

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review



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## Tenn and the Banana Queen: The Correspondence of Tennessee Williams and Marion Black Vaccaro

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Tennessee Williams's friendship with Marion Black Vaccaro spanned three decades, from their meeting in 1941 to her death in 1970. They were old and dear friends, each the "other's favorite traveling companion" (Leavitt 72). Although Donald Spoto, Lyle Leverich, Albert Devlin, Nancy M. Tischler, and others have discussed Vaccaro's relationship with Williams, unpublished correspondence in the Fred W. Todd Tennessee Williams Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection sheds new light on the friendship.

¶12 Williams first met Vaccaro in January 1941. A vagabond writer working on *Battle of Angels*, he visited Key West and found inexpensive lodgings in a "tiny cabin" (formerly slave quarters) at the back of a 125-year-old mansion, the Tradewinds (Windham 19). The property belonged to Vaccaro's mother, Clara Atwood Black, whose late husband, the Rev. Robert M. W. Black, had been "archdeacon for the Episcopal churches in Southern Florida" ("Mrs. Marion Vaccaro"). In a letter dated February 26, 1941, to Lawrence Langner, Williams offered this information about Mrs. Black: "[she] gives me lodging at a ridiculously low price because I remind her of her son who was an aviator recently killed in a crash" (Williams, *Selected Letters* 1: 305). Vaccaro and Williams eventually became fast friends, embracing the nightlife of Key West with gusto.

¶13 Born on January 17, 1906, Marion Black had attended prestigious boarding schools—the Hewlett School on Long Island and Rosemary Hall in Greenwich, Connecticut—before continuing her education at the University of Michigan and Smith College (Lozier). Intelligent and charming, Black worked for showman Florenz Ziegfeld and his actress-wife Billie Burke by tutoring their daughter Patricia and also serving as her traveling companion. In 1939 she married Regis Vaccaro, the heir to the Standard Fruit and Steamship Company in New Orleans. Williams would describe Regis as the worst drunk he had ever known. Not long after meeting the family, Williams helped Vaccaro and her mother usher Regis to Douglass, Georgia, to escape trouble in Florida over gambling debts. Because Vaccaro inherited Regis's estate upon his death, Williams often jocularly referred to her in correspondence as "the Banana Queen."

¶14 Though Williams and Vaccaro lost touch during World War II, they renewed their friendship after the war. For a few years, Vaccaro lived with her mother in the fashionable Pontalba Apartments on Jackson Square in New Orleans, where she threw a memorable party for the traveling company performing *The Glass Menagerie*. In 1950, she purchased a home on Biscayne Bay, in the Coconut Grove section of Miami, then famous as a gathering place for artists; here she often entertained Williams and Frank Merlo. Williams reciprocated her hospitality in his conch home on Duncan Street in Key West. During the 1950s and '60s, she frequently accompanied him to Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Jamaica, Rome, Sicily, Greece, Spain, and England. He fondly dedicated *Orpheus Descending* to her, and he may have recalled her marital strife when he wrote *Cat on a Hot*

*Tin Roof*. Beyond doubt, he used her as a model for the fun-loving Cora in the short story “Two on a Party,” published in *Hard Candy* (1954). This story, a source for *Cat*, has Brick married to “a New Orleans debutante who was a Mardi Gras queen, and whose father owned a fleet of banana boats” (305). According to Donald Spoto, Cora’s gay traveling companion and fellow sybarite, Billy, was “a clear surrogate for Williams” (88). The title of the story, as well as its concluding mantra “off they go,” captures the spirit of the relationship. So close were they that Williams kept a portrait of Vaccaro—a likeness from 1941, the year of their first meeting—in the bedroom of his Key West house.

