"I will march on paper!" – The politics of Tennessee Williams

"Marcharei no papel!" – A política de Tennessee Williams

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Abstract

The article explores the political dimensions in Tennessee Williams's body of work, elucidating how social and power dynamics can be found in his literary compositions, with special attention to his theatrical productions. Although not overwhelmingly considered a political writer, Williams's values and beliefs are evident in his private and public life. Raised in a Southern Democratic family, he voted for the socialist candidate in 1932, identifying with socialism throughout his life. A renowned playwright, Williams had various political involvements during his career. Instead of clear political affiliations, he expressed an affinity for bohemia. After achieving success, he continued to criticize post-war United States, corruption, and racism in the South. Avoiding direct approaches, he preferred complexity, emphasizing ambiguity in human relationships and incorporating political nuances into his works.

Keywords: Political positioning; American Drama; Biography.

Resumo

O artigo explora as dimensões políticas na obra de Tennessee Williams, elucidando como dinâmicas sociais e de poder podem ser encontradas em suas composições literárias, com especial atenção às suas produções teatrais. Apesar de não ser considerado hegemonicamente um escritor político, os valores e crenças de Williams estão evidentes em sua vida privada e pública. Criado em uma família democrata no Sul, votou no candidato socialista em 1932, identificando-se com o socialismo ao longo da vida. Renomado dramaturgo, Williams teve vários envolvimentos políticos durante sua carreira. Mesmo sem afiliações políticas claras, expressou afinidade com a boemia. Após o sucesso, continuou criticando os Estados Unidos do pós-guerra, a corrupção e o racismo no Sul. Evitando abordagens diretas, preferiu a complexidade, destacando a ambiguidade nas relações humanas e incorporando nuances políticas em suas obras.

Palavras-chave: Posicionamento político; Dramaturgia estadunidense; Biografia.

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The idea that Tennessee Williams's work was apolitical is one of those canards meant to make great artists neutral in the world according to a willfully shallow measure that seeks to disconnect all art from the world – especially great art . . . To say that Tennessee Williams's work is apolitical is to be ignorant of what politics is – or to lie.
Amiri Baraka (2011b, p. 40)

I'm an anarchist. I belong to no party. I belong to no race but the human race.
Tennessee Williams (Hartman, 1982, p. 1)

If one is looking for political statements, manifestos, or polemical arguments from Tennessee Williams, some digging is required. However, once you begin to look for the politics embedded in his creative writing, especially his plays, it becomes clear how integral politics are to a deeper understanding of Williams and his work. Political views can also be tracked in Williams's private and public actions, but rarely as overt demonstrations of ideology; they tend to be decisions based on his personal morality and relationships, and his navigation of times and events.

By most measures, Williams is not considered a political writer *or else* he is considered to be someone who was decidedly apolitical at best. If one follows a dictionary definition of politics, this is true: "The activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power" (Han; Demircioglu, 2016).

The belief that Tennessee Williams was not a political writer nor a political person by that definition is not a controversial idea.[2] However, in addition to gaining power and governing, another essential aspect is the reason why a person aspires to the use of such power. Or, as in Williams's case, when an artist does not aspire to a position of power or the use of power, one might ask how that artist's values, beliefs, and morals inform both their private and public creative lives. This is important in the case of Williams because he has never been considered a political writer in either popular culture or academia.

According to biographer Lyle Leverich, the Williams family were Southern Democrats who backed Roosevelt. However, in the presidential election of 1932, when he was twenty-one, Williams voted for Socialist candidate Norman Thomas – the first and

[2] Williams showed almost no concern for political campaigns, parties, or governance, with the exception of when, out of loyalty and his own sense of decorum, he half-heartedly supported his brother Dakin's multiple runs for U.S. Senator from Illinois and one run for Governor. Asked during an appearance on The Dick Cavett Show, April 7, 1972, if he was interested in politics Williams replied, "I'm interested in my brother's politics, yes. Yes, I'm interested in . . . everyone has to be interested in politics, [muffled] I guess."

last time he cast a vote – and identified with socialism for the rest of his life. His political conscience forged in the midst of the Great Depression, Williams did not care for Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal (Leverich, 1995, p. 136-137).

When Williams began to write for a local St. Louis theater group called The Mummers in 1936, he encountered quite a few members of the group who were communist. The Mummers was essentially a St. Louis Labor Theater, devoted to the dramatization of left wing causes and social justice.[3] The founder of The Mummers, an actor and director named Willard Holland, told a St. Louis reporter in 1936, "we are interested in original plays, along the so-called, although it is not a good designation, propaganda line, if they express community thought and tendencies" (Warren, 1936, p. 40).

