

UC Merced

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

Title

José García Villa's Silent Tongue Tie: Hispanic Resonances in Filipino American Literature

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7vq568nj>

Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 3(1)

ISSN

2154-1353

Author

Park, Paula C.

Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/T431020841

Copyright Information

Copyright 2013 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

José García Villa's Silent Tongue Tie: Hispanic Resonances in Filipino American Literature

PAULA C. PARK
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN

In a 1937 radio address, Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon announced that the Philippines could no longer “borrow” Spanish and English, and use them as common languages throughout the multilingual archipelago.¹ In preparation for independence, a native common language, which would be based on Tagalog, had to be developed. But Quezon also assured that their bond to the hegemonic languages was not to be broken: Spanish would become their “point of contact” with Spain and Latin America, while English would keep them linked to the United States.² As put by historian Vicente Rafael, “[t]he coming national language would shelter the colonial languages and so tame them for official use, turning their intractable foreignness into valuable resources. Both Castilian and English would become *instruments for making connections*” (my emphasis 162). It is well known, however, that during the three-century-long Spanish colonial rule, Spanish was never a dominant language in the Philippines. Its instruction remained limited to members of the religious orders and by the end of the nineteenth century it had only spread to affluent and middle class families.³ Furthermore, with the beginning of the American period at the turn of the century English rapidly took control of the media and the education system and Spanish lost its status and relevance. According to Filipino critic Wylan de la Peña, “by the 1930s, to speak Spanish, to be ‘Fil-Hispanic’ meant being old-fashioned; to speak English, to be ‘Americanized,’ meant being modern” (105). Nevertheless, Spanish continued to be taught in many schools well until the late 1940s.⁴ Besides, a generation of Filipino writers of Spanish emerged during what critics tend to call “the Golden Age of Philippine literature in Spanish,” which roughly covers the first four decades of the twentieth century.⁵

Many of the works produced during these decades have a celebratory or nostalgic attitude towards Spanish culture and the Hispanic legacy in the Philippines. For example, in a poem titled “A Hispania” (1913), poet Fernando María Guerrero praises the Spanish language for its beauty and hints at its potential to counteract the spread of English: “mi raza adoró la gloria / del bello idioma

español, / que parlan aún los Quijotes / de esta malaya región, / donde quieren nuevos Sanchos / que parlemos en sajón” (74). But instead of focusing on the Filipino “Quijotes” that continued to write in Spanish, this article analyzes the Hispanic resonances in Philippine literature in English, specifically in the works of José García Villa, who is often considered to be the “founder” or “father” of modernist Anglophone Filipino literature (San Juan Jr., “Articulating” 171-2; Ponce 87). Since Villa moved to the US in 1930 and lived there most of his life, he is also a perfect starting point to explore the remaining Hispanic “transcolonial” traces within Filipino American literature.⁶

The notion of transcoloniality dialogues with philosopher Enrique D. Dussel’s concept of “transmodernity,” which refers to the intellectual and intercultural dialogues within the Global South. According to Dussel “‘*Trans-modernity*’ points toward all of those aspects that are situated ‘beyond’ (and also ‘prior to’) the structures valorized by modern European/North American culture, and which are present in the great non-European cultures and have begun to move toward a *pluriversal* utopia” (43). But whereas the Dusselian concept of the transmodern seeks a disengagement from discourses valorized by Europe and the US, the transcolonial more specifically enables an understanding among individuals from formerly colonized groups through a shared evocation and strategic use of the imperial legacy that connects them. Put differently, it refers to the mutual identification between people from nations that were subjected to the same empire. For example, in his autobiography *America is in the Heart* (1943) Filipino writer, migrant worker and activist Carlos Bulosan remembers an uplifting moment of solidarity with Mexican immigrants in the US.⁷ Upon arriving to Los Angeles, he first encounters fellow Filipinos and immediately tries to communicate with one of them in Philippine regional languages Ilocano and Pangasinan. Yet revealing the multilingual reality of their country of origin they cannot understand each other. So he goes out again, alone and desolate, until in the Mexican district he unexpectedly realizes: “The sound of Spanish made me feel at home” (127). The Spanish language effectively enables a transcolonial experience: the formation of a bond that “extend[s] well beyond what even their Spanish colonizers [would have] expected” (Guevarra Jr. 9).⁸

While a generation of writers born before the twentieth century continued writing in Spanish, the young Villa, born in Manila in 1908, during the American period, readily “chose” to write in English. I call it a choice because according to Luis H. Francia, Villa’s friend and poetry student in the US, Villa was “like others of his social class in Manila, multilingual, fluent in Tagalog, Spanish and English” (xxviii). That Villa knew Spanish would not have been uncommon because apart from the fact that Spanish continued to be taught in many schools, Villa’s parents belonged to

a high social class that spoke Spanish fluently. His father, Simeón Villa, was the personal doctor to General Emilio Aguinaldo, the revolutionary leader against Spain, while Villa's mother, Guía García, was the daughter of a wealthy landowner and she was once famous for her Spanish poetry declamations in the Zorrilla Theatre in Manila (Joaquín, "Viva" 187). Nevertheless, presenting the generational conflict between Filipinos born before and after the turn of the twentieth century, Filipino writer Nick Joaquín states: "Don Simeón spoke no English; the young José spoke no Spanish" ("Viva" 187). Villa's level of fluency in Spanish remains uncertain,⁹ but for now perhaps we can at least agree on the fact that even though the young Villa grew up in a socio-political setting that inclined him to speak Tagalog at home and English at school, he undoubtedly still *heard* Spanish.

