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## The “Dragging Foot” of José Garcia Villa’s Performative “Comma Poems”

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**Abstract:** José Garcia Villa’s “comma poem,” in which he introduces “a new, special and poetic use” for the comma, is arguably the poet’s most contentious innovation. Starting from an appropriation of Leonard Caspar’s description of the comma poems as “demonstrably malfunctioning as a dragging foot,” this essay argues that the comma poem was a visual performance whereby Villa dis-oriented and de-naturalized poetic “flows” through a queer/crip aesthetic of hesitation and brokenness. Read as footsteps and/or footnotes, the comma’s minor mark interrupts and dis-ables normative flow, forcing the reader to adopt a nonnormative “gait.” Utilizing Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological theory of “queer orientation,” I examine how the comma poems’ specific incongruity extends beyond modern grammars: anticipating readings of his “foreignness” and “insensitivity” to the English language, Villa performs the essentiality of the “minor mark” through linguistic experimentation. In doing so, he queers not only the “direction” of modern poetry and its canonicity, but also a contemporary politics of recuperation.

**Keywords:** José Garcia Villa, modernist poetry, commas, Sara Ahmed, queer/crip theory

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With the 1999 publication of Kaya Press’s *The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings by José Garcia Villa* and Penguin’s 2008 *Doveglion: Collected Poems*, José Garcia Villa’s work has been critically reassessed within the traditions of modern American poetry and at the intersections of Asian American and diasporic literature. The Manila-born short story writer, poet, and editor who used the penname Doveglion (a combination of “dove-eagle-lion”) was, according to Martin Ponce, “the first Filipino writer to garner acclaim from prominent Anglo-American poets and critics” (60). After emigrating to the US to study at the University of New Mexico and in 1932 moving to Greenwich Village, Villa published a collection of short stories, *Footnote to Youth: Tales of the Philippines and Others* (1933), followed by several poetry collections, including *Have Come, Am Here* (1942). Recipient of accolades including a Pulitzer Prize nomination and a Guggenheim Fellowship, Villa was widely published and anthologized in the 1940s and 50s in the US and the

Philippines and celebrated by a modernist literary elite, including e. e. cummings, Mark Van Doren, Marianne Moore, and Edith Sitwell. By the 1960s, however, Villa's work was sliding into obscurity as his books went out of print. "Villa fell quickly from the canon of modern American poetry," writes Timothy Yu, "and now seems a mere footnote to its history" (42).

Jump-started in 1996 by E. San Juan, Jr.'s assessment of Villa as "probably the most neglected twentieth-century writer on the planet" (171), Villa recuperative scholarship has exhibited both a sustained interest in his short fiction and, since the 2008 publication of his collected poems, Villa's "queerness" in relation to poetic form. Denise Cruz analyzes the "irreconcilabilities" between Villa's semi-autobiographical stories in *Footnote to Youth*, contrasting the heteronormative, affectively stifled tales set in the Philippines with the "Others," the US desert- and city-set stories of mobility and queer eroticism which "feature stream-of-consciousness narration or experimental form" (11). Ponce tracks the "queer erotics" of Villa's modernism across several texts of his oeuvre, including "Man-Songs," the legendary teenage erotic poems that led to Villa's suspension from the University of the Philippines. Benjamin Kahan, reading Villa's "transpacific queer aesthetic" in poems selected from *Have Come*, proposes that the rhyming scheme Villa called "reversed consonance," wherein "the last sounded consonant of the last syllable, or the last principal consonants of a word, are reversed for the corresponding rhyme" (*Doveglion* 74), "creates new possibilities for coupling, suggesting a queer content, one which imagines pairings hitherto unimagined" (Kahan 656). Finally, Swati Rana explores how Villa's "grotesque" characters in his short stories expose the ways in which "Filipinos and other minorities are characterized socially as mere emblems and fitted to limited symbolic functions," "disclos[ing] the incongruousness of Villa's own position within his artistic and social milieu" (67, 73).