¶15 In 2004, The Historic New Orleans Collection (henceforth THNOC) purchased from Fred Todd what had been the largest holding of Williams’s manuscripts—books, posters, photographs, playbills, and other ephemera—in private hands. The Vaccaro-Williams material at THNOC comprises nearly fifty letters (many of them with dated envelopes), postcards, and telegrams. A majority are holograph, signed letters that Vaccaro sent to her family while traveling with the playwright or to “Tommie” while he was traveling without her. There are also several notes and cards from Vaccaro to Williams’s mother, “Miss Edwina.” Especially valuable are the ten typescript letters that he addressed to her as “Sister” or “Dearest Marion,” signing them “Tommy,” “10,” “Tom,” or “Tennessee.” This impressive collection offers insight into the pleasures and pains Williams shared with one of his closest friends.

¶16 The Vaccaro-Williams correspondence in the Todd Collection begins with a short note (Fred W. Todd Collection, THNOC, Ms. 562, item 774; item number alone in subsequent references) typed in 1945 on *Dance Index* stationery. (Donald Windham, the editor of *Dance Index*, was one of Williams’s early lovers.) “Dear Marion,” Williams writes,

I just got out of the hospital after another minor eye operation and found your telephone messages and note in my box at the Shelton. I am considerably run down and exhausted after the goings on here and in bad need of a change so I am going right out in the country where I’ll remain until Sunday when I have to be back for the Critics’ Dinner. If you’re still in town—will you let me know—call me at the Shelton sometime after Sunday and I’d love to see you and Regis. It was wonderful seeing your sweet mother—though I didn’t have nearly time enough. It’s been indescribably hectic—unpleasant as the hospital was, I enjoyed the rest.

Do you still live in Key West? I expect I’ll go down there a while next winter—now that the war’s about over it ought to be even nicer.

Signed “Best wishes, Tennessee,” the note shows Williams’s eagerness to re-establish his friendship with Marion and her husband Regis, who would die the following year. The final letter in the THNOC collection is dated 1965, when Williams was living in New York City and recuperating from one of his many bouts with depression.

¶17 Although the collection is not an exhaustive record of the friendship—there are many chronological gaps—it does provide a rich glimpse of the friends’ travels, particularly the trips they made together in 1958 and 1961, to Italy, Sicily, Greece, and Spain. During these trips, Williams and Vaccaro refer to his fatigue over *Baby Doll*, the Spanish premiere of *The Rose Tattoo*, the filming of *The Night of the Iguana*, and a lively San Francisco production of *Milk Train*. In much of their correspondence, she adopts the punctilious concern of a James Boswell to Williams’s Dr. Johnson.

¶18

But Vaccaro filled many other roles in Williams’s life—friend, traveling companion, confidant, nurse, fellow reveler, banker on at least one occasion, and, perhaps most importantly, sister. In an undated letter, Williams encourages her to come to Tangiers and stay at the El Djenina Hotel: “Unfortunately [while] there is but one bedroom in our little house you would be within hailing distance . . . and you *are* my family and I don’t like being far from you” (822). Frank Merlo also regarded Vaccaro as a member of Tennessee’s extended family. Writing from Tokyo in 1959, Williams conveys Merlo’s regards: “Frank was saying last night, I like Marion. I got to like her so much. I wish she had come with us” (785). In many ways, Williams saw Vaccaro as a substitute for his own institutionalized sister, Rose, and even as a possible caretaker for her. In the 1950s, he seriously considered moving Rose to Miami so that she could enjoy Vaccaro’s loving attention.

¶9 Williams placed similar faith in Vaccaro’s relationship with his mother. The THNOC collection features several items—a Valentine’s Day card, postcards—from Vaccaro to Miss Edwina. One card, with an image of Raphael’s *Madonna dell Granduca* on the front (814) and a thoughtful note on the back, surely tugged at Miss Edwina’s heartstrings. Dated January 12, 1965, the note reads:

Dear “Miss Edwina”—

George [Vaccaro’s brother] took these pictures of the memorial windows in the Church at Clarksville. He stopped by there while taking a motor trip with Dr. Hugh Hyatt. George thought that you might like to have them for your books—

Do hope you are well and that you will have a happy, lovely New Year. With love from us all.

