Playbill for the 1980 Vancouver Playhouse production of *The Red Devil Battery Sign*. The Fred W. Todd Tennessee Williams Collection at The Historic New Orleans Collection, 2001-10-L.353.

The Red Devil of Comox Street: Tennessee Williams in Vancouver, 1980 and 1981

John S. Bak

Since the publication of his letters and private notebooks, interest in Tennessee Williams's life has matched the level of interest in his plays. Much of his later, undocumented biography relies heavily on apocryphal stories—some of which Williams himself fomented. One such group of stories surrounds Williams's brief but significant sojourns in Vancouver: the first in the fall of 1980, and the second in the late summer of 1981. The first visit corresponded with Williams's stint as writer-in-residence at the University of British Columbia (UBC), where his contractual obligations included teaching courses on writing and theater and working as dramaturge for the Vancouver Playhouse, which was to perform a revised version of his political play, *The Red Devil Battery Sign*. His second visit, the following summer, involved his work on the Playhouse's premiere of *The Notebook of Trigorin*, his loose adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, which had been promised the Playhouse and its artistic director, Roger Hodgman, during the theater's production of *Red Devil* the previous year.

While both plays received polarized receptions (*Red Devil* was nonetheless preferred to *The Notebook of Trigorin*), Williams's antics offstage left a greater impression on Vancouver, in particular its gay community, something Dirk Gindt recently explored in an article on Sky Gilbert and Daniel MacIvor, two Canadian playwrights who penned separate plays about Williams's time in the city. Both playwrights' biodramas focus less on Williams the playwright and more on the man and his quirky behavior, which, as Marsha Lederman lists, included "Williams at a party, drunk, singing *Don't Cry for Me, Argentina* repeatedly all night; Williams going

out for dinner and leaving a single sock behind at the restaurant; Williams falling asleep at a preview of his own play." One particular story, however, drew most of their attention and formed the core of their respective plays: Williams's interest in the local male youth. "The tale that stayed with MacIvor is not a pretty one," Lederman adds. "A professor friend of MacIvor's, who used to be a hustler in Vancouver, recalls being recruited by Williams's personal assistant to find other young men to come to Williams's hotel room, strip to their underwear and read to the playwright from the Bible. Williams would then insult their reading abilities" (R1).[1]

Anecdotal bordering on spurious, these tidbits of gossip about Williams's hijinks are unflattering to the playwright and his reputation, but they were hardly uncommon. People in the United States were largely familiar with Broadway's enfant terrible following the publication of his confessional *Memoirs* in 1975, or even as early as 1972, when various unsavory features on Williams began appearing in major magazines, such as Tom Buckley's scathing piece in *The Atlantic Monthly*.[2] The fact was that throughout the 1970s, when Williams's theater no longer drew the crowds or reviews he had enjoyed in the past, his life became his spectacle. A string of personal biographies followed and contributed, directly or indirectly, to his character assassination. United States life-writing sources—interviews, letters, memoirs, and biographies—about Williams's stay in Vancouver contain just as many inconsistencies, queer gossip, and half-truths as do the Canadian sources.

Resituating the Vancouver stories in the wider context of Williams's public and private life at the time sets the queer gossip straight, as it were, and starts to restore Williams's reputation. Two recent biographies, my *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life* in 2013 and John Lahr's *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* in 2014, have attempted to counter this gossip-as-scholarship trend by returning to the sources behind the stories surrounding Williams's later life, not so much to debunk the tall tales but to balance fact and fiction. My biography touched on but did not look extensively into this brief, but defining, moment in Vancouver, and Lahr ignored it entirely. This essay consciously downplays the scandal and *up*-plays, so to speak, the professional achievements Williams enjoyed at UBC and the Playhouse in the fall of 1980 and summer of 1981, in order

to begin reclaiming his later life as serious artist from the more accepted view as human spectacle.

Unfortunately, primary biographical sources from Williams's time in Vancouver pale in comparison to the gossip, and thus these colorful stories are often nearly all that Williams biographers have to draw from when attempting to reconstruct his life.[3] Gleaning from gossip and eyewitness accounts any commonality that points toward a single poetic truth becomes the only way to substantiate, contextualize, or flesh out existing factual evidence. In other words, if fact is methodologically used to debunk gossip, gossip can be used to condition fact. Individually, these biographical sources (fact and gossip alike) about Williams's time in Vancouver vary in consistency and accuracy, but when viewed collectively, like the discrete biographemes of Williams's essays or his *Memoirs*, they help establish the poetic truth of Williams's tenure there.

The "Factitious Anamnesis": Toward a Gestalt of Biofiction

While the writing of biographies and autobiographies dates back millennia, the origin of what is sometimes called auto/biographical studies—or, more commonly, life-writing studies—is much harder to fix, because its history is an amalgam of "celebrated ambiguity and disciplinary iconoclasm" (Jolly ix). The study of biographical fiction, or biofiction—that is, the creative representation of a real person's life—is a recent trend in academe. *Biofiction* is a French neologism coined by Alain Buisine in the early 1990s to describe the biographical and autobiographical works that recount truthful stories in narrative- and dialogue-driven formats; in short, works that tweak fact with fiction to make emotional sense of a life. A postmodern genre that combines "à la fois une reconfiguration de territoire du roman modern et une révision de l'histoire littéraire" ("both a reconfiguration of territory of the modern novel and a revision of literary history"; Gefen 305; my trans.), biofiction fills the spectrum between fictionalized biographies and biographical novels, or, as Anne-Marie Monluçon and Agathe Salha note, between "biographies imaginaires de personnages réels" ("the imagined biographies of real people") and a "récit de vie d'un personnage fictif, reprenant la forme, les conventions du genre biographique" ("life narrative of a fictional character that replicates the

form and conventions of the biographical genre"; 8; my trans.).[4] In an essay that appeared in *a/b*, Monica Latham says of the portmanteau *biofiction* that it

> reveals the transfers that operate from biography to fiction and the crossover genre, which fuses two opposed poles when narrating the imaginary lives of people who really existed. This transgeneric life writing offers the reader a simulacrum of a real life: the writer-biographers' subjective representation of their subject's life. Such a strategy is part of the current postmodern cultural and literary practice that manipulates the real and plays with different layers of truths and pluralism of realities. (355–56)

Biofiction functions as a narrative historiography that reconstitutes, reorders, or reconstructs what Roland Barthes has described in the preface to his *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* as the *biographèmes* of a person's life, those individual moments or photographic impressions that represent discrete fragments of a larger truth, such as one's date of birth or high school senior portrait: "were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to 'biographemes' whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion" (9). Largely unintelligible in isolation, like phonemes and morphemes divorced from language, biographemes elicit meaning only when they are structurally combined to produce biographical knowledge, where the gaps between the recorded events are as important as the events themselves. A biographer, like a film editor, cuts the story of a person's life into manageable scenes and, leaving some clips on the cutting room floor, stitches together into a compelling narrative what he or she deems the best fragments. These fragments are highly subjective and context dependent, though most audiences would agree that selective highlights of a person's life make for a more compelling spectacle than exhaustive narration. Biographemes, then, and the manner in which they are combined, have as much to say about the biographer as they do about the subject, a phenomenon that led Barthes to conclude that all biography is essentially fiction.

Unlike historical biography, biofiction celebrates the gaps between biographemes and reproduces not the *what* of a given life but rather the *what could have been*. The concept follows the phenomenological precept that all history, including biography, is based on a personal narrative and thus contingent upon subjective determinism. The closest that we can get to an objective history is one that is agreed upon by the majority, though actual facts may be misinterpreted, misconstrued, or ignored altogether. Jean-François Lyotard called this process of truth conferral "paralogy," whereby biographical certainty is bound by the perspectives of an era that produced it, necessitating subsequent paralogical assessments with each new generation (60–67). In terms of the writing of Williams's life, the concept of paralogy helps explain why biographies written about the playwright in the pre-Stonewall, post-Stonewall, and homophobic Reagan years reveal a different man each time: the biographer's era has influenced his or her perception of Williams and the open secret of his homosexuality. Perhaps biofiction is the inevitable result of the closet since it requires a queer slant on the truth, and many gay writers in Williams's in-again, out-again inner circle of literary friends (such as Truman Capote, Christopher Isherwood, Donald Windham, and Gore Vidal) repeatedly infused their factual writings with fiction.

When the biographer is also the subject, distinguishing fiction from nonfiction in the collection of preselected *auto*biographemes becomes even more problematic. That writer's memoirs become no more accurate than a novel based on the writer's life and no less truthful than his or her authoritative biography. As Barthes writes in his own autobiography, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), the autobiographeme is "factitious anamnesis: the one I lend to the other I love" (109). Rachel Gabara understands Barthes here to mean that the "source of such a biographical fragment is its writer's desire for someone else (the object of biography) and not the life of this other author. The shift from biographeme to autobiographeme, therefore, is by no means self-evident. Can one write a desire for oneself?" (6). Barthes himself forewarns his readers that his autobiography cannot be considered factual. The epigraph of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* consists of the following caveat, reproduced in Barthes's handwriting: "Tout ceci doit être considéré comme dit par un personnage

de roman" (translated by Richard Howard as, "It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel"). Because memory is selective, reprocessed, and imaginative, Barthes says, an autobiographer cannot reveal the truth about himself but only morsels of truth that he considers important in his development. Lacking critical distance about one's own intellectual growth, Barthes concludes, forces an autobiographer not to "analyze himself" but to "rewrite himself." According to Gabara, autobiography, for Barthes, "is thus a genre of surface rather than depth and his own is like a patchwork quilt" (8).