After winning a literary contest in 1929, Villa decided to leave the Philippines and eventually settled in Albuquerque to study literature in the University of New Mexico. Already in 1933, he managed to publish his American debut *Footnote to Youth: Tales of the Philippines and Others*, a collection of short stories that take place in Manila, Albuquerque and New York City. Thereafter, Villa actually moved to New York and published a poetry collection titled *Have Come, Am Here* (1942), suggesting his arrival to the American literary scene no longer as a foreigner, as was the case with *Footnote to Youth*, but as a poet.¹⁰ Situating himself next to prominent Anglo-American poets at the time, he dedicated *Have Come, Am Here* to Mark Van Doren and e. e. cummings, and further proving that position its dust jacket came with praises by Van Doren, Peter Monro Jack and Marianne Moore. Years later, Villa pushed the boundaries of inventiveness with *Volume Two* (1949), which contained visual experimental poems, as well as his unique "comma poems," poems in which a comma is inserted after every word. He continued to publish with the support of influential figures like British poet Edith Sitwell, who prefaced his next book titled *Selected Poems and New* (1958); however, his work was gradually less and less read, and his sudden rise to fame faded away.

In regards to Villa's public disappearance from the American literary mainstream, in 1996 Filipino critic Epifanio San Juan Jr. declared that Villa could well be "the most neglected writer on the planet" ("Articulating" 171). According to San Juan, in the Philippines they had managed to preserve his "charismatic legend and aura," but in the US "even critics of multi-ethnic American literature d[id] not find Villa 'ethnic' enough to deserve serious attention" ("Articulating" 174). It was not until his death in 1997, that his writings began to be appreciated again. In 1999, Filipino American writer Eileen Tabios published a selection of Villa's poetry, short stories and essays, accompanied by a series of articles by his critics or friends. On the very first page, Tabios humbly announces: "This 'recovery' project is but an introduction to José Garcia Villa's life and work; I

hope that others after me will continue the attempt to bring his poetry to fruition by widening the dialogue over—and, thus, expanding the audience for—Mr. Villa’s poetry” (v). In effect, in 2002 Filipino scholar Jonathan Chua launched *The Critical Villa*, a commendable annotated compilation of essays Villa wrote from 1927 to 1940, which reveals Villa’s authority not only as a poet but also as a literary critic. More recently in 2008, to celebrate Villa’s birth centenary, John Edwin Cowen, a lifelong friend and student of his, collaborated on a volume of Villa’s selected poetic works in a Penguin Classics edition. By now Villa’s importance has no doubt been recovered and the approaches towards his work have diversified. As pointed out by critic Timothy Yu, for example, at some point Villa was rehabilitated as an Asian American writer and was even hailed as one of the “pioneers of Asian American literature” (qtd. in “Asian/American” 344). Extending the boundaries of this collaborative effort, I will assess the distant Hispanic echoes inscribed in Villa’s writings and question why he would have silenced his relationship with Spanish. Then, after evaluating his visual poems in *Volume Two*, especially his comma poems, and referring to some of his unpublished writings, which are housed at Houghton Library in Harvard University,¹¹ I will prove that Villa not only knew the Spanish language, but was also very much engaged with Spanish and Spanish American poetry.

In a poem from *Have Come, Am Here* the lyric subject is confronted by the entity of Death. In the attempt to survive this threatening encounter, in which language articulation is presented as a matter of life and death, he tries to act as politely as possible:

By death only. Her revival of infinity
 Declaimed silently. And this only.
 My heart is there at the prophetic mouth.

Will you propel me fairly, Death?
 Will you language me commensurately?
 Meanwhile, I am Spanish, caballero.

In this ravishing world I am polite.
 Tip my hat though inwardly I spit.
 Because my heart is bitter at your

Prophetic mouth. May brain is gay.
 My limbs are sensual. My heart only
 Has the perils of immortality.
 (*Have Come* 114)

The lyric subject has mixed feelings towards Death, yet comports himself and asks to be addressed justly, as indicated in the lines “Will you propel me fairly, Death? / Will you language me commensurately?” In the end, he seems to win this struggle against Death, which is revealed to be not only female, but also Spanish. This counts among the few references to strictly “Spanish” elements in Villa’s published works.¹² However, Villa substantially revises this line for the 1958 edition of his collected poetry titled *Selected Poems and New*. Instead of “I am Spanish, caballero,” the later edition reads “I am gallánt, caballero” (*Selected* 58).¹³ Villa replaces the Spanish gentile with a French referent silencing or concealing the fact that there ever was a deathly encounter, however fictive, with Spanish.

Perhaps one way to evaluate Villa’s ambivalent relationship to Spanish is through the conceptual frame developed by critic Gustavo Pérez Firmat in *Tongue Ties: Logo-Eroticism in Anglo-Hispanic Literature* (2003), a study that precisely analyzes how various Hispanic writers have dealt with their “bilingual anxieties.”¹⁴ To be bilingual is not defined by level of fluency but as being “equally attached to, or torn between, competing tongues” (Pérez Firmat 4). Thus, being bilingual at times results in diglossia, the linguists’ term for the use of different languages in different contexts such as at home and in various formal settings. Pérez Firmat claims that more than providing evidence for linguistic theory, however, his analysis is more of a conjecture of each author’s “personal ‘sense’ about his words” and the varying “degree of intimacy with them” (14). To measure those degrees of intimacy, three very useful classifications of language are offered, recurring to Spanish. They are *lengua*, *idioma* and *lenguaje*. *Lengua* highlights the personal bond with language, “the realm of sound before words, to the world of infancy” (15). *Idioma* is defined as that which is “marked by place” and possessed by a community. The example Pérez Firmat gives here is Borges’ *El idioma de los argentinos* (1928). Finally, *lenguaje* is not possessed but acquired. It is defined as “language detached from both persona and place; that is, language as structure, as an abstract and rational system, somewhat like Saussure’s *langue*” (18). In what follows, we will evaluate whether Spanish functioned for Villa as a *lengua*, an *idioma* or a *lenguaje*. But before that, let us take a closer look at Villa’s comma poems.

