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AUTHOR	Villanueva, Victor, Jr.
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ABSTRACT

In the form of a story, this paper reveals the life and lifework of a committed Latino professor of English who was born in Brooklyn in the Bedford-Stuyvesant projects. First recounting the early years of a bright boy, the paper then proceeds to tell about the young man as a dropout, as a soldier in Vietnam, as a student in college, and then as a graduate student (while his wife supported the family). The paper then focuses on "Victor" as a teacher of basic writing to his mostly Mexican-American college students and Victor as a parent at highly charged discussions of curriculum in the local public schools. Pinpointing the discovery of Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" as a turning point in the teacher's life, the paper then concentrates on the many ups-and-downs that accompany Victor's attempts to modify the basic writing curriculum at the university to accommodate Freire's (and now his own) beliefs about literacy and cultural politics. The remainder of the book deals with the problems of the daily life of the teacher and his family; with personal thoughts about cultural and critical literacy; and with the preparation and publication by the National Council of Teachers of English of the teacher's memoir, "Bootstraps." (NKA)

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To The Teacher Who Would: Cultural Literacy as Folkloristic

Victor Villanueva, Jr.
Northern Arizona University

I want to outline parts of a story. I'm something of the main character of the story, but my intention is to inform on other things besides my self. I want to tell about keeping jobs, while having a more political classroom (and I'm using that word political very loosely).

Now, I'm only going to read snippets, even modified snippets, from the book that is to some degree responsible for my being here: Bootstraps, even though I know that reading papers--even at conferences, where reading papers is expected--is often the final cure for insomnia. But maybe I can pique your interest. I want you to read the book. And my motive has little to do with economics. NCTE, the only press I proposed the book to, is non-profit, and that extends all the way down the line: no royalties, a flat fee that has already passed through my checkbook. I want you to read it because I wrote it with you--with us--as my readers: English educators, the NCTE and CEE and CCCC memberships.

I want to tell the story of the college prof from the Bed-Stuy projects, the kid of color, a Puerto Rican, a WPR as they wrote on my father's discharge papers after World War II, WPR--White Puerto Rican, with PR as the color. The kid of color, kid from poverty. Bed-Stuy.

I'll leave the stories of those early years, the Brocklyn years for you to read, except to say this: He as a bright boy. 1962 spelling-bee champ. 1965 dropout. After years in the Army, Vietnam, back to school, convert the GED into a diploma, maybe an Associates degree on something.

I want to tell **his** story. (For many Latino cultures self-disclosure is an embarrassment at best. But I have to tell. So I'll just tell about this friend . . .)

1976. Honorable discharge. To the local community college. At the community college, literature catches his fancy. He gets caught up in schooling, the University, literature at first, then rhetoric. Rhetoric, and its offshoot, composition, hold the promise of social action. Ten years later, GED to Phd, dropout to doctor.

There were failures along the way in college, but elementary school education carried him. Somewhere in the back of his memory were the lessons on Homer, Shakespeare, Thoreau, and the like from the Catholic school that charged a dollar a month tuition. Memory holds the standards, something like the canon, something like cultural literacy. His ghetto childhood and welfare adulthood also carries him, reminders that sometimes failures are more reflections of social systems than reflections of individual inabilities. He was critically aware. He had a critical literacy. Cultural and Critical. So he made it, at least within the confines of the country's present economic conditions.

He never set out to be a teacher. But, it seems, that's not

just what he does; it's what he is.

1979-1985. Carol, his wife, would go to her job in telemarketing, bothering people in their homes for minimal wage. Victor would go with his oldest daughter, Serena, to the food banks several times a week; welfare once a month. Sometimes at the food banks: frozen juices, frozen burritos, frozen turnovers. But we haven't a working freezer or oven.

Carol would return, and Victor would walk the five miles to the University to teach his basic-writing class.

In his class, a Mexican-American student, dressed in an ROTC uniform, writes about his grandmother's Spanish. "Gibberish" is what he calls it. The student writes another paper about the deterrent necessity of nuclear stockpiling. Another paper, after reading Catch-22, says that Yossarian is simply a coward.

