Tennessee Williams and the Cold War

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Palmer: What we're going to talk about today is Tennessee Williams and the Cold War. I just want to say a little bit about what that means to me, and then I'm going to throw it over to the panelists each in turn. We use the term "Cold War" as a kind of metonymy for a lot of different things, most of which have nothing to do with actually what the Cold War was. We can talk about the actual conduct of a kind of series of confrontations and proxy wars between the United States, its allies, and the Soviet Union, but most of the time when we're talking in reference to American culture and when we say "Cold War," we don't usually mean anything particularly directly connected to those confrontations.

So we're not going to talk about SALT treaties. We're not going to talk about the missile gap, probably. But we are going to talk about ways in which the term "Cold War" applies to a certain mentality in American culture, associated with such political phenomena as McCarthyism, the Red Scare, red-baiting, and, particularly of interest to Williams scholars, the sort of witch hunt that was undertaken starting in the '40s against homosexuals in American society.

One of the things I would ask the panelists to think about is the way in which the Cold War, which is connected to the 1950s and to kind of a culture of repression and persecution in the US, is the period that immediately precedes the sexual revolution. Now go figure that connection out. That's an interesting thing to think about. Suddenly when it gets to 1960, we are making love, not war, and maybe we're not so concerned about sexual repression as we were ten years ago. It's an interesting comment on American society, and certainly the plays of Tennessee Williams are marked by that change in cultural mood, which is quite spectacular in the late '50s and can be traced very easily, as Robert Bray and I have done, in the changing relationship of the Production Code Administration as it was applied to Hollywood filmmaking, and to institutions like the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency, which basically was out of business in the early 1960s because people were no longer interested in a kind of McCarthyite denunciation of prurient material and sexual difference.

So, starting with John, if we may—John, would you like to say a few things about the Cold War in some sense?

Bak: Let's start with the pre–Cold War, when Tom Williams was becoming Tennessee Williams. He came from a wannabe-bourgeois family. It wasn't bourgeois in the sense of St. Louis bourgeois, where money rather than social position determined one's class—though his mother Edwina certainly wanted to be more a part of the social set. But they weren't poor, either. And I think if you recall, his father still had a job during the Depression and had the clout to get his son a job as well. As much as he hated it, making sixty-five dollars a month, Williams still had a job and wasn't lining up for soup. But, yet, in the '30s, he identified himself as a socialist. It was a political flirtation of sorts, more than some of the hardcore socialist playwrights of the day, but he was adamant about social and financial equality.

For me, the problem for Tennessee Williams first began with MGM, where he was suddenly making $250 a week, after having been, for the most part, pretty poor after he left home. His father kept him on a rather short leash, financially speaking, and he resented that. One of the things he wanted most was financial freedom, and when he finally got that freedom, he started to recognize how little about his socialist politics really rang true.

And then reality really hit him hard, following the success of *The Glass Menagerie*. He was no longer the poor playwright. He could do whatever he wanted. He could go wherever he wanted. So his pre–Cold War social politics evolved considerably just at the turn of the postwar period—1945, 1946, certainly by 1948—and he became an extremely wealthy man. How could he remain loyal to those socialist ideas that he had espoused during the 1930s and '40s and yet also be a rich man?

I think what Williams does is, he takes the politics out of socialism, if you can do that. He starts to look at bohemianism as a sort of an extension of socialism, so he could maintain a bohemian lifestyle and still be a wealthy individual. And he was also very generous with his money and remembered how others had constantly helped him out financially, be it the occasional gift from his mother or grandparents or those friends who repeatedly offered a meal or a bed to sleep on. He later gave money—sometimes for tax reasons as well—to friends and various playwright and theatre organizations. He gave half the rights to *The Glass Menagerie* to his mother to offer her the financial freedom from Cornelius that she never had.

But I think after he starts to make money his socialist commitments sort of disappear, and they become instead those of sexual identity. And now he turns a financial issue of the pre–Cold War into a sexual issue in the post–Cold War era. And that's what I'd like to start out with, to remember that he did at first have a strong sense of socialism. First I'll offer an example from one of his essays of his early antifascist ideologies, and then I'll turn later in the panel to his anti-communist ideologies. He wasn't quite sure where he stood on the political line, as it were. He just knew that he stood against the mainstream ideas that preoccupied a postwar America.

> Today we are living in a world which is threatened by totalitarianism. The Fascist and the Communist states have thrown us into a panic of reaction. Reactionary opinion descends like a ton of bricks on the head of any artist who speaks out against the current of prescribed ideas. We are all under wraps of one kind or another, trembling before the specter of investigating committees and even with Buchenwald in the back of our minds when we consider whether or not we dare to say we were for Henry Wallace. [Wallace was the socialist presidential candidate for whom he voted, maybe the only time Williams ever voted.] *Yes, it is as bad as that*. (*New Selected Essays* 46)

So I just want to situate a bit where he's coming from before we launch into what his post–Cold War politics are.

