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Latinx Multilingualism and "American" Modernism: Concealed Transcultural Depths in William Carlos Williams's English

"Salgo de Puerto Rico pero Puerto Rico no sale de mí. ¿Será otro síndrome del colonizado?...La canción de mi país me atrapa."
—Luis Rafael Sánchez[1]

Literary studies often use channeled critical vocabularies—be them adjectives or nouns (like "[an] American")—in ways that disallow interpretation of the qualifying terms. When used in relation to a text or an author, such characterizations have important consequences: by pre-structuring the horizon of analysis, they limit the interpretative reading space to the predetermined confines of the categorization—and thus presume that novels, poetry, letters, and other texts signify in concert with the exigencies of the label.[2] When applied to diaspora cultures in the US, the "Americanization" theory attempts to annul nonimperial signifiers, and when this is not achievable, hyphenation becomes a secondary method of relegitimization.[3] In the case of Puerto Rican cultures in the Caribbean and on the continent, this circumstance situates William Carlos Williams and others like him in a violent relationship with nonimperial signifiers—in this case, with the poet's first language: Spanish. To

perform that natural part of himself in public is to open himself to ridicule, abuse, and other forms of violence; at the same time, the Puerto Rican dimensions of Williams's background are often muddled by use of the term "American" without hyphenation in reference to him.[4] In light of studies in monolingual communication of multilingual writers, this article argues that Williams's English should be understood as transcultural (and to an extent translingual), and thus a device that performs identities and sentiments that transcend the "American" label.

William Carlos Williams is widely understood as a pillar of Modernist poetry and a smith of the American (English) Language; however, English was not his primary means of communication until he was a teenager.[5] At home his mother and father—who were raised in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, respectively—spoke Spanish with each other and to young William Carlos, who would learn English at school and from his paternal grandmother. While this circumstance had various effects on his writing—in theme, subject, grammar, syntax, and structure—the transcultural depths of Williams's upbringing have been overlooked to an extent by critics.[6] Examining the cultural and linguistic backdrop of Williams's boyhood home in New Jersey (exploring its shaping influences on his approach to writing and translation), my argument maintains that the colonial complexes surrounding the US military invasion and ongoing occupation of Puerto Rico, as well as the colonial

exigencies put upon Puerto Ricans in the US, had a profound shaping influence on Williams's transcultural use of the English language throughout his life.

"The American map," notes Laura Dassow Walls, which lies so apparently flat and solid, is in fact yeasty with such heterogeneous spaces" (860). At first glance, interpreting William Carlos Williams through the Spanish language and Latinx cultures may seem counterintuitive, as he almost never published in that language and very rarely acknowledged in print the intercultural nature of his upbringing. Despite this circumstance, his sense of consciousness and social orientation, and linguistic performances (in English and Spanish) were shaped to a very important degree by a plural cultural foundation. A reconsideration of the cultural dynamics of the Williams's home involves some ubiquitous concerns: during his formative years, which languages spoke William Carlos Williams? How does the language of a phrase, thought or social interaction, shape its meaning? Are multiple linguistic indexes in the mind separate and unconnectable, or complementary? How does multilingualism influence cultural affiliation? How does knowledge of multiple languages influence monolingual writing? In multicultural homes, does one system take precedence over another? What establishes a division between the two cultures? Is this border ever crossed?

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Multicultural Geographies

While coexisting cultures blend and overlay one-another, linguistic sensibilities related to each cultural system are influenced by the location of the expression (a public vis-à-vis a private space, for instance) and the language of the performance. As the cultural system of the home space tends to be more influential in children's lives than those in public arenas (Decker and Vickers 75), it is important to emphasize that William Carlos Williams's home in New Jersey was a Spanish-speaking and Caribbean/Latinx cultural backdrop in his younger years; this cultural dynamic would interact and hybridize with the cultures he would encounter in public spaces (including at the public schools he attended in Rutherford where he would commonly find himself immersed in English-speaking surroundings). In this sense, Williams's boyhood had two principal—and interconnected—spheres: the ideas, norms, and material culture of the home space (A), and that of public arenas (B).

The Williams homestead celebrated several sets of holidays, feasts, and ceremonies, including those traditional in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (*By Word of Mouth* Introduction). The coexistence of these cultures and languages, and their symbolisms, were integral components to young William Carlos's worldview. Moreover, layering his experience to another degree, each person in the homestead had varying levels of affiliation to each culture, depending on their age,