Affectionately,

Marion

No daughter could have offered her mother a kinder gift than these photos of St. George’s in Clarksdale, where Miss Edwina’s father served as pastor and where Williams grew up. Williams also knew he could trust Vaccaro with delicate matters involving his mother. In a telegram dated November 30, 1963, he asks a favor of his friend:

DEAR MARION: MOTHER FLYING DOWN TO STAY WITH GRANDFATHER WHILE WE ARE NORTH. COULD YOU MEET HER MIAMI AIRPORT EASTERN LINES FROM ST LOUIS. ARRIVING 155 PM TOMORROW AND GET HER ON BUS OR PLANE TO KEY WEST. IF NOT CONVENIENT PLEASE WIRE ME TONIGHT. HATE TO EXPLOIT YOUR KINDNESS IN THIS BRUTAL FASHION

LOVE=

TENNESSEE=

(783)

¶10 The Williams-Vaccaro correspondence reveals that the two were soul mates on several levels. Like Williams, who could list a governor of Tennessee as one of his ancestors, she was a descendant of a prominent family, including Robert Raymond Reid, the “governor general of the Territory of Florida from 1839 to 1841” (“Mrs. Marion Vaccaro”). Both had been raised in Episcopal parsonages. Unquestionably, Williams also enjoyed Vaccaro’s conversation, *bonmots*, and gossip, and he in turn regaled her with his sense of humor, sometimes witty, sometimes wry. He generously introduced her into his international circle of friends—from the worlds of theatre, film, and literature—and her letters home bubble with excitement at meeting “celebrities from around the world.” “Have been having a grand time,” she glows in one letter (781).

The friendship was grounded in the mutual respect of fellow writers. Williams greatly admired Vaccaro's poetry. After her death, her brother George Robison Black sent Williams a bound book of her poems, now part of the Williams Collection at the Columbia University archives, because he knew his sister would want Williams to have them.<sup>1</sup> Handwritten in various media, including pen-and-ink, paint, pencil, and crayon, Vaccaro's unpublished manuscript contains about a hundred poems and other pieces. Her poetry was untitled (except for one piece she called "Ocean Wading") and ranged over several topics; the prevalence of death and other pessimistic subjects perhaps suggest Williams's influence. At the start of the book, Vaccaro included a short story (or fantasy) entitled "The Witchy-Bitchy Witch," again prompting an identification with Williams's own fiction. Vaccaro possibly began her book with the idea of filling it with stories rather than poems, but that is a topic for further research. One of her best poems, on mutual friend Diana Barrymore, was included in Richard Freeman Leavitt's *The World of Tennessee Williams* (129). Vaccaro's collection of poems documents still another affinity with Williams—she was an artist, and illustrated her book with watercolors.

<sup>¶12</sup> Vaccaro also shared Williams's gay world, though at first she did not fully adjust to certain lifestyle choices. In an April 7, 1950, letter to Oliver Evans, a poet-professor friend, Williams confided: "Paul Bowles is in India—he says Ceylon is the sexiest place he's ever been, and the natives are as flirty as Mississippi maidens. Marion Vaccaro was here [Key West] and we renewed our friendship. She had Neal Thomas with her and Neal's lover who is a sad sack of a prissy sort of queen. Poor Marion, she doesn't seem to have found her bearings in the gay world although it is the only one she feels right in. She will have no fun playing the patsy to these temperamental girls!" (*Selected Letters* 2: 303–04). Five months later, though, a catty, irreverent Williams wrote to Maria St. Just describing Vaccaro's behavior with Evans in different terms:

Oliver is in Florida, Miami Beach, visiting the widow of the heir to the United Fruit fortune [Vaccaro]. He died, the heir, rather abruptly and mysteriously a couple of years ago. He was an alcoholic with a glass eye who took ether when he gave up liquor and used to take out his glass eye and throw it at his mother-in-law, the widow of an Episcopal clergyman. The heiress (now a widow) is as big a queen as Oliver so they must be having a wonderful time together. Recently her diamonds were stolen by a sailor that turned "dirt" on her! (*Five O'Clock Angel* 35)