Another Mexican-American, another classroom. The man approaches Victor after class, carrying his copy of Fahrenheit 451, required reading for the course. The student doesn't understand the reference to a salon. Victor explains that this is just another word for the living room. No understanding in the student's eyes. He tries Spanish, la sala. Still nothing. The student had grown up as a migrant worker.

And Victor remembers the white student who had been in his class a quarter ago, who had written about not understanding racism, that there was none where he had grown up, in Wennatchee, that he had played with the children of his father's migrant workers without there being any hostility. His father's workers.

Property. Property that doesn't know of living rooms. And Victor thought of what the man from Wennatchee knew, what the ROTC Mexican-American knew, what the migrant worker knew. And he thought of getting up the next morning to go with Serena to St. Mary's for cheese and butter--what he knew. And he knew there was something he was not doing in his composition classrooms.

Hot, bright stage lights blaring down on the four teachers and two parents seated in a circle before a TV camera. The six are about to speak on the cable network's public access channel.

Channing is the ring leader: a big man, large round face, a shock of rumpled gray hair, large belly pressing on a gray vest, not the rotund of the sedentary, but the large of the powerlifter. He is big, blustery, and brilliant: a polymath, well-versed in everything, it seems, one who had traveled the class system: a childhood of unusual affluence, son of a government ambassador, an adulthood of unusual poverty.

There is Jolinda. She is lovely, thin, shoulder-length auburn hair, sparse make-up. She has a quick, critical mind, decisive, unflinching. A long-time interracial marriage and a racially mixed child to raise keeps her decidedly active politically, a hard-working democrat for Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, a hard working advocate for her children's school.

David Zank, goatee, baret, an administrator and a teacher at Jolinda's and Channing's and Victor's children's school--an experimental, alternative public school.

There are also two teachers from one of the more traditional public schools in the area. Known for only two hours, their names are now lost. Channing had found them. Silver gray hair on both, off the neck, tastefully curled atop heads, stylish glasses, pleasant faces. Both are before the camera because they are upset by recent changes in their curriculum, changes imposed from above, from higher administration.

And there is Victor, graduate student, parent.

Channing opens the discussion. At issue is a new curriculum the city had purchased from a major publishing house. It's a computerized package. Depending on how students perform on a standardized pretest, students are presented with a series of hierarchically ordered mastery tests. Versions of a mastery test are taken and retaken until a certain score is attained; then the next test, taken, retaken; then onto the next, and so on. The guarantee? City-wide improvement on national standardized scores, a guarantee that will be made good, no doubt. But the teachers protest that all curricular decisions are thereby taken from them, that they will be able to do nothing but teach to tests.

Zank's school has annually refused to administer standardized tests. He tells the teachers to do the same--refuse. The teachers say that though they agree with Zank on principle, they cannot afford to jeopardize their jobs. They would not have the support of their principal, would not enjoy the support Zank's teachers get. Jolinda argues that the

teachers' jobs are the education of children--matters of public responsibility more than personal security. Again, there is agreement on principle, but personal security is not confined to any one individual; there are families to feed. Victor says not teach to the tests, teach test-taking. His life would have been easier, perhaps, if he had understood standardized test-taking and knew not to take what they measure (test taking) seriously. Zank nods, says "Paulo Freire kind of stuff."

Victor had never heard of Paulo Freire before Zank's comment. He reads Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The things written there make sense.

Fall 1984. Victor is placed in charge of the English department's basic-writing program. He is the best candidate for the job in a number of ways: his fields are rhetoric and composition; he is doing research that focusses on basic writing; he is of color in a program mainly for those of color; and he is willing, as were the directors of the program before him, to undertake the job at Teaching-Assistant pay. Administration denies the color aspect. Wouldn't want to be accused of tokenism. But that's what affirmative action gets reduced to. And we must accept, the foot in the door, a chance at getting in and showing that color is no measure of competence. Colored folks are competent too.