Though garnering him much attention, both Villa's prose and "reversed consonance" poetry were forms he abandoned relatively early in his career. Surprisingly few scholars have expressed critical interest in the self-proclaimed "strange innovation" whereby Villa replaced the space between each word of a poetic line with a comma. The "comma poem" debuted in Villa's *Volume Two*, published by New Directions in 1949 (*Doveglion* 78). Rana references the (in)famous 1948 Gotham Book Shop photograph featuring Villa with "the who's who of modernist luminaries" (72); the image, she proposes, "testifies to Villa's bizarre incongruence as the colonial migrant who comes to occupy the heart of the American literary canon. . . . Partly eclipsed and partly overexposed, his face glares at the viewer, as though challenging us to develop the conditions for Villa's legibility" (72). In the following, I will argue that the "comma poems" occupy a marginalized status in the poet's body of work and might best reflect Villa's "glare" —his "othered" or "incongruent" status within Anglo-American modernism.

The fact that Villa republished the comma poems throughout his career, even composing new ones for *Selected Poems and New* (1958) (which, he wrote, "retained only those poems I can still care about"; vii), suggests that Villa's punctuative experiment extended "beyond grammar." The comma poems were not only pivotal to his artistic project but also an important modernist intervention in the "grammar" of canonical modern poetry. Taking inspiration from both critics' "queer" analytics and Rana's "focus on what Villa makes visible through characters that are also grotesques" (73), this paper attends to a selection of the understudied comma poems to read

how they disrupt normative "lines" through queer/crip<sup>1</sup> punctuative performance. Utilizing Sara Ahmed's phenomenological reading of "queer orientation," I argue that Villa's commas queer the lyric through an aesthetic of hesitation and brokenness. In the comma poems' performative effect on the reader, the pace of reading is deliberately slowed, disrupting normative flows and turning readerly attunement "off-line" to the poetic "footprints," or "footnotes," visually marked by commas (Ahmed 16). As the commas' "minor" marks interrupt and dis-able flow, the reader must adopt a queer "gait." By reading the comma poems for their radical embrace of punctuative "handicaps," Villa's poetry may be read as disorienting the "direction" of modern poetry.

The comma poem was a "more radical and obtrusive" innovation than reversed consonance, according to Yu, who highlights the placement of Villa's explanatory notes: in contrast to the note for reversed consonance which was placed after the poems in *Have Come*, "A Note on the Commas" importantly prefaces the comma poems, a move that foregrounds the formal experimentation of the technique (51). In "A Note on the Commas," Villa writes:

The reader of the following poems may be perplexed and puzzled at my use of the comma: it is a new, special and poetic use to which I have put it. The commas appear in the poems *functionally*, and thus not for eccentricity; and they are there also *poetically*, that is to say, not in their prose function. These poems were conceived *with* commas, as "comma poems," in which the commas are an integral and essential part of the medium: regulating the poem's verbal density and time movement: enabling each word to attain a fuller tonal [and sonal]<sup>2</sup> value, and the line movement to become more measured. (*Doveglion* 78; italics original)

To illustrate the "integral" nature of the commas, Villa compares the technique to Seurat's pointillism "where the points of color are themselves the medium of expression, and therefore functional and valid, as medium of art and as medium of personality" (78). Anticipating aversion to his comma device while "put[ting] forward an argument for his own artistry" (Yu 51), Villa states, "Only the uninitiate would complain that Seurat should have painted in strokes" (*Doveglion* 78).

