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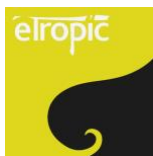
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## **Vernacular Virtual: Toward a Philippine New Materialist Poetics**

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### **Abstract**

This essay turns to and through the Philippine vernacular in order to open up the possibility of a new materialist regard of literature, one that specifically stems from the Philippine tropics. It proposes that the opportunity for such a tropical materialism rests on the onomatopoeism observed in the vernacular. Onomatopoeia, as a material linguistic principle, is recognized here to be most instructive in reunderstanding Philippine folk poetry — texts which date back to the precolonial period — in terms beyond mere representation. As a counterpoint to these traditional literary texts, the essay also ruminates on the poetry of Jose Garcia Villa, a prominent Filipino modernist writer, whose works in English are intuited here as demonstrative of the similar onomatopoeism found in Philippine folk poems. Although these literary materials might initially appear to be disparate and disconnected, the reading undertaken here nevertheless seeks to coincide these texts, bringing them into relation to highlight their possible yet understated entanglements, so as to ultimately motivate an intra-activity constitutive of contingent spatiotemporalities that may allow the emergence of a groundwork for a Philippine new materialist poetics.

**Keywords:** new materialism, material poetics, tropical materialism, onomatopoeia, Philippine vernacular, folk poetry, Jose Garcia Villa

## Introduction: Literary Materiality

New materialism is a critical sensibility whose primary motivation is to reveal and counter “a perceived *neglect* or *diminishment* of matter in the dominant Euro-Western tradition as a passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning” (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 111). In its crucial paradigmatic shift that “routinely emphasize[s] how matter is ‘alive,’ ‘lively,’ ‘vibrant,’ ‘dynamic,’ ‘agentive,’ and thus *active*” (Gamble et al., 2019, p. 111), new materialism nominates matter as the “focal point and searchlight” of its study (*COST Action IS1307*, n.d.), underscoring how things are not mere objects of discourse, but agents that partake just as much in shaping the same discourse. In turn, new materialism recognizes scholarship in general to be “material-semiotic” (Haraway, 1991, pp. 197-201) or “material-discursive” (Barad, 2007, pp. 146-153). That is, it asserts how scholarship is a practice whose meaning-making procedures are inevitably entangled with the materials — including the scholars themselves and the apparatuses that they work with — involved in each discursive gesture.

In the attempt of new materialist thought to further articulate how “matter comes to matter” (Barad, 2007, p. 152; also Barad, 2003), this critical sensibility has been noted to exhibit a “theoretical trend where (feminist) new materialist scholars turn to literature or literariness when thinking through post-anthropocentric notions of materiality” (Skiveren, 2018; also Skiveren, 2020; and Moslund et al., 2020, pp. 16-21). Among the foremost examples of this orientation toward literature can be found in the works of Jane Bennett (2010; 2012), Stacy Alaimo (2010; 2016), Karen Barad (2015), Donna Haraway (2016), Vicky Kirby (2011), Astrida Neimanis (2017), and Mayra Rivera (2015) among others (see Skiveren, 2018). However, in this recourse of new materialism to literature, lest the act of reading literary texts be reduced to merely a gesture “illustrat[ive] of certain concepts crucial to the new materialist thought...rather than sketch[ing] out a new materialist *mode* or *way* of reading” (Kaczmarki, 2019, pp. 198-199), it is necessary to emphasize how new materialism strives to “recast literature as a material force that exceeds the domain of the Anthropos,” particularly as “an abstruse and recalcitrant non-human actor that can never be fully known” (Skiveren, 2018) and yet is able to “‘help us [humans] feel,’ to engage us ‘at a visceral level,’ and to ‘render murky material forces palpable’” (Skiveren, 2020, p. 143; also Skiveren, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Literature, in other words, is recognized in new materialist thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Skiveren’s (2018) articulation here on the potency of literature as a material force is an assemblage of quotations from three key figures of new materialist thought: Jane Bennett, “Poetry can *help us* feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs” (2012, p. 235; emphasis mine); Mayra Rivera, “[L]iterary language, such as [Frantz] Fanon’s, engages our imaginations *at a visceral level*, to help us feel what cannot be seen” (2012, p. 141; emphasis mine); and Stacy Alaimo, “[P]roducers of various works of literature, art, and activism may themselves grapple with ways *to render murky material forces palpable*” (2010, p. 141; emphasis mine).

as matter in itself that is capable of stimulating an “intra-active” encounter among other matters, an event that “mutual[ly] constitut[es] [the respective] material agencies” (Barad, 2007, p. 33) of things involved in such an occasion, and thus underscores how agency itself does not precede such relational moments but instead emerges through them.

To demonstrate how new materialist thought and the field of literary studies intersect, Tobias Skiveren (2018) cites as an emblematic example Bennett’s (2010, p. 6-8) turn to Franz Kafka’s (1971) short story “Cares of a Family Man,” featuring as protagonist the spool of thread named Odradek. In her reading of the story, Bennett underscores how Odradek embodies “a vital materiality and exhibits what Gilles Deleuze (1991) has described as the persistent ‘hint of the animate in plants, and of the vegetable in animals’ (p. 95)...expos[ing the] continuity of watery life and rocks [and] bring[ing] to the fore the becoming of things” (Bennett, 2010, p. 8). And although for Paweł Kacsmarki (2019), Bennett — and by extension, Skiveren — appears to simplistically assume here that the “ability to imagine non-human actors [in Kafka’s story and in literature writ large] can be seen as [already] a proof, specifically as a proof that such non-human actors exist outside of our imagination” (pp. 197-198), it is also crucial to emphasize that in a new materialist paradigm, more than the mere capacity of literature to represent, it is the very potency of this matter to provoke similar ideations and perceptions — indeed imaginations (see Lundberg, 2008) — in a reader that demonstrates its agency as a material in itself. In other words, in such a supposed critique against new materialism on its purported “disregard [of the] fundamental materiality of language and discourse” (Beetz, 2016, p. 74, cited in Kacsmarki, 2019, p. 195), what seems to be forgotten is how the illustrative effect of literature is, in fact, an intra-action already between the literary material and the human reader: signification, above all else, is an instance of materialities already at work and enmeshed in an encounter, with the literary material itself as an agent just as active as the human reader.