To a great extent, Tennessee Williams's autobiography and the many biographies written about him (unavoidably based in part on his *Memoirs*) are all examples of biofiction or autobiofiction because each tends to rewrite more than recount Williams's life. And if anyone is guilty of tainting the biographemes of his own life, it is Williams himself, who often failed, even in his nonfiction (letters, essays, memoirs), to get the facts straight.[5] As Gindt rightly notes, "Biographical information, dramatic fiction, anecdote, and gossip are conflated not only in Gilbert's and MacIvor's plays, but also in the general reception and perception of Williams" (203). For instance, like MacIvor's Playwright, who refuses to "write about [his] life" (7), Williams repeatedly said that he would never write an autobiography because he felt the plays spoke for him. When his agent Audrey Wood asked him as early as 1965 to start writing his autobiography, he was insulted, believing she meant that his career was now over, and he responded to her directly in an unpublished essay entitled "Twenty Years of It" (c. 1965): "I thought my agent should know that my biggest and last indiscretion would be to come out with the sort of autobiography that I would write if I wrote one. I would have to write it in the psycho-analytical style of free-association, and if I did write it, which I am not about to do, now or ever" (1). A dozen years later, history would prove him wrong: he did indeed write that autobiography but held true to his claim that it would be written in "the psycho-analytical style of free-association" that he had practiced with Lawrence Kubie back in 1957.

Williams's free-association recollections in his *Memoirs* helped consolidate a gay community, for they spoke to and for gay men and boys, closeted or not, at a time when the sexual cold war was thawing in the

United States. What is important here in Williams's *Memoirs* is that the queer gossip that emerged from it was supplied by the playwright himself. "Truth is the bird we hope to catch in 'this thing,'" Williams writes midway through *Memoirs*, and "truth" for him was something "better approached through [his] life story than an account of [his] career" (173).[6] Readers were thus forced to decode the autobiographemes of his sexual exploits to uncover his commentaries about art and the theater. Unlike Oscar Wilde, who spoke his queerness through his art (e.g., *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and its famous art-for-art's-sake preface), Williams used his queerness to speak about his art. Only those in the know about all things Williamsian, however, would have recognized the playwright's legerdemain. Select any random page from his *Notebooks,* and it is likely to reveal his encounter with a lover (sometimes two) *and* his repeated disillusionment with his previous day's literary output. So inextricably tied were sex and writing for Williams that when one was lacking, you could be sure the other equally suffered. Writing about his sexual encounters was a way for Williams to disguise important thoughts and feelings channeled almost entirely into playwriting. His twentieth-century version of "sexting" the readers of *Notebooks* simultaneously diverted attention away from his creative process and conveyed information about it.

Williams's sex-for-art's-sake credo can be read as his method of achieving what he frequently refers to in his writing and interviews as his "poetic truth"—facts laced with fiction, half-truths, or even lies that, when collected, capture the gestalt of a life more accurately than does the reconstruction of historical facts (recall Blanche's explanation to Mitch in *A Streetcar Named Desire* about having never lied in her heart, and how Stanley's inquisition could never faithfully reconstitute her life in Laurel). "Why do I resist writing about my plays?" Williams asks himself provocatively in the *Memoirs*. He then offers in answer, "I feel the plays speak for themselves. And that my life hasn't and that it has been remarkable enough, in its continual contest with madness, to be worth setting upon paper. And my habits of work are so much more private than my daily and nightly existence" (193).[7] To Williams, there was a difference between historical truth and poetic truth, and the latter was significantly more trustworthy precisely because it was not bound by historical fact.

Sky Gilbert's *My Night with Tennessee* (1992) and Daniel MacIvor's *His Greatness* (2007) both extrapolate on Williams's notion of poetic truth, and both playwrights admit that their work is interpretive biography drawn from the gossip surrounding Williams's having invited young men into his Vancouver hotel room, asked them to strip down to their underwear, and had them read aloud poetry or passages from the Bible—a practice, tame by today's moral standards, that nonetheless preoccupies certain Canadian theater circles to this day:

> JAMIE: I can keep my underwear on?
> TENNESSEE: Why most certainly. (Gilbert, *My Night* 165)

Gilbert offers this version of the Vancouver gossip in his memoir, *Ejaculations from the Charm Factory*:

> About Tennessee Williams: I happen to know two boys he tried to pick up. One is an ex-boyfriend, Shaun, and the other is Daniel Allman, who performed in my play *Pasolini/Pelosi*. These two encounters inspired a play I wrote in the mid-'80s called *My Night with Tennessee*.
>
> Shaun was just a 15-year-old boy living in a Vancouver hotel with his mom back in 1979. Williams was staying there during a production of *The Red Devil Battery Sign*. He saw my lithe and lovely future boyfriend and slipped him his card, inviting Shaun to "come up and see him sometime." Shaun was too shy and didn't take him up on the request. He's cursed himself ever since. Daniel Allman was also propositioned by Tennessee in Vancouver. He invited the small, dark pretty boy to visit his hotel room and read poetry. There was one hitch—Daniel had to read in his underwear. Well, Daniel agreed. He said that Tennessee was pretty stoned and that nothing sexual happened. (49)

Constructing his one-act play around this one piece of gossip, Gilbert portrays a drunken, lecherous Williams not so much to demean him but instead to celebrate one gay man's defiance of the moral-, social-, and sexual-code policing of Vancouver's gay community in the second half of the twentieth century. David Rayside explains how differences in political, legal, and religious issues in cities such as New York, Toronto, and Vancouver account for the disparities in ways their gay communities have

developed over time. If the New York of 1980 was ahead of Vancouver in recognizing gay rights, Rayside posits, the trend had reversed its course by the mid-1990s,

> a short time period during which change to existing patterns of regulating sexual diversity extends rapidly beyond just one or two specific policies or practices, and spreads rapidly across regions [of Canada]. [T]he loosening or elimination of official barriers to parenting for Canadian lesbian and gay couples achieved a form of take-off from 1995 to 2001. In the United States positive change was spreading, but very slowly and unevenly across policy areas. (4–5)

While Gilbert's young man, Jamie, is asked to read Rupert Brooke's poem "The Hill" while wearing only his underwear, MacIvor's Young Man is told by the Playwright's Assistant that he may have to read from the Gideons' Bible placed in the nightstand drawer. When MacIvor's Young Man begins stripping, the Playwright stops him from taking off his underwear. "Leave that. As you are," the Playwright tells him. "You're beautiful." Instead of the Bible, the Playwright asks him to read poetry, his poetry: after the stage direction "*The Playwright hands the YOUNG MAN the book from the bedside table*," the Playwright says, "It's a special night. Read one of mine" (48). While the audience interprets the scene as being representative of Williams's unorthodox sex habits, MacIvor culls it for its "creativity" message, using Williams's own method of achieving poetic truth (see Bak, "Tennessee").

The similarities and differences between Gilbert's and MacIvor's plays are significant in terms of how biographemes are interconnected to retell or, as is the case here, to refashion a life. Drawing on the same biographical material, Gilbert places a morally indignant Williams at the center of his play, whereas MacIvor dramatizes the creatively depleted Williams penning his own *Künstlerroman* in medias res. One autobiographical event thus inspired two biographical representations. Gilbert describes these divergent views in their plays thus:

> In terms of MacIvor's play I would have to say that I was surprised that he wrote it. Of course we have very different takes on the incident in question, but I couldn't help feeling my play about the incident wasn't good enough—so there had to

> be another! Of course the plays reflect our different sensibilities—my play celebrates Tennessee Williams's life, really trying hard not to censure him for being a promiscuous old alcoholic (being one now, I think that was a wise decision!). Daniel's play is a very different type of play, looking at Williams's "lifestyle" with perhaps a more critical or distanced eye. ("Tennessee Williams, Vancouver 1980")

The facts concerning Williams's escapades in Vancouver merge with fiction as Gilbert and MacIvor spin gossip into universal truth: their biofictions celebrate the historical value not of what was but of what might have been and can now actually be. Both achieve a sense of poetic truth about the playwright despite their plays' obvious inaccuracies, embellishments, and differing details. For instance, Gilbert's play is set in the summer of 1979, but the real event took place the following year. MacIvor sets his play in a derelict room overlooking "*an unseen parking lot*" (4), whereas Williams's actual suite was on the twenty-seventh floor, with a pleasant view of the Pacific. Gilbert's and MacIvor's young men read different poems to Williams: their plays are similarly uninvested in the historical fact of what was actually read.

Whether or not the real young men present in Williams's hotel suite read from the Bible, as the Vancouver gossip claims, or from Williams's own collection of poetry matters little in the end, in part because Williams never cared about getting the details right, not in his *Memoirs* and certainly not in the rest of his nonfiction.[8]

If sex was Williams's obsession, truth was surely his mantra. In his life as in his plays, you needed the one to achieve the other.

