

Here's to You, Meestair Robangson: The Inter-American William Carlos Williams

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Julio Marzán, in *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* (1994), makes the point that Williams “was literally, not nominally, bicultural” (Marzán xiii), an argument based on Williams’s childhood. In an interview from 1950, at the age of sixty-six, Williams summed up the circumstances of his birth with this curt genealogy:

I was born [...] right in Rutherford of parents who were themselves born out of country. My father was born in England and didn't come here [to the Americas] till he was brought here by his mother, having lost his father at the age of five. And, well, switch to Mother, she was born in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, of mixed parentage she was, her mother coming originally from Martinique, a Frenchwoman, and her father being Puerto Rican. So, they came here. My father came here because the advantages there [in Puerto Rico] for a young man going into business were not great, came to New York, moved to Rutherford, and here I was born. (Williams, *Speaking Straight* 5)

Young “Willie” was always afforded every advantage in pursuit of his education to rise above his middleclass beginnings, and yet he held dear the Rutherford community, and especially his “closely knit family” (Williams, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* 16), a trilingual family, from the West Indies. Williams has written at length, in his *Autobiography* (1951) as well as his account of his mother, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* (1959), on the effects of his eclectic childhood, and he speaks warmly of his upbringing in New Jersey among a diverse set of relatives and friends:

Our household always, as I remember, included guests, guests who stayed sometimes for weeks and months or even all winter [...] either Grandma's English friends or Mother's friends and relatives from the West Indies.

Spanish and French were the languages I heard habitually while I was growing up. Mother could talk very little English when I was born, and Pop spoke Spanish better, in fact, than most Spaniards. (Williams, *Autobiography* 14-15)

Marzán's examination of Williams's literary output in relation to his cultural identity concludes that “Williams' Latin *half* revealed itself as his spiritual center. His major creative achievement was his translating the exotic voice of that core into the voice of an Anglo persona amenable to a reading public that conventionally held in low regard that most important component of his historical person [...] Williams' mission was therefore dual, to make his country rethink its myths and to find the balance between his person and his persona—which in secret comprised two personae” (Marzán xi). While this essay will disagree to an extent with Marzán's privileging of “Williams' Latin *half*” as center, understanding these cultural circumstances brings the literary Williams into sharper focus as author of *In the American Grain* (1925), which put the Caribs in dialogue with the Puritans, or inventor of the “variable foot,” a poetic measure intended to showcase the natural diversity and rhythm of speech.

Marzán is accurate in his assessment that Williams's multicultural childhood particularly rooted his views of America for many reasons. As Lisa Sánchez González explains: "Williams's literary strategy involves a new mode of narrating history. Rather than subscribing to the teleological North American notion of the nation-state, which assigns normative cultural citizenship to certain essentialized racial identities, Williams approximates transnational American history as a transtemporal 'plateau' of meanings" (Sánchez González 44). This reveals the distillation of Williams's cultural experience as a mature Caribbean-American writer, but even as a child, at thirteen, when Williams traveled to Europe to spend a year and a half with his brother, both students at the exclusive Château de Lancy in Switzerland and later at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, the experience made Williams feel that this "violent change in my fortunes altered the whole perspective of my life" (Williams, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* 11). It instilled in him, at a very young age, a vantage from which to measure a meaningful definition of America.

Marzán acknowledges that Williams felt pressures of assimilation and bigotry for being of Puerto Rican descent, claiming that although "he was aware that he was different from friends such as Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle in important ways, Williams' reflex identity was nevertheless white Anglo American, inherited from his language, his surroundings, and his father's English roots" (Marzán 7). Sánchez González, in her book, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (2001), picks up this line of reasoning. After establishing the term *Boricua* to signify the cultural identity of Puerto Ricans displaced from the island, Sánchez González contextualizes Williams in comparison to the pioneering archivist of African-American print culture Arturo Schomburg, and argues that:

Williams and Schomburg are conventionally read as foundational figures for U.S. modernisms, respectively defined in academic discourse as 'white' American and 'Black' immigrant men, and thus easily categorized as writers in the high modernist and Harlem Renaissance canons [...] By examining how their historical contexts as members of the Puerto Rican colonial diaspora inform their lives and lives' work, [such] analysis illustrates how these two figures have been assimilated by a dichotomous and naturalized racial allegory that belies the socio-poetic complications of their work as Boricua narrative. (Sánchez González 43)