As if warning and not just informing the reader about his excessive use of commas, Villa added an explicatory note at the very beginning of *Volume Two*. In it, he declares that commas for him are much more than just punctuation marks. They have a visual function. Villa compares their effect to post-impressionist French painter Georges Seurat’s “architectonic and measured pointillism—where the points of color are themselves the medium as well as the technique of statement” (5). Getting past Villa’s self-aggrandizement, from this comparison he conveys his

intention of using commas as a mode to craft language. This is precisely what is thematically expressed in one of the first comma poems in the collection:

Before, one, becomes, One,
The, labor, is, prodigious.
The, labor, of, un-oneing

To, become, a, One!
The, precision, of, un-oneing,
The, procedure, of, dissembling,

Is, the, process, of, expiation,
For, the, sin, of, Nothing.
This, Absurdity, is, Unification.
(*Volume Two* 18)

As the reader is invited to simultaneously deconstruct and reconstruct the cut ups, the commas naturalize the modification of words from one grammatical category to another. For example, “un-oneing” could have been avoided by using other existing verbs: separating, splitting or dividing. Instead, with the aid of commas, Villa artificially transforms words, restyling the English language.

Commas also have the ability to regulate the articulation of a poem. They produce, in Villa’s words, “a lineal pace of quiet dignity and movement” (6). Fittingly, in poems such as the following one commas help set a pace:

Moonlight’s, watermelon, mellows, light.
Mellowly. Water, mellows, moon, lightly.
Water, mellows, melons, brightly.
Moonlight’s, mellow, to, water’s, sight.
Yes, and, water, mellows, soon,
Quick, as mellows, the mellow, moon.
Water, mellows, as mellows, melody.
Moon, has, its, mellow, secrecy.
[...]
(*Volume Two* 144)

Resembling a tongue twister, the relationship between “moonlight,” “melody” and “watermelons” is purely phonetic. Although the poem follows a syntactical logic the similar

sounding signifiers operate in the realm of nonsense. Therefore, as word meaning become secondary, commas generate a rhythm and new meanings.

Villa's comma poems could be compared to Emily Dickinson's use of the dash or the typographical explorations of e. e. cummings. But Villa's personal notebooks disclose yet another expression of his fixation with commas, which makes him resonate much more with Hispanic writers, such as Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Whereas in Villa's notebooks we find commas personified through simple illustrations—such as a single comma on a blank page called “the lonely comma” or three commas called “a crowd of commas”¹⁵—Cabrera Infante's *Exorcismos de esti(l)o* (1976) opens with a paragraph that similarly evokes various forms of commas: "a las comas, alegres, diversas, múltiples, minuciosas, salvadoras pero modestas, a todas las comas como comas bajas y altas, al coma y, sobre todo, a las comas recién venidas al mundo, que aquí bautizo como comas suspensivas ,,," (9). This fragment at the beginning of the book simulates a dedication page; it reveals Cabrera Infante's own endearment to commas. Without implying that the Cuban writer was aware of Villa's illustrations of commas or even his comma poems, it is curious to note how comparable their playful take on them is.

Exorcismos de esti(l)o, a title that alludes to Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* (1947), has such a spirited style that critics have had a hard time classifying it. The contents range from short narratives, poems to typographic illustrations. For example, the visual poem “Il Pleut” consists of typewriter single straight quotation marks that represent falling rain, while “Four-letter word-square” is a palindrome of letters that multi-directionally make up four words. Likewise, Villa also came up with a series of visual experimental poems, but in the form of sonnets: the “Sonnet in Polka Dots” is composed of orderly drawings of little circles, the “Invisible sonnet” is followed by no writing at all, while the “Crossword Sonnet”—similar to Cabrera Infante's “Four-letter word-square”—simulates a crossword puzzle with the letters from the word “sonnet.”¹⁶ Villa and Cabrera Infante's re-purposing of letters, signs and punctuation marks problematize the limits of what language can represent.

Like Villa, Cabrera Infante was also multilingual. Apart from being a native speaker of Spanish, the Cuban writer knew English very well. He learned it since he was twelve years old, lived most of his adult life in exile in London, and even published complete works in English.¹⁷ Thus, if various critics such as Pérez Firmat, Suzanne Jill Levine or Michael Wood have suggested that Cabrera Infante's experimental creativity in Spanish was influenced by his knowledge of English and

his readings of authors like James Joyce and Lewis Carroll,¹⁸ I propose that Villa's work was inversely inspired or activated by Spanish and literature in Spanish.

On August 26, 1939, a day after producing the visual sonnets mentioned above, Villa came up with one in a splendid pseudo-Spanish jargon, which is characterized by a sonic profusion. Like his own *Ars Poetica* it is titled "Absolute untranslatable sonnet: A poet's sonnet:"

Yncantaress meresvel celest estel
 Estellarama llarama lorame laura
 Laurame tu dulce dulzura dulce mora
 Morame muero morel immorel.
 Encantame canto merezvel noel
 Ni el ni ella la bella mora
 Mira mora morezita pobrezita nora
 Ezperame ezperanza esperame turel.

Yncantaress mora morezita zita
 Zitame zolame zilame tu lanzita
 Mirame morenita celest estel
 Morame mirando morezita de miel
 Yncantame yncantame yncanteress
 Yncantame yncantame yncanteress.
 (Notebook "8," MS 2008M-14, Houghton Lib., Harvard U.)

Overall this sonnet (hereafter the "Yncantaress" sonnet) is based on the alliterated recombination and linguistic modulation of similar sounding consonants. It evokes the previously cited comma poem "Moonlight's, watermelon, mellows, light [...]" and likewise, it resides in the realm of nonsense. Nevertheless, some linguistic traces from Spanish—mostly two to five letter articles, pronouns and conjunctions—are left intact and with an apostrophic attitude, the sonnet hints fairly intelligibly at the use of the Spanish imperative mode. It seems to convey "do *x* and *y* to me." Evidencing Villa's affective bond to the Spanish language even more, below and on the same notebook page as the "Yncantaress" sonnet there are two lines written in pencil that were erased, yet still legible. The first one reads "Sonnet from the Spanish" and underneath, the second line says "Sonnet for-You-to-Guess." In a way, these two lines reveal that Villa was conscious that what he had written was neither in English nor in Spanish, but rather *from* Spanish.