Saddik: Piggybacking on what John said, I'm going to talk about the Cold War and Williams in terms of Williams's homosexuality and this hunt for communists and homosexuals as some kind of threat to the American way. It's one of the things I've been researching a lot lately and what my newest book is on, which I'm almost finished with. The book is called *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, the Crazed, and the Queer.* So I talk about Williams's late plays in the context of a kind of excess, grotesque, camp kind of sensibility, which I think might make them less scary. They are "too much," these late plays, and that's the point.

So I want to talk about Williams and the Cold War in light of this excess and queer sexuality, and I just want to read a couple of things related to that. This started in the

1950s, attacking homosexual playwrights and saying that they're "sick," they're infecting the American way; they're infecting the theatre.

You might be familiar with David Savran's book from 1992, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*. He talks about how these attacks started in 1958 in the early to mid-1950s, but certainly in 1958, with an essay that appeared in *College English*. I'm going to read just his description of that, and then I'm going to read you a few reviews of Williams's work, as well as that of Edward Albee and William Inge from the 1960s by Stanley Kauffmann and Howard Taubman. I want to analyze that language of infiltration and sickness and perversity.

So just very briefly, Savran writes that "beginning in the late 1950s, with an increasing public suspicion (or awareness) of Williams's homosexuality, a species of criticism emerged that attempted cunningly to decipher the language of 'obscurity' and 'indirection' in Williams's plays by translating his heroines into homosexual men in drag and, as a result, turning many of his heterosexual couplings into homosexual liaisons in disguise" (Savran 115). And many of you are probably familiar with this idea, that many critics attacked Williams and his work of the 1940s, saying that he can't write women; these are all men in drag—that he's a liar, essentially. John Bak has also done some good work on that. [Continuing to quote Savran, from *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers*:]

> This particular line of argument has been appropriated by many of Williams's scholarly critics. Stephen S. Stanton, for example, cites approvingly [Stanley Edgar] Hyman's "perceptive discussion of the homosexual element" in Williams's work and insists that his plays are "frequently transvestite." Nancy M. Tischler, meanwhile, asserts that "the puritanical, idealistic, confused females" throughout Williams's work "are really only female impersonators." Even Edward A. Sklepowich, in his pioneering essay on homosexual characters in Williams, makes no attempt to critique the assumptions underlying Hyman's charges (115)

I just want to read what was said about Williams's work and about the Broadway theatre and the American theatre in the 1960s. And during the 1960s, of course, the critical reception of Williams's work became quite brutal and often took the form of personal attack—tangentially and sometimes even directly targeting both his sexual identity and his drug and alcohol use. So it was as if Williams had transgressed his own boundaries, that there was no longer a boundary between the work and his identity.

He was never in the closet, exactly. His homosexuality was, essentially, an open secret. Yet his reputed homosexuality, as well as that of other prominent dramatists, was increasingly becoming the subject of surreptitious attack in the press during the transitional decade of the 1960s. So in 1961, Howard Taubman, writing in the *New York Times* about the "infiltration of homosexual attitudes" in the theatre, had this to

say about what he saw as the "unhealthy" result of these playwrights' "distor[tion]" of "human values." And again, there is the sense that they can't write women or they can't write about marriage—and are therefore ruining American culture.

Taubman continues:

> The infiltration of homosexual attitudes occurs in the theater on many levels. What demands frank analysis is the indirection that distorts human values. Plays on adult themes are couched in terms and symbols that do not truly reflect the author's mind. Characters represent something different from what they purport to be. It is no wonder that they seem sicker than necessary and that the plays are more subtly disturbing than the playwright perhaps intended. The unpleasant female of the species is exaggerated into a fantastically consuming monster or an incredibly pathetic drab. The male is turned into a ragingly lustful beast or into a limp, handsome, neutral creature of otherworldly purity. (Taubman X1)

I love that reference "sicker than necessary," because it makes me wonder how much sickness dramatic characters require and what that entails—what is "necessary"? So this is a very curious description, and he focuses on excess and transformation, the exaggeration of the female into a "fantastically consuming monster," the male as a "creature of otherworldly purity." It's like a Hieronymus Bosch painting, you know, these *creatures* coming out. There's an obsession here with the unnatural, and that's a label associated with queer or ambiguous sexualities. And this is where a lot of my research goes, into the grotesque. These readings of these plays seem to say more about Taubman's own fears and projection than about the playwright's constructions. His desire for traditional representation of character rejects any kind of ambivalence, any queerness, any fluidity, both in the drama and in the playwrights.