Marzán and Sánchez González make enlightening arguments in their accounts of the Williams legacy that few critics acknowledge even now in the twenty-first century. For example, in *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics* (2001), John Beck does not rely at all on Williams's Hispanic roots to argue that "*Paterson's* ambitions are, in large part, the agonized and unfulfilled ambitions of American Progressivism [...] articulated through a grammar of radical liberalism" (Beck 137); nor to argue that "Williams refuses to allow the voices in *In the American Grain* [to] cohere into an identity, into a national language, reducible to a given number of recognizable characteristics" (Beck 101). In *William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara, and the New York Art Scene* (2010), Paul Cappucci discusses Williams's ties to Rutherford only to assert that "Williams's medical work provided him with the opportunity to know people in the most intimate of ways" and thus his profession as a physician was necessary to his creative life (Cappucci 27-28). More recently, Wendell Berry's *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford* (2011) argues for the critical importance of "local adaptation," a theoretical concept that "has everything to do with discovering where one is in relation to one's place (native or chosen), to its natural and human neighborhood, to its mystery

and sanctity, and with discovering right ways of living and working there” (Berry 9). Berry makes his case by noting that “Williams dedicated his poetry to confrontation with the flux and diversity of the world and of our experience of it” (Berry 13) as he “lived by the terms of a community involvement more constant, more intimate, and more urgent than that of any other notable poet of his time” (Berry 23). Berry makes a fine point about Williams’s famous proclamation, “No ideas but in things,” clarifying the common misconception that Williams strove to be “mindless” by noting that “Williams is speaking, on the contrary, of embodied ideas” (Berry 48):

‘No ideas but in things’ is a poetic principle, but I think it is by implication a criticism of the European conquest of North America and its continuing history. We have lived in and exploited our country largely by preconception and wishful thinking, imposing on each new place we have come to the assumption that it is like the old place we have left, refusing to recognize where we are and to live within the limits of natural circumstance. (Berry 125)

This is certainly true; but Berry’s focus on the marginality of Williams’s world in Rutherford and “the complex cultural necessity of an ongoing, lively connection between imagination in the highest sense and the ground underfoot” (Berry 177) is not wholly trustworthy, for it lacks an honest consideration of Williams’s aptitude to perceive this world through his cultural perspective as the son of immigrants from Puerto Rico. A fifth-generation farmer from Henry County, Kentucky, Berry demonstrates no sensitivity to or awareness of the specific cultural context of Williams’s experience as a first-generation American with a Caribbean heritage. Berry misses the fact that the “Hispanic otherness of his home against his larger social and cultural world in Rutherford, together with the external forces of assimilation in the air, clearly fueled in him a burning desire to be American and speak American” (Cohen xxii).

Considering the entirety of his work, Williams’s constant purpose as an American writer was neither to surreptitiously encode his literature with Puerto Rican language and culture (as Marzán would believe), nor to pass as a full-fledged Anglo (as Sánchez González has insinuated). Nor was it, as is widely believed, to assert American discourse qua identity through provincialized synecdoches that allow citizen readers from across our land to commune in a Whitmanesque spirit of fellowship. And it was not to defend the legitimacy of his personal Americanness: but rather to foreground its primacy. It was to reintegrate mixed immigrant ancestry into the imaginary of American identity by asserting the psyche—its circumstances, manners of perception, and syntax—of the first-generation American as central to U.S. art, history, and ideology, central to the extent of being definitive. Williams came from multiple Americas and his writings defend, perform, and reserve a privileged status for this liminal identity, that of the *inter-American*.

The relatively recent publication of *The Letters of William Carlos Williams to Edgar Irving Williams, 1902-1912* (2009) lends a good deal of insight into the subtleties of Williams’s first-generation experience. Written to his brother (a year his junior), the letters span the decade from when Williams began his education at the University of Pennsylvania until he had established his private medical practice in the first-floor pantry of his parents’ house. Williams was profoundly homesick his first year away at university (Williams, *Letters* 42) and his genuine affection for his younger brother is salient throughout the collection of letters, underscored by pronouncements like: “There is no such thing as obligation between two brothers like you and me. We are one, as it were, what I have is yours and what you have ought to be mine [...] That is what I call brotherhood, it should not be even as two intimate friends but as part of the same being” (Williams,