At some point, Villa apparently showed his "Yncantaress" sonnet to Virginia Ganzon, a scholar who wrote an MA thesis about Villa's poetry in 1954.¹⁹ Thus, Ganzon quotes the sonnet in her thesis and comments: "The words used are not Spanish words, but they have a *decidedly Castilian*

ring. His Spanish heritage has no doubt influenced the sound structure of these words to a great extent” (my emphasis 41). For Ganzon, there is no question that Villa has a “Spanish heritage.” Being Filipino herself, the “Castilian ring” she perceives reflects their shared—although vanishing—*idioma*. Thus, the sonnet resembles simultaneously a language that is disintegrating, as well as a foreign yet still Spanish-sounding language on the making.

Further indicating that the “Yncantaress” sonnet is not only inspired by the Spanish language, but also from a Hispanic literary culture, in Villa’s notebooks one finds that during a span of three years, from 1939 to 1941, Villa consistently translated modern Hispanic poetry. The poems mostly belong to an established canon of Spanish American *modernistas*: Rubén Darío, Alfonsina Storni, Amado Nervo, Leopoldo Lugones and Enrique González Martínez. There are also a few translations of Spanish writers Juan Ramón Jiménez, Pedro Salinas and Federico García Lorca, Spanish American women poets Gabriela Mistral and Juana de Ibarbourou, and the avant-garde poet Vicente Huidobro. Hence, instead of being influenced by something like Carroll’s English-based “Jabberwocky,” the “Yncantaress” sonnet seems to dialogue more closely with Hispanic literary nonsense: the seventh canto of Huidobro’s *Altazor* (1931), which extends the limits of linguistic transformations, or Cuban poet Mariano Brull’s verbal play known as the “jitanjáfora.”²⁰

Moreover, taking into account Villa’s interest in visual poetry, it is interesting to note that in October 1940 he translated “Paisaje,” a calligram by Huidobro,²¹ as well as “Pórtico,” a sonnet by Bolivian poet Ricardo Jaimes Freyre that is notable for its use of many commas.²² It would be hurried to conclude that this is what inspired Villa’s comma poems, but it is certainly towards the beginning of the year 1939 that the excess of commas appears for the first time in his notebooks. This happens in a disjointed poem, or rather proto-poem, which begins in English and ends in Spanish:

Chinese on a bicycle
A child on a rose
Make a spiral of poetry
For you to follow on a green horse.

There, this, is, rose-coffee, drink it.
When, the, mountain, blew, the, wing, away,
Her forlove body
Because I have your name
Maria Margarita
Though you do not exist
I create you
Maria Margarita

That skull in my grave
 Will not be my skull.
 By now all is remotest death-
 Though death fuse with me

Las luces que me das tu
 Tu nombre es Atthis—y naciste
 En Naxos—tu nombre es Atthis.
 Mi nombre es Amor! Naci sin cuna,
 Naci prodigio, mi nombre es amor.
 (Notebook “1939, NY,” MS 2008M-14 (12), Houghton Lib., Harvard U.)

The first stanza consists of a combination of absurd disparate elements although there is a flashing idea that perhaps the “green horse” alludes to Chilean poet Pablo Neruda’s journal *Caballo verde*.²³ On the following stanza, there are cut-ups followed by the evocation of a female figure, “María Margarita,” and the last portion in Spanish contains references to Sappho’s poetry.²⁴ Interestingly, the only thing that these three stanzas share is an apostrophic attitude. Like the “Yncantaress” poem, they call on a “you” or *tú*.

The fact that the commas appear in the middle of these multilingual stanzas and in the midst of the years Villa was translating Spanish to English opens up the idea that his use of commas does somehow emerge from Hispanic culture. Suffice it to say, instead of resorting to Dickinson or e. e. cummings, Villa’s excessive use of commas may be in fact better understood from a Hispanic transcolonial perspective: not only by comparing him to Huidobro, Brull or Cabrera Infante, but also by considering the central role commas have played in Hispanic American expression. When reading Villa’s comma poems it seems relevant to think of what Hispanists have come to commonly refer to as “enumeración caótica.” Coined by Austrian critic Leo Spitzer, chaotic enumeration allows various elements to be listed—hence the tendency to use excessive commas—without them necessarily having a relationship.²⁵

In 1940, Villa eventually began writing poetry entirely in Spanish. These drafts, which were never published, reveal that he struggled with the written conventions of Spanish; however, they still produce a distinct poetic mood. For example, on October 18, 1940 he wrote a poem about Eve’s temptation, in which Eve remains immaculate and the evil deed of eating the forbidden fruit is attributed to the Holy Spirit:

En el alto cielo grita
 El espíritu santo
 Porque Eva refusa
 Comer la manzana.

Pajaritos verdes
 La golpean
 Pero Eva simplemente
 Las mira con desdén.

Entonces se huyen
 Los pajaros,
 El Espiritu Santo mismo
 Come la manzana.

Y así se queda Eva
 Inmaculada y pura.
 Aunque la biblia
 Cuenta la otra historia.
 (Notebook “24,” MS 2008M-14, Houghton Lib., Harvard U.)

In the second line, the accented “i” on the word “espíritu” is circled, as if wanting to remember or to consult later if the accent mark is correct, although in a later line—“El Espiritu Santo”—the accent mark on the same word is simply omitted. In the third line, Villa resourcefully invents a Spanish-sounding word in the attempt to use a cognate for “to refuse.” Thus, he uses the invented word *refusar* instead of *rechazar* [to refuse]. In other occasions, Villa more consciously seems to have decided to Anglicize his writings. A concrete example of this can be deduced from a brief poem written on January 6, 1940, where he first writes the words “kichy kichy,” then crosses them out and rewrites “keechy keechy.”²⁶ That is to say, what was initially thought in Spanish was then re-adapted to meet the conventions of English. This spelling hesitancy reveals Villa’s tongue tie, his silent and yet unavoidable divided affection for English and also Spanish.