Williams's comments to other correspondents suggest that Vaccaro, like Williams himself, relished creating a saucy persona. Apropos of his own behavior, Williams tells Vaccaro in an undated letter from the 1960s:

I arrived in Madridi [sic] in such a Camille-condition that they didn't want to admit that they have received my cable but I said I knew that they had it, and I would remain by the desk until I was forcibly removed if they didn't give me a room. So I got a room at once. (822)

The literary reference is telling: Williams's own actions call to mind Blanche DuBois's impersonation of Camille in Scene Six of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In a mournful epistle from Amexco, Rome, dated June 28, 1962, he closes with another feigned pose: "Sorry this sounds like a letter from a minor romantic poet now resting in a quaint graveyard" (800).

<sup>¶13</sup> Throughout her correspondence, Vaccaro records the lunches, dinners, cocktail parties, and other festive events at which Tennessee introduced her to the global glitterati. On a 1958 trip to Italy with the playwright, she writes to her family from Rome on Hotel Excelsior stationery: "Last night, we had dinner with Anna Magnani—most pleasant." From the Hotel San Domenico in Taormina, Sicily, a favorite Williams haunt, she informs her family: "Tenn invited me to what they call a 'gala' where they presented awards, like 'Oscars,' to all the

important people in the theatre world. Tenn and Magnani got one—Lollabrigida, Sophia Loren, and many others. . . . There were about 5,000 people in a huge outdoor theatre—Then they showed two of the latest films which have not yet been released to the public.—This hotel is crowded with celebrities from all over the world” (780). On another excursion, to Athens, she has occasion to comment on a little-known aspect of Magnani’s personal life: “Anna M . . . took us up to see her son (17–18 yrs.) who has a large apt. in the same building as hers—He is also a polio cripple, but paints with a lot of talent. It is very seldom she even mentions him, much less introducing him to people” (792). Although Vaccaro does not record Williams’s reaction to this visit, Magnani’s son—the disabled artist—may have struck a responsive chord in Williams in light of his sister’s afflictions and his own chronic maladies.

¶14 On May 8, 1958, from the Placido Hotel in Madrid, Vaccaro exuberantly tells her family: “We had cocktails (one night) and dinner (one night) with Orson Welles, who is most charming and brilliant (weighs about 300 pounds!), a grand person. Last night we had dinner with a famous international writer [Kenneth Tynan] and his wife Elaine.—Then we went to visit Ava Gardner at her house. . . . She was not nearly as glamorous as she appears on screen . . . in fact, quite careless in appearance, yet still most lively and gay—beautiful—liked her” (795). On another occasion, she and Williams had dinner with Agnes Morehead, and in Italy she and Williams enjoyed meals with Harry Belafonte and his wife Helen Hayes (July 1958). On a trip to Tangiers, Vaccaro records that she and Tenn dined one night with Paul Bowles and his wife Jane, and another night with Tallulah Bankhead’s sister (796). Vaccaro also met one of Williams’s most respected directors, Jose Quintero (788). In one letter in the Columbia archives, she asks Williams to be remembered to Maria Britneva, who had given her a curious gift—a rabbit’s foot—when Vaccaro visited London. In a less pleasant letter from Rhodes, dated May 17, 1958, Vaccaro speculates that “Tom is really going to Madrid (I think!) to dodge Audrey Wood. She wanted him to stay here until June 2” (794). In a letter dated the next day, she elaborated: “Audrey is coming to Tel Aviv, and wants Tom to return to Athens to sign papers. He is annoyed with her and feels that she is not treating him fairly—because she could easily fly here in 8 hours—then go to Tel Aviv—he is all confused up” (795).

¶15 When he traveled without her, Williams shared information with “Sister” about his meeting Fidel Castro, Hemingway, and Noel Coward; Vaccaro respectfully forwarded this news to Miss Edwina (784). While working on the filming of *The Night of the Iguana* in October 1963 at Puerto Vallarte, Williams confided in Sister about his relationship with the Hollywood stars in the picture: “Yesterday I made myself popular by re-writing a scene for Burton and Sue Lyon which everyone liked. Today I’m re-writing the ending which had been sentimentalized. I’m trying to replace the sentimentality with some more honest emotion . . .” Later, in the same letter, he reports: “Ava Gardner is taking another ‘cure’ at Extapan but is due to get here Tuesday. Liz, Burton, Etc. are established and in good moods” (803).