Williams wrote a tribute to the audacity, creativity, and wild spirit of The Mummers in his 1948 essay "Something Wild . . ." that expounded upon the importance of such renegade, non-commercial community theater – one of very few instances his writing broached overt political commentary. Toward the end of the essay, Williams describes an atmosphere in which America is threatened by totalitarianism while acting in a reactionary way against Communism and Fascism. The original House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was already quite busy and could "descend[s] like a ton of bricks on the head of any artist who speaks out against the current of prescribed ideas." Williams pivots to a declaration that the democratic impulse runs counter to "the police state" and "all forms of controlled thought and feeling. . . ," that was exemplified by the non-conformity of community theater. Williams cautions the reader to not defend oneself against totalitarian behavior by imitating it. He then compares outsider artists and bohemians with biological mutations, i.e., freaks, and calls for "more freakish behavior." "Maybe ninety percent of the freaks will be just freaks, . . . getting nowhere but into trouble. Eliminate them, however – bully them into conformity – and nobody in America will ever be really young anymore and we'll be left standing in the dead center of nowhere" (Williams, 2009, p. 43-47).

Williams's experience with the Mummers did not overtly affect his political behavior or identity in the traditional sense. While he socialized with the Mummers, he

[3] For more history and context about The Mummers, see Tom Mitchell's "Tennessee Williams and the Mummers of St. Louis: the birth of a playwright. **The Tennessee Williams Annual Review**, New Orleans, p. 91-104, 2009.

was disinclined to join the Communist Party to which many of them belonged. Writing in his journal, Williams said: "There's just a natural uncongeniality between me and that bunch. They are professional 'againsters'! I don't believe in that stuff. It's not necessary to be against everything else in order to be for Communism. They seem to think it is" (Williams, 2006, p. 65). However, Williams continued to identify with socialism for the rest of his life. When asked about his politics in a 1976 interview, Williams's response was consistent: "You want me to give you a straight answer? I loathe Communism. Let's put it that way. Because it's repressive. It's particularly repressive to that which I live by and for, which is creative work. Writing especially. And it's repressive racially, we know that. And I don't like bureaucracy in any form. I think the ideal society, the ideal government will someday be an enlightened form of socialism" (Tennessee..., 1976).

Williams's values, as reflected in his actions, include a sympathetic visit to Ezra Pound in St. Elizabeth's, the psychiatric hospital in Washington in 1957, and likely signing a 1956 petition to President Eisenhower in favor of the poet's release (Williams; Laughlin, 2018). Pound had been arraigned on charges of treason and hospitalized in 1945 upon his return from his self-imposed exile in Italy where his antisemitic, anti-American radio broadcasts during WWII had angered many Americans as well as the State Department. Later, in 1964, Williams signed a deposition he wrote himself, addressed to the U. S. Court in the Southern District of New York as a character witness on behalf of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, founders of the Living Theatre, when they were being held by the government on charges of tax evasion (Affidavit..., 1964).

At about the same time that a Broadway touring production of *The glass menagerie* opened in Washington, D. C., picketing by the Committee for Racial Democracy commenced in early 1947 against the National Theatre in Washington after it became headline news that a local law prohibited Black people from attending theaters along with white patrons. The Committee also attempted to secure the Belasco Theatre in Washington so that it could become an "anti-Jim Crow" performance space, however they were not successful. Most leaders in the arts remained silent on the subject, however Ingrid Bergman, who was touring in Maxwell Anderson's *Joan of Lorraine*, "objected strenuously" to playing under those circumstances, as did Anderson. Williams could easily have withheld his opinion about the controversy, but he did not. "I want to state that I have protested bringing *The Glass Menagerie* into Washington, but have no legal power to

prevent it. I can only express my humiliation that a play of mine should be denied to Negroes in the nation's capital. Any future contract I make will contain a clause to keep the show out of Washington while this undemocratic practice continues" (The Alabama..., 1947, p. 7).

In May of 1948, when Williams's agent Audrey Wood sent him a request from a Black theater company (possibly from Howard University) that wanted to produce *The glass menagerie* in Washington and then take it on tour, he was traveling in Italy. Williams responded with a telegram from Rome that read: "HEARTILY APPROVE NEGRO COMPANY MENAGERIE. TELL MARGO WILL MEET HER IN AIRPORT LOVE." Color-blind or cross-racial casting – what is now sometimes referred to as "non-traditional casting" (though quite different from multiracial casting) – was rare prior to the late 1960s, with the exception of certain productions of Shakespeare. Cross-racial casting was a bridge too far for most playwrights of the 1940s and 1950s. The blind part of "color-blind casting" was the failure to acknowledge, either in adjustments to the text or direction, the casting of a person of color in a role written for a white person, which tend not to resonate naturally with twentieth century plays in which Black actors play roles written for white actors. This was most accepted and done on Broadway in the 1960s and '70s in commercial productions, such as an all-Black Broadway cast of *Hello Dolly* that featured Pearl Bailey in the lead role. It is interesting then, that in 1958 when a proposed all-Black cast production of *A streetcar named Desire* starring Sidney Portier as Stanley was being planned for New York (though never realized), it was reported that Williams "[i]n giving permission for the production . . . also okayed some changes of dialogue to fit the Negro characters" (Jones, 1958, p. 30).

In spite of the fact that he was known to the U. S. government as a successful left-leaning homosexual American playwright, Williams was not called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that had been routing out suspected Communists in Hollywood and the U. S. Government since 1938. If that weren't enough, in the file kept on Williams by the FBI, evidence was cited of Williams's questionable associations because he was on the Board of Trustees of Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop, which was suspected at that time of being a Communist front (Williams, 2004, p. 361).