Villa also provides instructions in "A Note" for how to read the comma poems: "Regarding the time movement effected by the commas—a pause ensues after each comma, but a pause not as long as that commanded by its prose use: for this reason the usual space after the comma is omitted" (78). In comma poem #1 (#128 in *Doveglion*), Villa introduces the collection's dignified march measured by commas' "visual[ly] distinctive" little feet (78):

The,bright,Centipede,  
Begins,his,stampede,  
O,celestial,Engine,from,  
What,celestial,province!  
His,spiritual,might,  
Golding,the,night—  
His,spiritual,eyes,  
Foretelling,my,Size;

His,spiritual,feet,  
Stamping,in,heat,  
To,radium,brain,  
To,Spiritual,Imagination. (*Anchored Angel* 79)

Yu proposes that “A Note on the Commas” is evidence of Villa’s “further pressing [of] the case for himself as experimentalist modern, while betraying some anxiety that his devices will be seen as mere mannerism” (51). This anxiety proved to be correct as critics struggled with Villa’s latest experiment, providing both scathing reviews and some awkward endorsements. T. M. Pearce called the poems “puzzling” and “annoying” (207). Richard Eberhart wrote to Villa, “The arbitrary and perfectionist technique ... of the comma is somehow, I don’t know how, enlivening; it is a trick that refreshes, you know it is a trick and accept it, and in spite of yourself you read right through the commas, so to speak” (qtd. in Francia xxvi-xxvii). Beyond reducing the comma poems to “tricks,” Eberhart’s method of “read[ing] through the commas” was exactly how not to read the poems according to Villa’s directions.

In *New Writing from the Philippines*, Leonard Caspar read the comma poems as derivative (of Cummings) and a “reduction to absurdity, through excess” (107), writing,

Where a sort of processional measure is desirable, the “comma” in fact does distribute equality of weight among words. But for other poems it is as *demonstrably malfunctional as a dragging foot*. Being invariable, it allows no subtleties of suspension, syncopation, etc.; being identical, visually, ... it hinders the exploitation of punctuation. (107; my emphasis)

Like Caspar, who claimed that Villa used commas with “inadequate understanding and skill” (107), Babette Deutsch, in a review of *Have Come*, had conjectured that Villa’s grammatical experimentation was an effect of his “foreignness”: “The fact that he is a native of the Philippines who comes to the English language as a stranger may have helped him to his unusual syntax” (qtd. in Yu 48). This, along with William Meredith’s claim that Villa’s “insensitivity to the conventional meanings and uses of words” as evidenced by his “cavalier” use of English (qtd. in Yu 52) reveal a shared critical stance that Villa’s languaging proved his distance from English, and that this assumed “lack of command” hindered a “truer” experimental or modern poetry. Randall Jarrell’s scathing review of *Volume Two*, in which he called Villa a “Spanish mystic” (qtd. in Yu 53), and Marianne Moore’s use of the term “Chinese master” in an earlier review (Yu 53), are perhaps both examples of what Yu describes as “the delicate ideological work necessary to incorporate Villa, a Filipino subject, into the Anglo American modernist canon” (48). Beyond this, these criticisms reveal the extent to which Villa’s linguistic experimentation *specifically* put pressure on the assumptions and norms of the Anglo avant-garde.

While Villa acknowledged that his “new poetic employment of the comma may disconcert some readers,” he believed that “the more poetically and textually sensitive reader” would perceive the commas’ “essentiality” (*Doveglion* 78). In efforts to be one of Villa’s “sensitive” readers, this paper asks, what *are* the commas doing “functionally” and “poetically”? How did Villa, to quote

Jennifer DeVere Brody, "wrangle[...] with what or how punctuation performs as well as represents thought (as well as bodily presence)" (14)? In what ways can the comma poems be read as Villa's response to assumptions not only of his "disabled" use of English, but also as an anticipatory staging of his "foreign" and "footnoted" status within the modernist milieu in which he was briefly visible?

An apt word with which to describe the effect of the comma in Villa's poems is "suturing," a word combining breakage and linkage, as in when a wound is sutured, the site of skin's breakage remains visible; "knitting" works similarly, wherein the seams of a garment are visible and always vulnerable to being "unknit." "Breaking," "suturing," and "knitting" are themes running through *Volume Two's* comma poems. Like many of the volume's "Divine Poems" (all of which are comma poems), Poem #14 (#140 in *Doveglion*) dramatizes the knittedness of the self to a divine structure.