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profession, social status, and length of time residing in New Jersey (compared to other places) among other factors. The distinct dimensions of the familial cultures (A) and the public cultures (B) would intermingle, and thus the cultures of the Williams home and that of the public spaces were not independent or isolated systems. The spheres would interact and blend into a synthesis of symbol, language, and ceremony; such a multifaceted sense of cultural identity has been described by Homi Bhabha as one that is dominated not by Culture A or Culture B, but rather hybridized toward third path: A + B ≠ A, B, or C; rather A + B = ABC (*The Location of Culture* Introduction). Despite this intermingling at home and in public, Williams often projected and performed what has been labeled an "American" character, one that was ostensibly monolingual to the extent that the Latinx linguistic and social dimensions of his background were regularly concealed (and perhaps actively so). He achieved this in part by use of English as his primary language in his public life and through a creative focus on local and so-called "American" themes, a circumstance which elided, to a degree, the characteristics of his home life.[7]

Julio Marzán has argued that Williams had an "identity crisis" throughout his life, one that struggled to resolve two separate (A and B) and unrelated cultural selves (36). A multicompetence approach to language offers nuance to Marzán's work, and other similar studies.[8] In dialog with studies cognitive and social linguistics, I argue

that the Latinx and Spanish-language dimensions of Williams's formative years are not—and indeed, cannot be—separated from the ostensibly Americanized, monolingual man he often projected in public. Rather than two discrete spheres of cultural performance, A and B, I argue that both were active at the same time to different degrees, regardless of the language and cultural system of his immediate surroundings. Reports in sociolinguistics and cultural nuerology demonstrate that multilingual writers continually access several linguistic systems (and thus the sociolinguistic maps related to each tongue). Thus, the monolingual tool Williams used for writing—the English language—should be revisited and contextualized with the other tongues in his repertoire, in order to offer a more attuned understanding of the complexities of his multilingual mind.[9]

Multi-competence Bilingualism and Sociolinguistic Identity

Many scholars have noted that the acquisition and use of a second linguistic system subtlety influences a person's knowledge of their first language.[10] Multi-competence linguistics, an approach developed by Vivian Cook, maintains that the presence of several languages in the mind functions as one linguistic unit. Cook's theory nuances standard approaches to multilingualism, which generally interpret each language competency as a separate proficiency (silo)—and thus a wholly

separate structure of cultural performance. The existing critical treatments of William Carlos Williams's writing in English[11] generally hinge on perceiving multiple languages as independent linguistic and cultural spheres, a circumstance in which English and Spanish represent not only separate forms of communication, but also distinct worldviews, aesthetic and creative processes. The discrete loci model of being and identity maintains that Williams had one identity performable in English, and another, separate and unrelated to the former, in Spanish. The empirical studies from Cook and others indicate that multiple languages (and thus sociolinguistic spheres) are active in the mind regardless of which language is spoken, written, read, or heard, a circumstance that requires a reconsideration of the discrete loci model: the presumed sociolinguistic separation of cultural spheres (A and B) within a multilingual person becomes untenable. When we apply this strand of research to William Carlos Williams's English, it is clear that the other languages in his purview (Spanish, principally, as it was his first language) must be understood as active and reflective on his composition.

In addition, applying Cook's theory to literature and poetry has important outcomes on how we understand the cognitive capacities—and thus cultural identities—of multilingual writers.[12] Yudhijit Bhattacharjee comments, "there is ample evidence that in a bilingual's brain both language systems are active even when

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he is using only one language" (1). In a multi-competence approach, the mixture of tongues spoken by a multilingual person complement and interact with one another in all contexts. The cross-linguistic component of life at the Williams's residence is of particular importance; multi-language thinking (that is, thinking in Spanish and/or Spanglish, and other tongues) would have shaped William Carlos Williams's use and knowledge of *English*. Many reports note similar findings: "people with more than one language have different knowledge of their first language (L1) than do monolingual people" (Kecskes ix). These circumstances have shaping effects on behavior, such that "there is no reason why a person who speaks both English and Spanish should behave in the same way as a monolingual speaker of either language" (Paul Meara qtd. in Kecskes ix).

Vivian Cook has argued that such findings require a "re-valuing of the concept of a native speaker" (3) as it is clear that multilingual people should not be understood as "native" speakers of any one tongue: "Indeed," notes Cook, "there is little point to counting 'languages' in a single mind – L1, L2, L3, L*n* – as they form a single system" (7). Thus, when Williams was speaking English or Spanish, or any other of the tongues in his purview (he also was proficient in French and had some knowledge of Latin and German), he should not be understood as a speaker of "English" per se, as his knowledge of English was shaped by Spanish (and other languages). "The

language mode continuum is not then about *which* language to use but about *how much* of each. It is like a mixer tap that merges hot and cold water, but neither tap can be completely turned off" (Cook 10). Thus, English-centric readings of William Carlos Williams lack the horizon to appreciate the dynamic linguistic condition that occurred in his mind, behavior, speech, and writing. Indeed, these findings command a reinterpretation of the work of many multilingual writers, as "people who know more than one language have a distinct, compound state of mind" (Jarvis and Pavlencko 17).[13]