In a new materialist intuition of the literary text, its common appraisal as signifying matter can now be understood as a mere demonstration of its material agency and not its absolute thinghood. While conventionally appreciated by human readers for its representative effects — the variety of which already points to its ultimate “undecidability” (Colebrook, 2011, p. 19 cited in Skiveren, 2018; see also Morton, 2012, pp. 220-222; and Derrida, 1981) partially fathomable only in each chance of encountering it — a given literary text can only generate other forms of materialization of its agency in its intra-action with other materials, as after all, “material [such as the literary text] responds to other material too” (Tsing, 2019, p. 223). Consider as an analogous example the case of the cinematic text: as a material on its own, a film

“could not have meant anything, at least in the vicinity of our most anthropomorphic understanding [of it]: the motivation of the film could have been, for instance, to modestly light a dark room to attract moths, or to purely fill the same room with ambient sounds; it could have also been the process itself of making the film, without any necessity for its screenings...” (Benitez, 2021b, p. 67). In a similar manner, one can also sense that in order “to consider [literary] textual worlds *materially*...is to admit that processes of language and meaning [can] operate in the absence of human command, understanding and imagination” (Colebrook, 2011, p. 18), in ways that might deviate from the predominantly expected means of signification of literature.

It is here then that the present essay wishes to critically interpose in an attempt to further explore other means by which we human agents can consider literature materially. In such an endeavour, the Philippine vernacular becomes a crucial focal point and searchlight for this study in its “encompassing heterogeneous historical, cultural, and political formations of the [Filipino] indigene or ‘inside’ in dialogue with colonial or global power/knowledge and nationalist aspirations” (Campomanes, 2003, p. 11). This insistence on the Philippine locality is indispensable, if not an outright “imperative” (Benitez, 2022b, p. 2), for new materialism in general. For on the one hand, as evinced by these prefatory paragraphs riddled with citations, most of the existent and significant studies on the new materialist discursive field come from Euro-Western scholarship;<sup>2</sup> therefore, in “situating” (Haraway, 1991) the new materialist propositions regarding the literary in the specific context of the Philippine tropics, what becomes possible is an insistence that “material can [indeed] be drawn from anywhere, anytime, and anyone” (Holbraad et al. 2014 cited in Todd, 2016, p. 17), even and perhaps more so beyond the Euro-Western and temperate worlds, considering that in the first place, we — this very essay included — are already in the midst of things, being intimately and inevitably entangled with them at any given instant. On the other hand, the insistence to situate this essay in the Philippine context also responds to the perceived trends in the scholarly landscape of the country. For despite the growing number of works that consciously harness ecocritical sensibilities in practicing literary studies (see, for instance, works in Ong & Lacuna, 2019), many of these attempts return to a representative treatment of literature, regarding it as merely a medium that demonstrates certain material concepts or phenomena, without necessarily taking into consideration that literature, in and of itself, is material, and therefore a thing that warrants as much attention as the things it is purported to signify via itself. And so, the present essay endeavours to assert the valuable possibility that new materialism offers as a critical disposition, one which permits the current discourses intersecting Philippine literature and ecology to be rehearsed beyond such representationalist tendencies.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, consider the works cited by Skiveren (2018; 2020), Kaczmarki (2019), and Gamble et al. (2019).

To confront these problematics in both the fields of new materialism writ large and Philippine literary studies, the essay draws upon the vernacular as its foremost object and apparatus of interrogation — a crucial choice, given that the vernacular is itself a material that participates in and influences the particular intra-action that is the Philippines tropics. Here, it bears underscoring that the very existence of the vernacular — if not *any* vernacular — has always been entangled with other things: as a system of signs, its modes of material circulation and survival is made possible through, for instance, speech-acts performed by its human speakers, as well as its very inscription on concrete matters, which in turn are also affected and altered once marked by these signs. Consider, for example, the first dictionaries in the Philippine archipelago, the various *vocabularios* (see Hidalgo, 1977) “borne out of colonial duress, primarily made by the Spanish friars as to assist their dissemination of the Catholic teachings and coercion of the natives into conversion” (Benitez, 2022b, p. 2). In the present, these things permit certain words to continue existing and thus potentially become, say, “discursive entry points...as embodiments of particular historical contexts and materialities” (Benitez, 2019, pp. 459-460), which could have been forgotten otherwise. At the same time, the vernacular inscribed on such materials enables them to become, say, artifacts, which then shape the flow of these things in wider material ecologies.

This essay thus turns to and through the Philippine vernacular in order to open up the possibility of a new materialist regard of literature, one that specifically stems from the Philippine tropics. It proposes that the opportunity for such a tropical materialism rests on the onomatopoeism observed in the vernacular. Onomatopoeia, as a material linguistic principle, is recognized to be most instructive in reunderstanding Philippine folk poetry — texts which date back to the precolonial period — in terms beyond mere representation. As a counterpoint to these traditional literary texts, the essay also ruminates on the poetry of Jose Garcia Villa (1908-1997), a prominent Filipino “modernist” (Almario, 1984, p. 128) writer, whose works in English are intuited here as demonstrative of the similar onomatopoeism found in Philippine folk poems. Although these literary materials might initially appear to be disparate and unconnected, the reading undertaken here nevertheless seeks to “coincide” (Benitez, 2021c, p. 211) these texts, bringing them into relation to highlight their possible yet understated entanglements, so as to ultimately motivate an intra-activity constitutive of “contingent spatiotemporalities” (Haraway, 1997, p. 294, cited in Barad, 2007, p. 224) that may allow the emergence of a groundwork for a Philippine new materialist poetics.



## Onomatopoeic Vernacular

In his treatise on the peculiarities of Tagalog poetry, the Filipino literary figure Lope K. Santos (1996) describes the language to be largely onomatopoeic.<sup>3</sup>

*[E]l idioma tagalog es uno de los más acabados ejemplares del onomatopeyismo. Más del 50% de sus nombres y verbos radicales, son de este tipo y valor. Aún entre los vocablos compuestos y derivados, y en los simples que expresan idea abstracta, el tipo onomatopéyico [sic] es común. Se distinguen, generalmente, las palabras onomatopéyicas por su silabeo rítmico y por sus terminaciones sonoras y expresivas. Los nombres que implican acción o movimiento son, por lo común bisilábicos y trisilábicos, y las sílabas son fonética y literalmente iguales o semejantes entre sí. Los nombres de objetos o de cosas abstractas, se reflejan principalmente en las vocales que entran en su composición. (1996, p. 88; see also Santos, 1911)*

*[A]ng wikang Tagalog ay isa sa mga wikang sagana sa halimbawa ng onomatopea. Mahigit na 50% ng kaniyang pangngalan at pandiwa ay kabilang sa ganitong uri. Maging sa mga katagang tambalan at halaw, o sa mga katagang payak na nagsasaad ng kaisipang abstrakto, ay karaniwang lumalabas ang onomatopea. Kadalasan, ito'y nakikilala sa kanilang maindayog na pagpapantig at matutunog at makahulugang pagtatapos ng isang kataga. Ang mga pangngalang nagpapahiwatig ng kilos o galaw, ay karaniwang may dalawa o tatlong pantig, at ang mga nabanggit na pantig ay magkakatulad o magkakahawig ng tunog. Ang mga pangngalan ng bagay o abstraktong bagay ay nakikita lalo na sa mga patinig ng nililikhang tulâ. (Santos, 1996, p. 89)*

The Tagalog language is one of the more comprehensive examples of onomatopoeism. More than 50% of the nouns and verbs are of this type and value. Even among the compound and derived words, and in the simple ones that express abstract ideas, the onomatopoeic type is common. In general, onomatopoeic words are distinguished by their rhythmic syllables and their sonorous and expressive endings. Nouns that imply action or movement are commonly bisyllabic and trisyllabic, and the syllables are phonetically and literally same or similar to each

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<sup>3</sup> All translations to English throughout this essay are mine, unless otherwise stated.

other. Concrete or abstract nouns are principally reflected in the vowels that are included in their very composition.