¶16 These famous people, of course, were inseparable from the romantic places where Vaccaro had met them through Williams. The friends had a keen appreciation for the way in which setting creates mood; both gravitated toward romantic environments that served, for them, as safe havens. Her letters are filled with references to beaches, marketplaces, and historic architecture; her postcards capture colorful and sometimes bizarre landscapes. She often paints Williams as the adventuresome traveler. In a letter dated April 24, 1961, from Taormina, Vaccaro chronicles: “Tenn wants to drive from here, over the mountains to Palermo—they say it is a beautiful drive, and we have a good old man who drives us” (791). On a trip to Taormina without her, Williams recounts, “Last summer when I went there I was fried like an egg in my hotel bedroom and had to get

up at two or three A.M. and go down into the plaza and draw a fresh breath. But I must say the plaza could be interesting at night, at that hour” (820).

¶17 In one of his most intimate, revelatory letters, written on untitled stationery and dated July 16, 1965, Williams compares San Francisco to New Orleans circa 1940. “Dearest Marion,” he writes:

I trust all is going as well as possible for you and George. A friend and I are in San Francisco for a new production of “Milk Train,” as guests of the company. The production is interesting, not to say bizarre, but you would have to see it to believe it so I will not go into further comments.

I find that I have many old friends now living in Frisco. They call me up, having heard I am here, such characters as Stella Brooks. She called me from the lobby last night. She was obviously “air-borne,” her voice hardly intelligible. Then Ira Yeager, another left-winger or swinger whom you may remember from a brief encounter in Miami. An old man named Ed Hefter whom you may remember from Key West, and a young romance named Allen Knolles that I knew in the New Orleans days, now engaged in Oriental importing, of just what I don’t know. Perhaps poppy seeds. So the social scene is livelier than I would wish.

I must rush off to rehearsals to see what new fantasy is taking place here. This is a real swinging town, nothing like it since the early days in New Orleans. It is good to escape the heat of the New York summer.

Much love,  
Tom

(813)

The individuals Williams describes here (again linked to their symbolic geography) are a variegated assortment of friends, former lovers, and acquaintances, some of whom may have been prototypes for the characters that peopled his late plays. Though Knolles and Hefter seem to have left no footprints, Stella Brooks (1910–2002) was, according to her obituary in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “a smoky-voiced jazz singer who once mingled with Tennessee Williams and Billie Holiday. . . . In many ways, [her] life reads like the lyrics of a blues tune she might have sung during her heyday in the 1940’s and 1950’s” (St. John). Williams includes her in his *Memoirs*.

¶18 The correspondence also reflects Vaccaro’s and Williams’s shared love of animals. Shortly after breaking up with Frank Merlo, Williams informs Vaccaro that the dogs he and Merlo kept together in Key West have been “sprung” from a kennel: “I think it was ghastly to leave house-pets there so long, but then I never have been quite convinced that Merlo loved animals much more than he really likes human beings not known as Merlo.” In several of her letters home, Marion lovingly inquires after her own pets, to whom she refers at one point in Williamsesque form, as “the ‘Menagerie’” (April 8, 1961) (789). One of Williams’s dogs, Gigi, receives extra attention in the correspondence. In a letter dated October 2, 1963, and stored in the Columbia archives, Vaccaro asks Williams if she and her brother George can visit him and “little Gigi” in Mexico. Writing to Vaccaro from Puerto Vallarta later that month, Williams reassures her that “Gigi seems happy. She dances through the waves and waits on the balcony with ears cocked for our home-comings” (803).