Villa’s vast array of poetry translations seem to have been meant to remain in his notebooks, unpublished, as part of a formative period. But emphasizing his ambiguous relationship to Spanish even more, it is worthwhile to mention that on May 21, 1941, Villa actually did publish translations of five poems by Lorca in Manila-based magazine, *Herald Mid-Week Magazine*. He did this using his penname, “Doveglion” (a combination of dove, eagle and lion). Furthermore, almost ten years later, around a time in which according to his personal archives he seems to have sporadically gone back to the exercise of translation, he published two short reviews of translated poetry collections by Juan Ramón Jiménez and Pedro Salinas in the *The New York Times’* Book Review section.²⁷ In the first one, a rather unfavorable review of Jiménez’s *50 Spanish Poems*, he remarks: “His poetry suffers from the over-romanticism that characterized the Spanish poetry preceding it—too sweet and lush for the

Anglo-Saxon [...] his work seems dated in severe contrast with truly modern Hispanic or Latin American poetry” (51). The second one, titled “Rich With Reverberations,” is a review of Salinas’ *Sea of San Juan; Contemplation* and it is much more positive. Villa calls him “possibly the finest living Spanish poet” and his only criticism concerns Eleanor L. Turnbull’s translation, which for Villa is “adequate as to meaning, but fails to convey fully the great beauty and grace of the original” (44). Even though Villa did not seem to have made his connection to Hispanic culture too public, these two short reviews reveal his profound and broad-ranging knowledge of transatlantic poetry in Spanish. Moreover, although Villa dedicated himself to a literary career in English, it is evident that he still continued to value his experience with the *untranslatable* “great beauty and grace” that can be attained through the reverberating Spanish language.

At this point it is relevant to consider critic Lyn Di Iorio Sandín provocative suggestion that US Latino/a writers, whether born in a Hispanic country or in the US, often go through a struggle of “killing Spanish.”²⁸ As much as Spanish words and expressions are filtered into their writings, many of them are not fluent in Spanish and therefore their relationship to it changes over time, or remains ambivalent. Along the same lines, Marta Caminero-Santangelo clarifies that the Spanish language is not always what unifies US Latino/as: “the ‘common’ Spanish language can lead to a sense of cultural difference as often as of commonality” (16). Thus, it may be useful to borrow from the concept of *Latinidad* since by assessing the overlooked Hispanic resonances in Villa’s work, I have implicitly hinted at the possible cultural bond between multilingual US Latino/a and Filipino/a American writers.

As proposed by sociologist Felix M. Padilla, *Latinidad* has a remarkable potential for solidarity because it produces a strategic sense of “connectedness.” For Padilla, there can be “intergroup relations” based on an “ethnic-conscious behavior” that is “shared by more than one Spanish-speaking group at a point in time” (62). Yet Caminero-Santangelo questions the often static and homogenizing pan-ethnic view that results from the idea of *Latinidad* and rather proposes: “Latino identity might properly be understood as *always* an ‘in-between’ or ‘hyphenated’ identity, not just in the more common (and overused) sense of the hyphen between Latino and ‘American,’ but rather in the sense that ‘Latino’ is found in the boundaries between one so-called Latino group and another” (218). In other words, we can take Santangelo’s approach even further and include diverse “Asian Latinos,” among which we find Filipinos and the Filipino diaspora.²⁹ In the end, *Latinidad* calls for a transcolonial bond, as well as a shared and constantly re-negotiated relationship to Hispanic culture and the Spanish language.³⁰

Proposing that Hispanic traces persist in the daily life of the multilingual population in the twentieth century, Nick Joaquín claims that Spanish is the source of vernacular languages throughout the Philippines:

People who doubt that Spanish is a foundation of the national language have only to note that when the masses, who know no formal Spanish, construct a word, the construction is often Spanish. There must, therefore, be a Spanish source the masses draw from. Spanish is not dead in the Philippines; *we unknowingly speak it every moment of our lives*. (“Language of the Street” 12; my emphasis)

Joaquín goes on to refer to some Spanish loanwords that were used in the 1950s and 60s. But his bold declaration also seems to indicate that the multi-form influences of Spanish can neither be silenced nor edited out from the Philippines’ complex linguistic identity. Moreover, these traces continue to re-appear within the Filipino diasporic expression. As we have seen, even after migrating to the United States, Spanish continued haunting Villa. He had to deal with a Hispanic heritage, a sense of *Latinidad* that does not limit itself to Spain or Spanish America, but also extends to Filipino and Filipino American writers.³¹

In conclusion, delving into his personal archive, it does not seem like Villa felt a responsibility to maintain fluency in Spanish. In the end, for him it was neither exactly a personal *lengua*, nor a community or location based *idioma*. For Villa, Spanish functioned as a foreign yet familiar sonically profuse *lenguaje* through which he was able to find his own poetic voice. Hence, even if he did not write poems praising the beauty of the Spanish language, like fellow Filipino poets in the early decades of the twentieth century, he certainly had engaged encounters with it. Let us recall that for Villa, “Before, one, becomes, one, / The, labor, is, prodigious, / The, labor, of, un-oneing.” The lines from this poem, which was quoted earlier as an example of a comma poem, were originally written without commas on October 27, 1941,³² in the midst of his phase of consistently translating poetry from Spanish to English. Through translation Villa dared to go through the process of oneing and un-oneing Spanish from English and, in a way, the comma enabled him to continue articulating his multilingual anxiety. Although sometimes he wrote in Spanish and at other times tried to erase these writings, to even edit Spanish out of his identity, Villa continued to pay a silent homage to a culture and a language that was distant to him, yet still resonating in his ears.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank César A. Salgado and the two anonymous referees from *Transmodernity* for their helpful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Lance Villa, executor of the José García Villa Estate, for giving me permission to quote three unpublished poems from Villa's personal archives, which are housed at Houghton Library in Harvard University.