As language shapes thought and the ways that words and ideas are codified into text, it would appear that Williams's writings *in English* should be understood as informed (and at the very least inflected) by Spanish. In this way, Williams performed several identities through literature and poetry written in English (or, mainly in English). As grammars, verbiages, logics, philosophies, and nuances of other idioms – which may *or may not* be present in the phrase (or thought) – inform the cognitive processes, Williams might be expected to speak or write English with Spanish sensibilities, if not grammar and inflection, and vice versa.[14]

In a multi-competence approach, sociolinguistic *identity* (in addition to lexical performance) is balanced into a single, unified, and amalgamated concept. [15] Such sociolinguistic maps are important to bear in mind, as identity-performance and

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cultural behaviors (like writing) are closely interrelated. As Williams's first language was Spanish, his use of Spanish and English in ostensible isolation from one another (in a text in English, for instance) would have been the product of a harmonization of a language and identificational amalgam; our interpretations of these texts should take into consideration the hidden meanings, cognate sensibilities, and underpinned social values of other linguistic systems that may or may not be present in the phrases of the texts themselves.

William Carlos Williams: Home Life, Language, and Culture

"And America? [Ezra Pound asked Williams] What the hell do you a bloomin foreigner know about the place?" (*Letters* 181)

William Carlos's father William George Williams spent his childhood—at least 26 of his first 31 years—in the Dominican Republic.[16] William George met Raquel Hélène Hoheb, a native of Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, in Puerto Plata in 1882. After a brief courtship, they were married and within a year moved to the US mainland; William Carlos was born in 1883—a few months after the newlyweds had abandoned the Dominican Republic (Marzán 43).

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William's mother Raquel Hélène learned some English after she moved to New Jersey, but Spanish was the dominant language of her affairs until the end of her life. In private she would often practice the sounds that were difficult for her to pronounce in English, particularly the letter "s"; these practice sessions had a special significance to young William Carlos, who singled them out in his memories of childhood (*Mrs. Williams* 118-19). Williams notes that "Mother could talk very little English…and Pop spoke Spanish better, in fact, than most Spaniards" (*Mrs. Williams* 15).

"When I was a child," recalls Williams, "Spanish was the language spoken in the household." Williams's grandmother (a native of England), who also lived in the home, had lived for several decades in Puerto Plata and was also fluent in Spanish; she spoke in Spanish—or Spanglish—with William Carlos's mother and father, and mainly in English to William Carlos. William Carlos noted that as a boy he heard "Spanish constantly" (*Mrs. Williams* 4) not only from his family but also "from the lips of [family friends, such as] the Hazels, the Dodds, and the Forbeses" (Mariani 17) who had known his parents in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. It was also the language of his father's business office in New Jersey (*Mrs. Williams* 4). "I feel close to Spanish-speaking people," said Williams in 1930, "simply because I have heard so much of the language at home and knew so many [Spanish-speaking people]

among my parents' friends" (quoted in Mariani 17). Here, as with nearly all his reflections in print concerning Spanish, the colonial complexes urge Williams to elide commentary on his own employment of the language (his memoir indicates Spanish "was spoken" in the home instead of "I/we spoke Spanish"), which was a function of the pressure to conform to the broader linguistic norms that stem in part from US colonization of Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, William Carlos Williams would speak his first language throughout his life at work in the hospital and with family members and friends (Mariani 42).

The Latinx cultures of the Williams residence transcended language. In addition to the omnipresence of Spanish, the "diet, mores, expletives, heroes and manner of dress were *anything but* American" (*By Word of Mouth* xxii, emphasis added). In his memoir, Williams mused on life as an eight-year-old boy, "as they played, they learned nothing of America, but Puerto Rico…" (*Yes, Mrs. Williams* 116). But resonances of the Dominican Republic also filled out the backdrop of their home; after moving to the US at age 31, William Carlos's father would seize the chances he had to travel to Spanish-speaking countries for work in an effort to, as Marzán argues, "return to the surroundings" of his youth (Marzán 20). William Carlos obliquely addressed his father's veiled Latin American background in the Spanglish poem "Adam":

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But being an Englishman

though he had not lived in England

desde que tenía (sic) cinco años (*Collected Poems* 409)

Xenophobia toward Latin Americans in the US

Despite the rich transcultural qualities of William Carlos Williams's upbringing, the colonial complexes would urge him to downplay the non-English-language and non-US dimensions of background, and he occasionally denied their existence. William Carlos was 14 years old when the United States invaded Puerto Rico in 1898; as the armies moved slowly northwest from Guánica, they eventually entered Mayagüez, his mother's hometown, and marched down the street before her childhood home. (While the Williams family followed these events very closely in the newspapers, there is scant mention of the invasion and occupation in the family correspondences.) The military intervention was accompanied by a robust governmental propaganda campaign that constructed notions of colonial superiority over the conquered peoples in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The military invasions of 1898 brought the US into colonial relations with Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Hawaiians, and Filipinos, which stirred public discourse on how to engage with these communities. As James Carroll notes, "Journalists, politicians, business leaders, and

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clergymen contributed to the creation of policies that were at best paternal and at worst overtly racist" (707). In an 1899 cartoon "School Begins," which first appeared in the magazine *Puck* (a periodical with links to the Democratic Party), depicts Hawai'i, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba as babies in a schoolroom being educated by an enormous Uncle Sam. Elementary-school aged children representing Latin America are seated behind the new colonies, a Native American is seated in a corner, and an African-American cleans the windows. The blackboard reads: "The U.S. must govern its new territories with or without the consent of the governed until they can govern themselves."

