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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 ?" (2)

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PART 2: The Critique of Late Imperialist Culture

Why weren't the material advantages coming from the post-war economic boom enough for the working and middle-class people depicted in Williams', Miller's and Albee's plays?

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Perhaps the answer is obvious. Even Virginia Woolf, the English aristocrat, in 1941, could no longer support the contradictions and conspiracies around her—the social structures of her day, the returning wars then raging in Europe. She had written one novel about a World War in *Mrs. Dalloway*—now famous again in the movie "*The Hours*"—and she understood the conspiracy of war that drove her character Septimus Smith into the trenches and then to madness and suicide, not to mention the class conspiracy that kept Clarissa Dalloway in her privileged place, giving the eternal party for the Prime Minister and her Tory M.P. husband, Richard, whom she serves valiantly as hostess and ornament. No. Virginia couldn't do it all again: another war, another conspiracy of violence and destruction, another generation consenting to its own destruction. So, she is first sent off to the madhouse, like Blanche DuBois, then she walks into the Wye River with stones in her pocket like Willie and the gas pipe, and, at last, she exists only as a note in lipstick on a bathroom mirror, challenging the intellectuals to figure out her riddle, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the many class and gender and economic and military conspiracies which she knew so well, and to which she refused to consent. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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Moreover, what happened to her, and what of her long term suffering? What to make of the elite and challenging language she left us? How to interpret the conspiracies that drove her art, her life, and her suicide? In Albee's play, Martha responds for her: "I am, George, I am!"

When we look back on the 1950s, at the US as an economic powerhouse thanks to its triumph in WWII, now with an upwardly mobile population, runaway suburbanization, and rising incomes, we can wonder what the problem might be. After all, the Willy Lomans and the Stanley Kowalskis and the Blanche DuBoises ought to be doing just fine—as hyper individualism was well on the way to banishing the need for community, cooperation, and communalism. These Cs were on the run, and the little man could sing glories of Capitalism, self-help, and the entrepreneurial spirit. And the unknown C—Conformity—works in the background to keep the common man in order, minding his P's and Q's, raising his children according to the rules.

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What motivates the workers in these plays of the 1950s—realism about the possibilities of increased wages or promotion, liberation from labor, wage-slavery, or the hope of a more creative life? Hardly. What motivates them is the Holy Grail of the American Dream.

Workers like Willy Loman had been sold the American Dream, and they pursued it with a shoeshine and a smile. Willie wants to be like the super salesman, beloved everywhere and greeted with a smile in the Parker House Hotel. But the tangible wealth he once expected gives way to another empty promise—being loved and beloved. Because of the Dream he has signed onto, the family he has lived for, he cannot communicate his frustration to successful friends or over-bearing bosses—all reject or pity him. He hears his voice on the wire recorder, he hears his brother crowing from the past, and his present is destroyed. At some point the consent is destroyed by the overwhelming lie of the conspiracy, and nothing is left.

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Like Stanley Kowalski before him—as played by the powerful early Brando from the Group Theater, with the new deeply felt, emotional Stanislavki tradition forcing him forward to new and guttural heights of acting—cannot sustain the lie of his life, the many conspiracies of destruction he in which he takes part: the conspiracy to expose Blanche's sexual secrets, her tawdry past, her pretensions of Old Southern aristocracy, her artistic evasions, her make-up, her costumes, her theatrical evasion, those old colored lights, that trunk full of papers, land-grants, defunct wills, and tattered costumes. Stanley sees the artifice, the artificiality, the pretense and pretentiousness, and he must destroy it. Two great theatrical wills—the brutish and the artistic, the assertive and the narcissistic, the practical and the poetic—collide with conflicting conspiracies, and each refuses to consent to the other. The New South wins over the Old—and Stanley, like Willie, temporarily triumphs over his brood of women and men, playing out the conspiracy of capitalist production.

Stanley and Willie seem to be the protagonists of their plays—they are like the character in Joyce's *Counterparts* (in *Dubliners*) who is driven from his degrading office, takes a few nips, and wreaks out his frustrations on the weaker vessel in his family, his son, whom he abuses just as he has been abused by his boss. So it is with Willie and Stanley. When they are degraded by their work or by the legal system, they find consenting victims, in wives and sisters-in-law, in obedient colleagues, and in their children. They preserve the hierarchy of suffering, reproducing their kind, at home, in schools, and in the world at large. They become the bullies who abused them—torturing their own children until they consent to join in the false consciousness of the previous era, to join the very conspiratorial beliefs that are undoing them all. That's why Kansas votes Republican—because we are used to it, we follow the old rules which are presented as new ones, consenting time after time to play out the old lies.

