business ideals that conspire against his humanity and his desire to escape them. Will he also consent? We don't know at the end, at Willie's funeral, but we do know that he has begun to see the trap that had been set for his father and all of them, and that his father willingly walked into. What is the conspiracy that Biff and later, George and Martha are trying to escape?

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The conspiracy that runs through the developmental stages of all three plays, that defines the 1950s as a period of upward mobility, moving from Stanley and Blanche, to Willie and Linda, to George and Martha, from New Orleans slum tenement to blighted big city ghetto and to comfortable bourgeois suburban cottage, seems to be based on a conspiracy of hyper-individualism which became the new American credo. Even when economic independence may be granted, even when the secret conclaves of the conspirators granted some education and some class mobility, the conspiratorial nature of that rise for only the privileged few has robbed us of any sense of community, communalism or cooperation. By beginning with the glorification of the individual as the sole producing agent of the

culture—dismissing any kind of historical awareness or union or joining together or collegial workplace, by glorifying the myth of the individual creative and entrepreneurial spirit, these writers point out that there can be no independent and creative life. The common man in United-Statesian America was finally all alone, he had now to depend entirely on his own ingenuity—history was banished, the past was banished, and so-called human nature had only to be controlled and constrained and made to conform to the demands of work, performance, and puritanical devotion. End of History.

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In each case, these plays seem to be domestic dramas talking about a single family. Willy is the quintessential salesman who lives on "a smile and a shoeshine," who is out there making his way in the world of commercial capitalism—with a hope of finding the Holy Grail of security and glory—to be like the great salesman, Jim Singleman, at the Parker House in Boston, who was always greeted with a smile by his customers, who was famous for his friends and camaraderie. Willy, however, lives in the past and present at the same time, going in and out of his dream world, misunderstanding bill of goods that he, himself, has been sold. The conspiracy that has trapped him is the Big Lie of Capitalism—the security of a job, the idea of a pension, the retirement at the end—those tricky, elusive American promises that somehow never pan out, when inflation, crashes, bankruptcies, and vast international conspiratorial adventures, the boom and bust cycle, the wars that no one expects but always happen with a fearful regularity—all these unplanned ventures suddenly blow away the planning and promises once made to workers like Willy and Stanley and Blanche.

It is the same for Albee's middle-class couple, George and Martha, living in suburban comfort in a college town called New Carthage. While these characters live their mundane lives, believing in the Dream they have been sold, the Dream turns into the American Conspiracy, waiting to pounce, after years of consent and labor, on the used-up worker and his family, like the Lomans, on the exhausted teacher and macho immigrant, like Blanche and Stanley, even on the ironic and insightful history professor and his witty wife as they entertain the next generations of victims in Albee's closing of the 1950s cycle of conspiracies.

Even the elegant and witty history professor and his college president's daughter in Albee's 1962 middle-class tragic-comedy of manners, George and Martha—named after the founding family of the young republic—play out a domestic and family story that reflects the political crises and international marauding that characterize US imperialism. George, too, fears being found wanting, not being a "winner." George, a failed history professor and a failed novelist, shares the fears felt by women, Blacks, Hispanics, and other marginalized minorities in the 1950s. Stuck in the privatized kingdom of New Carthage, a college town, he lives the lie, adopting the mode of the Dream cum Conspiracy. He imaginatively concocts the story of a son whom they never had, and then adds the story of that supposed son's horrible death. What motivates a supposedly successful bourgeois couple to adopt the conspiratorial method as the crux of their own life? Why do they consent to repeat the conspiracy that has entrapped them?

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What do George and Martha fear? They fear being barren, lacking generation, expression, creative work, or meaningful lives. They fear losing security, being hurled out of the workplace and into hellish oblivion. Who put them in this middle class prison, living well and living in hell at the same time? Is it Martha's father, the president of the college who chose George for her? Is it the economic system of the time that denied brilliant women like Martha equality and real work? Perhaps, it's the academic conformity that demanded: "publish or perish." Why do George and Martha live in a fictitious world, like Willy, trying fitfully to pierce through to the realities of their grim and degrading and monotonous existence: he as a teacher who cannot teach, and a writer who cannot write, she as a wifey-poo who urges him onward and undercuts him at the same time? They just cannot seem to fit the rules and regulations and impossible goals that have conspired to destroy their lives.

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At every turn the academic and the political system conspires to demean them, to turn them into intellectual robots, serving up the same rotten beliefs to generations of students and colleagues year after year. They are the perfect bourgeois reflections of the Conspiracy they have signed onto. George and his sensual, exhibitionist, party-giving hostess wife, Martha, have joined the ranks of those who not only succumb and consent to their own degradation, but also consented to train the next generation to do the same? Faced with the impossibility of raising a free and creative new generation of either offspring or students or co-workers, they collude to repeat their own disaster—raising, instead, the next generation of obedient workers, victims of the same conspiracy that destroyed their human potential. If, at the end, they are still afraid of Virginia Woolf, barren and hopeless, repeating the endless party games that might well have been invented by Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway—another hostess with slim threads of hope, tied as she is to the corrupting political system of bourgeois England after World War I—they certainly express well-grounded fears of repeating Woolf's despair and her suicide. Their own child, their own imagined Septimus, the fantasy son is already killed—what remains for them but to succumb?

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Some say that George and Martha are training Nick and Honey to be their successors, even as they play Hump the Hostess and engage in more sexual parlor games and get drunk throughout the night—locked in their hermetic suburban cottage. When the younger Biology Professor and his hysterically pregnant wife try to escape, they are ordered to stay and play the game—which sounds awfully like an intellectual sado-masochistic game, where everybody's a "loser." In 1962, Albee breaks new ground at New Carthage, showing us how Stanley the slovenly, hyper-masculine, hyper-individualized, wife-beater and worker of the forties will be transmuted through decades of wear and tear to come. First, he will turn into the weary and pitiable worker on the road, who thinks he has raised his status, but is heading for the gas-pipe suicide and the rejection by all those whose conspiracies he has served and, finally, becomes, an educated and middle-class success story: a college professor, who has risen so far in the ranks, but will rise no further. From Stanley and Blanche, to Willie and Linda—who keeps saying about her husband—attention must be paid, to this man—to George and Martha, we see the whole panoply of workers from 1947 to 1962.

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