As,much,as,I,perceive,the,Future,  
Lo: the,Future,perceives,me:  
A,Mutuality,of,Eyes.

Untanglement,beyond,possibility—  
Too,knit,too,knit,together,we!  
None,can,effect,suture.

Not,I,if,I,wished: though,I,worked,  
Though,I,broke,all,my,life:  
Long,Ago,these,Futures,were,Weld:

Architecture,most,pure,most,splendid:  
God,Pyramidal,Darkness—  
And,I—Fire! climbing,it,climbing,it. (*Anchored Angel* 87-88)

Mutuality is structurally represented through phrase inversion ("I,perceive,the,Future,"/ "the,Future,perceives, me"); repetition ("Too,knit,too,knit" or "most,pure,most,splendid,"); rhythmic resonance ("if,I,wished: though,I,worked,"/"Though,I,broke"); and capitalization across all parts of speech. Connectedness and relationality are expressed through a style of mirroring throughout the poem. As the middle stanzas describe being "knit,together" and "weld," the words of each line are visually (un)tangled(able) through the stitching-effect of the commas. The "Fire!" of "I" suggests that the poet acts as welder of the "architecture" that the reader, disoriented at "the bottom" of the poem between the axes of "Long,Ago" and "the,Future," must now "climb."

Carlos Reyes, noting the dual effect of commas in Villa's poems, writes that the commas operate "simultaneously to disjoin and to conjoin" (165). The comma ambiguously functions in English grammar to "break up" sentences and to "link" clauses. In the world of punctuation, commas are minor(itized) or slight(ed) marks that *look* little but *do* much, resembling stitches, "ants" (a "noble" figure in Villa's poetry) (*Doveglion* 24), or the Centipede's "spiritual,feet" (79).

Pico Iyer, in his love letter to the comma, writes, “It seems just a slip of a thing, a pedant’s tick, a blip on the edge of our consciousness, a kind of printer’s smudge almost” (80). In this way commas share footnotes’ status: decentered, positioned usually “at the bottom,” and marked as an aside or *beside* the point. Even in her book dedicated to punctuation, DeVere Brody overlooks the comma in favor of more “interesting” punctuation such as the question or exclamation mark (5). Nevertheless, she argues for the necessity of reading all punctuation’s “means of inscribing bodily affect and presence” (5).

Since the general rule of commas in English grammar is to insert them when the reader would take a breath, the comma can be read as either an anticipatory mark of the reader’s “natural breath” or a guideline for how to breathe “naturally” while reading. Punctuation’s “mis-use” is rebellious, writes Iyer, since “we are taught that the function of punctuation is to keep up law and order” (80). By inserting an excess of commas, Villa seems interested in disrupting the “natural” order or pace of breathing, as noted by Deutsch who likened reading the comma poems to “gasping” (qtd. in Yu 52). Referring to enjambment determined by “natural pauses dictated by breath,” Villa said in an interview with Doreen Fernandez, “When your breath pauses, [the line] stops. There is no craft there” (qtd. in Francia xxxiii). If the commas in Villa’s comma poems retain their function of “breath-taking,” breathing is queerly quickened as the eye between words is slowed, or pauses are reoriented to occur decoupled from breath.

In addition to breathing differently, the reader is also instructed in how to “step” hesitantly through the poem rather than flow without pause. Ponce proposes that Villa’s serial numbering of his poems “is not geared toward teleological linearity, but rather makes possible a poetics of emergence and becoming” (81). At the level of the poem, I propose, the commas move the reader through a “process of becoming” by “regulat[ing] ‘the time movement’” from *word to word*, turning poetic emergence into something deliberately choppy, interruptive (81). The aesthetic of hesitation, a visual performance of an English read as “broken” and “sutured” through a queer poetic form, is enacted through an excess of commas that break up and disorient the flow of reading.

Interruptions of flow and other dis-orientations materialize in Poem “20” (“146” in *Doveglion*), a queer, multi-directional tour through the possibilities of proximity, resemblance, and “Truth’s” relationality.