² Quezon stated: "We may borrow for a time the language of others, but we cannot truly possess a national language except through adoption, development and use of our own [...] The fact that we are going to have a national language does not mean that we are going to abandon in our schools the study and use of the Spanish language and much less English [...] Spanish will preserve for us our Latin culture and will be our point of contact with our former metropolis as well as Latin America. English, the great language of democracy, will bind us forever to the people of the United States and place within our reach the wealth of knowledge treasured in this language" (qtd. by Rafael, 159 and 161).

³ Estimations about the number of Spanish speakers in the Philippines towards the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century vary. Benedict Anderson estimates that by the end of the nineteenth century, Spanish was "understood by less than 5 percent of the Philippine population" (5). Vicente Rafael relies on the 1903 United States Bureau Census to affirm that at the turn of the century only about 1 percent of the young nation's population was "undoubtedly" fluent in Spanish (197, n9). According to Luis Osmeña, "el español no se habló en su época de mayor expansión sino por la octava parte de los habitantes de Filipinas aunque fuese lengua común en la capital donde era hablada por la mitad de la población" (9). Osmeña adds that six decades later, according to the Census of 1960, "el español era lengua materna de tan solo 9.592 personas, aunque era hablado también por otras 558.634, el 2,1% de la población del país" (9).

⁴ Historian Florentino Rodao recounts that in 1947 Spanish instruction was made optional under the Sotto Law. In 1952, the Magalona Law made it compulsory only for two consecutive years in all universities and private schools, and in 1957, the Cuenco Law required twenty-four units in concentrations such as Law, Pedagogy and Liberal Arts. These laws were met with student demonstrations because they "did not want to study a language they felt was useless for their lives" (Rodao 105).

⁵ Some useful sources about Philippine literature in Spanish during these decades are Estanislao Alinea's *Historia analítica de la literatura filipinohispana* (1964, specifically the chapter titled "Periodo de Oro"), Luis Mariña's *Literatura filipina en castellano* (1974) and also Lourdes Castrillo Brillantes' *82 years of the Premio Zóbel: A Legacy of Philippine Literature in Spanish* (2006). According to Alinea, this Golden Period begins in 1903 and ends in 1942, while Osmeña points out that by the 1930s already, "no surgían ya nuevas figuras entre los escritores filipinos en castellano, eran éstos personalidades nacidas, en general, entre 1870 y 1900 [...] generación que puede decirse se agota vitalmente hacia 1960, año que marca la muerte de [Claro M.] Recto y [Manuel] Bernabé" (51). The more recent volume *Literatura hispanofilipina actual* (2011), co-edited by Isaac Donoso and Andrea Gallo, offers a critical introduction and a survey of Philippine literature in Spanish produced from the second half of the twentieth century up to the present times.

⁶ Although the term "Filipino American" has multiple and historically changing meanings (see Martin Joseph Ponce and Isaac Allan Punzalan), critic Rocío G. Davis calls Villa "clearly the first Filipino American writer (predating the existence of the term)" (10). It is also worthwhile to note that the spelling of Villa's complete name varies; most critics omit the accent on "García," which is what the author himself did, and some further omit the accent on his first name. Since in this article I seek to explore Villa's Hispanic side, I reinsert both accents following standard Spanish spelling rules.

⁷ Like Villa, Bulosan also migrated to the US in 1930, but due to extremely different socio-economic circumstances. While Villa belonged to a high social class in Manila, Bulosan was from a rural village in the province of Pangasinan and moved to the US to work as a field worker.

⁸ In his study *Becoming Mexipino: Multiethnic Identities and Communities in San Diego* (2012), Rudy P. Guevarra Jr. gives an overview of the encounter of Filipinos and Mexicans during the 250 year long Acapulco-Manila galleon trade, and focuses on the formation of what he calls a "Mexipino" identity during the twentieth century. Likewise, scholars Robert Chao Romero and Kevin Escudero identify four distinct groups of "Asian Latinos" and one of them, according to them, is composed of "older Filipino Americans who emigrated from the Philippines and settled in Latino neighborhoods in the United States or others whom found employment alongside Latinos in the agricultural fields and the cannery industry" (Chao Romero and Escudero 2).

⁹ San Juan Jr. contests Francia's statement about Villa's trilingual fluency by saying, "Francia's exorbitant claim that Villa was fluent in all three languages, Tagalog and Spanish and English, makes his other judgments suspect" ("Critique of Subaltern Poetics" 11).

¹⁰ In his recent article "The Making of Jose Garcia Villa's *Footnote to Youth*" (2013), Jonathan Chua recounts the difficulties Villa went through to publish his first book in the US with Scribner's due to the conditions of the American

literary market and also because of the publisher's demand for "Villa's otherness." Chua says: "Villa's attractiveness and publishability, the letters [exchanged between Villa and Scribner's] suggest, lay in his foreignness" (9).

¹¹ José García Villa's papers consist of 23 boxes of 22 linear feet of notebooks, letters, photos, clippings and lecture notes. When I consulted these archives in June 2012, they were not catalogued and therefore reference numbers may have changed. The fragments that I refer to or quote in this article are located in 2008M-14, Houghton Library, Harvard University, specifically in box 12.

¹² It is valuable to note here, however, that in the preface to Villa's *Footnote to Youth* critic Edward J. O'Brien affirms: "Blended with his Filipino sense of race is a strong Spanish sense of form and color" (my emphasis 3). When commenting Villa's poetry, Edith Sitwell also perceives something Spanish about Villa: "These strange, passionate, and beautiful poems are equally the labour of ages, growing from the poet's earth. Though entirely original, they have, too, a Spanish character" (xxiii). Likewise, in a more recent short article Peruvian critic and poet Eduardo Chirinos introduces Villa to Spanish speaking readers and momentarily wonders: "¿Escribió García Villa español? Confieso que como hispanoamericano, me entusiasma la posibilidad de contar 'entre los nuestros' a un poeta proveniente de uno de los rincones más apartados e inquietantes del idioma" (66).

¹³ I thank Jonathan Chua for telling me about this significant line revision. Chua became aware of it through John Labella's conference paper, "Doveglion and the Race Concept," delivered at the 2013 Association for Asian American Studies Conference in Seattle, on April 18, 2013. I also thank Labella for sharing his insights on this poem.