To further demonstrate his observation, Santos (1996) describes the affect he deems most perceivable in uttering letters of the Filipino alphabet. For instance, he relates the vowel *a* to ideas of the grand, the clear, the spacious and the superficial (“*idea de lo grande, de lo claro, del espacio y de la superficie*”), as in the words *araw* (sun) and *dagat* (sea); *i* to the dark, the deep, and the small (“*idea de lo oscuro, de lo profundo y de lo pequeño*”), as in *dilim* (dark) and *liit* (littleness); and *u*, interchangeable with *o*, to the towering, the far away, the abstruse, and the covert (“*idea de lo alto, de lo lejano, lo abstruso y lo cubierto*”), as in *bundok* (mountain) and *layo* (distance/distant) (p. 88). Meanwhile, he associates the consonant *h* to respiration, gentle rub, and rapid sounds (“*aspiración, frotamiento suave, sonido rápido*”), as in the words *hangin* (wind) and *hagod* (caress); *s* to slipperiness (“*ruido de algo que resbala*”), as in *ahas* (snake) and *agos* (flow); *w* to gentleness (“*suavidad*”), as in *awa* (compassion) and *giliw* (affection); and *y* to delicateness and slowness (“*delicadeza, lentitud*”), as in *banayad* (restful) and *yumi* (modest) (p. 90). According to Santos (1996), in assembling these phonemes, what materializes are words that perceivably embody the “verbal and alegorical interpretation[s] of the multiple manifestations and varied nuances of Nature” (“*interpretacion verbal y alegorica de las multiples manifestaciones y variados matices de la Naturaleza*”) (p. 88), through their aural materiality, which “sensorially permit[s] meaning to arrive most viscerally” (Benitez, 2022a, p. 250).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, these words are intuited to be matters that activate an instance of the virtual, “a lived paradox where what are normally opposites [such as presence and absence] coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt — albeit reduced and contained” (Massumi, 2002, p. 30).<sup>5</sup> Simply put, words themselves are recognized as agents most capable of summoning, evoking, conveying, or even conjuring things through *and* as the words’ very aural materiality.

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<sup>4</sup> The verb used here to refer to the relation between the onomatopoeic words and other things, namely *arrive*, is taken from Bienvenido Lumbea’s (2017) notion of *dating* (“arrival”), a vernacular conception of aesthetics that underscores the material effect of things — particularly literature — on a human perceiver. It is crucial to note, however, that such a verb is only one of the many possible actions that can be evoked to explicate the aforementioned relationship between words and things. As Bredin (1996) notes, “the relation that obtains between the two... generates an extensive and heterogeneous collection of names: imitates, echoes, reflects, resembles, corresponds to, sounds like, expresses, reinforces, and has a natural or direct relation with” (p. 555).

<sup>5</sup> The capacity of words to incite the virtual is what Viktor Shklovsky (1976), for instance, also aims to underscore in his formalist nomination of art as technique. However, in Shklovsky’s conception that “art is thinking in images” (p. 5), words are still ultimately encountered most representatively — indeed, as *images*, as signifiers for other materials, connoting and portraying the “pertained” materials, instead of already conveying them, in another form, in the very aural materialities of words themselves. It is in this sense that the notion of the *virtual* is preferred in the present essay over the *imagined*, which is ultimately rooted to such representative subtext of the image (see Williams, 1983, pp. 158-159). Consider, for example, the potential of the virtual to not only represent but also “even replace” another matter in Chittiphalangsri’s (2014) study on the virtualizing potency of translation in the context of Orientalist discourse.



Although Santos's observations have been specifically directed to the Tagalog language, this onomatopoeic quality can be intuited in other Philippine languages. This is especially so since the onomatopoeism that Santos describes has also been noted in Malay (see, for instance, Wilkinson, 1936; Gonda, 1940), a language which shares its roots with Philippine languages. While the former assertion necessitates a more thorough study, it suffices here to provide crucial examples of how onomatopoeism works in Philippine languages as their core linguistic principle that renders "the sound of a word, and...its meaning [as] inextricably intertwined" (Bredin, 1996, p. 557). Consider for instance the following vernacular words for *araw*, or the sun: in Bikolano, it is called *aldáw*; in Hiligaynon and Bisaya, *adlaw*; and in Ibanag, *aggaw* (see Panganiban, 1972). All these words similarly convey a sense of immensity, with the prominence of the *a*-sound made more capacious with the *w*-sound at the end — which can be easily heard, too, as an *a*-sound blending with an *o*, thus allowing the words to be perceived as, according again to Santos's paradigm, simultaneously evoking the notions of the high and the distant. It is through this possible sonic equation between the *aw*- and *ao*-sounds that the Kapampangan word for the sun, namely *aldo*, can be also appreciated: although it is not perfectly alike to the previous examples in the sense that the last vowel sound uttered here is an *o*-sound instead of a blend between *a*- and *o*-sounds which delivers the *aw* diphthong found in the first three words, the word *aldo* nevertheless evokes the enormity of the sun through the separate vowels *a* and *o*.<sup>6</sup>

The onomatopoeism perceived to be at work in the Philippine vernacular points then to a crucial insight. What emerges here is an alternative manner of regarding words that does not comply with the theoretical foundations from the fields of literary and linguistic discourses where "Saussure's principle, that the relation of sound to meaning is arbitrary, holds virtually universal sway" (Bredin, 1996, p. 565; see Saussure, 1986, p. 73 [106-107]). Instead, onomatopoeism identifies words as materials that perform embodiment and not merely stand in as objects to be received cognitively. Furthermore, the onomatopoeic quality calls for an emphasis on how the material world writ large is, in fact, implicated in the construction of what has been otherwise simplistically considered as "human" language. For materials, as now made more evident through the Filipino language, are recognized to actually influence, partake, and even motivate<sup>7</sup> the choice of phonemes and the formation of words, and it is in

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<sup>6</sup> The criticality of the vowels *a* and *o* in these vernacular signifiers for the sun is further underscored through considering other words from other languages that share the same root to the Proto-Austronesian *qaləjaw*, such as the Hawaiian and Maori *ao*, Chamorro *atdao*, Malagasy *andro*, Ngaju *andao*, and Makasar and Toraja-Sa'dan *allo*.