In 1966 appears probably the most famous attack—well, he didn't mean it as an attack, but it's been cited as such: Stanley Kauffmann's infamous article, "Homosexual Drama and Its Disguises," which recounts the "principal complaint against homosexual dramatists" that he said is well known. This is the complaint: "Because three of the most successful American playwrights of the last twenty years are reputed homosexuals and because their plays often treat women and marriage, therefore it is said postwar American drama presents a badly distorted picture of American women, marriage, and society in general" (Kauffmann 93).

And so without naming names, readers would know he was referring to Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and William Inge, and he concluded that "self-hating homosexual dramatists" (and there could be no other kind) had "no choice but to masquerade," resulting in a "distortion of marriage and femininity," since the heterosexual pairs they portrayed were actually pairs of homosexual men, with "female" characters essentially in drag, "drawn less in truth than in envy or fear." And he sees this as a kind of

"vindictiveness," resulting in dishonest work, and then he says that he laments "its effect on the basic concept of drama itself and on art in general." He went on to discuss the connections between homosexual dramatists and "camp" style—he says that there's a "glorifi[cation]" of homosexual exclusion that exalts "style, manner, surface," and acts as "an instrument of revenge on the main body of society" (93).

And that's where I think it gets interesting for our purposes, because he saw a distinct danger or, at the very least, a gross social irresponsibility in camp. And his defense of traditional dramatic form—essentially dramatic realism—is worth discussing, if only for its unmistakable warning of the homosexual threat that we see over and over in the 1950s and '60s. So in Kauffmann's mind, there's no separation between artists and art, and he argues that these dramatists transmit their deviant sensibilities—their desire—into their work, thereby destroying "the whole culture" and, by extension, "the society that produced it" (93).

So there's a very short quote I just want to throw out there, and then I'll move on. But in this following quotation, traditional dramatic form is metonymically linked to traditional desire, and [Kauffmann] sees form and desire—realism and heterosexuality, antirealism and queerness—as feeding off each other and infecting each other; in the case of homosexuality, definitely infecting. And his paranoid fears and the distortions that both he and Taubman are referencing are clearly constructions of their own distorted biases. Williams's response was, "You want distortion? Let me give you distortion"—and that's what he did. So here's the quote that I'll end with, and this is Kauffmann:

> Theme and subject are important historical principles in our art. The arguments to prove that they are of diminishing importance—in fact, ought never to have been important—are a cover for an attack on the idea of social relevance. By adulation of sheer style [camp], this group [homosexuals] tends to deride the whole culture and the society that produced it, tends to reduce art to a clever game which even that society cannot keep them from playing. (93)

So we need to watch out.

Hooper: I agree with Barton [Palmer] that in this discussion this afternoon, we're probably going to be talking more about the spirit of the Cold War rather than the Cold War events themselves, but I think it's worth bearing in mind where Williams was when the Cold War started. Most people date the Cold War to the end of the Second World War, i.e., 1945. But the Cold War had really started before that date, because there were a series of tense moments among America, Britain, and the Soviet Union, and those sort of rumbled on during the Second World War at various meetings—Yalta and Potsdam. So there was a lot of tension before the end of the Second World War and before the Cold War officially started.

Where was Williams at this time? Of course, Williams was really just starting out. He was trying to become successful. He had written in the 1930s a series of proletarian plays, as they've been labeled, which deal with strikes and prison troubles, et cetera. But then at the end of the 1930s, he decided on a change of direction, partly because those kinds of proletarian plays were not popular anymore. And so I think that at the start of the Cold War, he was more interested in his own success and where he might be as an American playwright than in the issues of the Cold War per se.

That having been said, a play like *Camino Real*, in 1953, clearly echoes some of the early developments in the Cold War, like, for example, the Truman Doctrine of 1947, which talks specifically and deliberately about totalitarianism, rather than referring to the Soviets directly. Williams picks up on that in 1953, that kind of uneasiness with totalitarianism, with state control. Periodically in his work after that—and even slightly before that, for example in the short story "The Malediction"—you can see this idea of kind of sinister plans and people working in secret ways and things not being particularly clear.

And, of course, he picks up on this whole surveillance culture. There's a reference in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, for example, in 1955, in one version, to Mae being like an FBI agent. There is, of course, *The Red Devil Battery Sign* later. He has outbursts—political outbursts—throughout his career, in much the same way that one of his late characters, Cornelius McCorkle, in *A House Not Meant to Stand*, delivers these kind of invectives at the audience about nuclear weapons, about capitalism and how capitalism has manufactured these weapons purely for its own purpose, to make individuals and big businesses rich. And I think you can see a sort of accelerated interest in nuclear weapons and the whole way in which they're used not just to defend the United States but to ensure that people are getting rich on the back of it, in that kind of post-1980 Reagan era, where we have a much more gung-ho attitude toward nuclear weapons and a resolution to defend the United States against the Soviet Union at almost any cost.