¹⁴ The writers examined are philosopher George Santayana, emigré Spanish poet Pedro Salinas, US-born Cuban writer Calvert Casey, Cuban exile Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Chilean author María Luisa Bombal and US Latino memoirists Richard Rodriguez and Sandra Cisneros. Pérez Firmat's *Tongue Ties*, of course, inspires the title of this article.

¹⁵ These and other similarly playful illustrations, from 1949 and 1950, can be found in notebook "2," MS 2008M-14, Houghton Lib., Harvard U.

¹⁶ This wide range of visual sonnets, written/drawn on August 25, 1939, is located in notebook "8," MS 2008M-14 Houghton Lib., Harvard U. Some of them, such as the "Sonnet in Polka Dots" and the "Invisible Sonnet" (re-titled "The Emperor's New Sonnet") were published in *Volume Two*, alongside the comma poems.

¹⁷ Cabrera Infante's writings in English include *Holy Smoke* (1985) and his self-translation of *Vista en el amanecer en el trópico* (1974) to *View of Dawn in the Tropics* (1988), which is closely analyzed by Pérez Firmat in *Tongue Ties*. Although I am comparing Cabrera Infante's case to Villa's own tongue tie, there are obvious and major differences between them: the use of the English language in Cuba and Cabrera Infante's time of residence in an English-speaking country cannot be equaled to the persistence (although vanishing) of the Spanish language in the Philippines in the first decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, it must also be considered that Villa possessed another *lengua*, Tagalog.

¹⁸ For Wood, "[i]t is Joyce's practice of language, and especially his long dedication to the manic and uncontrollable multiplication of meaning, that helps us understand many of the intricacies of Cabrera Infante's work, its impressive balance of lightness and loss, its sense of language as the most serious toy of all" (54). According to translator and friend Suzanne Jill Levine, Cabrera Infante's proficiency in English enabled him to read writers such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and Lewis Carroll, as well as to appreciate Classic Hollywood movies from the 1930s to the 1950s. Moreover, from early on, before his appreciation of Anglophone literature and culture, the English language itself produced in him a sensation of "intriguing exoticism" (Cabrera Infante qtd. by Levine, 25).

¹⁹ In a footnote in her MA thesis Ganzon refers to the "Yncantaress" sonnet as Villa's "unpublished poem written about 1939, which he so kindly showed to me" (63).

²⁰ "Jitanjáfora" was coined as a poetic concept by Mexican writer and critic Alfonso Reyes, a close friend of Brull, in 1929. The verse by Brull, from which the term originates, is: "Filiflama alabe cundre / ala olalúnea alífera / alveolea jitanjáfora / liris salumba salífera" (qtd. by Reyes, 190).

²¹ All translations, including this calligram, are located in notebooks "Trans." "Trans. 2" and "Trans. 3," MS 2008M-14, Houghton Lib., Harvard U.

²² This sonnet, originally published in 1898, evokes a Spanish medieval soldier. I reproduce here the first two and last three lines to showcase his extensive use of commas: "Villano, trovador, fraile o guerrero, / con hoz brevario, bandolín o espada, [...] combatir, si guerrero, noche y día, / asaltar, lanza en mano, una abadía, / o acuchillar la hueste musulmana" (127).

²³ *Caballo verde* was edited by Neruda, while in Spain, from 1935 to 1936. In response to the "poesía pura" aspired by Spanish poets at the time (mainly Jorge Guillén and Juan Ramón Jiménez), *Caballo verde* announced a "poesía impura" that would document the immediacy of surrounding reality. I thank César A. Salgado for pointing out this possible allusion to me.

²⁴ Villa also read avidly and transcribed poems by Sappho in 1949. These transcriptions, sometimes translated to Spanish, can be found in notebook "Trans. 2," MS 2008M-14 (12) Houghton Lib., Harvard U.

²⁵ Spitzer first introduced this concept in 1941 in an article about Pedro Salinas and then in 1943 expanded it to a book-length study, which is translated to Spanish as *La enumeración caótica en la poesía moderna* (1945). Spitzer notes that before him, Amado Alonso had referred to Neruda's "enumeraciones desarticuladas" in his book *Poesía y estilo de Pablo Neruda* (1940).

²⁶ These two poems are located in notebook "24," MS 2008M-14, Houghton Lib., Harvard U.

²⁷ I am grateful to Jonathan Chua for pointing out these references to me, including Villa's publication of his translations of Lorca.

²⁸ Di Iorio explains that the expression "killing Spanish" comes the Spanish "matando el español," which refers "to what islanders believe happens to Spanish when Nuyoricans or Dominican Yorks of a working-class background forget, hybridize, and reconstitute language fragments." She then adds, "Fragmentary and hybridized Spanish, or the use of Spanglish, are more common in mainland based Latino/a poetry" (4-5).

²⁹ See Chao Romero and Escudero.

³⁰ Along these lines, critic Allan Punzalan Isaac observes that Filipino-born American writer Jessica Hagedorn "captures not only the more obvious American elements translated and reappropriated by Philippine culture but also the *enduring Hispanic* and international European presence in cosmopolitan Manila" (my emphasis 177). In an interview, Hagedorn confirms this statement by saying: "My identity is linked to my grandmother, who's pure Filipino, as pure as you can probably get. And that shaped my imagination. So that's how I identify. I also identify as a Latin person, a person who has Latin blood" (Interview with Bonetti, 95). Hagedorn incorporates *Latinidad* genealogically (she says she has Spanish ancestry through her father), yet she also claims to have been influenced the most by Latin American writers (Interview with Bonetti, 93).

³¹ In this respect, Donoso and Gallo remark: "Por un lado, cualquiera que haya paseado por las calles de cualquier región filipina se percatará de inmediato de la presencia active de elementos hispánicos en la cultura contemporánea del país. Por otro, cualquier Filipino que viaje al exterior, especialmente a cualquier parte de América, reconocerá de inmediato elementos culturales que pensaba eran patrimoniales del mundo filipino" (23).