A hero like Willie Loman lives in the dream world of the American Dream—he has no way of correlating that dream with the painful workers' realities that are consuming him—debt, mortgage, age, decline, the end of employment and income, being cast aside by the very people who exploited him and celebrated him as the common man. Miller's Willy Lo-man, low man on the capitalist totem pole, doing the dirty work of capitalism, face-to-face selling on the road, tries to turn it into a way of life, an adventure, a calling, a noble quest—but he only succeeds in displaying to audiences his “false consciousness,” his inability to make reality fit the Dream world he has been sold—like so many worthless shares sold to willing victims by Bernard Madoff, who conspired and made off with the money of his greedily consenting investors.

Despite all the hoop-la about the fifties, our greatest playwrights told us apparently domestic family stories that are based on exploitation and dream-worlds, that actually reflect the degradation of the so-called “common man,” his brutal and tragic ending, and the actual situation of the bully of United-Statesian America acting beyond its borders. The domestic drama reflects the political life of the country in a conspiratorial house of mirrors—where family stands for country, and domestic tragedy stands for international dominance.

In the Drama of the 1950s, the major playwrights—Williams, Miller, Albee—are signaling desperately from the decks of a foundering ship. They use family drama to get under the skin of middle-class and college-educated and finally, high school audiences—to tell them that what they see on the stage is their country, their economy, their politics, their international relations—but is anyone listening? Did any of the warnings get beyond the footlights? Perhaps these frantic signals from Willie and Stanley and Blanche and George and Martha helped to spark the movements that came after the 1950s, the artistic and political upheavals of the 1960s and 70s. Or perhaps they signaled a break, a sad break with the socializing movements of the 1930s and 40s, with the true movement plays of Clifford Odets, and the workers and artists' collectives of the Depression Era.

It seems that America lost its history in the 1950s, that social movements and our collective history was hidden and concealed under the Red Scare and McCarthyist pressures. Surely, the Loyalty Oath, no less than the Pledge of Allegiance served to create a Conspiracy of Silence from the top down, a not-so-friendly fascism that conspired to cut

us off from our proper social history—the history of unions, and labor and social pressure—that we have never really regained in the US. The conspiracies of silence and fear that rules the 1950s succeeded in silencing Workers, Women, Wobblies—all the communities that had been forming before the War. With or without their consent, the idea of “American Exceptionalism,” the Bomb, the fear of Russia, and the imposition of capitalist certitudes to ward off the socialist certitudes were enforced on them.

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Locked in their narrow domestic prisons, Willy Loman and Stanley and Blanche and even George and Martha—an academic couple living in suburban comfort—all attack each other as if they had found the enemies within. They take the fear that is rampant in the land—the proto-fascism, the Red Scare, the long hours of labor, and translate them into fear at home. Instead of the Dream they have been imbued with, they find the nightmare of daily life. The Conspiracy of the American Dream—a lottery, a wall-street gamble, a Las Vegas shuffle—has enslaved people until they cannot trust what they see before their eyes. They are constantly interpreting the real events of their lives in order that they fit the conspiracy of the Dream they have been sold.

Willy Loman has taken the bait, and consented to his own destruction. In Miller's play, fantasy collides with reality, conspiracy with consent, and a kind of implosion takes place—William Loman can go no further. The false consciousness in which he has been living destroys first his mind, then his family, and then his life. He disappears under the contradictory pressures. Willy Loman becomes a psychological wreck unable to cope with a world in which others are doing just fine.

But are these people psychological failures, or, is there something outside of them conspiring against their success? Each of them is isolated in his or her little domestic universe, with no help coming from the outside. That's “America,” even, eventually, to the hatred of “the government”. Because, with the ascension of Ronald Reagan to the highest office, there is no social support, no unions, no communities in the world of Willie or Blanche or Stanley, or even in the isolated college town of George and Martha—New Carthage. All that is left is social carnage, only the hermetic and sealed world of the individual, facing his and her horrors alone.

There we see the whole American Drama spread out before us, desperate husbands and desperate housewives clinging to outworn and hyper-individualized, anti-government ideas, struggling to live in the false consciousness preached by the American Conspiracy, a better name for the Dream. What is the Dream but a conspiracy of corporate and military powers to keep the factories full of low-wage labor, obedient labor and, as well, the armies full of obedient cannon-fodder: cannon-fodder for factory floor and battlefield, as Johnny comes marching home again, only to go out again to Korea, and the incessant foreign battlefields, every day somewhere on the planet. Every day since World War II, there has been an American Empire war or subversion or takeover or overthrow in Iran, in Guatemala, in Greece, Italy, Chile, Panama, Nicaragua, Honduras. But you know the list, the roll-call of Empire that the Willies and Stanleys and Georges and Marthas support by their unspoken consent, by their everyday consent, as they turn towards reproducing the empire in your living rooms, unaware of the symbolic value of their professed victim-hood, abroad.