How,high,is,low,  
If,it,resembles,high,  
Yet,not,grows?

As,far,as,falsity,only,  
Not,less,not,higher,  
Not,reaches,Truth’s,door,  
Expires,as,it,aspires.

How,far,is,glass?

As, far, only, as, not, broken,  
 Not, more, not, less,  
 Than, this, single, address.

How, far, then, I, from, you?  
 As, far, only, as, I,  
 As, far, only, as, your, unbroken, glass,  
 Mirrors, serenely, the, broken, mouth,  
 Of, my, unbroken, unbreakable, mind.

(*Anchored Angel* 91)

From the poem's beginning, readers are thrown "off-line." Upon reading "How, high, is, low" the reader wonders how "high" can even be "low," fumbling to find a reference point from which to read "highness" and "lowness." "Low" and "high" quickly become capable of "growth," which changes their "shape" altogether, but any sense of progression trips over the pause and retractive movement of "not, grows" and "Expires." Orientation in this sense is unfixed, as the process of positioning becomes privileged over resemblance. The poem steps into a landscape of prepositional comparatives— "as, far, as," "not, less, not, higher," and "Not, more, not, less" —again with equivocal object/place referents. The instability or invisibility of the referent (as in, "How, far, is, glass?") opens the possibilities of "reference" or relationship. The spatial meaning of "How, far", for example, is sutured (connected yet separated) to the figurative: how far (spatially, figuratively) are "we" from glass? How far is glass from "Truth's, door"? When glass becomes "unbroken" mirror, nearness and farness are further skewed, since the glass now "resemble[s]" "I" and/or "you"; thus "distance" must also be measured as "difference."

The poem's final stanza suggests more explicitly the "broken connection" between the poet's "broken, mouth" (a mouth from which one might speak "brokenly") and an "unbroken, unbreakable, mind." Importantly, the mouth's brokenness is presented only as it is "serenely" mirrored by "you"'s "unbroken glass." A broken mouth or speech is thus a reflection, but the poet seems to embrace this brokenness through making it "of" his "unbreakable, mind." Through a complex, measured process of spatial, phenomenological disorientation, the poem, like Poem "14", demonstrates words' relationality while revealing the extent to which grammar's "sense" is embodied and "makes sense" only through invisible, repeated lines.

When commas replace spaces between words in Villa's poems, words come into queerer relation to each other because they no longer "follow" each other "naturally." In fact, if each word is imagined as leaving a footprint, the "following word" is now oriented to "come before" the previous, which now "follows" the next. It is as if the words were walking in a line (following each other), and the commas mark each word's footprint; the reader's eye, like the word, sees the next word's footprint before following the line. In this way, words take steps, deliberately and hesitantly, and, similarly to clauses, are both visually dependent on and independent from each other. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed unpacks how orientation-along-certain-lines, or directions, happens through the "footprint":

A paradox of the footprint emerges. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. To say that lines are performative is to say that we find our way and we know which direction we face only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view. So in following the directions, I arrive, as if by magic. (16)

At the level of the clause, a syntactical construction structured by and around the footprints of punctuation, the formation of “the path” becomes “hidden from view” through grammar’s repetition. Through the hyper-visibility of the commas in Villa’s poetry, the movement of “following” is made visual. As new “repetitions” come into view, the pace of reading is “queer” because this new gait feels “awkward.” Reading’s awkwardness, or the feeling of being queerly off-flow or off-line, reveals how “natural” earlier flows felt because of previous repetitions.

Villa queers punctuation in the comma poems to dis/re-orient the reader away from a syntactical “path well trodden” (Ahmed 16). A state of suspension infuses Poem “12” (“138” in *Doveglion*), which defies gravity despite a ripe, religious heaviness. The poem is always *about* to move as the phrase is always *about* to be “complete,” but the “end” feels deferred by some “still[ness],” some “ill[ness].”

At,the,in,of,me,  
More,real,than,unreality—  
There,greens,an,infinity,

Ripens,and,does,not,fall:  
Fruit,of,very-whole,  
My,saint,my,prodigal.