He institutes a Freire-like dimension to the curriculum. He does away with the focus on sentence-combining, adopts the

autobiography of Carolina Maria deJesus, Child of the Dark, the story of a woman from the favelas of Brazil. Her diary presents a view from the eyes of a barely literate woman, her political awareness and the contradictions she carries, her understanding of social stratification, and her desire for what she believes she cannot have, the social stigma she suffers in having to provide for her children by collecting trash, and the pride she nevertheless feels, the way she is labeled a marxist by a local politician when she complains about her living conditions, indignant because she nevertheless believes in the system. It's the story of an American of color and of poverty, set in Brazil. It is a story that the basic-writing students might well understand. And because she is barely literate, the writing is such that the students can be critical of her language use, can gain confidence in their own abilities with literacy.

The basic-writing teachers enjoy teaching the book. But the political is downplayed. Discussions turn on the cultural: "Tell me 'bout the ghetto and I'll tell you 'bout the 'burbs." Students enjoy the dialogue. But there seems to be no dialectic, no sustained probing into the conditions that relegate certain peoples to the ghettos and others to the 'burbs in disproportionate numbers. But this is minor problem. At least the students were being heard.

Still there are problems, not with the material but with the relations between students and teachers. Students are being graded on their courage more than how others at a University or

elsewhere might regard their writing. Disgruntled students complain that they have been lied to, that they thought they really were "A" or "B" writers, only to find that others consider them barely literate. Irate professors say that the university is no place for remedial courses. Victor convinces the higher administration that the basic-writing program is a cultural education, not remediation. The program survives, eventually acquiring a regular, permanent administrator.

But while Victor was still there, there were still the disgruntled and the irate to contend with. He prepares a memo that quotes Louis Faraq'an, a naive move. Nothing radical; nothing religious. The memo notes that Faraq'an defines black power as the ability for black people to come to the table with their own food. The point is to have teachers stop proffering academic charity, no matter how well intentioned. Victor knew the pain of charity.

He goes on a job interview. He returns to find a memo announcing his replacement for the coming academic year. He had not been consulted. They say they know he will surely get a job. But he remembers the teachers in that television show. He had gone too far.

There must be a way to go about doing our jobs in some traditional sense and meeting some of the potential inherent in our jobs, the potential for social change, without inordinately risking our jobs. Utopianism within pragmatism; tradition and

change.

When I think of tradition, I think of E.D. Hirsch. His Cultural Literacy. Now, I'm not going to enter into a Hirsch bashing. There's already been plenty of that. Still, it does sound like he's suggesting a return to halcyon days that never were, surely not wondrous bygone days for people of color, surely not for the poor. Mythic nostalgia permeates his book, its concept winding its way into many a curriculum these days. That great time past. The great works.

He denies that he's advocating the great books (like on page xiv). He says he's advocating the recognition of national-cultural allusions, his list of "what literate American's know," a list, he points out, containing relatively few references to literary works (pages 146-215; and page xiv), his dictionary. But he apparently senses the superficiality, backing up his theory with references to broad reading (as in page 109, or on page 23). What, then, to read? Seems like we're back to a canon.

And that canon has historically favored one gender and one race. That this is the case, says Hirsch, is an accident of history (106). Same casualties in this recurring accident, like the same fender-bender with the same car time and again. But Hirsch does go on to argue that national-cultural allusions are subject to change, that as more women and people of color become literate, they will affect the norms. And there is something to this. There are more women in the canon nowadays, more people of

color. But the changes are not proportionate to the accomplishments or the potentials of women or people of color, surely. And those who enter the canon tend to be those who are politically tame. We read Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B" more than Hughes's more angry "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." We read Martin Luther King but little of W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Rodriguez over Ernesto Galarza, Emily Dickinson more than Virginia Woolf. Hirsch guarantees better test scores and more access to the middle class--not for making the class system more equitable.

For all that, there is something to cultural literacy. One does have to know how to be heard if one is to be heard. Those who rail the loudest against cultural literacy can afford to. They already have it. How, then, to exploit it without being subsumed by it?