These circumstances were inserted directly into the life of the young William Carlos, who had to balance the cultural inheritance from his parents with a violent public climate toward Puerto Ricans in his place of residence. New Jersey, for Puerto Ricans who lived there, was (and to a degree is) a colonized space not unlike the archipelago, where Puerto Rican language and cultural performances were not only unwelcome, but signifiers of the racist and classist violence of the US colonial program. In this realm of cultural tension and the anxiety that stemmed from it, Williams was compelled to suppress his ability to speak Spanish—and for that, despite its omnipresence where he lived and worked, Williams's descriptions of his use of that language and its role in his upbringing often belie the reality of his home.

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Williams constructed a literary and public identity that was cleansed of Caribbean culture.

Several scholars have noted that Williams's fascination with aligning himself with the English language was a chief component in his "Americanization" process. Marzán argues that use of his second language in public spheres was "a form of patriotism" (59). Lisa Sánchez-González notes that "Williams was a figure forced into the US binarism of racial identifications" (53). In the same way, a thematic emphasis on things New Jersey and pastoral "American" subjects was a useful literary resource to effect this social appearance through writing. Julio Marzán observes, in the midst of "Anglo-American xenophobia, Williams felt ashamed of his mother's foreignness" (65). To develop that idea to another degree, this "foreignness" was not limited to his mother – but also an integral part of William Carlos's being; the cultural weight of US colonial empire was upon him, in his own home, and in a context in which Puerto Rican cultures and language are to be publicly delegitimized, some of Williams's remarks on the Spanish language manifest his desire to distance himself from this "non-American" tongue. Despite much evidence to the contrary, he notes, "[I have a] very scanty knowledge…of Spanish" (quoted in Mariani 738); "My Spanish wasn't so hot" (*Autobiography* 73) and "I didn't speak it" ("The Art of Poetry" 1). These

reflections stem from a colonial complex and illustrate how the US invasion shaped not only the lives of those in Puerto Rico but also in New Jersey.

Veiled Critique *in the American Grain:*

In citations like those above, Williams performs and twists the unhyphenated-American label attached to him, inventing new spaces within the colonized realities that loomed about him. As Antonia Rigaud notes, Williams's semi-historical, part literary treatise *In the American Grain* (1925), the author "sought to oppose the idea of a monumental national narrative" and by doing so, he seeks "to define the American mind … [through] the demystification of patriotic narratives" (13, 14). Williams, embedded in the colonized diaspora, "wanted to write a history of America that would be stripped of bias" (Rigaud 14) and does so without discussion of the imperial invasions of Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic.[17] But he does address the use of fear and terror, long at the center of US policy, and the "stupid" nature of such enterprises, offering a critique that repeats first-person plurals:

> all that is not pure accident—is the growth of fear. It is this which makes *us the* flaming terror of the world, a Titan, stupid (as were all the giants), great, to be tricked or tripped (from terror of *us*) with hatred barking at *us* by every sea. (174–75, emphasis added)

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He also discusses attempted destruction of Native nations, gesturing not toward monocultural "Americanization" but toward hybrid futures:

> And to give to him [a Native American] who HAS, who will join, who will make, who will fertilize, who will be like you yourself: to create, to hybridize, to crosspollenize (sic),—not to sterilize, to draw back, to fear, to dry up, to rot. It is the sun. (121)

Lisa Sánchez González's deft analysis of these phrases notes that Williams "clearly inscribes the authenticity of mestizo consciousness *as the American consciousness*" (52, emphasis added). It appears Williams's context prohibited performance of this *mestizaje*, that is, speaking Spanish to the tyrant: "Hence the amnesia" from critics, writes Sánchez González, "concerning Williams's Puerto Rican heritage" (62). However, as soon as we unlink "Puerto Rican heritage" and culture from the Spanish language, a transcultural dimension to texts in English appears, and this new critical space allows one to perceive other channels of meaning. Things Puerto Rican are memories concealed, emotions performed under threat—but they can be articulated in another language, including that of the tyrant (English).