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How do they sell the Old Lie in America? As Wilfred Owen has said—“*Dulce et decorum est—pro patria mori*”—how sweet and fitting it is, to die for one's country. Are these characters really willing to submit to death, as they are to the corporate corruption and sleazy conspiracies that rule their life, their ideology? Do they represent, in addition to the consenting to the economic inequities and inhumanity of their lives, a commitment to foreign conflicts and military adventures? How do Williams, Miller, and Albee project domestic political drama onto the world stage? Why have

these plays worn well in the world beyond American shores? Is there a capitalist and an imperial conspiracy nascent in American plays?

What about Ben, the brother, who successfully invades the jungles and wilds, whose intentions and actions are more coherent than those of Willie and his sons? Does he achieve the greatness that Willie has thrust upon him? Is he the successful entrepreneur on a world scale, or is he merely another of Willie's fantasies of possible past glory? Is he the Bill Gates that Americans dream of, without knowing that Bill Gates started with capital? Where does Ben's capital come from? What deals did he conspire in to get the wealth that Willie supposes he has? Or is he just another part of the fantasy that moves the American Dream—converting all evidence into proof of its veracity? Maybe it's just the easy triumphalism of characters in these plays—their assumption of the superiority of their beliefs that underlines the Ugly American of the 50s? Only George and Martha dare question their own assumptions, see through the conspiracy by the end—but at the cost of killing their own son, even in fantasy. Is that fantasy son really the victim of one of America's fantasy wars—in Korea? In the many small invasions, takeovers, and subversions of governments from Iran to Italy, from Greece to Guatemala, from Honduras to Haiti to China and Chile—all wars with ideals and high purposes—all aspects of the American Dream, which kills the sons and ensure the continuation of the old conspiracies for resources, for industries, for bananas and oil and shipping and short-term profits. George and Martha lose a son—and by that imagined or real loss, they lose their real lives, their hold on reality, their own stream of consciousness so wisely depicted and then broken by Virginia Woolf herself.

They have come to the end of their string, they have achieved petit bourgeois status, and in teaching and defending the conspiratorial rules they have learned, they destroy their hopes for humane life. Who's afraid of the sudden death of war—whatever war is raging now? Who's afraid of impotence, death, hysteria, disease, sudden eruptions of repressed emotions, the disloyalty of friends and family, the competition between workers for the crumbs from the table? We are George. We are.

Do audiences see the reproduction of hidden capitalist and imperial values in these domestic situations? Do they see the multiple conspiracies that have led to our own enslavement, the debasement, decadence and corruption of our social values? How could they miss it? These playwrights are exposing the flaws of the empire right in front of them, as they are lived in the life of the Common Man—calling into question the formation of that man's consciousness, and the forces that conspire to keep him from asserting his real and human powers. Demanding that he sign on the dotted line and consent to the fine print in the unreadable, non-existent social contract!

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Where is the creative life of Willie Loman, of his wife and sons? It is buried in the bowels of managerial work for Happy, who is most unhappy. It is hidden in the burning discontent of Biff, who yearns to be a builder, to use his hands, to work in the great outdoors with calves and horses and livestock. But they and Willy are debarred from the old dreams for their motives are in conformity to the demands of capital—to serve and work for profit, but not for any kind of creative fulfillment. In an age before the invention of the Business Major, Happy and Biff are already alienated by the Conspiracy that says they are inadequate without financial success. Before the Fall of Wall street came the fall of common decency, common social connections, common humanity—Willie and Stanley and George and Martha are ordered to stop whining and to look inward for their salvation, at the nuclear family, so aptly named, and to turn away from the political terrors of the Atomic Age. They are encouraged by spectacles like the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a moral lesson against communism preached by all the newspapers, to approve of a corporate government run on behalf of GM and its ilk. Their conformity must imitate the oppression and abuse of the political system, and the racism and misogyny of the country in their daily lives, played out before our eyes in shocking physical and mental tortures.

The tortures of daily life, the minute conspiracies from Pledge of Allegiance and other Loyalty Oaths, show trials and atomic demonstrations, are vividly and truly represented on the stage in these plays. Even the imperial domination of the globe is there—the abuse, the superiority, the mental anguish of the imperial overlord—all is there. Stanley

Kowalski thinks he's a real American and he can conquer both the social challenge and the conspiracies that make him. His insular and isolated existence, his sway over the lesser lights in his life translate quickly to the international sphere, where the victim-victimizer model plays out again.