Dozens of writers, actors, and directors were called to testify before HUAC – including playwrights Lillian Hellman, Irwin Shaw, Norman Rosten, Arthur Miller,

Arthur Laurents, William Inge, Garson Kanin, Marc Connelly, Clifford Odets, Abe Burrows, Paul Green, and Bertolt Brecht – yet Williams was overlooked or ignored. After committee member Senator Joseph McCarthy became the most vituperative, demagogic anti-Communist voice in America, HUAC began to receive greater attention. Perhaps most notorious was the testimony in April of 1952 by Williams's closest collaborator, director Elia Kazan, who later gave the names of Group Theatre members who had once belonged to the Communist Party in the 1930s. Widely criticized and openly shunned for decades because of that decision, Kazan would later write that the "most loyal and understanding friend I had through those black months was Tennessee Williams" (Kazan, 1988, p. 495). It doesn't seem plausible that even if the HUAC knew of Williams's loyalty to Kazan it would have affected their decision not to call him.

About the following decade of social and political upheaval in America, Williams told an interviewer, "The Sixties was no good for me . . . everything went to pieces. I told Gore Vidal that I didn't remember a thing about the Sixties – that I thought I had slept through them," when in reality he was overwhelmed by drugs, alcohol, and grief (Devlin, 1986). After the death of his life partner Frank Merlo in 1963, he became more addicted to benzodiazepines and alcohol, at the same time receiving regular injections that included animal hormones, enzymes, human placenta, painkillers, steroids, and amphetamines from Dr. Max Jacobson, known in popular culture as Dr. Feelgood. Patients taking this cocktail were cautioned not to combine it with alcohol. The sustained use of alcohol, the injections, and other drugs caused debilitating bouts of exhaustion, blackouts, confusion, and paranoia, all of which led to Williams's brother Dakin having him committed to the psychiatric division of Barnes Hospital in St. Louis for almost three months in late 1969. Going cold turkey in Barnes led to heart attacks and strokes while Williams was institutionalized, but afterward enabled him to come out of the experience more lucid and productive for the last dozen years of his life (Williams; Laughlin, 2018, p. 222).

Williams broke a self-imposed rule of not speaking publicly about politics when he agreed to participate in the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice rally at the Cathedral St. John the Divine in New York City December 7, 1971. The People's Coalition, referred to at the time as "The Movement," was a merger of all the major anti-war groups brought together by Dotson Rader, who organized the evening and recruited Williams to be part of it. The event was later described in the press as a victory for Richard Nixon – who had

publicly and strategically just promised to end the American war in Viet Nam – in his goal to destroy "the previously powerful support behind the anti-war movement" because the rally ended in chaos and controversy (CBS, 1972). The slogan for the rally was "Remember the War," and it was advertised as featuring Norman Mailer and Tennessee Williams. Also appearing before the audience of approximately five thousand were luminaries of the left Gore Vidal, Gloria Steinem, Julian Beck, Ossie Davis, Charles Mingus, Willem de Kooning, Jules Feiffer, Susan Sontag, Ruth Ford, Nat Hentoff, and activist for nonviolent change David Dellinger.

Following some singers and speakers, the actress Ruth Ford introduced Williams, who came to the podium and spoke extemporaneously, at least initially:

> As I came in, it appeared to me that there were great reverberations. And as a theater man, I'm very concerned about the acoustics. I hope . . . I don't care whether you hear me or not, but I trust that you heard Mr. Dellinger. Mr. Dellinger, I'm still, you know, a novitiate. Now, Mr. Dellinger has probably preempted all the statistics which I have come here provided with. They are statistics about the dead and the casualties of both sides. All sides in the present war. Which is now of course being followed by a successive war. Which will be equally unsuccessful. I'm a bit old for marching in the streets. [*sounds of protest from the crowd]* I am. [*even louder protest*] I know what I'm able to do. [*the crowd sound lessens*] I will march on paper! [*the crowd erupts in applause and cheering*] (CBS, 1972).

These are some of the statistics Williams offered: 54,000 American deaths; in North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia over a million deaths, mostly non-combatants; 400,000 wounded American "boys." He then went on to ask, "And when does it stop? By whose secret schedule? Does this mass slaughter end [and] the shamelessly criminal war stop? Will it be only when another war begins? (And one *is* begun.) What does a military industrial system depend upon? Where is Kilroy's way out?" (CBS, 1972).

Discord arose during the proceedings in response to a reading by Beverly Bentley and Rip Torn of Norman Mailer's anti-war play *D. J.*[4] At a certain point, the obscene language in the play offended Williams who, along with many other people, walked out of the cathedral. Responding to questions on his way out, Williams said, "It's hurting the Bishop who gave us the church. And it is hurting The Movement to bring the gutter into it." Williams's beloved maternal grandfather was an Episcopalian minister. When asked if the evening was successful Mailer replied, in part, "Uh, except for Tennessee Williams

[4] Originally titled *Why are we in Vietnam?* after Mailer's 1967 novel of the same name, the play contains extreme vulgarity and, according to scholar John Bak, homophobic slurs.

who walked out of the play. . . I'm in shock about it . . ."