Letters 59); and, “there’s a certain atmosphere I get with you Bo that doesn’t exist anywhere else on earth or in heaven than at the place where we are together” (Williams, *Letters* 85). In the closeness expressed between “Bill” and “Ed” one can begin to detect features of their shared first-generation condition. Bill’s years at Penn and Ed’s years at MIT were consumed by studying hard, attending collegiate sporting events, and meeting young women, activities the pair expressed with glee and satisfaction, and yet in these same years both brothers often complained to each other of depression, of having “been on the bum for some time” to the extent of taking prescription medication (Williams, *Letters* 97). The elder Williams complained often of the provinciality of Rutherford, “the worst town for petty scandal I ever saw” (Williams, *Letters* 70). In 1906, he wrote: “At home the people are in general small; they see their little neighborhood. I have seen that, I have seen the world and love to contemplate and in all humbleness of mind wonder at even greater things. For that reason I have little interest in the people I have known” (Williams, *Letters* 112). Nonetheless, he often encouraged his brother’s academic pursuits and fed his motivation with competitive spirit exhorting that “We must earn everything” (Williams, *Letters* 189) and convinced that hard work would bring them success and social advantage, so long as they stayed “in it to win” (Williams, *Letters* 128) and promised to “[s]how them where you live” (Williams, *Letters* 100).

Many incidents recorded in these early letters reveal intricacies of the Williams brothers’ cultural identity as first-generation Puerto Rican Americans—in Sánchez González’s terms, as *Boricuas*. In the fall of 1906, Ed went to listen to an orchestra performance in Boston that he thought “was great, splendid, magnificent to the nth power” (Williams, *Letters* 106) and he was so smitten by the vocal soloist that he waited by the exit to watch her leave the building. Ed wrote to Bill:

She came out with a bunch of the orchestra people who looked like a bunch of street laborers on Sunday—with their caps and light colored overcoats. I was not disenchanted. I butted into a crowd of a dozen or so of which she was the center and had a good look at her. I was awed.

This country has much to learn. We are a money-worshipping pack most of us. If anybody does catch the eye and incidentally the pocket book of the crowd pop goes their head. They think they are gods. Then comes a bunch of Dagos in modest garb without any of the ‘you-ought-to-hear-me’ element and produces the goods. I was more than pleased. (Williams, *Letters* 106)

The image is analogous to the manner in which Ed envisioned himself and his brother. He was “more than pleased” because, as a *Boricua*, he in the end empathized with his fellow “Dagos,” the indispensable, behind-the-scenes talent responsible for awe-inspiring achievement but too modest to not be evasive toward acclaim.

Caribbean touches dapple the correspondences between Bill and Ed. For Bill’s twenty-eighth birthday, he feasted on a home-cooked meal of chicken, okra, beans, and sweet potato (Williams, *Letters* 276). He uses the term “basta” instead of “enough” on occasion (Williams, *Letters* 221, 229), and often uses phrases from the French like “ennuyeux a la fin” and “plus tard” (Williams, *Letters* 223, 294). In a letter dated February 13, 1907, Bill reports, “I received a letter from Ezra Pound today in which he introduces me to a most excellent New York girl. I am going to see her soon. In the letter he wishes to be remembered to Meestair Robangson, and by the way Miss Hilda also pays her respects” (Williams, *Letters* 118). As Andrew Krivak remarks in his notes

to this collection, “Meestair Robangson”—or as Pound actually wrote, “Meestair Robingsonnh”—is a reference to Ed’s “‘bawdy tale of Mr. Robinson, who cuckolded a Frenchman and pissed in his eye,’ which was well known, apparently, amongst [Williams’s] family and friends” (Krivak 346). Much is lost by way of the context of this story, but the transliteration of “Mr. Robinson” is noteworthy. The story of Mr. Robinson obviously became an inside joke between Pound and the Williams brothers, and the fact that this story was also circulated amongst the Williams family is part of the humor because both Ezra and Bill transcribe the name in a Puerto Rican accent. It might seem generically Spanish, “Meestair Robingsonnh,” but replacing an *n* sound with an *ng* sound in “Robingsonnh” and “Robangson” is a distinctive feature of pronunciation in regional Puerto Rican Spanish. Thus Pound added his own layer of meaning to the humor of the anecdote. He laughs with the Williams brothers in recalling the ribald story; he laughs at them in mocking the Puerto Rican accents of the rest of their family.