Biographemes: The "True" Vancouver Stories about Williams

To begin with, there was not one trip to Vancouver, but two (four, in fact, if we consider he briefly left Vancouver during his two stays there), and one wonders how much the stories have conflated what actually took place over the span of a year. Williams's initial trip fulfilled an obligation to the University of British Columbia as their fall semester's writer-in-residence. In January 1980, Mitch Douglas (who had recently replaced Bill Barnes as Williams's agent at International Creative Management [ICM]) had engaged in "conspirator[ial]" talk with UBC to bring Williams out

to Vancouver (Williams, *Notebooks* 757). According to Douglas, UBC wanted Williams just to teach, something Douglas knew would not work, as he told Thomas Keith in their 2012 interview:

> So I got a call from Vancouver, and they said, "We want him to come here and teach." And I said, "You kidding? He can barely tie his shoes." I said, "But why don't you do this: why don't you do one of his plays and invite him to be an artist-in-residence and let him come to rehearsal." And they thought that was a swell idea. And they said, "Sure, we'll do *Sweet Bird of Youth* or *Streetcar*," and I said, "No, no, no." I said, "You have to do one of the later plays." And they agreed, and they decided to do *Red Devil Battery Sign*. ("Coffee" 00:26:44)

In an earlier interview, with the biographer Donald Spoto, on 11 October 1983, Douglas's story had differed slightly: "By this time [. . .] he was out of vogue and he knew it. His plays had lost money and he was hard to sell. There was no new market for him, and naturally this upset him. [. . .] But I wanted also to make things happen for his plays [. . .], which I knew he wanted. So *I suggested* to Vancouver that *they do one he liked—The Red Devil Battery Sign*" (qtd. in Spoto 348; emphasis added).

In an interview in 2015, Roger Hodgman, who directed both of Williams's plays in Vancouver, had different recollections of how the contract transpired:

> My memory is that someone from the university approached me and said that part of the bargain for him coming to teach at UBC was if the main local theater company would do *Red Devil*. One important board member of the Playhouse, Norman Young, was involved in negotiating with Mitch. The Playhouse, which had no formal ties with UBC, was the largest not-for-profit theater company in town and the obvious choice, I suppose, to be offered the play.

Hodgman confirmed that his and Williams's relationship while working on *Red Devil* was very cordial, from the moment they first discussed various cuts to the play during a meeting in the Hamptons to the play's actual rehearsals the following autumn:

> I traveled to Long Island [in the summer of 1980] where he was staying to discuss the script and to negotiate arrangements.

> It was the beginning of the two most exhilarating collaborations of my professional life. Instead of the burnt-out, drunken former genius depicted in the American media, and in the biographies since, I came to know a lively, humorous, generous man, still passionately committed to writing and to the theater and still capable of writing with the power and poetry of his early plays.

Hodgman had suggested some cuts to *Red Devil* (set just after John F. Kennedy's assassination and steeped in paranoia and conspiracy theory), which Williams finally agreed to. Williams wrote "Rogger Hodgeman" a letter soon after his visit, saying that he felt "good vibes about this production" and adding, "I deeply appreciate your visit and the pleasure of getting to know you" (Personal collection).

Ronald Hayman, one of Williams's later biographers, claims that Douglas had UBC add the incentive of performing the play on top of the lectures he was to give in UBC's theater department (234). Given that the version in Spoto's biography was recounted closer to the actual event, and Douglas had not yet embellished the story (which he was wont to do over time), that earlier version is probably the more accurate one. In spite of these variances on how Williams ended up in Vancouver, one thing remains certain: during production with *Red Devil*, the Vancouver Playhouse obtained the rights to premiere a new Williams play the following season, the details of which Hodgman and Williams worked out later in Vancouver over a few glasses of wine. Williams thus returned to Vancouver in August 1981 to help mount the premiere of his adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, entitled *The Notebook of Trigorin*.

With facts as varied as these, who needs fiction?

Various unpublished letters between Williams and Douglas in the months leading up to the fall of 1980, as well as several they exchanged the following year before his return to Vancouver, provide the backstory to Williams's arrival in Vancouver and offer reasons why the gossip altered over time. What can be deduced from these letters is that Williams wanted very little to do with Douglas and made that fact clear to him and to his boss, Milton Goldman, then vice president at ICM and head of the talent agency's theater department. Williams simply did not trust Douglas to look out for his best interests, including during the brief stint in Vancouver. In

Douglas's defense, Williams was not an easy client, especially in his later years, when his paranoia grew virulent, and Williams was already quite gun-shy about ICM's treatment of him since his breakup with his long-time agent, Audrey Wood, back in 1971. Williams had long thought that Bill Barnes, whom Wood had hand-picked to succeed her, was a puppet, and the playwright thought the same of Douglas when he replaced Barnes in 1979.

On 14 April 1980, Williams informed Douglas in a letter that he was leaving the United States later that summer with his artist friend Henry Faulkner ("We have a lot in common. Osteo-arthritis and a corresponding madness" [Harvard Theatre Collection]). While Faulkner would "paint" in Taormina, Williams would put the final touches on "three scripts, maybe four" that he was working on, which included the new one-act play *The Everlasting Ticket, or As I Lay Going Mad in Santo Domingo*; *In Masks Outrageous and Austere*; and very likely *Some Problems for the Moose Lodge*, which he would bring with him to Chicago later that summer.[9] From the start, Douglas's and Williams's professional relationship was marked by Williams's general sense of distrust (Williams saw Douglas as one of Audrey Wood's protégés). Distrust soon escalated into acrimony, and letters from Williams to ICM chafe at being represented by Douglas. On 3 July 1980, Williams partly typed and then handwrote a letter on Dulles Marriott Hotel stationery to Goldman (Williams was having problems typing on "one of these rolling ball IBM typewriters borrowed from the hotel" [1]) to complain again about Douglas, suggesting at the end of the letter his "need to represent [him]self" (3).

A year later, their acrimony crescendoed into open warfare, as evidenced in a letter to Goldman written in late July or early August 1981 but possibly never mailed.[10] In type riddled with extra spaces breaking up numerous words, signaling the feverish state in which he dashed off the letter, Williams again pleaded with the ICM head to find him another agent and stated outright that Douglas could not be trusted:

> Perhaps the m[o]st outrageous of his statements is that he sold "The Strangest Kind of Romance" for a sum that would have brought me $1200, after commission, and that always nebulous 5% of the profits. And that I agreed to these terms in the presence of two young Canadians, with one of which I was

> enamored, so you can imagine how inapproproate the occasion was for discussing a business deal. [. . . F]rankly, I do not sell my work for the price of a hack's short-story. The later discussion of the terms must surely exist purely in Mitch's confused recollection. (1)

This letter to Goldman was prompted by a four-page tirade that Douglas had written to Williams on 27 July 1981. (Williams, in the undated letter to Goldman, added in hand at the end that he "did not—could not—answer Mitch" himself.) Written a little before Williams returned to Vancouver for the *Trigorin* premiere, Douglas's 27 July letter was itself a response to a letter Williams had sent the agent earlier, demanding that they both "level with each other" (1). Douglas's angry 27 July letter contains a few pertinent details about the negotiations surrounding *The Strangest Kind of Romance*, which had taken place back in the fall of 1980[11]:

> I've received your letter in which you say, "Let's level with each other". Let's do. [. . .] There is no mistake nor misunderstanding about the contract for THE STRANGEST KIND OF ROMANCE. We discussed this matter thoroughly on the morning of Thursday, October 16, 1980, in your hotel room at the Denman Inn in Vancouver in the company of Verne Powers and your friend, Harry. (1)

Recriminations festered, accusations flew, but history will probably side with Douglas. After all, he had no reason to lie, and Williams, set against Douglas from the start, was notorious at this time for doing one thing and saying he had done another.[12]

Williams and Douglas would settle their dispute later in the summer, but not before Williams nearly severed their professional relationship (which he would eventually do later that December). In a letter of August 1981, now housed at Columbia University, Williams explained to Douglas, "As representative and client, we are simply not well cast":

> Don't let that bother you. You're an excellent agent for anyone but me. I can't reform, at my age, in my state of health, to the Olympic marathon jumper you want and deserve. [. . .]

> Notice, please, that I have no protests, no complaints. Am just being realistic. And apologize for any embarassment that I may have caused you in places like Orlando.
>
> When I return from Vancouver, if you'd like to see me, I would like to see you.

Williams eventually returned from his European trip with Faulkner in July 1980 and flew to Key West, dividing his time between preparing *Some Problems for the Moose Lodge* for its autumn premiere in Chicago and revising *Red Devil* for the Vancouver Playhouse in the months ahead. Several weeks later, Williams "packed up and went off to Vancouver" (Douglas, "Coffee" 00:27:05), arriving at UBC in October 1980. Funded by a Cecil and Ida Green Lectureship, Williams conducted daily writing seminars, sometimes twice a day (*Five O'Clock Angel* 382)[13] for five weeks in the university's Theatre and Creative Writing Departments (see Page 92), for which he received a weekly stipend of two thousand dollars (*Five O'Clock Angel* 382; Hayman 234). In addition to his UBC stipend, his living expenses were covered by the Vancouver Playhouse.