<sup>7</sup> Saussure (1986) describes the relationship between a signifier and its signified as "arbitrary," pertaining to the perceived "unmotivated" association between the two (p. 69). However, it is also crucial to note that Saussure nominates "two objections...which might be brought against the principle that linguistic signs are arbitrary," one of which is onomatopoeia.

this sense that the occurrence of our human verbal language can be understood as an event of intra-action between ourselves and the vaster material ecologies in which we belong. And so, while the onomatopoeic impulse is commonly appreciated as our “mere plain articulation of what is perceived by [our human] ears and senses” (“*payak na pagsasawika lámang ng nasasagap ng [ating pantáong] tainga at pandamá*”) (Almario, 2017, p. 172), it can now instead be asserted that it is a procedure that is ultimately a collaboration with things often overlooked and neglected as objects devoid of agency, in the particular moment that is language. As such, the Philippine vernacular, in its predominant onomatopoeism, can be described as a language that we articulate through and in entanglement with the world.

In nominating onomatopoeism as a vital linguistic principle of the Philippine vernacular, we can intuit a new means to understand poetry in the language. Consider, for instance, folk riddles, such as the following Tagalog *bugtong*, found in an entry from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Tagalog-Spanish dictionary compiled by the friars Juan de Noceda and Pedro de Sanlucar:

*Bongbong con liuanag*  
*Cun gaby,e, ay dagat.* (Noceda & Sanlucar, 2013, p. 61)

Bamboo by daylight  
By nighttime, a sea.

The riddle alludes to the *banig* or a woven mat. Existent scholarship that briefly turns to this riddle often cites it as a poem that “elucidates on the worldview of its time” (“*nagpapaliwanag... [sa] pananaw-mundo sa kapanahunan [nito]*”) (Tolentino, 2007, p. 32), particularly on how the natives were imagined to go about their daily lives. The Filipino critic and poet Bienvenido Lumbera, for example, explains the epiphany that comes after figuring out the answer to the riddle simply as follows:

The solution to the riddle leads the audience to realize that the sleeping mat is indeed like a bamboo tube [*bongbong*] during the day [*liuanag*] when it is rolled up into a cylinder for purposes of storage. At night [*gaby*], the mat becomes a sea [*dagat*] when spread on the floor because it is wide and flat. The perception of the relationship between the clues and the answer is an act of imagination.... [In effect] it equips the individual for the perception of insights about the life around him. (Lumbera, 1986, p. 4)

What bears underscoring in Lumbera's exegesis — which is emblematic of the foremost readings of this particular riddle (see, for instance, Tolentino, 2007, pp. 32-33; and Almario, 2006, pp. 35-35) — is its singular emphasis on the representative potency of words: in the poem, *bongbong* and *dagat* are merely thought of as signifiers pertaining to the materials, namely the bamboo and the sea, figuratively standing-in for the mat when it is rolled and spread out. In other words, these very words are interpreted as plain symbols for other things — material things which the guessers are required to encounter outside the occasion of riddling itself in order to ultimately solve the puzzle (Almario, 2017, p. 181). However, while the significance of such meeting with the material world cannot be refused, it is also critical to take into account how words, too, in their own aural materiality, actively partake in such a poetic event. Given the crucial orality of the folk riddle and the remarked onomatopoeism of the Philippine vernacular, the words involved in the above poem can thus be regarded beyond their semantic or semiotic operations and instead be perceived viscerally — the roundedness and stability of *bongbóng*, for instance, or the expansiveness yet rockiness in *dágat*. Therefore, more than simply referring to other things in order to imply imagistic hints regarding the conundrum, the words in the riddle can be grasped as already an attempt to evoke the *banig* — and possibly the entire material ecology in which such things belong.

In other words, the *banig* is already made manifest virtually through the utterance of this very riddle. In this sense, the poem as a *kathâ* or work, can be understood simultaneously as an ideation and already a composition — two descriptions that can be found in the definition of *catha*, as a verb, in Noceda and Sanlucar's (2013) dictionary: "to compose, to ideate" ("componer, idear") (p. 141). To put it another way, the poem can be taken as already the thing it is purported to merely "represent," albeit the text renders that thing in another materiality, namely as the poem's very verbal self. Therefore, the poem can be grasped as a synesthetic transformation of the "signified" thing in its virtual becoming through and as the vernacular — an event that is only ontologically characteristic of things or *bágay* in the Philippine worldview, with their thingness that simply "emerge in and through time," through such "encounters [as the above poetic creation] in which [these things] partake [of] each instant" (Benitez, 2022b, p. 3-4).<sup>8</sup>

This perceived entanglement between representation and presence, through the nexus that is the word — *katagâ*, or perhaps, even *katâ*<sup>9</sup> — can be observed in how,

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<sup>8</sup> Such Filipino intuition of the *bágay* is intimately intertwined with the notion of temporality, or *panahon*: "while bagay can be *anumán* or anything that can be perceived by the senses, the *anumán* at hand can only be ascertained according to this bagay's appropriateness or timeliness to a particular moment" (Benitez, 2019, p. 480).

<sup>9</sup> *Kataga* commonly denotes "word" ("*salitâ*") (Almario, 2009, p. 592) itself, while *katâ* pertains to "idle talk" ("*walang-saysay na pagsasalita*") (p. 592). The Filipino fictionist and scholar Allan Derain (2018) underscores the entanglement between such seemingly senseless words (*katâ*) with the act of creating and creation itself (*kathâ*)

for instance, creation myths of the Bago people from Northern Luzon are recited during the harvest ritual, as “narration itself...is [deemed] an act of uttering the creative words by which the desired event is believed to happen” (Hornedo, 1997, p. 26).<sup>10</sup> The Filipino scholar Florentino Hornedo asserts that in general, “the Filipino is a true believer in the power of the word. He [sic] does not say anything he [sic] does not wish to happen...” (1997, p. 222). And although Hornedo roots such Filipino belief in the “spirit world [that] can make [the words] happen,” the present emphasis on the materiality of the vernacular points to the insight that perhaps it is the onomatopoeic quality of Filipino words that renders them a force that can make things “happen,” virtually. In this sense, the etymology of the very word *onomatopoeia* can be understood alternatively: while its root words *onoma* and *poiein* are commonly interpreted to together pertain to “the creation of a word *ex novo*” (Bredin, 1996, p. 556), they can be now intuited as indicating how the word itself likewise creates *ex novo* — that is, that the word is also a creative, and not merely created, matter.