¶19 Given the role of exotic animals in Williams’s plays, it is not surprising that he would write about those he saw on his travels. The Hotel Rio in Puerto Vallarta, he observes, “has a dining-room like a small Trader Vic’s, and on the premises are wandering at large an ant-eater, a wild boar with a good disposition, and a member of the jungle-cat family.” As if recalling *Camino Real*, he adds in the same letter: “Burros, horses, descended directly from the horse of Don Quixote, and hogs wander about and are plentiful” (803). Although Williams and Vaccaro were usually of one mind when it came to animals, she did not share his passion for the bullfight. In

Madrid for the Spanish premiere of *The Rose Tattoo*, she cried when she accompanied him to see the sport of matadors. Williams, however, could not stay away; in an undated letter from Madrid, he confesses to her, “I saw three bullfights in one week” (820).

¶20 Vaccaro and Williams also shared financial information. Judging by the correspondence, Vaccaro kept a shrewd eye on her investments. On April 14, 1961, while traveling with Williams, she frets: “I cannot keep up with the market here in Sicily—the news is 2 or three days late” (789). The following month, from Tangiers, she instructs her brother: “Can’t keep up with Market News—so George, do whatever you think best on my accounts—also, please check my balance at Coco Grove Bank and if it is low, ask Chuck to send a check to be deposited to my account” (796). Financially savvy, Vaccaro was also generous; in 1963, Williams thanks her for “covering my mis-directed tax-debt” (802). Williams’s own philanthropic efforts are on display in a letter from Japan, dated 1959: “We’ve been here about three weeks, including Typhoon Vera, a great Wagnerian noise in the sky above us which didn’t hit us directly but hit my pocketbook directly as I had to buy a thousand dollars worth of rice for the sea-coast victims” (785).

¶21 Over the years, the correspondence gravitated toward health issues. In 1958, Vaccaro tersely records that “Tom was in his room all day with some sort of inflammation of the stomach” (778). In letters home to her family, Vaccaro discusses Williams’s need for peace and quiet and her responsibilities as travel companion: “Don’t know if I am much help—but he cannot travel alone—I do my best to help him” (788). On May 6, she reveals that she “hate[s] to leave Tenn alone. He is quite nervous at times” (792), and from Madrid, later that month, she repeats: “Tommie is quite nervous, with much on his mind—and seems to want me to stay with him—He really should not be traveling alone” (795). Again and again, Vaccaro documents Williams’s restlessness. Her concern is sincere, but the frequent references to caregiving suggest that she wanted her family to appreciate the important role she played in Williams’s life. Certainly, Williams’s habit of changing plans on a day-to-day, or even hour-to-hour basis must have been as taxing for her as it was for his other frequent companions.

¶22 When Williams and Vaccaro were apart, he kept her apprised of the state of his health, physical and mental. In a two-and-a-half-page typescript letter from Brighton, mailed June 19, 1963, he confides that his energy is flagging; reports on a visit to Liz Taylor’s doctor; and recounts a joke he has played on one of Maria St. Just’s stodgy guests:

Dearest Marion:

I’m cutting the trip short as I find that I just don’t have the impulse or energy to knock about Europe this year. Also that marvelous Gama Globulin stuff I was taking in New York is not available over here. Also I think I ought to spend a few weeks alone with Frank. Maria and I called him and although he made no reference to it, I sensed that he was not as well as before I left K.W. Anyway I have him on my mind too continually to enjoy being on the other side of the sea. We’re spending a few days in Brighton, then flying back to the States this week-end. I’ll spend a few days in New York, then hop on down to Frank and the creatures. Frederick will remain in the New York apartment. I feel it’s better that way. In London I went to Liz Taylor’s doctor and he leveled with me. I have a precirrhotic condition of the liver which is enlarged by two and a half inches and he thinks I have to cut alcohol down to the absolute minimum if I wish to survive. He’s given me some marvelous green tablets which pick me up like Bennies but don’t give the ticker-trouble. Cutting the booze down is going to be a slow business, been on that booze-kick so long now. All this, the cutting short of the holiday and the return alone to Frank, is a bit hard on

Frederick, but home is where you've hung the most years with someone, and Frederick will stay on the pay-roll and perhaps he'll like being alone for a while, or with other companions.