Speaking before a CBS camera afterward, Williams continued: "It's a desecration of The Movement. The Movement must have nobility. And decency. and I'm not talking about language. I'm talking about an attitude toward human beings. Which was absent in that play. Which was a desecration of humanity. . . ." Bill Barnes, then Williams's agent at ICM, observed, "Here you are in a cathedral, which should be handled with respect. And there was such dignity. It was so elevated . . . All of the sudden Norman Mailer came up and it was like using a toilet." Composer Burt Shevelove, who also walked out, chimed in: "We all know it was just dreadful, selfish, it was indulgent, it was personal. He wasn't part of a cause. He was selling himself just so that Norman Mailer's name would appear . . . " (CBS, 1972).

Though no transcript of Williams's speech is extent, he published a related essay the following month in Harper's Bazaar titled "We are dissenters now," which is comprised primarily of a series of rather tepid anecdotes about the origin of Tennessee as his first name, his time in Acapulco in the summer of 1940, an English actress receiving a backstage visit from a Bulgarian actor, and his sister Rose (Williams, 2009, p. 160-164). There are general mentions of raising one's voice against wars and injustice, and of faith in humanity, but no mention of the rally at St. John the Divine or the conflict in Viet Nam. Williams did express his feelings about the event in an angry letter to Dotson Rader: "I avoided all affiliations of a political nature all of my life till I met you, and I'm going to avoid them totally from now on." (Lahr, 2014, p. 528). And he did.

Another controversy arose in the press when Williams joined Vanessa Redgrave onstage for an event in Boston April 30, 1982. Redgrave was originally scheduled to narrate *Oedipus rex* for the Boston Symphony Orchestra April 15-17, but the management cancelled her appearance, citing public safety concerns and "circumstances beyond our control." Presumably the real reason was the threats received because of Redgrave's continued outspoken support of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which was dedicated, among other things, to the destruction of Israel. Redgrave filed a $5 million lawsuit for breach of contract but was unsuccessful in court (The Boston…, 1982, p. 129). As she was persona non grata in New York and Hollywood, any association with Redgrave at that time was considered suspect. When Redgrave organized an alternative event for April 30 sponsored by the National Association of Arab Americans, she invited

Williams to participate, which he did. In response to objections from agents at International Creative Management – who were "appalled when I read with Vanessa Redgrave" (Hartman, 1982, p. 1) –, Williams wrote a letter to the company president Milton Goldman that began, "Because of my true affection and respect for you, I want to explain in detail the choice that I made in appearing at the Vanessa performance in Boston." Williams then went on to explain his veneration of and admiration for Redgrave as "the greatest actress in the English-speaking theatre of our time," that his interest was purely artistic, and that Redgrave was "somewhat put off by my lack of interest in certain political matters – in fact, my profound ignorance of them." Williams detailed that lack of knowledge in the areas of Redgrave's politics, and then wrote:

> In all my life, Milton – seventy-one years of it – I have never signed a paper except a professional contract. Belong to no political party. In fact I have only registered to vote once in my life, when I first came of age.
> Now I want to capitalize this statement because I think it deserves to be so emphasized. – FOR AN ARTIST THERE IS NO RACE EXCEPT THE HUMAN RACE.
> . . . I am not interested in her party nor any party now existing. But I am profoundly committed to the theatre of which she is a flaming heart.[5]

William later declared in an interview, "I'd never write a political play. What a tiresome subject. No writer has ever affected the flow of history, which just moves along its course" (Hartman, 1982, p. 16). Perhaps the playwright was thinking of agitprop theater meant to sway hearts and change history, which he came close to in his early full-length plays dealing with issues of social justice.

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The genesis of Williams's early social justice plays came in the autumn of 1936 when he was asked to write a curtain raiser for The Mummer's upcoming production of Irwin Shaw's anti-war play *Bury the dead.* Flattered by the invitation and excited at the prospect of having his work onstage, Williams came up with *Headlines*, which by most accounts (no script has survived) was akin to "The Living Newspaper" that had its origins in Europe and was later developed at Hallie Flanagan's Federal Theatre Project – a series of images and shouted headlines engaging political issues of the day.

[5] Unpublished letter to Milton Goldman, May 2, 1982, New Directions editorial files.

When Holland next requested a full-length play, Williams gave him *Candles to the sun*, a play he had been drafting since 1935, about the working conditions of Alabama coal miners, and the strike organizer rallying them; The Mummers produced it in March 1937.