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Multilingual Writings and Embracing things Latinx

Later in his life, by then an established physician and successful author, Williams published the biography of his mother, *Yes, Mrs. Williams: A Personal Record of my Mother*. This semi-memoir, which he had been working on for decades, treats with interest and fondness her years in Mayagüez and the rich cultural contact zone that was their home life in Rutherford. The text went to print in 1959, two years after *West Side Story* had broken ground of Puerto Rican realities on the US mainland; it also printed in the midst of the "A Bridge Between Two Cultures" propaganda campaign that intended to attract US corporate investment to Puerto Rico. The importance of their multilingual home life is paramount: "she [mother] speaks three languages…English the least perfectly, but for that very reason what she says in English—sayings with Spanish and French words intermixed—fascinated me the more. I began to copy down her phrases" (*Mrs. Williams* 26). Williams uses the image of his mother as the point of reference to discuss—always from the distance of a vicarious perspective—the multicultural topics of their home.

Williams underscores how some of his literary interests relate to their Spanish-language heritage. He notes that Quevedo "had come down the two hundred years after his death even to Mayagüez and so on to me" (*Mrs. Williams* 21). *Yes, Mrs. Williams* is an illuminating postmodern pastiche, one that is not essentially linear or

coherent. The unifying elements of the text are non-US cultural realities presented with a playful and seemingly haphazard movement from theme to theme and from language to language. This indirect form of autobiography, like Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, allows Williams to use the circuitous subject as a resource to provide some fleeting and inferred perceptions of his self and literary identity. The various languages, times frames, and juxtaposition of value systems are also a veiled literary description of home-life for the Williams family, a circumstance characterized by several cultural spheres.

A particularly salient quote from his mother concerns "Americans" and their use of Spanish: "Speaking of language—When you Americans write Spanish, sometimes you forget" (*Mrs. Williams* 55). This sentence appears to layer William Carlos with a cultural separateness from his mother, which is constructed through "you Americans";[18] the phrase is artfully abstract in its brevity and appears to leave an element absent. Williams (or Raquel Hélène, his mother, whom he is quoting here) is making a clever translingual joke—as "forget" is a transitive verb in Spanish, yet it has no object in this sentence. The clause "sometimes you forget" ends the sentence. What is it that "you Americans" (from Spanish-speaking families) are forgetting? His mother evidently recognized Williams's reluctance to perform his home language and

identity in public, and the lost element of this phrase could be an allusion to that circumstance. The topic is retouched in *Paterson*:

The language, the language

fails them,

they do not know the words

or have not

the courage to use them.

(Paterson 11)

Williams traveled to Puerto Rico in 1941 and again in 1956. In 1941, he described the journey as "un viaje proyectado desde hace mucho tiempo."[19] A 1956 letter explains that he suddenly had the desire "to stop and listen to him with his *coquoc quille* rather than to a world of humans."[20] The coquí is a symbol of the island and Julio Marzán has argued that the Frenchification of the word to "coquoc quille" was meant to construct a "distant air" toward locals.[21] In a short-story called "The Prince," which is often interpreted as partly autobiographical, the protagonist realizes a symbolic voyage of return: "So he went on, homeward or seeking a home that was his own, all through a 'foreign' country whose language was barbarous" (*Selected Poems* xvii).

William Carlos occasionally acknowledged the importance of his colonized, multicultural reality, particularly concerning how they influence the structure of his

texts written in English. In an interview with the *Paris Review* entitled "The Art of Poetry," conducted in 1962, a year before his death, Williams was queried on the role of Spanish in his writing:

> INTERVIEWER: Do you think the Spanish has had any influence on your work?
>
> WILLIAMS: There might have been a permanent impression on my mind…. My relation to language was a curious thing…. Spanish was spoken in my home….I was read to in Spanish. My mother's relatives [who could not speak English] used to come up and stay two or three months. (1+)

Like Sandra Cisneros, Gertrude Stein, Benjamín Alire Sáenz, Saul Bellow, Isabel Quintero and Jack Kerouac, among many others, Williams wrote almost exclusively in his second language.[22] Williams's familiarity with the "permanent" presence of Spanish in his mind underscores that his native tongue was an embedded component in the fabric of his work, regardless of the language of its composition. Measuring the precise outcomes of a language amalgam was an abstract and complex task that Williams himself occasionally mused: "the icy chastity of Spanish thought," he explained in an essay, "comes through the reality of the event from which the man does not flinch" (*Selected Essays* 228). Williams also lamented that not many

American writers could appreciate Spanish texts in *versión original*, and that the translations are poor. In his words:

> If more of the Spanish were better translated—more in the spirit of Modern American letters, using word of mouth no literary English—most of the principles which have been so hard won, the directness, the immediacy, the reality of our present day writing in verse and prose would be virtually strengthened. Our efforts away from vaguely derived, nostalgic efforts, so deleterious to the mind, would be directness and objectivity we so plainly seek. (*By Word Of Mouth* xxxv)