Well before meeting Pound at Penn, Williams had his own formative struggles with Anglo-American acceptance. In 1949, to the Bergen *Herald-News*, Williams described his youth as overwhelmed by a “pressure to prove he ‘really belonged’ in Rutherford and the United States,” wanting “so badly not to be considered a foreigner” (Frail 28). In retrospect, the angle Williams played to prevent this label was shrewd. He argued, “my family is among those who came to America from Europe through the West Indies—so that in the United States—since they still owned slaves in Puerto Rico—I feel more southern than the southerners, and by virtue of my father, who was born in England, as northern as if I had come from Maine” (Williams, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* 28). Inadvertently, Williams shows the drawbacks of America’s vast cultural range: that sometimes Americans are more like foreigners than they are like other Americans; and that resultant traumatic experiences of social alienation can breed a curious strain of self-doubt. Williams has confessed that, as a young man, he never wanted to study or practice medicine—that he was “pushed into” it—and that his preference was to be a “farmer” (Williams, *Letters* 176) or “forester” because he “had no desire to be among people,” preferring to live “rather a solitary life with one or two companions” (Williams, *Speaking Straight* 5-6). Now whether this is a manifestation of artistic detachment or simply a matter of temperament, one cannot be sure, but the pressures to be accepted as an American that Williams himself carefully responded to could only have added to his hunger for repose.

After digesting his often nervous and alienating childhood, Williams addressed the matter of cultural diversity with a heartening optimism. Williams always found inspiration in the Caribbean, never shame. He explained: “In the West Indies, in Martinique, St. Thomas, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, in those days, the races of the world mingled and intermarried—imparting their traits one to another and forgetting the orthodoxy of their ancient and medieval views. It was a good thing. It is in the best spirit of the New World” (Williams, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* 30). Williams kept feet in different worlds throughout his literary career. In 1941, Williams flew by airplane for the first time in his life: to speak at the Inter-American Writers Conference at the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan. In his *Autobiography*, Williams describes the experience of traveling to Puerto Rico as inspiring, his mind buzzing with Hart Crane and *In the American Grain* and the enormity of returning to his ancestral origins by so modern a means (Williams, *Autobiography* 313). Time and again the particularly Spanish aspect of Williams’s heritage had a serious effect on his poetry. In *Yes, Mrs. Williams*, he describes his octogenarian mother recalling in Spanish nostalgic tales of when Puerto Rico was still under Spanish rule, and how he got into the habit of jotting these snippets down on scraps of paper so as to not forget them: as he put it, “so as to preserve the flavor and the accurate detail” (Williams, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* 23). With feet in

different worlds, Williams was a master of synthesizing experience and aesthetics. The convergences of difference—in language, setting, and virtue—were the bedrock of his writing field.

Williams's greatest contribution to poetry was his synthesis of preexisting poetic forms and subsequent invention of new patterns of poetic diction, innovations importantly related to his inter-American experience. For example, Williams freed the metric pattern that Gerard Manley Hopkins had termed "sprung rhythm" from the constraint of the initial stress of the first syllable of every line, providing a poetry whose sound was less sermon-like and flowed more naturally than ever. This metric innovation, in the 1930s, planted the roots of a strain of free verse that over time would extend as far as the present, in contemporary forms of hip-hop poetry, jazz poetry, and spoken word. The poem "The Cod Head" (1932) almost sounds like a fisherman's freestyle:

Miscellaneous weed
strands, stems, debris—
firmament

to fishes—
where the yellow feet
of gulls dabble

oars whip
ships churn to bubbles—
at night wildly

agitate phosphores-
cent midges—but by day
flaccid

moons in whose
discs sometimes a red cross
lives—four

fathom—the bottom skids
a mottle of green
sands backward—

amorphous waver-
ing rocks—three fathom
the vitreous

body through which—
small scuddling fish deep
down—and

now a lulling lift
and fall—

red stars—a severed cod—
 head between two
 green stones—lifting
 falling (Williams, *Selected Poems* 67-68)

The poem dances, gesturing and swaying between dashes and short lines of phrases linked fore and aft, mending shifts of things unsaid between the spaces of disparate words. The surprise and eclecticism evoked by the language coheres by means of “subject rhyme” (Kenner 93), in this instance a seaside scene. But through its juxtaposition of lineated short phrases, the poem also operates in an early form of Williams’s “variable foot”: a unit of poetic measure longer than a stress but shorter than a conventional line, a space in which a cadence is captured. Widely understood through his idea of the “variable foot,” Williams is primarily known as an Imagist. In his collection *Spring and All* (1921)—which Sorrentino considered the first book of American modern poetry (Sorrentino 13)—Williams whittled the poetic message down to its most irreducible possibility with “The Red Wheelbarrow”:

so much depends
 upon
 a red wheel
 barrow

 glazed with rain
 water

 beside the white
 chickens. (Williams, *Selected Poems* 56)

Because “so much depends / upon” the scene, i.e. the image, it suggests how fine a focus the poet and reader should have. Finding significance in the thinnest sliver of a detail—echoed formally in the way there is a line break between “wheel” and “barrow” when conventionally “wheelbarrow” is one word—had never been transcribed so precisely. Berry has remarked that “it is important to notice that this poem’s charm depends wholly upon its prosody [...As] Williams formed it on the page it both sings in the ear and lights up in imagination” (Berry 111).