In the way that young painters study and initially imitate the great masters, in his first full-length plays Williams absorbed the influences of playwrights of the 1930s. The demand for social justice and ambitious use of phonetic speech and jargon in *Candles to the sun* appear to be inspired in part by Clifford Odets. *Candles* received positive reviews from the local press, including Colvin McPherson of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "It stands on its own feet. Its characters are genuine, its dialogue of a type that must have been uttered in the author's presence, its appeal in the theater widespread" (MacPherson, 1937, p. 31). According to Williams's friend William Jay Smith who attended the opening night performance, "When to thunderous applause, loud cheers, and resonant foot stomping the full cast gathered for numerous curtain calls, they suddenly burst out singing 'Solidarity Forever.' The celebrated union anthem . . . gave the play an aura of propaganda" (Smith, 2012, p. 33). It is notable that in his review Reed Hines of the *St. Louis Star and Times* observed: "Lobby critics immediately dubbed it a 'propaganda' play, but [it] is not that . . . Only the fact that it is concerned with coal miners who strike gives it the tone of a propaganda play" (Hynds, 1937, p. 23).

In November 1937, The Mummers produced Williams's second full-length play, *Fugitive kind,* which is set in a St. Louis flop house populated with radicals, writers, artists, mobsters, G-men, a hobo, an orphan, and Jewish characters, all caught in the upheaval of the Great Depression. It is arguably Williams's most overtly political play, though it was not as well received as *Candles*, in part because Williams was already studying at the University of Iowa when *Fugitive* went into rehearsals. As Williams scholar Allean Hale has pointed out, the tone and content of *Fugitive Kind* were influenced by Robert E. Sherwood's *The petrified forest* and Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, and the play owes a debt to Maxim Gorky's *The lower depths*, albeit with an array of distinctly American character types from the 1930s (Williams, 2001, p. xi-xxi).

Williams described his third full-length play, *Not about nightingales*, as the most violent and horrific he ever wrote. Given an assignment by his professor at the University of Iowa to write a play inspired by a true story from the newspapers, Williams chose an article about prisoners in Pennsylvania who were roasted alive in a boiler room used for

punishment. *Nightingales* owes much to prison films of the 1930s, especially *The big house* (1930), which also has a main character named Butch and dramatizes a prison strike. *Not about nightingales* was not produced during the playwright's lifetime but, after a 1998 London premiere, it opened on Broadway nearly sixty years after it was written and was nominated for a Tony Award for best play of the 1999-2000 season. *Nightingales* shows the influence of Eugene O'Neill and William Saroyan, among others. Reviewers of the premiere productions often showed surprise that Williams had ever written any play that could be considered "political."

In these three early plays Williams tried his hand at social justice plays because he had been invited to write for a political theater company, not because agitprop or "propaganda" was his ambition or his interest. Yet, he was and remained sympathetic to the outsiders of life and always considered himself an outsider; it was from that perspective he wanted his work to be meaningful, to make an impact. Williams made clear on multiple occasions that he didn't want to be identified with an ideology, political party, or a single cause, so the politics in his plays after the 1930s were almost always indirect, ambiguous, or rooted in the humanity of the characters, but were never the primary subject of a play. Williams's oblique politics addressed "the eternal conflict between the cruel rulers of an indifferent world and the tender creatures, crushed but noble in their allegiance to beauty and kindness, that must try to survive in it" (Isherwood, 1999). As early as 1938, Williams began to experiment with writing a "Great American Play," just as writers of the previous generation – Sinclair Lewis, Thomas Wolfe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and others – were determined to write the "Great American Novel."

Williams's impulse to write an epic story during this period is evident in multiple drafts housed at the University of Texas's Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center [HRC] in Austin; these include the titles *The spinning song*, *The paper lantern: A dance play for Martha Graham*, and *Daughter of the American Revolution*. In these unrealized works, Williams tried out ideas and scenarios that later found their way, albeit transformed, into *The glass menagerie* and *A streetcar named Desire*.

By late 1939, Williams had completed the first draft of what would eventually become *Battle of angels*. Produced by the Theatre Guild in 1940, *Battle* was his first commercial production and his first commercial failure, closing out-of-town in Boston prior to the Broadway opening. *Battle of angels* has everything in it but the kitchen sink – it

is a potpourri of motifs, themes, metaphors, and plots. A later incarnation of *Battle*, heavily rewritten and originally produced on Broadway in 1957, is a separate and distinct play, *Orpheus descending*. The plot of *Orpheus* hinges on the explosive politics of race in the American South and is centered around a woman, Lady, whose father was a Sicilian immigrant and bootlegger during Prohibition who made the mistake in rural Mississippi of selling liquor to Black people. As a result, his vineyard was burned down and he was murdered by a mob fitting the description of the Ku Klux Klan. *Orpheus* was considered at the time a modest failure, which, as Martin Sherman has pointed out, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* called "one of Mr. Williams pleasantest plays" in his opening night review (Williams, 2012, p. 1). What is jaw-dropping in hindsight is that the overt racial politics in *Orpheus* were essentially ignored. Not only did the character of the bohemian Carol Cutrere deliver a monologue about protesting "the gradual massacre of the colored majority" (Williams, 2012, p. 34) by pellagra and starvation when the army worm and bool weevil destroyed the cotton crops, and when Willie McGee was wrongly executed after being wrongly accused of raping a white woman, but the leading male character, Valentine Xavier, is threatened with a variation on the well-known threat made to Black men in the South at that time: Don't let the sun go down on you in this town. When Lady asks Xavier about the autographs on his guitar, he says that Blues greats Leadbelly, King Oliver, and Fats Waller signed it and their names are "written in the stars." He speaks directly of institutional racism in America when he tells her about another signature: "That name is also immortal. The name Bessie Smith is written in the stars! – Jim Crow killed her, John Barleycorn and Jim Crow killed Bessie Smith but that's another story . . . ." (Williams, 2012, p. 43-44).