Unbody,and,end,only—  
Vision,and,end,only—  
More,ill,more,beautiful,

More,still,more,musical,  
Than,death,and,rose,in,love,  
Than,rose,and,death,in,love.

(*Anchored Angel* 86)

In contrast to the “bigness” of the poem’s divine content, the commas sit as footnotes to the words, marking the line like a broken metronome, measuring the footsteps of the poet’s inner walk. The combination of the opening prepositions “at” and “in” create an image of a “place” called “the,in,of,me,” but the description of this place— “More,real,than,unreality” —leaves ambiguous the measure of its reality. Comparative “mores” fill three stanzas, denoting excess and overflow,

yet there is again a lack of referents to determine what is "less" as compared to this "more." The forthcoming action ("there, greens") is deferred by a description of suspension—"an, infinity" "greens" but hangs there "ripen[ing]," "not, fall[ing]"—and further stilled by the colon.

Absent words, like "son" following "prodigal," or substitutions, like "very-whole" for "the-soul/spirit," increase the sense of a suspended, or reoriented expression. An implied body becomes "unbod[ied]," and the repeated "only" resembles hanging fruit, especially in combination with the striking em dash breaking lineal sutures. "Only" embodies contradiction since, contextually depending, it can mean "solely" (one) or "except" (without one). Commas tilt grammatical hierarchies by equalizing "minor" and "major" words—we pause on "and" and "of" just as we do on "infinity"—but beyond this, the commas also stand in for the breaks, replacing the spaces between words that would have established "straighter" relations through normative grammar-logic. The absence of the space and its replacement with a break complements the logic by which words are unexpectedly invisible and replaced by queer substitutes.

By disrupting "straight" orientation with the performative insertion of commas, Villa queers grammar through spatial, often phenomenological dis-orientation and a crisp aesthetics of hesitation. Referring to the way in which she has learned to "reinhabit" space as queer, Ahmed explains her own "hesitant" performance: "In a way, my body now extends less easily into space. I hesitate, I notice what is in front of me. The hesitation does not 'stop' there but has redirected my bodily relation to the world, and has given the world a new shape" (102). In Villa's comma poems, a similar reshaping of the space of poetry occurs as a result of the hesitant pause performed by the comma. Villa's commas, writes Eileen Tabios, "can help create another door to that 'space' where the reader may best be able to pay attention to what the poem is saying" (145). Villa's poems queer orientation so that other routes and queer "spaces," which challenge "Western thought, and, more particularly, Western conceptions of form," come into view (Reyes 165). If "punctuation plays a key role in our quotidian movements and missteps by stopping, staying, and delaying the incessant flows of information to which we are subject," as De Vere Brody contends (6), Villa's commas slow the reader's quotidian pace and defer the "magic" of arriving at the assumed "sense" of poetry, thereby emphasizing the work of *moving-through*, or reading itself. "Directions are about the magic of arrival," writes Ahmed (16). "In a way, the work of arrival is forgotten in the very feeling that the arrival is magic. The work involves following directions. We arrive when we have followed them properly: bad readings just won't get us there" (17).

Villa's specific choice to utilize commas to do this queer-directional work is significant since the comma is a minoritized mark sharing the status of the footnote, a status occupied historically by Villa (Yu 42). The pause that the footnote warrants makes reading awkward just as the gait of Villa's comma poems is marked by the awkward "dragging foot" of the comma. In the poet's "grotesque lyrics" the commas expose the strictures of how words, syntax, and punctuation especially are characterized in Western poetic tradition as unbreakable instruments of "meaning" functional only through an "active,"<sup>3</sup> less "hindered" flow. Villa demands in Poem "136" the disorientation of "sight," or, possibly, the unquestioned perspective that desires painterly "strokes" over "points": "Erect, me, to, where, / All, eyesights / Break— / Let, all, eye— / Sights, break!" (*Doveglion* 86). Referring to Villa's short stories, Rana writes that Villa "contorts his characters, effaces their