O'Connor: Well, I'd also like to expand the parameters of the Cold War a bit and tie it back also to what John talked about a little bit, about Williams's own identity developing during this period. And I think I may have mentioned this morning [in a paper on "Law, Sex, and Tennessee Williams"] that various historians who have studied sexuality in the twentieth century have talked about this series of sex panics, beginning, actually, after World War I, in the 1930s. And, actually, it's sort of interesting that they were facilitated by the end of Prohibition, because Prohibition ended in 1933, and at that time the government stepped in quite strongly to regulate liquor consumption. That meant that the government also had control over who was in places where liquor was being consumed. And so we have George Chauncey's book *Gay New York*—he goes from 1860, I think, to

1940 and looks at the subculture of homosexuals in New York City who were actually quite out during the ’20s but who increasingly became invisible in the 1930s because of the restrictions of the government. This was just at the time when Williams, of course, had finally left home for good in the late 1930s and begins to write in his journals and in his letters about the various homosexual subcultures that he encounters in New Orleans, in Key West, in New York City. So he would have been sort of coming of age as a homosexual right when the government was actually starting to look very carefully at people and their sexuality.

These sex panics were, allegedly, to target sexual psychopaths—sexual molesters, of course, kind of at the core—but in laws they quickly sort of expanded, and the terms “child molester,” “homosexual,” “sex offender,” “sex psychopath,” “sex degenerate,” “sex deviant,” and then eventually, of course, “communist” became interchangeable. And so I think that Williams’s place here and the things that he wrote about, not only in his letters but also represented in stories and in even some of the early plays, were affected by these policies.

In fact, it was World War II that brought the first established procedures for the screening of homosexuals and gender minorities to bar them from military service. Prior to World War II, there was no such system to identify and prevent undesirables, so to speak, from serving. So after the war, the federal government used these same kinds of policies and procedures to exclude homosexuals from civil service.

When I was looking around for this panel, I came across a publication—it’s actually online; it was put out by the state of Florida, by the Johns Committee of the state legislature, in 1964—and it’s called “Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida.” It explicitly describes homosexual activities and connects such activities to sexual predators, concluding that you cannot be a genuine citizen or even a decent human being in America if you are not heterosexual. This, of course, particularly by 1964 but even in the ’50s, coincides with what Elaine Tyler May calls the culture of containment. And here it goes back to what Barton said to introduce the topic, that we often think of the Cold War as a process of domestic containment as much as we think of it as international politics. There is this emphasis on the family as the only really safe place to be in this period after World War II. And then if we think about Williams’s plays, so many of them depict the family, but they’re also often families in which some representative of the sexual deviant has come home.

Of course, I think of Blanche and I think of *Streetcar*, which also reminds me or takes me back to the trope of the interrogation. I mean, I think that Williams consistently has his characters interrogate each other in ways that were consistent with policies about people who didn’t fit or didn’t belong. People were talked about as being threats to national security based on their identity and their pasts.

I was re-reading not long ago Bill Kleb's article in *Confronting Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*—that volume was published in the early '90s or late '80s—and he references that moment in *Streetcar* when Stanley and Blanche first meet, and she says, "I'm Blanche." And he says, "Stella's sister?" And Kleb says, "What other Blanche could she be?" I just love that, because you can see that interrogation that Stanley begins right at the very beginning of the play, in effect, asking her, "Who are you? Why are you here?" (30).

And of course, going through her trunk, which has always been just my favorite scene in that play—the way that he reaches deep down into the bottom and pulls up those letters, and she responds by saying, and I paraphrase: "The touch of your hand insults them! I'll burn them now!" And he says, "Why do you say you're going to burn them?" and she says, "Everyone has something that is too intimate to be touched by other people."

So I think that this issue comes up again and again in Williams—of privacy, the need for privacy, and the very real need during the Cold War for certain people to have privacy. I guess I would end this with a line from the HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] questionings: "Are you now or have you ever been . . . ?" What is always striking to me in that question is, it's not about what you did—it's about who you are. Are you now or have you ever been? And I think Williams was consistently interested, because of when he grew up, because of the time in which he lived, in challenging this questioning of identity and the interrogation of identity in his work.

Palmer: Thank you so much, all of you. I have a question for the group: first of all, would it be useful to speak of Williams as having a sexual politics? Can we see something that we might use for the term "a sexual politics" being an animating force in his work?

I call attention to the fact that, as John has pointed out, the political impulse of Williams seems to have been diverted, as it were, into matters sexual, so that there's a very strong contrast in those two wonderful plays of the late 1940s, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman*. Where the Arthur Miller play is more ostensibly and obtrusively and provocatively political, where it takes a more obviously socialist line, so that when the film version is made of it by Columbia Pictures, Columbia Pictures gets the wind up and produces a documentary to be shown in theatres saying, "Don't mistake Willy Loman as somehow someone representing American society. He's crazy!" This film was called *Career of a Salesman*, and it's a wonderful example of Cold War politics, where with the Miller play, there was such a fear of Miller's politics coming out.