During much of the time he was composing *Battle of angels*, Williams was also revising drafts of an expressionistic, political drama called *Stairs to the roof***.** After the dismal failure of *Battle*, he continued to labor on *Stairs* with the hope that it would be the commercial Broadway success he had wanted. Williams used his three years working in the International Shoe Company as fodder for this drama about a demoralized factory clerk, Benjamin Murphy, struggling to understand his place in a highly industrialized society. Murphy is unhappy at his job, in his marriage, and with his life, and the blame falls entirely on the class structure in America: "A young man's dreams, ambitions, the fabulous golden cities of adolescence, sold down the river – for *what*? Eighteen-fifty a

week!" (Williams, 2000a, p. 21).

While influenced to a great extent by Elmer Rice (Williams imbues *Stairs to the roof* with the robotic and impersonal setting akin to that of *The adding machine*), the play is also shaped by Williams's response to the exuberant optimism of William Saroyan: "In the time of your life, live!" Combine those aspects with the politically driven theme and some surprising science-fiction elements (the protagonist is sent off finally to colonize new planets), and it is quite a jumble of ideas and styles. In a letter to Audrey Wood 5 July 1940, he wrote, "I'm getting back to work on my new play 'Stairs to the Roof' –It doesn't have the strong sex theme but I think is a more serious, artistic piece of drama than 'B.A.'" (Williams, 2000b, p. 256). Williams mused to Lawrence Langer in a 23 July 1940 letter that if someone else had written *Stairs to the roof*, it might have turned out to be "the 'great American drama' – there is so much amplitude in the theme" (Williams, 2000b, p. 259). *Stairs to the roof* was given a full production at Pasadena Playhouse in 1947, but remained unpublished until 2000.

Williams's agent, Audrey Wood, could not sell *Stairs to the roof* to any producers. It was especially stinging that the Theater Guild, who had produced *Battle of angels*, passed on the opportunity. Sometime in the next couple of years, as America's participation in WWII escalated, Williams drafted a note to introduce a play he was writing after *Stairs* (it could have been *The spinning song*, *Daughter of the American Revolution*, or *The gentlemen caller*). By then, he had swung so far in the other direction from overtly political theater, that he defended himself against a hypothetical attack accusing his work of not being relevant to current affairs: "I have anticipated a type of objection . . . which I think is unjustified and unfair and likely to have . . . a seriously detrimental affect [on the theatre]." He complains that because of the nation's total focus on the war, the tendency on Broadway was to produce "war plays" and declares them full of "high-sounding platitudes, pseudo-heroic posturing, . . . shibboleths, hastily assembled out of the mumbo-jumbo of our ideological past and the chaotic braying of the present." It is impossible, Williams contends, to write anything true about the current condition of a country without some distance. Williams closes, "You will see that this protest is a general one, certainly not merely an apology for one or two of my own creations which I know are not important enough in themselves to justify it" (Williams, ca. 1942).

While Williams abandoned writing plays that addressed social problems as directly as he did in *Stairs to the roof*, a social and political component remains in all his theatrical writing. Most of his famous plays have a specific socio-political background and context that anchor the larger story: *The glass menagerie*, civic and economic upheaval in America during the Great Depression; *A streetcar named Desire*, the decline of the titled agrarian South in the face of the growing working class of industrialization; *Cat on hot tin roof*, the class and cultural divides between new and old money; *The night of the iguana*, the insidious global violence of the twentieth century contrasted with the poverty of developing nations.

It's true that Williams neither identified with a known political party nor advocated for one in his work or his life. What he did identify with was bohemia. Williams described himself as a bohemian and wore that outsider status like a comfortable old coat – for Williams it was not an ideology, it was a fact of his nature that he understood about himself long before he gained notoriety as a playwright. Even well after he became the ultimate insider, a commercially and critically successful writer, Williams never lost his identity as an outsider, a bohemian, which is generally not thought of as being political at all, rather as a lifestyle or an aesthetic. Yet for Williams, the boundaries of bohemia extend well beyond the art world to non-conformists wherever they reside; from the well-to-do members of Alma's lonely book club in *Summer and smoke*, to the sexual freedom of countless Williams female characters, to the impoverished denizens of the boarding house in *Vieux Carré*. Williams frequently depicts a kind of morality and honor in the characters of the bohemian and the outsider, something not always found in the mendacious society that oppresses them. Williams has often been contrasted with playwright Arthur Miller who is thought to have written more conspicuously political plays. Neither was political enough for critic Robert Brustein, who found the work of both men "needlessly ambiguous," and chastised them in 1960 for writing allegorical plays that were not "a direct confrontation of American life" (Brustein, 1960, p. 4).