Perhaps this is true—that the poem’s strength is its careful rendering of language—but it is also true that this poem can be analyzed as a peculiarly Latino text. Marzán claims that “The Red Wheelbarrow” was “the result of an experiment in imaginary translation” (160), a process of transferring language “both into visual imagery and from Spanish” (Marzán 159): “In Spanish, to know things by heart or to do something by rote can be described by the phrase *de carretilla*: *hacer de carretilla* or *saber de carretilla*. The image evokes carrying around the knowledge using a small cart. Colloquially, one can refer to someone’s habitually prattling on about something as bringing back one’s *carretilla*. And *carretilla* also literally denotes ‘wheelbarrow’” (Marzán 161).

When it came to literary translation from Spanish to English, Williams himself felt confident to say that “I can do this sort of job peculiarly well” (Williams, *Letters* 233). Jonathan Cohen’s recent collection of Williams’s modest set of translations of Spanish and Latin American poetry, *By Word of Mouth: Poems from the Spanish, 1916-1959* (2011) underscores the point of

Williams's ability in the Spanish language. Although "he never really mastered it in terms of native fluency or sophistication," it is certain that "Spanish was Williams's first language" (Cohen xxi). Marzán's reading of "The Red Wheelbarrow" (and many other poems, like "The Wanderer: A Rococo Study") as clandestine Latino text feels intuitively accurate. At the 1941 Inter-American Writers Conference at the University of Puerto Rico, Williams expressed appreciation for Iberian literature and the need "to make us familiar with its forms as contrasted with our own" (Williams, "An Informal Discussion" 31) and Marzán concludes that Williams's "recommendations to look into Spanish literature were really an invitation to find his sources; behind his advocacy was the knowledge that through him Spanish literature had already influenced Anglo American writing" (Marzán 165).

For his gentle eye for detail, and his ear for cadences and rhythms, and his concern for American identity and an honorable American literary tradition, Williams's persona has been characterized by humility. Regarding the early, short poems, Pound wrote, "In his verse Williams' integrity passes for simplicity" (Pound 400). Kenneth Rexroth believed that Williams addressed "A dying social order, a dead language, a value system emptied of meaning" and "subverted it with humility" in the manner of a "Taoist revolutionary" (Rexroth 78). In comparing the influence of Williams to that of Pound, Sorrentino finds an apt metaphor: "Whereas Pound has been a teacher and an influence on a strictly tutelary, or abstract, level, Williams has forced his way into the minds of the poets who were his contemporaries, as well as those who are now young men, by virtue of his absolute rapport with all of us here, Americans. It is the voice of a brother as against that of an inspired evangelist" (Sorrentino 13). True as that may be, the reverence many writers show for Williams often does border on the religious. Allen Ginsberg once remarked that reading Williams's poem "Thursday" "reconfirmed my feelings that he was some kind of a saint of perception" (Ginsberg 337). The saintliness, the humbleness, that pervades Williams's aura is an achievement in itself, considering a career that included a National Book Award, a Bollingen Award, an appointment as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, a Pulitzer Prize, and a Gold Medal for Poetry from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Although it did in fact take time for Williams to receive the recognition and respect he deserved, it came. In his literary career, he produced over forty books, *all* in the American grain; in his medical career—the Head Pediatrician of Paterson General Hospital—he delivered over two thousand babies to America's working poor. At every turn, Williams's legacy is colored by achievements grounded in the challenges and successes he experienced of being a first-generation U.S. citizen of Caribbean extraction. For this, he was truly a citizen of the Americas, an inter-American, and it is this quality of diverse ancestry and experience that makes him a unique literary figure in the U.S.—a uniqueness that to this day is routinely unaccounted for in discussions of his life and work even by academic specialists in Modernist poetry. He was in deep and manifold ways a servant of *the Americas* from the fleeting moments of childbirth to the timelessness of literary record, or, to invoke Wallace Stevens, "both in the inch and in the mile" (Stevens 159).

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