Another example of this capacity of words for the virtual would be the case of seemingly nonsensical terms found in other folk riddles. For instance, in the Ilocano *buburtia*, “*Piña, piña / marabotinia*” (Starr, 1909, p. 52), which pertains to rice grains, the entirety of the riddle does not really make sense, for while the first two words *piña* are understood to refer to pineapple,<sup>11</sup> the second line *marabotinia* is unidentified and undefined as a word in Ilocano or other Philippine languages (Hart, 1964, p. 35). However, as Donn V. Hart (1964) asserts, the term must not be dismissed as merely nonsensical, since it is also perceived to generate a sensible effect on the folk poem, namely to “mislead the person trying to guess the solution” (p. 35; see also Starr, 1909, p. 16). And yet, it is also crucial to note Hart’s reading for its utmost irony, considering that his argument on *marabotinia* as a non-nonsensical term derives from its being nonsensical indeed, albeit deemed most functional here as a distraction in the context

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as follows: “the *katha* can begin with a single *kata*, but now composed of multiple and branching *kata*. It is here that the mode of knowledge transmission more familiar to us Filipinos since time immemorial enters. The possibilities can only expand. For if *katha* began in the mouth of god, or prayer of a devotee, or incantation of a *babaylan* or shaman, or whisper of a *mananambal* or witch-doctor, it further disseminates now as myth, legend, testimony, news, tall tale, wit, rumor, tattle, chatter, account, story, gossip, hearsay...” (“*ang katha ay puwedeng nagsimula sa iisang kata pero binubuo ngayon ng marami at sanga-sangang kata. Dito papasok ang mga paraan ng transmision ng kaalaman na mas pamilyar sa ating mga Pilipino sa simula’t simula pa. Lalawak ang mga posibilidad. Dahil kung ang katha ay nagsimula sa bibig ng isang diyos, o dasal ng isang mananampalataya, o enkantasyon ng isang babaylan, o bulong ng isang mananambal, lalaganap pa ngayon ito bilang mito, alamat, testimonya, balita, bida, siste, tsismis, sitsit, daldal, kuwento, istorya, tsikahan, bulung-bulungnan...*”) (p. 22; translation mine).

<sup>10</sup> Regarding such “efficacy of the myths” (Demetrio, 1990, p. 7), Raffaele Pettazzoni (1967) asserts that such lies in the magic of the word; in its evocative power, the power of mythos in its oldest sense, of the *fa-bula*... a secret and potent force, akin, as its very etymology shows, to the power of *fa-tum*...” (p. 15, in Demetrio, 1990, p. 7). Here, it is crucial to note that “*fatum* comes from the Latin word *for, fari, fatus sum* ‘to speak’; it connotes the meaning of ‘decisive word’...” (Demetrio, 1990, p.23n12). For an intuition regarding the relationship between myths and deliberateness, particularly as intensity, see Benitez (2018).

<sup>11</sup> In Starr’s (1909) index, however, he provides the following translation of the riddle to English, which does not make any mention of the pineapple: “If there is none, you will die” (p. 52).

of the riddling game. It is here then that onomatopoeism as a linguistic principle of the Philippine vernacular proves instructive in moving toward another intuition of the said (non)word, and in turn, the folk poem as a whole. Listening to the term, *marabotinia* can be perceived as somehow intensifying the preceding line, for while *piñá*, *piñá* virtually renders a couple of rice grains, through the minute *pi* and the delicate *ña* (*nya*), and their repetition, it is *marabotinia* that conveys their further multiplication, with the quickness in the expansive syllables *ma* and *ra*, and vessel-like *bo*, and the continuing presence of the rice grains in the similar-sounding *tiniá* at the end (Benitez, 2022c, p. 246). In other words, as a couplet, while the first line appears to express only two rice grains, as made palpable in the enunciated two *piñá*'s, the second line, *marabotinia* suggests their plenitude, in the rush of the word that virtually evokes the same rice grains.

Hart (1964) notes that “nonsensical” terms can be found not only in Philippine folk riddles, but also in other forms of folk texts (p. 34). Examples of such terms are documented, for instance, in the folk epics *guman* of the Dumalinao (see Malagar, 1980) and *hlolok* of the Tboli (see Lapiz, 2006, cited in Yapan, 2010, pp. 59-61; also Yapan, 2021, p. 42). Animist Filipinos from Northern Luzon are also noted to sing folk songs said to be “non-meaningful to the singer and the listener,” but nevertheless cherished as “artistic expression, and as a symbol of group solidarity, not literal content” (Eggan, 1956, p. 253, cited in Hart, 1963, p. 34). Meanwhile, Ilongots are described as protracting “the end of some words” and mention “meaningless syllables” in their retelling of folk tales, for ornamentations like these permit a “delightful manner of telling [itself]” that is deemed more significant than the development of the plot being narrated (Wilson 1947, pp. 29-30, cited in Hart, 1964, p. 34). This is similar to how Ifugaos profess to “enjoy...myth recitations because [they] appreciate...the babble of them as a rising and falling sound [with] the voice...‘ris[ing] and fall[ing] like the sound of the bamboo harp” (Barton 1955, pp. 6-7) — a comparison that essentially articulates the aforementioned onomatopoeic materiality of the vernacular.<sup>12</sup>

The Filipino scholar and fictionist Alvin Yapan (2010) further values the aural materiality of the vernacular through syncopating on the phenomenon of repetition in the context of the chanting of epics. According to him, this mechanism facilitates *kasidhian* or an intensity of affects,<sup>13</sup> which in turn allows the Indigene “to comprehend

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<sup>12</sup> This comparison is worthy of underscoring, as it is similarly articulated by Percy Shelley (2002) in his *Defence of Poetry* (p. 511), which then became foundational in Morton's (2012, p. 206) “object-oriented defense” of poetry.

<sup>13</sup> Yapan (2010) defines intensity as a principle that “forms discourse by degrees of affect, which is recognized as capable of accommodating abstraction. Affect is distinguished only in terms of degrees of intensities. Affects can thus possibly interchange, since their intensity and temperance can be manipulated. In this manipulation, repetition becomes an instrument to calibrate affect” (“bumubuo ng diskurso sa antas ng damdamin, na tinitingnan din bilang may kapasidad para sa abstraksiyon. Dinadalumat ang damdamin bilang magkakaiba lamang ng antas ng kasidhian. Nagkakaroon ng posibilidad na pagpalit-palitin ang mga damdamin gayong maaaring manipulahin ang



themselves and their surroundings” (“*[ma]dalumat...ang kanilang sarili at paligid*”) (p. 18; see also Yapan, 2021, p. 45). Yapan cites as an example the manner through which Ifugao chanters were described to recite their epic *hudhud*, not in perfect synchrony with each other as in starting at the same time from the beginning of the epic, but with each chanter commencing at different points of time yet from the same beginning of the epic. In other words, these multiple chanters are heard in lines of sounds parallel but not coinciding to each other, resulting in a performance that “thickens the already layered sound created in the simultaneous chantings” (“*[nagpapa]kapal...[sa] patong-patong nang tunog na nalilikha sa magkakasabay na pagkanta*”) (Yapan, 2010, p. 61). As such, at some point during the ritual of epic-chanting, the listening audience is likely to not understand anything at all regarding the narrative itself, and so, “only the excessiveness of the sound created is appreciated” (“*ang kalabisan sa tunog na lamang na nalilikha ang pinahahalagahan*”) (2010, p. 61).