During his stay, Williams took a suite at the Inn at Denman Place on 1733 Comox Street, a fashionable if now weathered hotel situated near the city's bay, lively West End, and gay quarter. According to Hodgman, Williams had demanded a hotel with a swimming pool and had specified that he be given a suite with two bedrooms, as panic attacks at night prompted his need for an ever-present assistant. Williams's suite was on the twenty-seventh floor of the inn, and, in a 14 October 1980 letter to Maria St. Just, he describes this room as commanding a "magnificent" view overlooking the Pacific Coast "studded with mountainous little islands" and the harbor full of the "little sailing boats" (*Five O'Clock Angel* 381). It was, to Williams, "probably the most beautiful city next to Venice" that he had ever visited (*Five O'Clock Angel* 381).[14]

Spoto notes that things for Williams "in British Columbia began very well, and Williams was at ease in the social life" the city had to offer: "The theatre people there called a press conference with the local Gay Activists League," Douglas told Spoto in an interview, "and they threw him a party with a band of worshipful admirers. Tennessee was in his element" (qtd. in Spoto 348). Douglas also informed Spoto that it was after the Gay Activists

League events that Williams, who Douglas claims did not have a traveling companion at the time, fled to San Francisco out of desperation, where he stayed for two days.[15] Yet to Thomas Keith years later, Douglas said that Williams fled to San Francisco much earlier, when things were not going well in Vancouver, and that the press conference and party were designed to coax him back. (This timing is corroborated by a letter Williams wrote to St. Just [*Five O'Clock Angel* 382].) In the interview with Keith, Douglas reported that things improved only when UBC hooked him up with the Gay Activists League:

> They called and said, "He's disappeared," and I said "Well, he does that." [. . .] When he got there, he didn't know anybody. He didn't have a traveling companion at that moment, and he had gone to San Francisco. But sure enough he came back, and they said, "OK, what do we do?" I said, "Do you have a gay organization in town?" And they said, "Yeah." I said, "Give him a party." Well, that's what did it. He made new friends. By the time I got there, he was having the time of his laugh—life. He had a new traveling companion [Verne E. Powers]. He was having a little affair with somebody. He was in his prime. He was reading poetry at night. He was in great shape. And the other nice thing was [that he was seeing] a brilliant production of that play. (Douglas, "Coffee" 00:27:25)[16]

In a letter dated 6 March 1981, Williams wrote to St. Just that he had recently "made the mistake of bringing a companion [Powers] from Vancouver" down to Key West, whom he describes as "highly efficient" but as "cold as a fish" (*Five O'Clock Angel* 383).[17] In an earlier letter to Hodgman, dated 30 October 1980, Williams had expressed only optimism about his new companion:

> A young man I met in Vancouver, Verne Powers, is with me here. He's the first secretary I've had in a long line of them who is professionally helpful, having been an English professor at some university in Saskatchawan, and being highly intelligent and particularly interested in plays. We leave for Key West immediately after the plays [the group "Tennessee Laughs," at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago] and he'll be a marvelous help in collating "In Masks Outrageous and Austere", a long play I've been working on a long time, typed mostly on hotel station[e]ry in various places. (Personal collection)

According to Douglas, Powers was in Williams's hotel room when Douglas got Williams to sign the television contract for *The Strangest Kind of Romance* back in October 1980. (Williams would later write a letter of reference for Powers in 1983, just weeks before the playwright died.[18])

In an exchange that I had with Douglas, he extrapolated on this new secretary:

> Vern would pickup TW up after rehearsal and go swimming with him. He was a mature and charming guy—very nice and easy going. He returned to Key West with Tennessee and traveled with him for a while. And I believe the relationship was simply that of a paid employee . . . in other words it didn't extend to the bedroom. I've never told anyone this, but Vern was quite taken with me when I got to Vancouver. Tennessee noticed and made sure that Vern was seated with him and me at the opening of RED BATTERY. At the end of the evening, Tennessee said "Vern, I think you should go back to the hotel with Mitch and spend some time." And he did. So I can truthfully say, while Tennessee never bought me presents, he once got me laid. ("A Couple More TW Questions")

Powers was one of the many young men who were drawn to Williams's celebrity and who imagined that they too could make history by living with history. Gregg Rowe describes the allure of Williams's celebrity in recounting his experience as a nineteen-year-old interviewing the playwright for Gayblevision, a Vancouver cable program dedicated to gay life in the city:

> I sucked in my breath. I was being handed a gold mine. I was going to interview the idol of my who helped me decide upon my career choices. Gayblevision was about to go big. [. . .] Tennessee and I enjoyed a seafood platter, talked about his writings and the adaptation to stage and television of his works. As we strolled along the seawall, Tennessee openly talked about his works, the characters in his plays and representation to real life versus artistic license [. . .].
>
> I enjoyed my time when I interviewed him. He was witty and charming and the man I admired since I was twelve and read Streetcar. It's not too often that a nineteen year-old from a small rural town moves to a metropolitan city and gets to interview his writing idol.
>
> The morning that Tennessee left was a saddened day. A few years later, he would be dead from still what to some is a

> controversial death. Yet the morning he left, I dreamed I would travel with him. Pack my bags and go on a Winnebago with him across Route 66. As the crew loaded up the equipment there was a note sitting on the camera.
>
> It was from [another Gayblevision staff member]. Seems Tennessee already had his eye on someone for his road trip. A pain of jealousy swept over me, then a sigh of relieve. At least Tennessee would be able to enjoy what would remain of his last days with someone he wanted to be with. Into the summer air I wished them a safe trip where ever they were traveling in their Winnebago somewhere in the US.[19]

It is hard to imagine that Williams ever fantasized about driving along Route 66 in any vehicle, let alone in a Winnebago, but if nothing else, Rowe's narrative provides a glimpse of Williams interacting with his Vancouver fan base at the time.[20]

Though the details vary, the general story of Williams's arrival in Vancouver, his initial dissatisfaction, and his eventual departure and return is fairly consistent. Read separately, the various versions recount only the individual biographemes of Williams's life; read collectively, a historical mosaic begins to emerge. In terms of Williams's stay in Vancouver, when certain facts on the wall of truth are unavailable or unverifiable, biographemes function as a form of historical spackle that, when viewed from a distance, provides a sense of continuity to the sheetrock of his life.

"Going off the Rails": Gleaning the Published Vancouver Sources

Once he was settled in Vancouver, Williams divided his day between his teaching, his rehearsal work with Hodgman, and his free time. There exist various testimonies describing these activities, some of which help fill out the backstory to Williams's time in Vancouver. Williams was contractually obliged to teach courses on writing and theater at UBC, and there is an online source that captures a little bit of what he did during one of his university classes. A former student of Williams's creative writing seminars, known today as blogger Father Theo, describes one of the lessons, which included the collective writing of a short story in the vein of a collage (a writing method dubbed "exquisite corpse" by the surrealists):

> He entered with a faculty entourage, and quietly entering with him, saying not a word the whole time and sitting on [a] chair behind the eminent author while the proceedings went on, was a very pretty young man who nobody bothered to introduce or refer to. Tennessee's date.
>
> I suspect that young man felt a little lost.
>
> As for Tennessee, while I do remember him talking, I don't remember what, if anything, he had to say about writing. What he did instead was something which cemented him firmly into the biographies of everyone in the class. He wrote a story with us.

Williams, his former student reports, wrote a paragraph and had the students take turns adding a paragraph to the story. Each writer was able to see only the preceding paragraph when adding the new one: the result "actually was not that bad a story. Although I can't recall a single detail, a single word, or the slightest notion of what it was about, I remember being impressed and surprised by how well it held together." Albeit about one specific class, this recollection offers insight into Williams's classroom presence and practice.

Never the pedagogue, Williams was primarily interested in getting another crack at *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, which was now as "tight as a fist," cut down to eighty pages or "about twenty less than it was in England" back in 1977 (*Five O'Clock Angel* 381). *Red Devil* was to open at the Vancouver Playhouse on 18 October, and, on 14 October, Williams confided to St. Just that "the definitive production of *Red Devil Battery Sign* [is] being staged by a brilliant director," Roger Hodgman (*Five O'Clock Angel* 381). Hodgman had an excellent rapport with Williams during rehearsals, which the playwright frequently attended, and remembers him only as a professional artist contributing to the play's success. The actor David Marr, who had a small role in the chorus and later performed the role of the Assistant in the premiere of MacIvor's *His Greatness*, confided to the journalist Marsha Lederman some of his own recollections about working with Williams. In recounting this interview with Marr, Lederman notes:

> David Marr, who stars as the assistant in the play, has first-hand knowledge of that flawed humanity. When he was 20, the Vancouver actor was cast in *The Red Devil Battery Sign*. He

> was in the chorus, a role he landed after an unusual audition in front of Williams. "We all had to howl for him," Marr, now 47, says.
>
> Marr's memories of Williams the artist [. . .] are largely positive. "He was great in rehearsal," he remembers, "very funny and charming." He was also productive, as Marr remembers it. "He was there as a writer and would try to fix things that needed fixing."

However, Marr also recalls a Williams a little less charming:

> "[He was] going off the rails," being "lubricated" and at times inappropriate. Marr was late for notes one day, and as he came running down the stairs of the theatre, he remembers Williams saying: "Well, if it isn't the gay one."
>
> Marr (who is not gay) was speechless. "I stopped. And everyone laughed and I had nothing to say. I must have gone beet red and I thought, 'Maybe he just thinks I'm happy.'" (R2)[21]

In reality, Williams had a lot of respect for the actors, as well as for his director, Hodgman. There is plenty of evidence of the convivial relationship between the playwright and the director in the letters Williams wrote to Hodgman and in interviews they conducted together. Their mutual respect and their collaborative working relationship with each other and with the actors is evident in an interview Hodgman and Williams gave to St. John Simmons and Joe Martin, the student editors of UBC's literary magazine, *PRISM International*, before the opening of *Red Devil Battery Sign*:[22]

> [*PRISM International*]: Do actors have an influence on the work?
>
> [Roger Hodgman]: Yes, they do. You get actors working with the words. [. . . S]ometimes the actor may say, "I'm not sure this phrase is right for this character" and, if you trust the actor, very often it's true. Some times I think it's overdone, though. Some Canadian productions I've seen, the writing is left out. I've seen this happen where an inexperienced writer lets an experienced group of actors and directors loose and he finishes up with something that's not at all like his original version. That disturbs me.