As an antidote to the colonial crisis put upon him, Williams endeavors to amalgamate American English and Spanish, using translation as a vehicle. Subsequent to this reflection, Williams took on translation as part of his vocation. He found the solid constitution of Spanish-language texts inspiring, and, precisely, clarity is a defining characteristic of Williams's writing in English. He wrote of Jorge Carrera Andrade's poetry: "I don't know when I have had so clear a pleasure, so unaffected by the torments of mind which are today our daily bread. The images [in Spanish] are as you say so extraordinarily clear" (*By Word of mouth* 157). And when he reflected on the role of Spanish-to-English translation in his purview of writing itself, Williams had this to say:

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> attempting translations…should permit us to use our language [English] with unlimited freshness. In such attempts we will not have to follow precedent but can branch off into new diction, adapting new forms, even discovering new forms in our attempts to find accurate equivalents for the felicities of the past. (*Autobiography* 349)

"Our" refers to English in this case and the pronoun "we" has English speakers as its limits; Williams discusses translation in a phrasing that situates himself on one side of an imaginary divide. Moreover, speakers of Spanish will note "felicities"—a word seldom used in English—relates to its cognate *felicidades*, a term comparatively common in Spanish. This reflection at once constructs a distance from his native tongue and recognizes the potential of multilingual writing and translingual thought.[23]

The process of translation itself was a forum for Williams to explore new uses of the English language. When applying this to "Lorca and Gongora," he observes, "putting them over into our language, we have almost an ideal opportunity for trying out new modes entirely" (*Autobiography* 350). Again, Williams uses the act of translation to situate himself with the English-speaking sociolinguistic group (through use of "our"), and gestures toward these modes—when used in English—would take

on the characteristics of these texts in Spanish. This recognition of a new, hybrid or multivariate use of the English language arises again during a lecture in Puerto Rico in 1941, when he argued that the eight-syllable, four-stress line common in Spanish-language poetry could complement iambic pentameter (Marzán 188).

We can find some more direct allusions to Puerto Rican and other Spanish-language writers in his work in later years. As Julio Marzán points out, "his obsession with concreteness and things over abstractions, with an unfailing language unafraid to address reality, coincided exactly with how contemporaneous Puerto Rican writers rejected [romanticism]" (60). Indeed, the employment of Spanish communicative tendencies in English, the number of syllables common to another register, and the economy and starkness of prose, were products of the translingual nature of Williams's mind. He described this new diction as "No ideas but in things" (*Paterson* 6), a concept that is central when one is translating texts. Translations differ from standard composition in that their objective is to reduce potential secondary connotations; this if often achieved through word choice, punctuation, and tone, which intend to simplify language into standardized and comprehensible forms. As Lawrence Venuti observes, "translation is fundamentally domesticating" and "is constrained by the exigencies of communication and therefore renders foreign texts in standard dialects and terminologies to ensure immediate intelligibility" ("Strategies of

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Translation" 244). The clarity and precision of Williams's texts, particularly poetry, have a quality that enables the words to exist in concert in a way that resembles translation. In "This is just to say":

I have eaten

the plums

that were in

the icebox (*Collected Poems* 372)

Translation parses sentences, clustering groups of words by semantic function in order to report them with optimal accuracy. Williams uses line breaks here to separate text into blocks of partial clauses, "I have eaten" and "that were in," which allows the phrasal objects, "the plums" and "the icebox" to appear independent from their modifiers. This technique eliminates viable interpretations (always a goal of translation) of the composition. The range of meaning that may be applied to these words is reduced; words are employed in stock form, as tools toward what might be termed the "immediate intelligibility" of the *things* (not the *ideas* that might stem from an interpretation of the words).

We find a similar approach in "Della Primavera Transportata Al Morale":

a green truck

dragging a concrete mixer

passes in the street (*Collected Poems* 331)

As occurs in the first example, this poem fragment introduces a noun ("truck"), an intransitive and transitive action ("dragging" and "passes"), and a place ("street"). Through brevity and spacing, the parts of language are engaged in ways that reduce potential interpretation. While this example has verb and object in the same line, the function is the same: the verbs and their objects are part of a singular clause anchored by the "truck," which subordinates the "mixer" and the "street" to their relation to the truck. The truck as subject removes the modifying quality of the verbs and their objects, making the terms themselves, as in "This is just to say," rebellious to interpretation. Such textual construction has links to Williams's interactions in Spanish and English (and Spanglish), his experience doing translations, and his attempts to bring the clarity of Spanish imagery into English. Williams was building new forms of English diction through the interaction of English and Spanish, and found new qualities emerging when the diversity of several registers is employed as a single unified concept.