In the case of *Streetcar*, the concern was the representation of various aspects of sexuality that are dramatized or reported in the play, and so the censorship questions are all about what can you show or tell, and what can you not show and tell? The questions

are more, as Jacky [O'Connor] says, about "who are you and what have you done—what have you been?" I wonder if we can think of Williams as having a kind of sexual politics that would distinguish him from Miller but that still has a kind of provocative edge. Maybe we could see Williams's sexual politics connecting to the New Left and its fascination with the critique of Freud—particularly in the works of people like Erich Fromm, in a much more user-friendly way, but also in the work of Herbert Marcuse, in a much more provocative way—to American society. We can see a kind of line from a play like *Streetcar* right through to the critique of Freud that we see later in the proponents of the New Left. Let me just throw that out as a question for the group.

Bak: A seemingly long time ago, I wrote the following sentence: "Brick is a Kinseyan male through and through—a sociosexual conundrum, a Cold War signifier without a signified" (Bak 148). I'm still trying to figure out what that actually meant, but I think what I meant at the time is that Williams needed to show America that his politics were not necessarily wrapped up in the same way that Arthur Miller's were when you consider *The Crucible* or even *Death of a Salesman*. Arthur Miller, like Clifford Odets, was in-your-face Group Theatre—there was no mistaking the politics of his plays. And when Williams began to turn toward political dialectics with *Camino Real*, theatre critic Walter Kerr basically said to him (I'm paraphrasing): "Don't be cerebral; you're not a cerebral writer. You're a writer who touches the pulse of American society. You're not an intellect; don't go down that path."

I think Williams kept his politics, though. We tend not to think of Tennessee Williams as a political writer, but I believe in the last twenty years, or at least ten, we've been discovering that he was a hell of a political writer—potentially more political, more subversive, than Arthur Miller himself because of how he dealt with politics. And for Williams, sexuality was certainly political, but it was not the only means with which he examined American politics.

I'd like to eventually get back to Williams's politics at some point, because he did harbor them. He wasn't just hiding behind issues of sexuality. But Brick, for me, was the turning point. As I've argued elsewhere, I never wanted to see Brick as homosexual, not because I had anything against him being a gay character, but because I found him to be more politically subversive in his questioning what it meant to heterosexual or homosexual. I found that to be more politically subversive for Williams, who was admonishing a homophobic Cold War America by saying, "You're telling us in political speeches, you're giving us images in Hollywood films, you're trying to show us that sexuality is purely bipolar and that all of us are one or the other, despite the fact that Alfred Kinsey and other sexologists, like Masters and Johnson, have shown us that sexuality forms a spectrum between the extremes of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and everyone can

find himself or herself somewhere along that line." I think what I had felt with Brick was that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was *not* about his presumed Cold War heterosexuality or homosexuality—it was more about Cold War epistemology and sexual politics. In other words, what sexuality means, and how it is politically controlled and commodified. Now, I know that certain people don't like that argument. They think, "No, Brick was gay, and let's defend Tennessee Williams's bold attempt to suggest that in the play. It was a bold step to take in the 1950s." That is certainly true, but I think it was a bolder step for Williams to say that Brick didn't even know if he was gay or not, and whose fault was that? Well, that's our fault, our nation's fault. So Williams's message in *Cat* was don't say he's one or the other, because in doing so you're passing judgment on Brick based upon your own ideas and epistemology of sexual identity. Brick just doesn't know, because we've inundated him with images of masculinity and effeminacy.

And I think that's what I meant ten years ago when I wrote that rather pretentious sentence.

Hooper: I think your analogy with *Death of a Salesman* is an interesting one, because there were only two years between it and *Streetcar*. Miller is often considered to be the more political playwright; it's true. He dealt with moral questions within a kind of political framework, much more than Tennessee Williams. It's important to remember, I think, with *Death of a Salesman*, that Arthur Miller creates very one-dimensional female characters. Willy Loman's wife, Linda, is very much in the traditional role of the housewife expected of 1950s America. And then the other female character we have in the play, the woman from Boston, is barely sketched at all.

Whereas Tennessee Williams, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is much more interested in women and women's desires, and so he's kind of going in the face of Arthur Miller's exploration of masculine politics. And Williams, as has already been mentioned, continues that subversion of the homophobia that was present in the 1950s by bringing homosexuals onto the stage whether they were actually dead already—just mentioned in stories or references—or whether they were very slight figures, not at the center of things. So there is a kind of sexual politics there. If we mean by "sexual politics" the relationship between men and women, then I think Tennessee Williams is not particularly interested in that, only in the sense of individuals fulfilling their desire and their needs. So there is a kind of private sexual politics between people, and this dimension has probably given him the reputation of not being a political playwright, because he deals with the political more personally. I know that it's often been said that the personal is the political and vice versa.