PI: In your essay, "A Delicate Situation," you said it is up to the director to lift the play above manuscript . . .

[Tennessee Williams]: Oh, that always happens with a good director who cares.

Though the relationship between playwright and director is congenial throughout, the peremptory nature of some of Williams's responses to questions gives the impression that the playwright is annoyed with the interviewers:

PI: Do you look upon other people and their suffering, be it personal or under a political system, with compassion, pity, disdain . . .

TW: I'm not a bleeding heart. I think you have to intellectualize your compassion and your pity and you can't go around weeping and wailing at every street comer. You have to distill it somehow.

PI: Your major characters are brutalized and function at the border of the madhouse. Why?

TW: Something inherent in me, I should think. Wouldn't you?

When asked about his "view of the role of the artist in society," Williams is decisive and unapologetic:

TW: I think he has to be a visionary to a certain extent. There are several kinds. A soothsayer, perhaps. He feels, he is solipsistic, that's what makes him so difficult and unattractive, the solipsism, the self-absorption, but he needs that to defend himself and to contain his world from which he looks out and interprets reality as he sees it. He has a role in society, I think society considers him at their service to entertain, but he doesn't see it that way, he sees the need for entertainment and excitement but what he's at is something else, he wants to make some meaning out of his life and he's selected the role of artist to attempt to make some meaning and to make an order out of chaos. I think an artist ceases to be what the society he lives in—he doesn't limit himself to what the society he lives in, wants him to be. He explodes from that because it's too limiting for him, he has to express himself.

PI: Do you see him as "the unacknowledged legislator of the world"?

> TW: No. That becomes paranoia, it becomes madness. I think you'll find the best answer to this in "Fear and Misunderstandings in the Artist's Revolt." ("Interview" 50)

As if ensuring that his irritation with the *PRISM* interview be preserved for posterity, Williams shortly thereafter puts in writing related reflections about his approach to theater, in similarly absolute language, in a preface that appears in the Playhouse's October 1980 *Program Magazine*:

> I confess to you without shame and without apology that this is melodrama, not classically pure tragedy. [. . .]
>
> Of course I know that in Greek drama there were tragedies and there were comedies and the two were very distinct from each other. But in modern theatre many conditions have changed—the masks have been discarded and also the stilt-like elevations on which the actors walked to give them a superhuman aspect.
>
> My kind of serious theatre is to somehow combine humor and terror and sensuality and heart-break. ("Playwright's Preface")

Williams finishes the preface by half-scolding his spectators, predicting that they will not "get" his play: "To have great theatre we must have great audiences too."

"Getting" the play, and its new ending, was important to Williams and Hodgman. In the *PRISM* interview, for example, they discuss how the play's ending has changed since its previous versions and how it will need to be "pull[ed] off" for this audience if the play is ever to be a success. We find traces of that new ending in this interview (which also gives us insight into the number of daily revisions that were made to the script; most of these manuscripts eventually filled up several files in the Harvard Theatre Collection):

> TW: If we can pull off the ending then we've got it made. But there's a big question mark there.
>
> (A discussion ensues over which version we have read and it becomes apparent that considerable changes have been made since rehearsals began.)
>
> PI: Did you put forward suggestions, Roger?

RH: I certainly had some ideas. It's always a collaborative effort. [. . .]

PI: At what point do you have the finished play?

TW: We don't. We don't have it now. We don't know if the ending is going to work.

[. . .]

RH: It's a very positive ending. It's easy to see that ending as negative or sad or tragic. It's a very positive ending.

TW: Dynamically positive.

RH: That's what people are going to find hard to accept, because what's positive about it is really uncomfortable. ("Interview" 51–53)

The Red Devil Battery Sign eventually opened on 18 October 1980 with a cast of "10 supported by 11 students from the Playhouse Acting School—and two *mariachi* players" (Page 92). The text of the play, "for those tracing Williams' continuing decline," as the critic Malcolm Page later opined, "appeared in the Spring 1981 issue of UBC's *PRISM*" (92). The play received mixed reviews but enjoyed some commercial success, and a contented Williams left Vancouver with Verne Powers to work with Greg Mosher and Gary Tucker at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, which was presenting on 8 November three one-act plays under the title "Tennessee Laughs."[23]

Regardless of Williams's antics while not at work in Vancouver, be it his tireless pursuit of young trade or an aged Bordeaux, he was the consummate professional when it came to the theater. Yes, he was shopworn and physically exhausted by 1980, but that did not prohibit him from writing every day and, as Hodgman has noted, producing some exceptional lines of dialogue. There were still a few strong plays yet to come—*Something Cloudy, Something Clear*; *A House Not Meant to Stand*; and *The Notebook of Trigorin*. It was this last one that Williams was preparing for its Playhouse premiere the following season. Given his lathering by certain Canadian critics for *Red Devil*, Williams was more than a little reluctant to return to Vancouver. But return he did, and although *The Notebook of Trigorin* received mostly harsh reviews, it gave Williams another precious performance of a new work, which was all that he cared about at the time.

"Flee, Flee This Sad Hotel": Williams's Second Vancouver Visit

Williams returned to Vancouver a different man, and those around him noticed the change. He was drinking more, looked in poorer health, and allowed paranoia to dictate his attitude toward people, especially theater critics. As Roger Hodgman has stated, "On his second visit, the honeymoon with the Vancouver media was over. One visit from a genius was regarded as an event, a second was a matter of suspicion." If Williams equated his later life to a "sad hotel" from which he needed to "flee"—"Hotel is a metaphor for life," he had once told Maria St. Just (a reference to the early title of his memoirs, *Flee, Flee This Sad Hotel* [*Five O'Clock Angel* 295])—he nonetheless saw his art in terms of his living (drinking, swimming, cruising), and he was never going to give that up. He would ultimately stay on several weeks, attending rehearsals, rewriting scene after scene as it played out before him on stage.

That Hodgman planned to open the new season with *The Notebook of Trigorin* suggests how much respect he still held for the playwright. The rapport between Williams and Hodgman captured in the 1980 *PRISM* interview is confirmed in a series of unpublished letters that they exchanged in preparing *The Notebook of Trigorin* for its 1981 Playhouse premiere. Earlier that spring, after the contract for the production had been finalized, Williams had written a letter to Hodgman from Key West, dated 7 May 1981, apologizing for having lost contact during the seven months since the *Red Devil* production:

> Dear Roger:
>
> We've been out of touch for so long, except through intermediaries, that I don't know whether or not (for sure) you are still interested in my doing an adaptation of "The Sea-Gull" for the Vancouver Playhouse. All of the play is to me the greatest of modern drama but, as a sample, a question, I'll send you this scene between Treplev and Nina which I happen to like most of all. I trust you to let me know if you feel that I am exceeding the licenses I must take to derive some creative pleasure from the undertaking.
>
> I know how sparingly you like a play to be written.—In rehearsal superflutties fall easily by the way. Still, the power of words must not be discounted, and the dynamic of language is probably my principle asset as a playwright.

> I will get this off to 575 Beatty St., Vancouver [The Playhouse's address until 1982] soon as I've had it photostated or typed.
>
> Faithfully,
>
> Tennessee [signature]
>
> I leave in a week for Europe—but will only be there less than a month, and should be available to you by mid-July. [Added in hand:] Call or write—Mitch Douglas will know where I am. (Harvard Theatre Collection)

In a letter handwritten in June or July 1981, Williams describes a bit of their prior exchanges, from which we learn what Williams did in Vancouver during rehearsals: "Dear Roger. It was essential to discuss Battery with you personally. Feel such a discussion still more important with Seagull. Therefore proceeding with original plan of taking script with me to New York within the week. Yours Tennessee." Hodgman flew to New York and met Williams in his suite at the Hotel Elysée only to find that the play was far from completion. In another letter sent from Key West, dated 13 June 1981, Williams tried to reassure his director that the finished play would eventually arrive on his desk:

> Dear Roger:
>
> *De temps à temps* I will be sending you photo-stats of my work on SEAGULL. My Russian friend Maria in London thought it was such an outrage for me to take liberties with the play that she hid or destroyed my copy of Ann Dunnigan's translation (the best, I think) and I had to use Constance Garnett's which is downright illiterate.
>
> I have now obtained a new copy of Dunnigan's[.] I suspect that Maria's attitude toward the project may be shared by others. All I can do is try very hard to make the script as I interpret it, so beautiful that it will disarm them. I will probably take more licenses than we retain but I've always worked that way, going far out and then drawing in[.]
>
> I've not yet unpacked my Ms. case since my return from London and there are a lot of other revisions to be sent to you.
>
> I think the ending will be real magic. I hope it is understood that this is an act, a profession, of deep love for Chekhov.