When *Camino Real* opened on Broadway in 1953, quite a few critics found the political and social ideas conveyed in Williams's phantasmagoric experiment obvious and unsubtle – "too blunt" (Clurman, 1953, p. 293-294). The play is an extended comic parable that mixes fantasy with recognizable character types (con men, beggars, petite bourgeois, ominous bureaucrats) and well-known figures from literature and history (Camille, Lord

Byron) in an expressionistic netherworld almost completely lacking in decency, courage, or honor. *Camino Real* revolves around the arrival into that dark world of a clownish American G. I. with the iconic name of Kilroy, who is at his core an innocent; Kilroy literally has a heart of gold (which is later surgically removed and tossed around like a football) and he is taken advantage of because of his profound naivete. By the end of the play, his open-heartedness and instinct to remain true to himself – he leaves the Camino Real with Don Quixote when they venture into an impassible desert – are what save him from a catastrophic and dishonorable world. Williams's narrative is a metaphor about what he saw as a spiritual and moral crisis in post-World War II, mid-twentieth century America.

When Kilroy tells a con artist called The Gypsy that he doesn't know what she means when she says, "Humanity is just a work in Progress," she replies, "Who does? The Camino Real is a funny paper read backward!" (Williams, 2008a, p. 84). The drumbeat of images and ideas in *Camino Real*, even when satiric, speak to the age of anxiety in the shadow of the atom bomb:

> Gypsy's Loudspeaker: Are you perplexed by something? Are you tired out and confused? Do you have a fever? [*Kilroy looks around for the source of the voice.*] Do you feel yourself to be spiritually unprepared for the age of exploding atoms? Do you distrust the newspapers? Are you suspicious of governments? Have you arrived at a point on the Camino Real where the walls converge not in the distance but right in front of your nose? Does further progress appear impossible to you? Are you afraid of anything at all? Afraid of your heartbeat? Or the eyes of strangers! Afraid of breathing? Afraid of not breathing? Do you wish that things could be straight and simple again as they were in your childhood? Would you like to go back to Kindy Garten? (Williams, 2008a, p. 25).

There was critical backlash against *Camino Real* in its original commercial production, both for its experimentation, diverging as it did so dramatically from Williams's other work, and for its social reverberations, which were unwelcome during the McCarthy era.

A Williams play that shares that mythical approach to America's spiritual impoverishment is *The Red Devil Battery sign*, which opened in 1975 in Boston where it closed before coming to Broadway, and in revised versions in London and Vienna in 1977. However, *Red Devil* is also representative of several of Williams's later plays because it expresses what was earlier only moral and spiritual crisis now in a realm of growing dystopian and apocalyptic danger. It is the story of a celebrated Mariachi band leader

named King who becomes involved with a character known only as Woman Downtown, daughter of a dishonest Texas politician who has been subjected to electroshock therapy by her husband who is the president of a sinister international conglomerate, The Red Devil Battery Company. The Woman Downtown is a feral being who survives the prison of her husband's corporate/government control and the wasteland that surrounds the mythical Dallas, where the play takes place, and can commune with the "Wolf Boys," a marauding gang of homeless youth that live a wild and predatory life in the desert. Williams described *Red Devil* as "an assault on the moral delinquencies of America. I think all of my plays have had – subliminally at least – a great deal of social content" (Berkvist, 1975, p. 1, 4-5). Later in an interview in Vienna he said the play was "A parable of a world corrupted and eroded by civilization" (Kahn, 1977, p. 363). An undercurrent of fear and paranoia runs through the story – it is implied that the same corporate cabal that controls the government was behind the assassination of John F. Kennedy, though it is never directly addressed.

One of the timeliest examples of politics in a Williams play, albeit indirect, surrounds the character of Boss Finley in *Sweet bird of youth*, which opened on Broadway in 1959. The idea began in an earlier play Williams had abandoned about Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long called *The big time operators*. The corrupt Florida politician and segregationist Boss Finley[6] in *Sweet bird* is an overt racist who uses violence to suppress the Black vote and engage his white followers. Boss Finley continually blames things on "The Northern Radical Press" and here addresses rumors that his daughter has been made barren from venereal disease:

> Lookin' at you, all in white like a virgin, nobody would dare to speak or believe the ugly stories about you. I'm relying a great deal on this campaign to bring in young voters for the crusade I'm leading. I'm all that stands between the South and the black days of Reconstruction. And you and Tom Junior are going to stand there beside me in the grand crystal ballroom, as shining examples of white Southern youth – in danger (Williams, 2008b, p. 54).

Boss Finley then refers to taking violent action to preserve "the pure white blood of the South." The political context of *Sweet bird* could not have been more relevant to that moment in history, the plot, or Williams's tragic depiction of the dark side of the American

[6] It's never stated in the play what Boss Finley's office is or what he's running for. It's possible he's a state senator, probable he's the Democratic party boss, and he does have presidential aspirations.

Dream. The play premiered amidst an inflection point in the Civil Rights Movement: after the murder of Emmett Till, the defiance of Rosa Parks, and the bravery of "The Little Rock Nine," and just before the Greensboro Lunch Counter Sit-Ins, the Freedom Riders, and the March on Washington. Yet, critics failed to validate Williams's consistent use of American politics as context for his plays, perhaps, as Brustein complained, because his plots did not involve historical events or take a partisan point of view, or because his political elements were overshadowed by his poetic depictions of human suffering.