While Yapan’s (2010) novel study relating repetition with affective intensity is still arguably anthropocentric, given that it primarily concerns itself with the consciousness of human Filipino Indigene across various forms of art (see, for instance, 2010, pp. 74-93), its potential contribution toward a new materialist regard for literature can nevertheless be articulated here, especially in conjunction with the earlier discourse on the Philippine vernacular. If we were to take into account the onomatopoeism at the core of these languages, the rehearsal of their excessive repetitions can be understood as a recurring attempt to convey materials viscerally. To put it another way, the intensity incited by the practice of repetition can hence be intuited as bare desire itself to render the material world *virtually*: the lush strata of sound created in the method of chanting the *hudhud*, for instance, can be recognized as a material translation — particularly in the materiality of the aural — of the entire mythic world that is the narrative itself, which can also be regarded as metonymic of the Ifugao worldview writ large. In a similar manner, we can now also recognize that in the occasion of riddling, in the repetitive utterance of poetic conundrums to the point of exhaustion (Almario, 2017, p. 180; Burns, 1976), what becomes possible is a spatiotemporality in which the things poetically evoked in the conundrum are made to virtually manifest in the very materiality of the vernacular. It is in this sense that literature, particularly that from the Philippine tropics, can be materially considered, with words grasped beyond being mere signifiers pertaining to other things, but as materials in themselves by their own auralness, with utmost force and capacity to agentially summon — if not create, again — the material world, perhaps in another form.

### Villa’s “Magical Song”

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kaigtingan at kalusawan nito. Sa ganitong manipulasyon, ang pag-uulit ang nagiging instrumento ng kalibrasyon ng damdamin”) (p. 181; translation mine).



While this preliminary proposition toward a Philippine new materialist poetics appear to cohere within the folk world and its orature, the temptation to merely root and bound this sensibility to the Indigenous domain must also be resisted, lest this poetics be taken as characteristic only of traditional cultures (see, for instance, Müller, 1865, p. 74 cited in Wilkinson, 1936 p. 74). After all, onomatopoeia, particularly in its common rehearsal as the mimicking of sounds made by animals and other matters, is often considered to be “at the lowest threshold” (Bredin, 1996, p. 558) of significations, with “[human] language [deemed as] a higher and more systematic apparatus than the pure sound and natural groan of animals” (“*ang wika [ng tao ay] mas mataas at sistematikong kasangkapan kaysa dalisay na tunog at likás na ungol ng hayop*”) (Almario, 2017, p. 172). And so, as a final turn to the poetics being proposed here, it is most instructive to consider another literary example that can demonstrate how this sensibility also materializes in encounters with texts beyond the species of folk poetry and even the Philippine vernacular itself. In this way, the nominated new materialist poetics of this essay can be ideally expanded elsewhere and also accommodate other forms of literary texts.

The poetry of Jose Garcia Villa (1908-1997) — a renowned Filipino literary figure and hailed as the “almost singlehanded...found[er]” (San Juan, 1996, p. 171) or even the “father” (“*ama*”) (Almario, 1984, p. 128) of modernist Filipino poetry in English — is remarked for its sheer “technical idiosyncracies” (San Juan, 1996, p. 172). Among the innovations and experimentations that Villa executed in his poetic corpus are the reversed consonance, a scheme which switches the last principally sounded consonant of a word for its designated rhyme;<sup>14</sup> and comma poetry, a form which utilizes the titular punctuation mark instead of spaces between words (see Villa, 2009, pp. 74-75, 78). Much of the scholarship regarding Villa’s poetry, however, underscores the significance of discourses on race and nationality in shaping his work. For instance, Timothy Yu’s (2004b) invaluable reading of the foray into the American literary landscape of Villa’s poetry asserts that “American modernism could only adapt to the phenomenon of a Filipino modernist writer [namely, Villa] by placing him within the Anglo American literary tradition, while filtering his racial difference through an orientalism already present within modernist ideology...allow[ing] readers to

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<sup>14</sup> In 1949, Villa wrote to the editors of *Western Review* to assert the originality of his reversed consonance over Edmund Wilson’s “amphisbaenic endings” or “backward rhyming endings,” featured in his work “The Pickerel Pond — a Double Pastoral,” published in *Furioso* magazine in the same year. As Villa underscores, “by *calling attention* in [Wilson’s] by-line to the rhyming method, and yet making no acknowledgment to anyone, Mr. Wilson leaves the reader to deduce that he is the inventor of this method, especially as this ‘backward rhyming’ is not generally known and has had no appearance in print before except in my book ‘Have Come, Am Here...’” (Villa, 2002, p. 308). It is interesting to note here Wilson’s naming of such rhyming scheme as *amphisbaenic*, for while it connotes the mythological two-headed snake, it also pertains to “a womanlike genus of lizards found in America” (p. 309) — which crucially echoes the “feminizing orientalism” (Yu, 2004, p. 52) that has been observed in western readings of Villa’s poetry, as well as the critical remark by Dame Edith Sitwell in reference to Villa (see below).

aestheticize Villa's race in a way that did not disrupt the ostensibly universalizing standards of modernism" (2004b, p. 42; see also Yu, 2004a). And so, despite the "generally positive reviews" and supposed appraisal regarding Villa's poems, these utterances are ultimately "vexed in their attempts to find aesthetic criteria that can remain untainted by [Villa's] race or nationality" (Yu, 2004b, p. 44). A foremost example would be Marianne Moore's (1942) review of *Have Come*. Here, she makes an effort to flatter the "delicacy with force" of Villa's writing by likening it to "one of the colors of black ink from a hogs'-hair brush in the hand of a Chinese master" (1942, p. 394). Meanwhile, Dame Edith Sitwell, who helped propel Villa's career as a poet in the United States,<sup>15</sup> is said to "enjoy...the fantasy that [Villa] was some kind of magic iguana," being "this presumably minute, dark green creature, the colour of New Zealand jade, spinning these sharp flame-like poems" (Glendinning, 1981, p. 246, cited in Yu, 2004b, p. 57n7; San Juan, 2010, p. 12).