> I hope to have a very agreeable traveling companion—a friend for ten years, from New Orleans but highly educated as well as compatible.
>
> Yours,
>
> [signature]

Handwritten under this typed portion, and dated 17 June 1981, Williams adds:

> I have a feeling that Chekhov only did one draft of the play—so much is still not fully realized in it. I will mail some more material to you this afternoon. I am only departing from the 2 best adaptations (Dunnigan's and Stark Young's) for sections that need a deeper or more contemporary treatment. Saw a very bad film of play. Simone Signoret miscast as Arkadina, James Mason a Trigorin and a homely and graceless Constantine. Only Dorn and Vanessa Redgrave's Nina came off well. All played in different styles under Sidney Lumet's direction—filmed in '68. The scenery (Sweden) was lovely.
>
> [Added later:] Papers keep disappearing from my studio!—so I have to send fragments of some scenes. Never mind. I love to re-write.
>
> "The Notebook of Trigorin"—a possible title, to distinguish this from "Sea Gull[.]" (Harvard Theatre Collection)

Williams expanded on this postscript in another letter to Hodgman from Key West, dated 27 June 1981 (Harvard Theatre Collection): "Practically all of the play, besides these provocative departures, is scribbled between lines in the really good translation by Ann Dunnigan. Several of the re-written scenes (my typing) over-lap. As for the provocative new element, it's controversial but I love controversy and it introduces an element that I can use to advantage. I've always felt there was something unspoken in this play" (1). The "something unspoken" was Williams's suspicion of Trigorin's bisexuality (and Chekhov's latent homosexuality), though Williams knew that his reading of the original play and subsequent adaptation would create a scandal: "How should the marquee read? The Sea-Gull by Anton Chekhov / Interpreted Freely by Tennessee Williams" (1). To preempt the controversy, Williams wrote a long foreword to the play that he hoped would be published in the press or the playbill.

The unpublished foreword, written at the end of June 1981, lays out sequentially many ideas fostered in Williams's letters to Hodgman. It attempts to defend Williams's rationale that Chekhov was gay but could not express it in tsarist Russia and to deliver him from the closet by exposing *The Seagull*'s latent homosexual content:

> My intent has been to make what is whispered—and so quite likely to be unheard—spoken out boldly. [. . .] And so I have chosen to work mainly on the dynamics—and on the penetration of character that I believe an artist acquainted with Freudian analysis would discover in these Russian folk, most of whom are drowsing their lives away on the shor[e] of a beautiful, hypnotically tranquil lake. ("Foreword" 1)

For Williams, the play's interest lay in the character Trigorin, the established writer, not in Treplev, the struggling younger writer. Williams's adaptation also reflects his interest in the interconnections among Chekhov, Trigorin, playwriting, gender, queerness, and perhaps himself:

> What I say, now, may seem like an impertinence to those of you who still adhere to the rectitude of a serious writer belonging psychologically to the sex of his body. I consider it a limitation. In the last week I have seen a Russian-made film of Chekhov's life. His youthful pictures are manly but in a way that I associate with the psychologically androgynous. It appears to be there, in the sensibility of his eyes and mouth. (2)

Williams proceeds to offer up evidence, item by item, that attests not to Chekhov's homosexuality, as such conclusions could not be drawn, but to his having the "sensibility" of a writer "whose female characters are deeply and vividly drawn" (2). Williams genuinely felt that his interpretation would add a needed dynamism to the play. In an interview, Hodgman reports understanding the adaptation in these terms: "It was as if he'd taken the subtext and placed it on the surface to make a play that was both faithful to Chekhov, in particular to his humor and passion, and yet was somehow a Tennessee Williams play whose central figure, Trigorin, was clearly autobiographical."

This foreword, and the unpublished letters to which Allean Hale makes reference in her introduction to the New Directions edition of *The Notebook of Trigorin*, are hardly the ruminations of a broken man, which

Hale recognizes. But even she, observant and sympathetic critic as she is, seems caught slightly off guard by the rigor of Williams's project: "It is a surprise to find Williams, so often derided by critics as non-intellectual, engaged in the scholarly work of comparing translations. To see the master playwright of one generation humbly pondering the working methods of the earlier master is somehow touching and provides a glimpse of how each one created" (xii–xiii). Hale's words are a gentle reminder of the dismissive opinions circulating when the play was first staged, taken to the extreme by the critic Malcolm Page in his 1982 essay "Tennessee Williams in Vancouver":

> How can one account for the Playhouse twice falling for Williams, for presenting one failure by this has-been and following it with his ruin of a great play? Apparently Hodgman was under the delusion that Williams was doing Vancouver and the Playhouse a favor by permitting him to stage his work. In fact, Vancouver was doing two big favours to Williams—to whom it owes no favours whatever. (95)

Williams's prediction that Maria St. Just's "outrage" and dislike of "the project" would be "shared by others" would eventually prove true.

Williams left for Vancouver again in early August 1981 to oversee production for the *Seagull* adaptation, spending the better part of the month there. Hodgman, who again showed only respect for the United States playwright, had reasons for concern, however. Production was set to begin, but Hodgman was still waiting for the final script. In a 21 July 1981 letter, Mitch Douglas complained to Williams about his delays in delivering the completed script, for which Williams always had a ready excuse (including a postal strike that supposedly resulted in the loss of the only finished copy):

> I'm very distressed about THE SEAGULL script. Canadian mail is still on strike and unless it breaks in the next week Roger Hodgeman will not have a script to go into rehearsal with. Would you please turn the house upside-down to see if you can find a copy there? The show has been announced in Variety. Vancouver has sold tickets on the basis of its being their opening show, the case for Vancouver has been hired on the basis of doing this show, and it's a most exciting project that everyone is looking forward to. If you find the script call

> me immediately and we'll make arrangements to have it copied and rushed courier to Roger Hodgeman. (1)

Labor unrest in Canada proved an ill omen for Williams and a headache for Hodgman. In addition to the postal strike that may or may not have been responsible for the loss of an important copy of the script,[24] a civic strike shut down the Vancouver Playhouse, forcing the cancellation of the final production of the 1980–81 season (Ross 250; cf. Fisher).

Feeling the pressure from Douglas to complete and mail a manuscript, Williams snapped at his agent, which led Douglas to write his own angry "Let's level with each other" epistle of 27 July 1981, noted earlier. Douglas added, among his long list of answers to various charges leveled by Williams, the "latest": "the implication that I stole your SEAGULL script when I was in Key West. Total paranoia. Vancouver has built their season around that show, it has been announced in Variety. If it doesn't get delivered, it looks as if you've failed to deliver, which does none of us any good" (4). The script did eventually arrive when Hodgman accompanied Williams to Vancouver, but it was not yet complete, and Hodgman worked with Williams over the next few days before rehearsal began, finishing up the adaptation of the *Seagull* scenes Williams had left aside.[25]

The Vancouver premiere of *The Notebook of Trigorin* was set for 12 September. Douglas had made it clear in a letter of 22 June 1981 that he wanted Williams to leave rehearsals in Vancouver to be in New York for the opening of *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, which was planned for 26 August. Accordingly, Williams traveled to New York for the off-Broadway premiere. He then returned west and was back in Vancouver overseeing production at the end of August. (Douglas wrote again on 1 September 1981, informing Williams that he had just seen *Something Cloudy* and thought the production—directed by Eve Adamson and performed by the Jean Cocteau Repertory Company—very successful.[26]) In spite of the earlier setbacks with the script, *The Notebook of Trigorin* opened on time and ran to 10 October, though suffering harsh reviews: Wayne Edmonstone of *The Vancouver Sun* faulted Williams's "obsessive dabbling with the script which at its most obvious ranges from lachrymose to ludicrous" ("From Seagull") and Ian Mulgrew of *The Globe and Mail* complained that "the play drags in parts and the cast flits between farce and melodrama."[27] A

few days after the premiere, "with Williams safely departed," Page cruelly adds, Williams's controversial ending—in which Dorn, the doctor, directly accuses the actress-protagonist Arkadina of being responsible for her son's suicide—was "abandoned and the drama ended on Chekhov's subdued note" (94).[28]

Just as he had done with *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, Williams included a "Playwright's Preface" in the *Vancouver Playhouse Program Magazine*.[29] The four-sentence preface, which was written in Key West on 27 July 1981 and published in September 1981, carried the header "From Tennessee Williams' Foreword to the Notebook of Trigorin":

> Chekhov was a quiet and delicate writer whose huge power was always held in restraint. I know that in a way this may disqualify me as "interpreter" of this first and greatest of modern plays.
>
> If I have failed him, it was despite an intense longing to somehow utilize my quite different qualities as playwright to bring him more closely, more audibly to you than I've seen him brought to you in any North American production.
>
> Our theatre has to cry out to be heard at all . . .

These four sentences would eventually form the "Interpreter's Note" in the 1997 edition of *The Notebook of Trigorin*, but they are not the playwright's only words on the subject. In 1981, Williams elaborated on these sentences in preproduction interviews he gave while in Vancouver:

> Chekhov was a quiet and delicate writer whose huge power was always held in restraint. I'm nothing at all like that. Already, some people have expressed real anger that I would dare attempt an adaptation of him.
>
> In fact, a good friend of mine in London is three-quarters Russian. I was visiting her a few months ago and when she heard what I was doing, she hid my copy of the play. The Russians, you know, even when they love you, can be curiously cruel to you.
>
> But I don't think North American audiences have ever been able to truly appreciate Chekhov's greatness. Our theatre today has to cry out to be heard at all, and his subtlety cannot be appreciated in that context. That is why I want to bring out loudly what Chekhov only whispered.