To come back to what I said earlier, I think he has these kinds of big outbursts from time to time, both in his plays and in his interview comments about mainstream

politics. But he is, as you suggest, more concerned with sexual politics, with power relations between people, with people being kind of fragmented and pursuing their own individual desires that affirm their fugitive existence still more.

Saddik: That relates to what both you and John are saying about the complexity of character, whether in women or someone like Brick. Is that the reason that the critics saw him and other dramatists as fake—that, well, women can't possibly be like this? "Blanche is not a real woman. She must be a gay man." Or what Jacky was saying about the nuclear family structure being the only safe place. If you were breaking that apart as a playwright, if you were showing human beings who are ambiguous and complex, then that's very threatening to the social order.

Williams had said that "it is not the essential dignity but the essential ambiguity of man that I think needs to be stated" (*New Selected Essays* 111). One of the things that these critics felt threatened by was the secrecy and the confusion, that it's a trick. You're being tricked. Camp is really a secret code. Characters are not really what they seem. So there's a sense in which they were writing about the "real"—what is complex, what is ambiguous, and what is true? Yet these playwrights are somehow being seen as fake and therefore insidious and trying to trick us, so I think there's something in that.

Palmer: Wouldn't you say that stuff testifies to the provocative nature of Williams's representations, that the issue can be raised? In some ways it's made more interesting by the aura of biographical knowledge that circulates around him in the '50s—the penumbra, shall we say, of homosexuality, which some people know more about than others and which can be used to kind of contextualize his work in ways that render it even more provocative than it otherwise would be. I think if you take a play like *Streetcar Named Desire* and you read it just in terms of straight politics, straight sexual politics, that its concentration on Blanche and the difficulty of establishing the notion of sexual virtue for a woman—what exactly does that mean? Do I have to consider this label of being a nymphomaniac and therefore somehow subhuman; is that what my sexual desire means? Does it have to be stigmatized? Do I have to pretend in a relationship with someone like Mitch to be other than what I am in order to be accepted as a woman?

These, I think, are provocative questions, and I don't see anybody else in the American theatre or indeed in American fiction raising those questions about women at that time. Williams is really the only one that's doing it. So Brick is fascinating, I agree, but I think Blanche is just extraordinary, that we have a character like that. It's very provocative. It's disturbing, as you say.

Saddik: Even the idea of a woman like Blanche *having* sexual desire was seen as something that must be some kind of excess or illness. It reminds me of when Ibsen's *A Doll*

House was performed in Europe. There were protests about Nora leaving her husband, but they weren't protesting that this woman left her husband and children, because that to us seems like the shocking thing, that she left her children. There were protests such as, "Well, this is fake. Women don't really feel this way. They're very happy being mothers and wives and little doll-like creatures, so what is this nonsense?" And I think Williams was doing the same thing. "Blanche is not a real woman—what is that? What woman can have those desires? That must be some kind of illness or some kind of fakeness." And Williams said many times that he didn't know if Brick was gay or not. Sometimes he said yes, sometimes he said no; it depends on the interview. And sometimes he said he doesn't know.

O'Connor: Well, you mention biography, and it made me think of last September when I spent two weeks in New York City at Columbia University in the rare book and manuscript room, looking at Williams's papers there. As many of you probably know, they have the contents of his Key West house. So it's a very different set of papers, with obviously some overlap to what's in Texas and New Orleans, and what I was really struck by was the acclaim and the national attention he received throughout his life, and particularly from the White House. And there are letters in there from several first ladies, including a letter in 1962 from Jackie Kennedy saying, "Oh, the next time we're in Florida, maybe you can come over and shoot tin cans with us again." There's a letter from President Johnson's wife.

The craziest thing—this is not a wife, but actually the man himself—there's a pop-up card from Ronald Reagan in 1981, and when I opened the envelope and looked at it, I thought, "What is this?" Reagan had been elected to the presidency the year before, and he's dressed in a cowboy outfit with a hat. You can pop him up and he's dressed in this outfit, and behind him is the White House with the Hollywood sign and mountains behind that, so it's not realistic. And then there's the Air Force One helicopter and the Secret Service limo, and it's scribbled on the back with Reagan's hand: "Hey Tom," you know, "Hope to see you soon. Best wishes, Ronnie." It was so crazy that I sat there for the longest time, just—a pop-up card? Really? You're president, and this is what you decided to do?

It relates to the Cold War tangentially, because of Reagan's presidency and the time in which he was President. But what I was really struck by—and I agree with everything my colleagues said here about the way that he was pushing us through all those decades to a knowledge, to admit to things that we were afraid of—is that those letters to him during that phase of his life, when his theatre was certainly not as popular as it had been, they are filled with such enormous gratitude and admiration toward what he had done. There's all kinds of people writing to him, saying, "Can you send us some old shoe of

yours, so that we can auction it off?" and, "Will you come and speak at this commencement?" and, "Your work has made such a difference to us," and so forth.