Crisis Aesthetics and Colonized Diasporas:

Language applies meaning to signals. When speaking, the signals are words, grammatical frames and tones of voice, complemented by gesticulations, uses of

space and silence. Language organizes how we perceive and sense a world; it is also the vehicle how we compress such concepts into physical realities such as text, sound, or gesture. We are in a constant state of language acquisition and learning, and for many Latinx writers, like Williams, the translingual qualities inform their texts in ways that transcend the language of the words themselves.[24] These dimensions of Williams's work are the result of life in spaces that bridge linguistic canons and allowed him to explore philosophies, values, aesthetics, and perceptions of multiple cultural systems—at once. The departure from monocultural expression is manifest not only in utilization of vocabulary and syntax—but also in the ideas, senses of value and beauty, and the diverse ways of life that complement each linguistic system. Nuancing an English-centric critical focus offers a mine of planes of understanding that recognize how profoundly the colonial status of his family homeland informed William Carlos Williams's writing. The cultural-interactions in the mind that harmonize into translingual writing, so common in Latinx aesthetics, often emerge not only in word-choice and phrasal construction, but in storylines and character-behavior, the tacit components so important to all literary expression—all of which, under colonial distress, are artfully articulated by Williams in English.[25]

"I write in French to tell the French I am not French," writes Kated Yacine, engaging Algerian sensibilities appropriating a French colonial tool—using the

imperial apparatus as a decolonial intervention.[26] Likewise, Williams's aesthetics were cultivated out of the colonized identity that had been set upon (not within, but *upon*) him since birth by his country of birth: his achievement was cultivated out of a culture and a people and a language that a colonial power yet strives to annul—in relevance if not existence. While the words he used in the colonizer's tongue were appropriated by him, they do not repeat the tyrant's myths: within them, in the depths of his parents' and his own language, written in English, was the plurality of his own agency.[27]

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Notes:

[1] After Hurricane María, as Mariolga Reyes Cruz deftly observes, "Nuestra gente fuera del archipiélago vivía angustiada por la falta de comunicación y ya organizaban su amor y solidaridad porque sabían mucho más sobre lo que pasaba acá que quienes estábamos en medio de la inmediatez forzada por el silencio de los celulares, los radios y los televisores. Pero los paquetes no llegaban y la gente hacía de tripas corazones. Todavía estas escenas se repiten en distintos 'bolsillos' de este archipiélago" (1).
[2] And even when that same vocabulary appears in disagreement, so as "to oppose power," as Víctor Figueroa points out, the resulting readings are yet "defined by power" (77). In a review of Marta Aponte Alsina's novel *La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams*, Efraín Barradas notes that there are also dilemmas embedded in the new paths of being, which he describes as: "un limitante nacionalismo defensivo se quería enfrentar un mal llamado universalismo [cosa] que era otra forma de coloniaje" (1). The presumed distinctions of community-membership are re-engineered through literary studies by means of comparative oppositional signs that, like other forms of fiction, become a mechanism "for defining social relationships, sustaining social rules, and strengthening social values" (Geertz 99).
[3] For more on this topic, see chapters 1-3 of my book *After American Studies: Rethinking the Legacies of Transnational Exceptionalism*
[4] Some important and groupdbreaking scholarship (like that of Julio Marzán, Miguel Mota, and Lisa Sánchez González) demonstrate resistance to this tendency, but the "American" qualifier still dominates Williams's location in literary critique.
[5] Mark Rudman has argued that Spanish dominated the Williams household such that without external schooling and the perseverance of his English-speaking grandmother, William Carlos Williams "might never have attained mastery of the English language" (50). Like Williams, Jack Kerouac did not speak English at home and he was not dominant in that language until his late teens (Sheldon 35).
[6] Julio Marzán's theoretical approach separates "Spanish" and "English" – and thus the social and philosophical systems that stem from each – into discrete entities; Lisa Sánchez González also investigates these depths but with somewhat different aims. In this essay, the *trans* emphasis rethinks the supposed isolated nature of Spanish and English, and their cultural implications, into a hybrid and unified system in which Spanish and the philosophies and sentiments embedded therein may be articulated in English.
[7] Cultural Geography as an academic discipline examines how symbols (colors, language, food, clothing, iconography, among many others) can be used to describe the social characteristics of communities and individuals. Albert Bierstad has suggested three dimensions of culture: Ideas, Norms, and Material. Ideas (the ethics, morality, aesthetics, sense of value, and so on, of the predominant ideology in a space) are transmuted into behavioral norms (or, how a person should act per the ideas); and the material artifacts (texts, festivals, song, visual art, ceremony, ritual, and so on) communicate the ideas through tangible modes. According to Bierstad's model, there is a multidimensional hierarchy of the three dimensions of culture. The theoretical base of this essay nuances Biertad's model by examining through the shaping influence of cultural hybridity, as articulated by Homi Bhabha, an approach which reorganizes "ideas" (as well as their intangible links to norms and material) through a multicultural base. For more on this topic, see my book *After American Studies*, chapter 1.
[8] In *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams*, Julio Marzán's groundbreaking work is situated through a lens involving two "selves": Bill and Carlos. Carlos is "inherited from his Puerto Rican mother" (5) and is underscored by "newness" (5, 14); while Bill is "not a foreigner" (7) in New

Jersey. Marzán develops this concept under the notion that "Bill and Carlos as distinct and interacting selves" and that he had a "life-informing quest to reconcile his cultures" (Marzán 3, 6).