> I think I've brought out a lot of the inner dynamics of the play. That is important because we live in explosive times and people are not prepared to sit and watch a play dreamily unfold.
>
> Of course, I've had to indulge in a lot of hypothetical thinking, but I have appreciated working within a plot I didn't have to create. My main worry is that Mr. Chekhov may not get the proper billing. (qtd. in "From *Streetcar*"; see also Page 94)

Williams's fears were well grounded; few critics recognized the original play, and of those who did, many were resistant to the notion of a worn-out playwright's free adaptation of a classic.

Though he championed the play, Hodgman in an interview nonetheless admitted that it was flawed in several ways, partly because Williams was interested in adapting only certain scenes and thus lacked a total vision of Chekhov's drama: "It became apparent that he was excited by the big scenes, and less interested in writing the linking passages, or, as he put it, 'the dummy lines.'" Williams toyed with at least eight different endings to his play—some of which elicited laughter from the audience—before Hodgman decided to restore the original version. Years later, Hodgman regretted not running Chekhov's and Williams's plays side by side in repertory at the Playhouse, for audiences to see—and potentially better understand—Williams's intentions to "put the subtext" of Chekhov's play "on top rather than underneath."

Following opening night, Williams fled his "sad hotel" on the corner of Comox and Denman streets—just as he had nearly a year before—bent, but not broken. He continued, in his creations, to draw from his life's failures more than from his successes. He would achieve some of that success with *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* and even more with *A House Not Meant to Stand*, when it moved from Goodman's Studio Theatre to its main stage, in Chicago, in April 1982.

*

When biographical details are lacking, gossip quickly fills the vacuum. Such was the case with Tennessee Williams's brief time in Vancouver in 1980 and 1981. More was known about the playwright's antics than his

professional achievements because fewer people took heed of the latter, while the former were given life of their own, transmitted for decades from mouth to ear to, eventually, the stage. This essay has attempted to balance that gossip with fact and, in so doing, restore a sense of history among the many stories by and about him—to connect the histories with his stories, as it were. When the sources of gossip outnumber the factual evidence, a biographer cannot dismiss them entirely. Gossip can be a valuable tool for serious biography when it is, first, cross-referenced with other gossip stories to identify embellishment and, second, weighed against primary documents whose purpose is simply to supply or constitute fact and that meet the biographer's standards for trustworthiness. While a biographer aspires to truth, he or she often settles for plausibility—or poetic truth, to borrow Williams's words.

Capturing Williams's time in Vancouver, then, is about both the preservation of fact and the celebration of fiction, and both must be acknowledged, if not finally accepted, as invaluable resources. Whether he was liked, admired, or loathed, Williams commanded attention in Canada, arguably more than he did in New York during the final years of his life. Perhaps it was because visits from internationally known playwrights were a novelty in Vancouver theater at that time; perhaps it was because American celebrities in general were rarely seen walking that city's streets. In Williams, one had both, and that alone is reason for stories about him to circulate the city's gay and theater communities for years before spreading across the entire country. It mattered little which Williams play was performed in Vancouver in the opening years of the 1980s—any would be both a failure and a success, simply because its author was.

On 23 February 1981, when Mitch Douglas sent Williams the final Vancouver playing script of *The Red Devil Battery Sign* for his approval, he told Williams that it was for the Soviet Embassy. Williams, who was something of a demigod in Russia at the time, talked about leaving the West altogether and going to Moscow, where he could live off the millions of rubles in royalties he had amassed there. He never went, of course,[30] a point MacIvor underscores in his Playwright's response to the Young Man's question, "Do you really know Warren Beatty?"[31] After a pause, the Playwright responds to the question with a non sequitur:

> PLAYWRIGHT: I might go to Russia. They like me in Russia.

YOUNG MAN: Russia's fucking cold, man.
PLAYWRIGHT: That's true. Oh well. Fuck Russia. (76–77)

Among all the sex gossip, all the half-truths, all the fictionalized facts surrounding Williams's stay in Vancouver, at least one truth stands tall: one red devil did finally enjoy a hit that autumn in 1980, and he lived for a brief time on Comox Street.

Notes

I would like to thank Mitch Douglas and Roger Hodgman for providing me with various details of Williams's stays in Vancouver and for allowing me to quote from their private letters to Williams and emails to me. I would also like to thank Sky Gilbert for giving me his version of the Williams gossip in Vancouver. Thanks are also extended to John Tofanelli of the Columbia University Libraries for tracking down a few important sources in the Williams collection there. Finally, I would like to thank the Tennessee Williams Estate and the University of the South for allowing me to quote from Williams's unpublished letters to Douglas, Milton Goldman, Hodgman, Verne Powers, and *PRISM International*, as well as from the pieces entitled "Twenty Years of It" and "Old Sweetheart of the Keys."

[1] Gindt notes, "Gilbert first heard the 'underwear' anecdote about Williams in 1983, but did not produce *My Night with Tennessee* until 1992. After that it would be another fifteen years before MacIvor wrote *His Greatness*. The story about Williams's visit to Vancouver has thus been circulating in Canadian theater communities for decades; in some ways, it has served both as an entertaining cautionary tale and as a means to create bonds between performing artists" (192). For a different take on Gindt's gossip thesis and MacIvor's and Gilbert's plays, see John S. Bak, "Tennessee Williams, Daniel MacIvor and Biodrama in Canada."

[2] Williams decried the Buckley piece as fallacious and even looked into suing the magazine for defamation. His brother Dakin, a lawyer, advised him against it, well aware that Williams would have lost.

[3] Roger Hodgman strongly believes that many of the various "mythologies" that were fashioned around Williams's time in Vancouver are the result of his second visit in 1981, when Williams had more difficulty coping with the city and the rigors of daily rehearsals. Had he made only the first visit, when everything was more or less working well for him professionally and personally, perhaps the "mythologies" about him, including the underwear episode, would never have begun circulating.

[4] Gefen describes biofiction as "fictions littéraires de forme biographique (vie d'un personnage imaginaire ou vie imaginaire d'un personnage réel)" ("literary

fictions that resemble biographies [that is, the real life of an imaginary person or the imagined life of a real person]"; 305; my trans.).

[5] Williams frequently and intentionally obfuscated the truth, such as when he said in several interviews that he was an "octoroon" (Jennings 240) or that someone was trying to murder him. More often than not, though, he was a lazy autobiographer, willing to paraphrase himself and others instead of looking up the precise quotation or reference, approximating the year an event took place instead of confirming dates through his letters, etc.

[6] For Williams's relation to poetic truth in his essays and autobiographical writings, see Bak, *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life* and "Where I 'Love': Tennessee Williams's Indiscrete Truths."

[7] As Williams also writes in *Memoirs*, "Of course, I could devote this whole book to a discussion of the art of drama, but wouldn't that be a bore?" (181). Then later, almost apologetically, he adds: "Well, now, about plays, what about them? Plays are written and then, if they are lucky, they are performed, and if their luck still holds, which is not too frequently the case, their performance is so successful that both audience and critics at the first night are aware that they are being offered a dramatic work which is both honest and entertaining and also somehow capable of engaging their aesthetic appreciation. I have never liked to talk about the professional side of my life" (212).

[8] The narrator of Williams's second novel, *Moise and the World of Reason*, written simultaneously alongside his *Memoirs*, comments once about the looseness of the novel's structure in words that echo Williams's own about the rather unorthodox organization of his thoughts and recollections in *Memoirs*: "It's seldom my practice to observe sequence. When I try to, my thoughts blur and my fingers shake [. . .]. Now I have got to discontinue this *thing* for a while, even though I never ignore the possibility that some inadvertence, a sudden subway of sorts, may stop it permanently in its tracks" (38–39; emphasis added).

[9] See Williams's undated letter to Douglas, written sometime after 1 June 1980 on San Domenico Palace Hotel stationery and mailed from Taormina (Columbia U). In a letter postmarked 25 June 1980, Williams explained to Maria St. Just that he was still in Taormina but that Faulkner's antics with the local Sicilian boys were irritating him (*Five O'Clock Angel* 379–80). In August, he would meet with the director Gary Tucker and with Greg Mosher, artistic director of the Goodman Theatre, about a possible production of several of Williams's one-act plays.

[10] The letter was typed on an IBM typewriter, likely borrowed, since the typeface does not match that of Williams's preferred machine at the time. Its envelope was addressed and stamped but not postmarked, which suggests that it was hand delivered or, more likely, left unmailed.

[11] On 8 October 1980, Rex Victor Goff wrote to Douglas, trying to get Williams to agree to a film version of *The Strangest Kind of Romance*. He was willing to pay Williams $1,500 and ten percent of the net profits, which Williams purportedly told Douglas was scandalous for someone of his stature.

[12] Consider, for instance, Williams's many charges against Tom Buckley, who claimed to have recorded his interview with Williams in order to get the facts straight. Or even his legal tussle with Donald Windham over the rights to publishing their letters, for which there exists a signed letter (and not a cocktail napkin, as Williams later said) of agreement between Williams and Windham, dated 6 January 1976, for the sale of the copyrights for one dollar. (The letter was countersigned by Sandy Campbell and Robert Carroll as witnesses [Tennessee Williams Papers, 1920–1983, box 55, folders 2–3, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University].)