So I was really struck by the way that he managed, as a person, even though personally he pushed us on so many levels, to still be such an admired figure by so many people.

From audience: Did Williams participate in any political rallies?

Bak: Yes, once, and he didn't like it. He was asked to partake in an anti–Vietnam War rally on December 6, 1971, for the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice that took place at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. He was to join forces with Norman Mailer, and Norman Mailer read from his anti–Vietnam War play *D. J.*, and Williams tried being political, but in the end he really couldn't be. He later made fun of "The Movement," as he calls it. In one of his later plays, *I Never Get Dressed Till After Dark on Sundays*, and even in his *Memoirs*, he talks about how "The Movement" was just not his thing. And he left the Vietnam War rally in a real huff, because he didn't like Norman Mailer's profanity. Norman Mailer had denounced homosexuality as well, but that didn't bother Williams as much as his use of profanity. Williams was used to that type of homophobic discourse. But Williams couldn't stand Mailer's use of profanity in a church.

But apart from that one anti–Vietnam War speech, that's the only time Williams actively participated in a political demonstration. He simply didn't feel comfortable. And the essay that his speech eventually produced, "We are Dissenters Now," which he published later in *Harper's Bazaar*, was as disjointed in logic and naïve in political commentary as was that Coalition speech.

Hooper: I was just going to add that he said in that essay that we no longer can be humanitarians, which is the stance he had taken up to that point—that we have to be dissenters, that we have to be radical in some way. He said that America the Beautiful was sick with killing, and he talked about the iced eyes of the Pentagon. And as John said, it's a disjointed essay, but it is perhaps one of his most radical statements politically.

From audience: During this Cold War period, was he any more political in his short story writing?

Saddik: Well, during the late '40s and the '50s, of course, you have "Hard Candy," "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio." They're sexually more explicit. As far as being political in the sense that we're talking about . . . I don't think so.

From audience: I'm wondering to what extent you think Williams's success kept him out of the glare of McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, unlike

Lillian Hellman and others who were called forth. I know he was cagey and didn't want that kind of spotlight.

Bak: I think that we underestimate the position Williams put himself in after Elia Kazan had named names for HUAC. Kazan went into self-exile in Germany and was filming *Man on a Tightrope*. He was persona non grata to everyone in the business except for Williams. Now, was Williams being an opportunist in maintaining those ties? Williams knew that Kazan was brilliant. He also knew that the success of his own plays often depended upon Kazan's direction. Did Williams support Kazan when everyone was turning their backs on him because he was interested in another hit play or because he really supported Kazan's sense of duty to himself, as well as to his nation? It's one of those questions that I'm still puzzling over myself. But in a time where guilt by association could ruin your career, we underestimate the risk that Williams took in openly supporting Elia Kazan. Half of me thinks that he really just wanted the success, and the other half thinks that, no, he respected Kazan for standing up for what Kazan believed in, for right or for wrong.

But there's a lot of pure politics behind Williams that we haven't really touched on yet, that I think are important, and *Camino Real* is at the heart of it. It's not just *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is much more about sexual politics, but *Camino Real* is hardcore politics, which audiences just rejected in the day because Miller's *The Crucible* was already there. People looked to *The Crucible* as the defining Cold War play, and *Camino Real*, because it was so obscure to people—so esoteric—was dismissed as politically naïve. That really irritated Williams. He wanted people to know that this was a highly political play. And I think, to some extent, because his sense of politics have always been wrapped up in ambiguity, that audiences didn't take *Camino Real* seriously, and that bothered him immensely, whereas everyone looked to Arthur Miller and to *The Crucible* and said, "This is our political play."

Hooper: Just to get back to what John was saying about HUAC, Kazan actually said that "Tennessee Williams was the most loyal and understanding friend I had through those black months." And then Williams, writing about HUAC himself, to Maria St. Just, said, "I take no attitude about it one way or another, as I am not a political person, and human venality is something I always expect and forgive" (*Five O'Clock Angel* 56). So read that as you will, because he's said various things about his political stance on issues throughout his career, but his brother, Dakin, also said that Tom had a very vague notion of politics.

From audience: One of the things that I've always found interesting is the use of "they" and "we," in that "they" could be the syndicate. "They" could be Generalissimo, which

is referred to as "she." "They" could be the Red Devil Battery. "They" could be the oil companies and the governor, who are in control of Boss Finley. There's this larger creature out there in this political world of Tennessee Williams, which is as frightening as the god of *Catch-22*. They can do anything we can't stop them from doing. Perhaps you want to comment on that aspect of politics in the world of Tennessee Williams.