The Lady Just has given me several parties. I have been with Hermoine Baddeley and Maggie Leighton is coming down here to Brighton Friday. Too much society when you're trying to cut down the booze.

Signed and sent auto-mail to Lefkowitz a cheque for you yesterday, to repay your covering my mis-directed tax-debt. You should have it in a couple of days now, and I am awfully grateful to you. I must hang on to Rose's house if Magruder will let me.

I hope you'll have a chance to stay with the Horse and me when I get back there, and that the heat isn't intolerable.

It's bright and beautiful here in Brighton. My room looks over the sea and the air is stimulating as the new green pills. I cant bring you the air but I'll bring you some of the pills. So hold on for 'em, they're coming. Give Miss Clara my love and keep her marching.

One little Joke. At one of the Lady Just's parties there was a Lady Cholmondeley (pronounced Chumley). Maria said go talk to her. I said what about? Maria said, Think of something. So I went over and sat by Lady Cholmondeley and said, I've been instructed to have a conversation with you. Where are you from? She said she was from Suffolk, Surrey, or Sussex. I said Well, this has been a nice conversation, we mustn't stretch it too far. Then I stumbled up and went back to the liquor tray.

The beard is doing nicely. A London barber trimmed and shaped it for me, and they say it's becoming. Becoming what, I don't know.

Much love,

10

(802)

This letter reveals many sides of Williams—the wounded, the witty, and the wickedly debonair.

¶23 On March 3, 1964, five years before he was committed to Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, Williams describes his depression in light of Vaccaro's own recent hospitalization for plastic surgery: "I envy your vegetative existence, what I have been going through these past few weeks is much worse. I didn't know 'depression' could get so deep. At times it is like a sort of undefined panic. I guess I am having a nervous breakdown, or about to have one, and I guess it's long overdue." Two paragraphs later, he seems to buoy himself up: "If I'm not actually dying or going mad, or both, I have the offer of a villa in Rome with swimming pool for the next few months. Ray Starke [producer of the film *The Night of the Iguana*] has offered to recompense me for my work on 'Iguana' this way" (804).

¶24 In another one-page typescript, postmarked September 28, 1964, from New York, he details the treatment he is receiving for his depression and describes his own brand of religion:

Dear Sister:

Blue paper for a blue mood, which I always have on Sunday, but I do want to thank you for the very beautiful poem. I save all your poems since I don't know whether you have other copies, and they shouldn't get lost.

I'm going every day except Sunday to this psychiatrist that Jim and Stell Adams took me to, and I'm also getting the pictures. I've learned how to give them to myself now. I guess it's risky and it's certainly unpleasant to stick yourself with a long needle, but they pick me up a little for a while. The psychiatrist is also giving me medication, pick-up pills called "Elavil" that are supposed to combat a depression. Ask Henry if he knows anything about them. Frankly, they don't seem to do much for me, and the psychiatric sessions are a drag as I have so little to say to the

doctor, every day being almost an exact copy of the one before. I have continued to lose weight and am down to 142 pounds from my usual 155. Had to buy some new suits as the old ones were hanging on me like a scarecrow's.

I see very few people besides Chuck and Paula who are marvelously warm and considerate. They had a Mass said for Frankie last Sunday. I didn't go to it, as neither Frank nor I ever darkened a church door except to take Grandfather to services when he was with us. I feel that Mass can be celebrated just as well in the privacy of the heart as in any church. Did you get to Key West? Don't be surprised if I pop down there. I give the doctor and his pills another week or two to demonstrate their magic.

Never let anybody talk you into renting a pent-house apartment in New York. The terraces are filthy. You can't sit down in a chair without looking like a chimney-sweep, there is so much soot in the air.

This Sunday is now mercifully enveloped in late dusk, a few shades darker than this paper.