[13] Ronald Hayman repeats this information but is drawing solely from *Five O'Clock Angel* when he notes that Williams was obliged to give daily lectures, some twice a day, in addition to his work on the play, and was paid two thousand dollars a week (234).

[14] Hodgman noted that during Williams's second visit to Vancouver in the summer of 1981, the playwright was put into another hotel, the Bay Shore Inn (the Inn at Denman Place had refused him a room due to previously unpaid room service bills). According to Hodgman, Williams quickly absconded and demanded that the management of the Inn at Denman Place find him an available room there, which it did.

[15] Hodgman's version is slightly different. According to Hodgman, Williams left Vancouver because he had just had a "panic attack" and "a falling out" with his assistant at the time, Zoo Steers, a tall, blond playwright whom Williams soon fired. Hodgman said that he was worried when he went to the Inn at Denman Place and found that Williams and his companion had checked out, but he was soon reassured when Williams sent him a telegram that read in part, "Dear Roger, Have not jumped ship. Will return."

[16] Douglas confirmed this version in a telephone interview on 27 August 2013. A quick read through the reviews suggests that the production was anything but "brilliant": the Vancouver *Province* called it "interesting, albeit flawed," and the reviewer Bob Allen wrote that "it smacks a bit of both paranoia and simplistic thinking" (both reviews qtd. in Lederman R2). Ray Conlogue in *The Globe and Mail* called the play "vapid, the afterglow of talent." Wayne Edmonstone, who had interviewed Williams over lunch just days before the premiere ("Interview with an Exile"), declared in his review for *The Vancouver Sun* that *The Red Devil Battery Sign* "contains a uniquely candid series of personal statements by a man who remains one of the world's greatest playwrights" (qtd. in Page 92).

[17] According to a 14 September 2013 email I received from Douglas, "Vern was also on the trip Tennessee and I made to Orlando for the Tennessee Williams Festival there. But I noticed that TW's paranoia was starting to turn toward Vern then [. . .] so he may well have been referring to Vern in the 'cold fish' remark he made to Maria. TW did have that way of turning on people. [. . .] I'm not quite sure when Vern left TW's employment, but he died not long afterwards of AIDS."

[18] The brief letter was typed and dated January 1983. In it, Williams writes that he is "happy" to recommend Powers for any job "requiring keen intelligence,

reliability and educational background," calling him a "highly adaptible and reliable young man" (1). Powers, an English teacher from the University of Saskatchewan, accompanied Williams to Chicago and then to Key West, as Williams wrote Hodgman in a letter dated 30 October 1980. Powers may have kept a diary of his time spent with Williams, but if it exists, it is likely in private hands. The Canadian academic Carolyn Mamchur claims on her website to have written a play entitled *The Dinner Party*, which she describes as a "[t]wo act play based on snippets and stories [from] the diary of Verne Powers, my dearest friend and room mate who temporarily traded me in for Tennesee Williams in the 80s." I was unable to reach her for more information on the diary.

[19] Gayblevision disbanded in 1986, and the interview has never been digitized. Interestingly, Williams makes a reference to this interview at the bottom of a short story he was writing, entitled "Old Sweetheart of the Keys": "I am being interviewed by Gablevision and I think I am being quite indiscreet in some of my disclosures, but then I think 'When have I been otherwise (and is not all art an indiscretion if It is true. Well, I don't want this interview to be prejudicial to the production of 'Red Devil Battery Sign' so I trust that my friend Verne will allow me to suggest the editing that I think is required and will do what is fair. Verne appears, repeat appears, to be a gentleman of the new school if such a school exists" (1).

[20] One of the final recollections of Williams's time in Vancouver comes from Kenneth J. Emberly. An aspiring playwright at the time, Emberly recalls how Williams took the time to read his play and even wrote a letter of praise to the young man on 19 October 1980, just before leaving for Chicago.

[21] Lederman continues, "When Marr was preparing for his role in *His Greatness*, he began reading about Williams's life. There wasn't much about Vancouver. 'You look at his memoirs and it's hardly a footnote in his life. But he certainly did make a mark when he was here'" (R2). There is no footnote in the *Memoirs* about Vancouver because it was written principally between 1972 and 1974, long before Williams went there.

[22] Though conducted before the play opened, the interview would not be published until 1981, when it would appear alongside the version of *The Red Devil Battery Sign* that premiered at the Playhouse Theatre. According to Veronique West, *PRISM International* debated whether or not to print the play: "Williams produced *The Red Devil Battery Sign* while he was Writer in Residence in Theatre & Creative Writing at UBC. He was a fan of PRISM, and he suggested that the magazine print his play." *PRISM*'s board was "hesitant about printing the play," given its recent critical panning in Vancouver: "UBC Faculty emeritus George McWhirter told Andrea Bennett about the debate earlier this fall, describing it as a battle between PRISM editors St. John Simmons and Joe Martin. According to McWhirter, Martin wanted to publish the play, and Simmons did not. Eventually, after the editorial board had a chance to see a dress rehearsal of *The Red Devil Battery Sign*, the decision came down to a vote at an editorial board meeting. The first question Simmons posed to the editorial board: Did you like the play?

Eight or nine people voted *No*, while three voted *Yes*. Second question: Should PRISM publish the play? All hands went up for *Yes.*" In a handwritten letter in the Harvard archives addressed to the "Editors of *Prism International*" (and more than likely not mailed), Williams attacks the theater critic Wayne Edmonstone for his scathing review of Williams's play. Williams concludes the letter, "May I spark such a suggested appraisal of Wayne Edmonstone with the question: 'Is *sadism* acceptable as a highly pronounced element in the character of a man who serves as a theatre critic?'" (Letter to *PRISM International* 2).

[23] Much of this information appears in a letter, dated 30 October 1980, that Williams wrote to Hodgman (Personal collection), in which he confides that "the notices were better than we'd expected," concluding: "With luck I'll return to Vancouver in the summer (if you are there) with an adaptation of 'The Sea-Gull'" (1).

[24] Hodgman finds Williams's version of the story a bit suspect: "Whatever he told Mitch, the reality was that he had not completed the script. And when he said he would post it to me, I told him that instead I would go to NYC, where he was staying, to pick it up. That's when I discovered it was incomplete and arranged to bring him up before rehearsals to complete it (it was probably seventy-five percent complete)."

[25] Page notes in his article on the play that "[i]n the absence of a Williams text—not forthcoming till the first day of rehearsals—plans went ahead from Chekhov's text. [. . .] Williams' script proved to be a 'free adaption' re-titled *The Notebook of Trigorin*, the new title appearing rather late in Playhouse publicity" (94). Ross perpetuates this version of the story, writing that when Williams finally arrived in Vancouver for rehearsals in early August with yet another version of the script, he incited anger in several of the actors who had begun learning their lines (250–51). Hodgman has entirely dismissed this version of the story.

[26] Douglas wrote a second letter later that day, when he received a letter from Williams forwarded to him by someone at the Hotel Elysée—and then a third letter on the same day, thanking him for the painting that Williams sent him to give to Audrey Wood, who had suffered a stroke a few months earlier and was lying in a coma.

[27] Mulgrew's piece describes a Williams already at odds with the press before the play's opening: "In the middle of an interview on Friday [11 September 1981], when he was asked what he saw as the heart of *The Seagull*, he rose and stormed from the room saying: 'I have not been paid to pass the time with people who insult me.'" (The description of Williams's outburst resembles the behavior of MacIvor's Playwright in an interview scene in *His Greatness*.) In an earlier interview, Williams was less belligerent. See "From *Streetcar* to *Seagull*," published in the *Globe and Mail* on 9 September 1981.

[28] Hale confirms that Williams's "early defection" brought about some bitterness at the Playhouse and that Chekhov's ending was restored (xiv).

[29] The *Notebook* preface, like the preface he wrote for *Red Devil* a year earlier, ends with a facsimile of his signature.

[30] By 27 July 1981, Douglas, still awaiting both a final approved version of *Red Devil Battery Sign* and a finished script for the upcoming *Notebook of Trigorin*, had reached the end of his tether: "After a year, I am still waiting for your final version of THE RED DEVIL BATTERY SIGN. To speed things along I put together the [Keith] Baxter and Vancouver versions and hand delivered them to you in Key West. I still have no script. You tell me you want to go to the Soviet Union. When I get the invitation, you refuse to accept" (3). In his *Memoirs*, Williams reports that he had, decades earlier, told the Epicurean Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko that he would never go to Russia: "[Yevtushenko] told me that I was a millionaire in Russia from the accrued royalties of my plays there and that I should come over and live off them like a king. I said, 'Be that as it may, I'd rather stay out of Russia'" (9). For more on Williams's *Red Devil* and the Soviet connection, see Ross 260–64 and *Five O'Clock Angel* 382.

[31] The Warren Beatty "speech" references throughout MacIvor's play are no doubt a nod to Williams's fascination with the actor, who performs the role of the Italian gigolo in the 1961 film version of Williams's 1950 novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. In Dotson Rader's *Tennessee: Cry of the Heart: An Intimate Memoir of Tennessee Williams*, MacIvor would have read how Beatty sent Williams a glass of milk at a casino as a way to get to read for the role. And while this detail is also found in Rader's 1981 interview with Williams for the *Paris Review* ("The Art of Theatre V," reprinted in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*), the gossipy details about Beatty's having come back later to Williams's hotel room and offered to seal the deal, which the speech could very well be alluding to, are only found in Rader's "intimate memoir" (see *Tennessee* 45–46).

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