Bak: Can I launch into that as well? I think of the penultimate slide I showed earlier today [in a paper on "Tom and Tennessee in Europe, 1928 and 1948"], of Tennessee with Gore Vidal next to the Jeep that Williams had purchased in Rome in 1948. A few years later Williams would become ardently anti-fascist. In 1952, around the time he was drafting *Camino Real*, Williams wrote Elia Kazan some really great letters that complain about fascism, that complain about *Time* magazine being the mouthpiece of American fascism and about Nixon being its poster child. But that didn't mean he was pro-communist either. Again in 1948, when he was in Rome, Williams was really quite scared for himself, as well as for the Roman people, because it looked as if the country would fall to communism. The year 1948 marked the first democratic election in Italy. But 1948 was also the year that Czechoslovakia fell to the Soviet bloc. The military coup there brought the Communists to power.

America talked about the domino effect, of course, in the 1950s, with Korea; in the '60s, with Vietnam; et cetera. But Williams notes that the theory was already evident in 1948, and Williams was particularly worried about Italy, because the Communists had a real hold upon the Italian people. Though the Communists eventually lost to the Liberal Democrats, and by a pretty wide margin, Williams's fears were justified. He writes about those fears in a letter to Brooks Atkinson, and it's one of the most political letters I've ever read from Williams. It's very long, and I don't want to give you all the details, but I would just like to read a couple of sentences from what he says. And, again, this is Tennessee Williams, in 1948:

> Most of the people I've talked to [in Italy] think that Togliatti [who was the Popular Front, the Communist, candidate whom Williams and others thought would win the election] will win. The trouble is that none of the other parties have put up candidates that appeal to the people. There is a terrific reaction against the church particularly since Monsignor Scippio skipped off with a vast amount of money. When you mention de Gasperi [who was the Liberal Democrat, a Christian Democrat leader] to the Italian-in-the-streets he makes a wry face and says "Prete!" [priest].
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> Nothing at all has apparently been done by the native government, as it now exists, to relieve the really appalling social conditions. It honestly looks as if seventy percent of the Italian population are mendicants and prostitutes, families are living in the roofless shells of buildings in the bombed cities such as Naples. I feel that if we had made really sacrificial efforts to relieve the distress of Europe the Communists would have no appeal. As it is, the people

> in their really dire circumstances, bewildered by the vacillating and make-shift puppet governments headed by weak and blandly opportunistic figures, rooted in no defined party or policy or philosophy, are a natural and easy prey to extremists. What a tragedy it is, that America, our nation, at the one great moment of destiny, suddenly lost the man, Roosevelt, who was apparently the one leader in the Western World who could see realistically and think idealistically and feel humanely enough to get us all through this interval of panic without a catastrophe, which now seems to be coming. What it really took was simple human understanding which somehow seems to be lacking in the present leadership. (*Selected Letters* 2:176–77)

There's this sense in Williams here—which is not at all naïve, politically speaking—that we were failing Europe then. If Italy had fallen to the Communists, Europe today would certainly have been geopolitically different. And this was Tennessee Williams; it doesn't sound like him, but I think we've neglected his politically savvy nature over the years. The Communists didn't win in Italy, but that did not stop Luchino Visconti from producing a Communist version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by having Stanley, the proletarian, destroy the South's aristocracy in raping Blanche. Williams didn't care for that production, but you do get from him, in that letter, a playwright obviously versed in the gambits of Cold War Europe. And this letter really counters the traditional image of a playwright who did not understand politics. He was aware of it in Italy in 1948, and it had little to do with homosexuality or sexual identity in general.

When he was going to leave Italy, as did Gore Vidal and Truman Capote, he wasn't leaving because he was homosexual. He was leaving because he was an American capitalist and feared for his money, for his life. And that's the part of Tennessee Williams that I'm just discovering now, that I find extremely fascinating.

From audience: Could you talk about the bishop who denounced the film? We were told we would go to hell if we saw it.

Hooper: *Baby Doll* was referred to as the dirtiest film ever made, I think at the time of its release.

Palmer: That was from *Time* magazine, the arch-fascist news magazine as we now know it.

Hooper: One of the things, in terms of Cold War politics, that *Baby Doll* sets up, and I think this is kind of continued throughout Williams's career, is of a house crumbling. So you get this symbol repeated, most obviously in *A House Not Meant to Stand*, whereby a house represents the nation—and possibly the world, too—crumbling under the strain of capitalism that no longer works, of democracy falling apart at home. So I think that that's an important Cold War image as well.

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Saddik: Well, it's interesting you mention the crumbling house, because Williams's 1960 *Period of Adjustment* was his attempt to answer the critics and write a play about traditional marriage and heterosexual couples in a way that he thought would be acceptable to American society. And yet the house is over a cavern and it's crumbling throughout the play, so it didn't work.

Palmer: Well, I think we're at the end of our time. I want to thank the panelists for a terrific discussion and to thank you for your insightful questions.

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