While Villa's "uprooted condition" (San Juan, 1996, p. 177) as a Filipino writer in the United States certainly played a crucial role toward his "radical *formal* response to the ethnic writer's [Villa's] need for a new poetic language (Sollor, 1987, p. 254 cited in San Juan, 1996, p. 177), a vital decentering of Villa in reading his poetry permits an alternative encounter with the poems as materials in themselves, and not merely as *his* poems that can be simply assumed as always bounded by his authorial and anthropomorphic intentions (see Kaczmarek, 2019). For while the critical attempts to demystify Villa's poetry through an incisive consideration of Villa himself against the backdrop of larger human political realities of his time prove valuable (see, for instance, San Juan, 1996; San Juan 2010; and Chua, 2013), as the new materialist Jane Bennett (2010) also reminds us, such acts of demystification "should be used [too] with caution and sparingly, because demystification presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a *human* agency that has illicitly been projected into things"; in effect, this "tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce political agency to *human* agency" (2010, pp. xiv-xv, cited in Benitez, 2021b, p. 65). And so, as a gesture toward a new materialist regard of Villa's poetry, it is instructive here to approach these poems in a manner similar to what has been previously rehearsed in the above instances of Filipino folk poetry — that is, via their very material aurality.

It is important to note that while the English language is not generally characterized by onomatopoeism, it is still observed to demonstrate this aural impulse that is most capable of inducing the virtual. For instance, in Hugh Bredin's (1996) crucial essay that nominates onomatopoeia as a "figure and linguistic principle," he asserts that

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<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, her introduction in Villa's third book of poetry, *Selected Poems and New*, first published in 1958 (Sitwell, 1993).

more than being a direct resemblance of the sound it names (p. 558) or a conventional association between the material it signifies and the latter's respective sound (p. 561), onomatopoeia can also be performative in the sense that "its foundation rests upon the amount and the character of the physical work used by a speaker in uttering a word," so as to ultimately render a "relation" to the connotation of the word itself through an instantiation of its sense, and not through mimicking per se the sound of the matter it pertains to (p. 563-564). To put it another way, the onomatopoeic word becomes the matter through which a human speaker may enact a halfway meeting with the material world writ large (Barad, 2008), through the very aurality of a word. Bredin furthers such conjecture through reading a famous passage from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (II, lines 364-373). Through attending to the sonic quality of the poem, he notes how the lines themselves can be perceived as mostly embodying ideas they convey: *Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows* (line 366), for instance, is observed to "exemplif[y] softness and gentleness"; *But when loud surges lash the sounding shore* (line 367) "very effectively captures the precise character of the continuous water noise that the line compels us to imagine"; while *The line too labours and the words move slow* (line 368) deploys the "sibilant" s-sound, "lengthen[ing it] indefinitely and used...to slow down the pace of the utterance" (Bredin, 1996, p. 564-564). After briefly citing examples from other writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, John Keats, and James Joyce,<sup>16</sup> Bredin can only conclude that "sound *does* matter in language," especially since "one constituent of our [human] consciousness as language users is an awareness of the fit between sound and meaning" (p. 566). And in the present new materialist poetics offered in this essay, such perceived "fitness" of the word and its sense is indeed the event of the virtual, when these two coalesce in the seemingly paradoxical moment of onomatopoeic utterance: what is said is recognized as indeed what is said, in the sense that what is pronounced *is* what is meant.

It is now, after Bredin's interlocution, that we can punctuate this essay through finally considering the following lyric poem by Villa, said to be "written in a dream and, when he awakened, the poem wrote itself and he was merely the scribe, making no further revisions" (King, 2015, p. 23 n.13):

First, a poem must be magical,  
Then musical as a sea-gull.  
It must be a brightness moving  
And hold secret a bird's flowering.

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<sup>16</sup> In particular, Bredin (1996, p. 566) notes the following instances: Doyle's naming of his detective character *Sherlock Holmes*; Keat's line "Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam / Of *perilous* seas, in faery lands forlorn" (emphasis mine) from his poem "Ode to a Nightingale"; and Joyce's specific word choice of *crustcrumb* in the phrase "liver slices fried with crustcrumbs" in his novel *Ulysses*.

It must be slender as a bell,  
 And it must hold fire as well.  
 It must have the wisdom of bows.  
 And it must kneel like a rose.  
 It must be able to hear  
 The luminance of dove and deer.  
 It must be able to hide  
 What it seeks, like a bride.  
 And all over I would like to hover  
 God, smiling from the poem's cover. (Villa, 2008, p. 12)

The poem is an *ars poetica*: it describes what a poem “must be.” What bears emphasizing, however, is how the aural materiality of the words embodies the very sense of the entire poem: from the first line that opens with a jolt (*first*), it mellows to a certain (the article *a*) fullness (the thing *poem*) and toward a slow opening (*magical*) that is particularly echoed in the second line (*musical, sea-gull*). While the third line pushes the reader onward (the rise in *brightness*, before *moving*), the fourth line executes an ironic knot between concealment (the staccato in *secret*) and revelation (the eventual *flowering*). The fifth to twelfth lines exhibit the range of the characteristics of the poem being described by this very poem: its supposed juxtaposition of elongation (*slender*) and briefness (*fire*) with stability (*bell, well*); its roundedness (*wisdom, bows, rose*) and its slenderness (*kneel, hear, deer*); and its simultaneous elusiveness (*hide, seeks*) and solidity (*bride*). The poem then condenses everything (the encompassing *all*, the binding *over*) with a couplet of rhyming words that seem to evoke the lightness, if not delicacy, of the poem itself, as a material that is entangled with another delicate thing, namely the paper on which it is written (*hover* and *cover*), with the latter especially contrasted with the weightiness of *God* at the beginning of the last line, who shows seeming coyness (*smiling*). Overall then, one can surmise that this poem demonstrates very well what Villa foremostly asserts regarding poetry — that it “is, first of all, *language, music, and form*” (King, 2015, p. 3).

The aural materiality of the poem — especially musical aurality — matters to Villa’s poetics for it is deemed “very closely allied to...the quality of *magic* — the power of enchanting, putting the reader under a spell or incantation” (King, 2015, p. 52), or that force both “marvelous and extraordinary that casts a mysterious spell on us...giv[ing] poetry a narcotic or hypnotic effect” (p. 19). For Villa, “the best definition of poetry,” in a word, “is magical song” (p. 69). Using Villa’s appraisal, we return again to reading the above poem: the first three keywords can be understood better — *magical* and *musical* are heard to reverberate with one another, almost homophonically, precisely because in Villa’s poetics, these two qualities are most intimately entangled.