particularity, and renders them in highly visual terms”; rather than “sublimate the ‘unassimilable reality,’” Villa’s grotesque characters “expose it” (73). Similarly, in the comma poems, Villa could be said to “contort” the poetic line. Through punctuative experiment, he renders the “particularity” of words in “highly visual terms,” in effect de-hierarchizing words, re-fashioning grammatical norms, and denaturalizing poetry’s “flow.” Re-fashioning the English lyric through this “defacement,” the poet anticipates charges of his grammatical “insensitivity” (Meredith 291, qtd. in Yu 52) or “inadequate understanding or skill” (of English, of poetry) (Caspar 107), performatively exposing the limitations of Anglo-avant-garde poetry’s experimental “grammar.” Villa categorizes the comma poems as “divine poems” because through them the poet considers his Self and his “coordinates” (Rana 67). Within his self-theology, the material wrestles with the immaterial, and the relationship between man and divinity is de-hierarchized, with both affected by the encounter with the other. Villa writes that his “aim as an artist is to strive for the development and unification of the human personality—to arrive at the essential ‘I,’ the ‘I’ that is not the grammarian’s ‘I,’ but the ‘I’ more than the individual, surpassing him and yet him—the very force and dignity of man” (*Anchored Angel* 132). The seriality of the commas, like that of the poems, emphasizes “becoming” the “essential ‘I’” over, for example, individualistic progression toward the “grammarian’s ‘I.’”

“The poet,” he wrote, “has a breathlessness in him that he converts into a breathlessness of words, which in turn becomes the breathlessness of the reader” (*Anchored Angel* 127). Through the comma poems, a highly visual rebellion utilizing a breathless excess of minoritized marks, Villa positioned himself as a modern visionary within a community that frequently undermined his artistry through racializing, often linguistic, exclusion. If Villa “sought ways to make himself legible as other than grotesque, delimited by Orientalist and primitivist caricature,” as Rana writes (91), the comma poems are a queer performance through which Villa creates a space the reader of modern poetry must walk around in “draggingly.” “The result,” according to the poet, was “a lineal pace of quiet dignity and movement” (*Doveglion* 78). With this gait, the reader may find it possible to meditate on the assumptions knitted into language and other coded coordinates used to determine artistic legibility. Marianne Moore claimed that Villa was “with great effect, at times, ‘deliberately aiming just beside the mark’” (qtd. in Yu 45). Indeed, his work asks us to consider the invisible method by which “tonal and sonal value” is allotted, distributed, and also “recuperated.” Recuperative scholarship may uncritically aspire to situate “minor,” marginalized, or culturally displaced artists among the already canonized or “the pantheon of American literature,” which, claims Luis Francia in his introduction to *Doveglion: Collected Poems*, made the Penguin edition “all the more valuable” given Villa’s exclusion from anthologies of Asian American poetry (xxxv). Villa’s comma poems, however, force us to *pause* to consider our orientation toward not only the canon and the politics behind recuperation, but also our “magic” determinations of “the mark” and what is “beside” it.

## Notes

1. This paper gestures toward “crip theory” (see Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, NYU P, 2006), adapting “crip” to refer to sonic-textual poetic performances by socially and racially marginalized artists. For more on “thinking disability as method,” see SAQ’s special issue “Disorienting Disability” (Friedner and Weingarten 483-490); for more on “crip” languaging from a linguistics perspective, see Jon Henner and Octavian Robinson, “Unsettling

- Languages, Unruly Bodyminds: Imaging a Crip Linguistics," *PsyArXiv*, 8 July 2021, doi: 10.31234/osf.io/7bzaw.
2. The phrase "and sonal," which appears in both *The Anchored Angel* and *Selected Poems and New*, is oddly missing from *Doveglion: Collected Poems*; I have readded it here.
  3. According to Gertrude Stein, commas are "purely servile": "A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it ... the use of them was positively degrading" (220).

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