³² This draft can be found in notebook "31," MS 2008M-14, Houghton Lib., Harvard U.

Works Cited

-
- Anderson, Benedict. *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*. London: Verso, 2005. Print.
- Bulosan, Carlos. *America is in the Heart*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984. Print.
- Cabrera Infante, Guillermo. *Exorcismo de esti(l)o*. Madrid: Suma de letras, 2002. Print.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. *On Latinidad: US Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. Print.
- Chao Romero, Robert and Kevin Escudero. "‘Asian Latinos’ and the U.S. Census." *AAPI Nexus* 10:2 (Fall 2012): 1-20. Print.
- Chirinos, Eduardo. "José García Villa o el danzante enmascarado." *Letral* 5 (December 2010): 64-69. Web.
- Chua, Jonathan. "The Making of Jose Garcia Villa's *Footnote to Youth*." *Kritika Kultura* 21/22 (2013/2014): 1-31. Web.
- Davis, Rocío G. "Introduction: Have Come, Am Here: Reading Filipino/a American Literature." *MELUS* 29: 1 (Spring 2004): 5-18. Print.
- De la Peña, Wytan. "‘Filipino’ vs. ‘Fil-Hispanic’: The Politics of Appropriation and Assimilation in Philippine Cultural Identity Construction." *Encuentro: Philippine-Spanish Friendship Day*. Ed. Ma. Luisa T. Camagay. Quezon City: Spanish Program for Cultural Cooperation, 2008. 101-13. Print.
- Donoso, Isaac and Andrea Gallo. "Estudio crítico." *Literatura hispanofilipina actual*. Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2011. 9-114. Print.
- Dussel, Enrique D. "Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation." *Transmodernity* 1:3 (2012): 28-59. Web.
- Francia, Luis H. "Introduction." *José Garcia Villa Doveglion: Collected Poems*. Ed. John Edwin Cowen. New York: Penguin Books, 2008. xx-xl. Print.
- Ganzon, Virginia. "Purity in the Poetry of José Garcia Villa." MA thesis. Columbia U, 1954. Print.
- Guerrero, Fernando María. *Crisálidas*. Manila: Philippine Education Foundation, 1952. Print.
- Guevarra Jr. Rudy P. *Becoming Mexipino: Multiethnic Identities and Communities in San Diego*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012. Print.
- Hagedorn, Jessica. Interview by Kay Bonetti. "An Interview with Jessica Hagedorn." *The Missouri Review*. 18.1 (1995): 90-113. Print.
- Isaac, Allan Punzalan. *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Print.
- Jaimes Freyre, Ricardo. *Obra poética y narrativa*. Ed. Mauricio Souza Crespo. La Paz: Plural Editores, 2005. Print.
- Joaquin, Nick. "Viva Villa." *Doveglion and Other Cameos*. Manila: National Book Store, 1977. 180-227. Print.
- . "The Language of the Street." *The Language of the Street and Other Essays*. Manila: National Book Store, 1980. 3-21. Print.
- Levine, Suzanne Jill. "Guillermo Cabrera Infante in the Wonderland of English." *How I learned English*. Ed. Tom Miller. Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2007. 25-7. Print.
- Pérez Firmat, Gustavo. *Tongue Ties: Logo-Eroticism in Anglo-Hispanic Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.
- O'Brien, Edward J. Preface. *Footnote to Youth*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1933. 2-4. Print.
- Osmeña, Luis. *La literatura filipina en castellano*. Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1974. Print.
- Padilla, Felix M. *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago*. South Bend: Notre Dame Press, 1985. Print.

-
- Ponce, Martin Joseph. "The Queer Erotics of José García Villa's Modernism." *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature and Queer Reading*. New York: New York University Press, 2012. 58-88. Print.
- Rafael, Vicente. *The Promise of the Foreign: National and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Print.
- Reyes, Alfonso. "Las jitanjáforas." *La experiencia literaria*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1952. 182-226. Print.
- Rodao, Florentino. "Spanish Language in the Philippines." *Philippine Studies* 45:1 (1997): 94-107. Print.
- San Juan Jr., Epifanio. "Articulating a Third World Modernism." *The Philippine Temptation: Dialectics of Philippines—US Literary Relations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 171-214. Print.
- . "Critique of a Subaltern Poetics." *EurAmerica* 40.1 (2010): 1-29. Print.
- Sandín, Lyn Di Iorio. *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent US Latino/a Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Sitwell, Edith. "Prologue." *The American Genius: An Anthology with Some Prose*. London: John Lehmann, 1951. vii-xxv. Print.
- Tabios, Eileen. "Editor's Acknowledgments." *The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings by José García Villa*. Ed. Eileen Tabios. New York: Kaya Press, 1999. Print.
- Villa, José García. *Have Come, Am Here*. New York: The Viking Press, 1942. Print.
- . José García Villa Papers, ca 1920-1997. MS and TS. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Print.
- . "A Lyric Spanish Voice." Rev. of *50 Spanish Poems*, by Juan Ramón Jiménez, trans. JB Trend. *New York Times Book Review* 26 Nov. 1950: 51. Print.
- . "Rich With Reverberations." Rev. of *Sea of San Juan; Contemplation*, by Pedro Salinas, trans. Eleanor L. Turnbull. *New York Times Book Review* 30 Dec. 1950: 44. Print.
- . *Selected Poems and New*. New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958. Print.
- . *Volume Two*. New York: New Directions Book, 1949. Print.
- Wood, Michael. "Cabrera Infante: Unruly Pupil." *Transcultural Joyce*. Ed. Karen R. Lawrence. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 49-62. Print.
- Yu, Timothy. "Asian/American Modernisms: Jose Garcia Villa's Transnational Poetics." *Pinoy Poetics: A Collection of Autobiographical and Critical Essays on Filipino and Filipino American Poetics*. Ed. Nick Carbó. St. Helena, CA: Meritage Press, 2004. 343-67. Print.