Exemplifying such entwining, the word *sea-gull* is suddenly let sound, yet seamlessly, sincerely, as if, indeed, evoking an instance of a magician conjuring from nowhere a bird — and a sea-gull no less! Yet, in the habitus of magic, as Villa also reminds us, “although we clearly know that [the magician] will produce a rabbit or saw a woman in half — what entrances us is not the rabbit or the woman but how he [sic] does it. We are surprised by the mystery of the medium...which [in poetry] is language” (King, 2015, p. 19). Such syncopation of the materiality of language — in underscoring how Villa’s poetry “live[s] a life more convincingly as sounds, arrangements of words and lines” — does not mean however that it is “delinked” from “emotions, feelings, thoughts, and desires” (Patke, 2007, p. 8): for as already demonstrated above, these latter affects are virtually manifested through the materiality itself of the words — an event that one can ultimately propose as the instance of magic in poetry.

How the magical is rehearsed in the poem can be further grasped when one considers that it is, indeed, an *ars poetica*, that is, a poem that ruminates on the art of poetry. As such, the utterances which describe how a poem “must be” — that it ought to be musical, and so on — do not necessarily pertain to the qualities possessed by this poem, but perhaps by another poem, or a poem in general, that is hoped and envisioned to hold the aspired characteristics. And so, while the poem onomatopoeically embodies the very ideals it enumerates in its own lines, as shown above, it is now intuited to simultaneously evoke another poem — “a poem” that is also pertained inside the poem — which virtually manifests the catalogued features.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the poem, in and through itself, effectually summons *another* poem, this new one which is not necessarily here, or here *yet*, or can ever be here in the present, considering its utter exceptionality, as hinted by Villa’s *ars poetica* (for what poem, after all, “must be a brightness moving / And hold secret a bird’s flowering”? “Slender as a bell, / And...hold[s] fire as well”? And what does it ever mean, for it to “have the wisdom of bows... / And...kneel like a rose”?). And yet, regardless of the seeming impossibility of finding a poem that can indeed exemplify these traits, Villa’s poem can be perceived as already palpably presenting to us this almost unthinkable and ineffable poem in the here and now of the utterance of the same Villa poem by way of its onomatopoeic impulses that somehow permit an encounter with the anticipated magical poem.

Thus, it can be recognized that Villa’s poem allows sensorially and viscerally the arrival of a poem that might otherwise not take shape or happen at all, given the precise, if

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<sup>17</sup> While for Harold Bloom (1997), “the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem* — a poem not itself” (p. 70, in Morton, 2012, p. 220), Villa’s poem, in its virtualization of another poem through itself, makes possible the seemingly paradoxical, if not impossible: that the “other” poem it means which is not itself *is* also the same poem, indeed itself. As such, Villa’s poem only affirms Morton’s (2012) intuition of things as ultimately contradictory (pp. 210-211).



not unattainable, attributes that are expected of it. In this way, the poem permits the “new”, most coveted by the Modernist movement of Villa’s time (see Pound, 1935), to emerge and appear virtually, without the inevitable paradox of it retreating to becoming old once already uttered and thought. Such a seemingly impossible — indeed, magical — feat is realized through the poem’s embodiment of onomatopoeia in the etymological sense of the word: it creates a word — namely, this other poem, this desired new poem — from nothing — that is, in the latter’s wordlessness, its precise absence, with its senses conveyed by Villa’s originary *ars poetica* through its own sound. Therefore, despite being “not — [or] cannot be — ascertained, the verse itself somehow permits for an intuition of what is becoming before us, allowing such [a new poem] to aurally arrive, despite its...improbability” (Benitez, 2021a, p. 212).<sup>18</sup> And for Villa (2008), such is a deed only required from a poet: after all, “the poet,” he says, “makes things known as words” (p. 158).

### **Conclusion: Poetic Magicks**

Jose Garcia Villa’s poem, in other words, is magical — or, magicks — precisely in its conjuration of this new poem from some other time and place through its very aural materiality: it coincides, most ironically and transcendently, what seems to be not here with what is at present. In its agency for such seemingly impossible creative convergence, Villa’s poem — regardless of its usual distinction as an early specimen of “modernist” poetry in the Philippine literary landscape — ultimately appears to be most similar, if not at one at all, with “premodern” folk poetry in the vernacular, such as the poems previously considered in this essay. For after all, what are all these verbal matters but things most capable of inciting powerful effects, such as summoning an entire folk worldview or evoking the new without having it vanish at the same time? From this comparative insight, what can be finally gleaned is an ecology of Philippine poetries intimately entangled with each other, irrespective of how we human readers conventionally classify and separate them in terms of our imposed historical periodizations. Indeed, as it has already been articulated time and again: we have never been modern — or perhaps, we have always been modern (Latour, 1993).

As such, what is Villa’s poem but an anagram too, perhaps, of the inscription on an ancient pot found in Calatagan, Batangas, in southern Luzon — a jar that can possibly “make [even] a wilderness surround itself,” with a “verbal system” that asserts itself as “its own magnificent cause of being” (Lentricchia, 1995, p. 438)<sup>19</sup>:

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<sup>18</sup> It is crucial to note that this quotation is in reference to the work of the contemporary Filipino poet Marlon Hacla (2020), which similarly demonstrates the new materialist onomatopoeism described in this essay.

<sup>19</sup> Particularly referred here is the jar placed in Wallace Stevens’s (1923) poem “Anecdote of the Jar” (p. 112) which, according to Lentricchia (1995), can be read as a poem that is borne to an extent by the “first [American] imperial



*Gana Bisa Kata*

*Duna kita halabas  
Yawa, sala, kakaga  
Yamyama la ni Manugdait:  
Kita sana magbasa  
Barang king banga*

Powerful is *Gana's* Word

We have a sword  
Evil, faults, falsehood  
Just chant this, Shaman(s)  
Let us read the signs  
Spell/power of this pot! (Guillermo & Paluga, 2011, p. 149)<sup>20</sup>

Or, in translating again to Villa's terms, this time as his own comma poetry:

God's,powerful,word,  
Here,is,our,sword,  
To,evil,falsehood,faults,  
Poets,just,chant,this,so:  
Come,now,let,us,read,  
This,earthen,pot's,magic.

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incursion[s] in the Orient," that is, "as if the [colonial] episode in the Philippines gave rise to the poem" (p. 442). And indeed, what is Stevens's jar placed in Tennessee but the same jar found in Calatagan?

<sup>20</sup> The intuition of the word as a virtual weapon can be similarly observed in another Filipino poem from the early Spanish colonial era (see Benitez, 2022a, pp. 252-253). As such, the said poem — as well as the one above, and perhaps Villa's poem too — can be intuited as an *anting-anting*, that is, "a superstitious thing with which, they [the Indigene] believe, they will not receive any damage from the enemies" ("cosa supersticiosa en que creen que con ella no recibir ningun daño de los enemigos"), such as "a small book or piece of paper" ("un librito ó papel") (Noceda & Sanlucar 2013, p. 600, in Benitez, 2022c, pp. 215).

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