The indirect approach remained true of Williams's work after *Stairs to the roof*. For Williams, ambiguity meant complexity, the antithesis of melodrama or agitprop: "[T]he thing that I've always pushed in my writing – that I've always felt was needed to be said over and over – that human relations are terrifyingly ambiguous. If you write a character that isn't ambiguous you are writing a false character, not a true one" (Devlin, 1986, p. 128-129). In a 1967 interview, Williams was asked if he ever wrote directly about Black Americans and the struggle for civil rights or about the American War in Viet Nam. Williams replied, "I am not a direct writer, I am always an oblique writer, if I can be; I want to be allusive, I don't want to be one of those people who hits the nail on the head all the time" (Devlin, 1986, p. 98).

Another articulation of this approach is found in a 1947 letter to Elia Kazan about the nature of the characters and their relationships in *A streetcar named Desire*: "There are no 'good' or 'bad' people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other's hearts" (Williams, 2004, p. 95). This commitment to ambiguity on Williams's part is essentially a commitment to depth, which for him was antithetical to the polemical or to an overbearing political message in drama: "When you begin to arrange the action of a play to score a certain point the fidelity to life may suffer"(Williams, 2004, p. 96). This complexity is a hallmark of Williams's work and characters; it's what makes them tragic when they are tragic, and it's what makes them hilarious when they are funny. There are also instances, because of draft manuscripts, in which one can see where Williams wrote specific politics into his scripts and then pulled back from them.

In a 1971 one-act called *Green eyes*, an American soldier, the "Boy" on leave from service, and his bride, the "Girl," are on their honeymoon in New Orleans, which becomes a battlefield of jealousy, impotence, and control on their first morning – the transactional

nature of their relationship becomes brutal. The soldier refers to the war being fought in a place called Waakow, where the Boy was "ordered to shoot down screamin' wimmen an' children, and I done it, I done it!" (Williams, 2008c, p. 155). The latter is an allusion to Lt. William Calley's order to murder hundreds of innocent Vietnamese men, women, and children in what became known as the My Lai Massacre. Waakow is slang that was used by American soldiers to describe their experience in Viet Nam. On a draft manuscript of the play one can find the word "Vietnam" typed over with Xs, and replaced with the word "Waakow" next to it. If Williams had identified the country correctly or mentioned the My Lai massacre, then the play would risk becoming a war play or "a play about Viet Nam" instead of a play about the transactional nature of human relations. The complexity of what is going on between the Girl and the Boy might have been lost to politics, but instead Williams only evokes what is necessary to give context to the narrative.

Williams' final full-length play, *A house not meant to stand*, takes place in a dilapidated house in Pascagoula, Mississippi and depicts the final stages in the breakdown and collapse of a family. It was originally produced in three successive versions in 1980, 1981, and 1982 at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. In draft versions of the play, the father's obsessive fears about the possibility of nuclear war are articulated quite specifically, even mentioning Ronald Reagan who was president at the time, while in the final 1982 version, his concerns about an apocalyptic global confrontation are more general as part of the context. In draft versions, the mother's concerns about the treatment of her eldest son, who has just passed away, lead to her speak of the mistreatment of gay people in America, but those lines were cut from the final 1982 version. In both cases, the specificity of those political issues might have drawn focus away from collapse of the house and family as Williams's larger metaphor about the collapse of America. Once again, he didn't want to hit the nail on the head.

In addition to Williams's brilliant one-act political satire *The municipal abattoir* from the late 1960s, other published Williams plays that include somewhat more overt political context include *Me, Vashya*, *Thank you kind spirit*, *Honor the living*, *Escape*, *Mister Paradise*, *This is the peaceable kingdom*, *The demolition downtown*, *Now the cats with jeweled claws*, *Once in a lifetime*, *The chalky white substance*, and *Tiger Tail.* And yet, there is not a Williams play in which politics do not factor in some regard.

In 2007, poet and playwright Amiri Baraka gave a talk at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival. Baraka explained that he had come to know Williams through the film versions of the plays, not the plays themselves, and that when he first watched the films in the 1950s, he felt Williams was speaking to him directly, that he was included in the conversation. He saw himself in the stories and understood that as a Black man he was one of the outcasts, outsiders, one of the fugitives that Williams was portraying.

Amiri Baraka later summed up the narrow understanding of politics at the root of skepticism about Williams's deep level of political awareness:

> To say that Tennessee Williams's work is apolitical is to be ignorant of what politics is – or to lie. It's much like the hopeless art curator at the Museum of Modern Art who claimed his memorial to the great Afro-American painter Jacob Lawrence was not political, that those chronicles of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman and John Brown were just blocks of color in contrived space. This is to make formalism a dismal scam. The same is true of Williams, that critics who would hold such ridiculous ideas believe that politics refers only to membership in a political party or proselytizing toward specific platform planks of reform or reaction (Baraka, 2011a, p. 281).

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