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In their domestic dystopia, these characters play out pages from the national drama, their very isolation making them a fitting screen for what forms them, conspires against them, and which they reflect in their distorted and demeaning human relations. The personal indeed becomes the political in these plays—corporate rules and laws conspire to form willing workers, like Willie and Linda, Stanley and Blanche, George and Martha. And since we've asked why Kansas votes against its own interests, we can ask why these salesmen, hucksters, cowboys, housewives, factory workers, teachers, loose women, sex workers, college history professors, and desperate drunken housewives all become victims of a vast right-wing conspiracy, and then consent to their own degradation?

Far from profiting, these characters are victims of the economic system. The lives of the salesmen and factory workers in the US follow the pattern of being degraded to fit a mean and limited, profit-driven and hyper-individualistic "human nature" to fit the ideals of capitalist competition. Any idea of common good or community is squelched in the death of the social sphere, the death of public life. It is the end of community in the US in the 50s. Blame the workers and the unions for the failures of General Motors—until it's too late, and then do it again. The company is never at fault. The common man must be controlled, restricted and celebrated at the same time—celebrated for his ability to consent to his own destruction.

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In the 1950s, Eisenhower secretary of commerce said, "What's good for G.M. is good for America." Wilson, former head of General Motors brought that business philosophy into the welcoming Eisenhower cabinet and spread it throughout the entire era. Whereas the old continent was developing social assistance programs, the Eisenhower administration praised the private sector. General Motors was supposed to be producing jobs and wealth for the whole country, while in fact they were beginning their long and painful decline by making bigger and fancier and more expensive and outlandishly garish automobiles. Plated with vast sheets of chromium and brilliant circus colors from pink to charcoal to orange to iridescent green, the automobiles of the period dominated the expanding highway system like an army of outsized metallic insects. In addition, like the tobacco, oil and construction companies, the huge car companies suppressed advances in gas mileage, safety features and child safety development. They conspired to build bigger and bigger cars to make larger profits. The SUV craze of the 1990s is nothing new. These products led to the destruction of the ecosystem and to their own extinction today. Now the companies and the workers are bankrupt. Again, Willie says it best:

"I'm talking about your father! There were promises made across this desk! You mustn't tell me you've got people to see—I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the fruit and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!"

Interesting how those who are new to the ideology and the rules of America use the rules to gain advantage over more recent immigrants. The conspiracy of the 50s was the plot to make the immigrants feel grateful for their status, make them the keepers of the flame of conformity, to make them willing workers and subalterns in the burgeoning capitalist economy. Like capos in the concentration camps that some had barely escaped, the Willie Lomans and the Eddie Carbones and the Stanley Kowalskis, white collar salesmen, machinists, and dock workers and factory workers—they all agreed that in order to join the club of capitalism and drink from the cup being held out to them, they had to conform—change their names, imitate the majority, suppress their deviances from the norm, and become "American". This brilliant melting pot ideology, sold in the schools and in the press and on every radio and TV program from "Leave it to Beaver" to "Stella Dallas" to "Backstage Wife" and to "The Shadow"—confirmed the

conspiracy of conformity—to the unspoken rules: stay in the shadows, women, serve your man, make an ideal family with a patriarchal structure that echoes the paternalist authoritarianism wielded by Eisenhower in the glorious 1950s and imposed over the entire world.

The idealized American family, bastion of American ideology, was itself a conspiracy commanding conformity to its rigid rules—reflecting the supposed meritocracy that was US America, which was of course not really the case. The war, the fear, the ideology of hyper-individualized achievement, and finally, the personal failure of those who failed to live up to the projected ideals—involved the consent of Everyman and Everywoman to consent to their own roles in the conspiratorial rules of upward mobility. It was a whole culture being groomed to become the loyal drones of conspiratorial capitalism—what could possibly go wrong?

While the US political system reached out with the power of the atomic bomb in its hip pocket, saving Korea from the dreaded Communists—projecting conspiracy onto the enemy in acts of massive denial—the common man was enlisting in the army of the employed.

Drama may be privately conceived, but it is publicly created. A very social art form, aware of its own conventions, drama de-familiarizes the actual by dramatizing the extent to which social reality is pure theatre, is construction.

Theater foregrounds actual, living bodies—those of everyday people in varying modes of hygiene, attire, attentive to their particular patterns of movement, gestures, and modes of expression. So this foregrounding of the body itself is an act of resistance to a world in which the mechanical dominates. There is a sense of bodies turned to dust, of the individual suddenly severed from a world that seemed secure, of the thinness of the membrane that separates us from chaos. Loss of human dignity through the Great Depression underlies Williams', Miller's and Albee's views of the world. For them the integrity and practical viability of the social system had been thrown into question by the Great Depression of the 1930s. In their plays, they reveal a culture of suspicion lurking behind the prevailing consensual ethos.

PS:

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