My love to all of you,

Tom

(811)

¶25 In another letter, postmarked June 24, 1965, from New York, Williams elaborates on his medical treatment and his theology of illness/indulgence: "My days are repetition. I work a couple of hours, then go to the head-shrinker, then take a swim at the 'Y,' and return to my new apartment, relieved that most of the day is finished. That feeling at the end of the day, the relief that it's about over with, is not a healthy feeling, I know. But my greatest pleasure now is reading at night in bed." Near the end of the letter, he wonders if God is "chastising all of us who are Southerners" and suggests, "We must send an ambassador to Him to explain that [we] have built-in problems from birth and the errancy of our ways should be indulged a little" (812). Invariably confessional, Williams shares his views about how his regional identity influenced his psyche and his soul.

¶26 Williams also expressed compassion for Vaccaro's physical and mental vicissitudes, often interpreting her problems through his own psychic history. On June 28, 1962, he wrote from Amexco, Rome:

I am both glad and sorry to hear you are going into the Lahey clinic, glad because I know they will give you the very best advice and treatment but sorry because I know that you hate hospitals as much as I do. But do try to go through it. It is such a drag to feel not well or only half well and such a difference in the mind and spirit when the body is put right. I have been in such a physical slump myself these last few weeks that I'm just barely marching. However, we have to keep marching. Stopping is not appealing. (800)

His counsel to her is simple and loving: "You give too much of yourself. The trouble with that is that eventually there's not enough left to give. Save yourself for yourself and us who love you and need you!" (800). A master of self-reflexivity, the exhausted celebrity-playwright could have been speaking to himself. When Vaccaro had plastic surgery in 1964, Williams provided further soothing words on March 3: "I'm relieved to know you will still look like Sister, as I have always loved the way that you look" (804). Yet in a February 26 letter to Maria St. Just, Williams had been much blunter about the operation:

"The Banana Queen" is in New Jersey, recuperating from a face-lifting operation. I must say I approve of the measure, that is, if it has worked, as she looked ten years older than her actual age, due to John Barleycorn's reciprocal devotion. She wants to come to Greece in early summer. (*Five O'Clock Angel* 188)

Here, as in other letters to St. Just, Williams descends to his correspondent's level of biting satire. Yet a letter to St. Just dated March 16, 1970, describes his farewell visit with "Sister" in far more compassionate terms:

I have just returned to Key West from Miami where I went to visit what I fear is the death-bed of my old and dear friend Marion Vaccaro. I have been up to visit her in hospital several times. She keeps having partial recoveries and then relapses and has spent most of her six weeks in hospital in what is called “the Intensive Care Unit,” a chamber of horrors in which all the patients are connected with mechanical devices that record their breathing and heart-beat and are usually fitted with tubes to their kidneys, etc. On this last visit I found her with tubes down her nostrils, conscious but unable to speak, only able to cling to my hand. With the free hand she kept gesturing toward the door, meaning that I should take her out. While I was there an electric device over her bed suddenly sounded off shrilly and doctors and nurses rushed to her bed-side as she was having a cardiac spasm. I won’t go into further details: enough to say it was a shattering experience, although the dear lady still survives. I sometime wonder if it is right to keep people surviving in that condition. (*Five O’Clock Angel* 199)

¶27

The Williams-Vaccaro correspondence at THNOC stands as testament to dear friendship. More realistic and worldly than Williams, Vaccaro nonetheless provided him with a sister’s kindness and companionship. He amply rewarded her with his decades-long devotion and his irrepressible wit, even in the face of debilitating depression and cruel betrayals.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

I am grateful to Celine Little and the Tennessee Williams Estate for permission to publish full text of the three Williams letters in this article.

<sup>1</sup> The Columbia University archives contain only two Vaccaro letters to Williams—one from Miami, dated 24 May [1963] and the other, also from Miami, dated 2 October [1963]. Vaccaro’s manuscript book of poems is classified as “Works by Others, 1934–1982” in the Columbia collection.

<sup>2</sup> My thanks go to curator of manuscripts Mark Cave at THNOC. I am also grateful to Richard E. Kramer for his help in accessing the Vaccaro materials at Columbia University.

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