[9] The cloak that is held over William Carlos Williams's Spanish represents the forces that strive to annul Puerto Rican identity and language, on the island as well as on the US mainland.

[10] See "Foreign Language Knowledge can Influence Native Language Performance in Exclusively Native Contexts" by Evelyne Lagrou et. al; "Does Bilingualism Change Native-Language Reading?" by Eva Van Assche et. al.; and "Is Syntax Separate or Shared Between Languages? Cross-Linguistic Syntactic Priming in Spanish-English Bilinguals" by RJ Hartsuiker et. al.

[11] See Miguel Mota and Kerry Driscoll.

[12] See Vivian Cook, *The Effects of the Second Language on the First* and "Evidence for multicompetence" *Language Learning* 42. (1992): 557–591.

[13] "An individual can acquire the shared knowledge of two cultures and either set of shared knowledge can become activated in the mind of the bicultural individual by certain contextual clues, and the activated knowledge set will affect the individual's subsequent cognition, affect, and behavior" (Hong "A dynamic constructivist approach to culture" 4).

[14] See the Introduction to *The Sociolinguistics of Identity* edited by Tope Omoniyi and Goodith White.

[15] In *Second Language Identities* David Block argues that separate identities based in part on language have links to social class, ethnicity, migratory-status, and other concepts (introduction).

[16] In a cultural sense, then, Williams's father was *dominicano*. Another version of the family history maintains that William Carlos' was born in Puerto Plata (Marzán 22).

[17] The only mention of Puerto Rico in the text is in reference to Spanish colonization: "Ponce found his plantations going under for lack of slaves—no more to be trapped in Puerto Rico, *rico!* all ruined" (39).

[18] The phrase "you Americans" does not precisely exist in Spanish; if it were uttered in Spanish and literally translated to English, the sentence would read: "Cuando ustedes, los norteamericanos, escriben en español…" [then translated] "When you, the Americans, write in Spanish…"

[19] Quoted in Marzán 30.

[20] Quoted in Mariani 29.

[21] See Marzán 29.

[22] For more on this topic, see: "Life as a Bilingual: The reality of living with two (or more) languages" by Francois Grosjean and "Does Bilingualism Change Native Language Reading?" by Eva Van Assche et. al.

[23] The use of a style of English that is exactly translated from Spanish is a signifier of Williams's interest in this process of veiled self-discovery and exploration; the union of languages is the vehicle of that search.

[24] These are essential to bear in mind amid the recent inundation of new colonial apparatuses since Hurricane Maria: migrants forced from the island this generation are not exceptional to the circumstance of Williams and his family. On the mainland Puerto Rican identities, languages, philosophies, sensibilities, and their cultural signifiers, are yet immersed in a hierarchical relation, if not annulation, with the dominant system.

[25] William Carlos Williams's work has many parallels to other writers—like Junot Díaz, Gianna Brasci, and Edwidge Danticat—who also work in between Caribbean and US cultural spaces, and in between traditionally separate linguistic spaces. And the cross- and interlingual nature of their English-language expressions (in fiction, poetry, prose, interviews, translations, and correspondence) could be read similarly through the nuances and harmonizations with other languages and their philosophies, a concept that indeed complicates the notion that multilingual authors have a single "native" language or culture.

[26] Quoted in Orlando 161

[27] "They have erased the Puerto Ricans," notes Marta Aponte Alsina, author of *La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams*, "dehumanised us, since the invasion in 1898, and there have been no changes in the imperial policies of the United States since then. Debt repayment policies are combatted in many countries, we are not alone. The difference is that here such policies are not subject to appeal, since they are imposed by a dictatorship and we have no access to international fora. We are under the control of a junta of administrators who were not elected by the people of Puerto Rico." Aponte Alsina's eloquent reflections on the US empire outline the ways these controls emerge through literary modes: "We have been deleted from the international community by the colonial relationship," she writes, a circumstance that weighs heavily on Puerto Rican letters: "In this island colony, words resound in slow, almost portable ways. It's undeniable that we are cursed by our colonial condition" (2017). Indeed, in a colonized reality in which local, Puerto Rican aesthetics have "been angrily scratched out," Aponte Alsina's remarkable novel cultivates a multiple-frame expression in ways that combine languages, geographies, memories, and families: "In some passages from the novel, the waters mix"; a confluence of dimensions that she has called "A unitive aesthetic, crossing the boundaries between fiction and memory....the foreign gaze, the extended ties of Puerto Rican culture, the re-writing of canonical texts, the voices of women" (2017). The purpose of this approach to literature, culture, expression, as Aponte Alsina eloquently describes, is a path "to give voice to silence" (2017).

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