Critical literacy, "Paulo Freire kind of stuff," will lead to change, we're told. But what is the student to be critical of? How does she come to know what to be critical of? Why not cultural literacy, the national cultural? Play out the polemic; develop the dialectic.

The idea gets support from the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci. He believed the classics and the national-cultural should be taught in such a way as to expose what he called the folkloristic, the commonly accepted ways of the world, the things too often accepted as if they were parts of nature, in short, the ideological. This suggests to me that it is possible

to provide what's needed for the commonly accepted notions of succe s but with a critical dimension that might foster social action, among teachers and among students.

In a way, the graduate course on classical rhetoric I teach lends itself best to Gramsci's ideas. But I will speak of other grades too. In the graduate course we read Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and others. And we discuss and write about the ways in which some of the things they espoused are still with us--things like censorship for children's better good. We find Cicero writing of writing as a mode of learning and Quintilian writing of peer-group work. We find the first century idea of proper oratorical arrangement and discover the basis for the five-paragraph theme. We look at how the ancients are still with us and question the degree to which they ought to be. Students gather something of a classical education, a matter of some prestige, high culture, and they develop a critical perspective.

Something of the same ideas can be adopted to under-graduates, the secondary school, elementary.

1990, Flagstaff: Victor and Carol's younger children attend the public school. The school district has adopted a literacy package from a major publishing house that explicitly discourages individual instruction. All the children perform their drills in unison, do their reading together, everybody, every time getting

100% on everything. This isn't a matter of collaboration. Just recitation. The books contain color: drawings of kids with nappy hair or slant eyes, not caricatures, done respectfully, yet there is a single cultural norm being advanced--forced-fed cultural literacy.

More than hints at racism start to crop up at home. The brown-skinned, curly-haired five year old daughter asks whether an Indian woman (American Indians the largest number of people of color in the community) would care for a human baby if she found one. A human baby! Another daughter, seven at the time, considerably more immersed in this literacy package than the kindergartner, mentions in passing that she doesn't care for black people. She didn't know any at the time. And she failed to see her own sister's features, forgets the pictures of her aunt, on whom the West African comes out clearly--BPR.

Victor and Carol don't blame the school completely. Market forces have them living in a predominately white community, making for little exposure to the kind of cultural complexity Victor and Carol's older children had known in Seattle or that Victor had known as a child in New York. But even if the school had not been completely to blame for the hints at racism Victor and Carol would now have to counter, there remained the school's blind acceptance of reductive cultural literacy, a curriculum that did nothing to expose and glory in difference as well as similarity, drawings of kids from of different races notwithstanding.

Home schooling becomes the only short-term (and economically viable) alternative. Victor and Carol expose the kids to the national-cultural, but with an eye to multiplicity. The seven year old reads Cinderella, for instance. But she doesn't just stop with the Disney version. She reads translations of the Grimm Brothers' version, Poirot's seventeenth-century French version, an older Italian version, an ancient Chinese version. They're readily available. Discussion concerns how different people, with different ways, living in different times can see some of the same things differently. She writes her own Cinderella story, which inevitably includes characters and situations from her own life. Spelling comes from the words she's trying to use in her own writing. Spelling has a context and a motive--gettin' it like she wants it. Grammar comes from trying to make her stories sound like she wants them to.

Other subjects take a similar tack. For history and geography, for example, she reads stories of dragons from China and dragons of the middle ages and C.S. Lewis's dragons and even Homer's. She writes dragon stories.

Oral proficiency more or less takes care of itself; no need to impose doggedly the standard dialect. Victor's dialect changed without his being overtly conscious of it. The Spanish accent disappeared, so did much of the black dialect from the block. The more he became exposed to written discourse, the more his speaking came to reflect that exposure. And exposure to different worldviews, even if written in one standard dialect,

provided the critical perspective. Reading aloud would help hone speaking skills in the prestige dialect.

I take the Cinderella idea to high school and college. The only real difference in the high school and the college, is that I have the college students look up and report on literary critics who write about fairy tales. They read people like Bruno Bettelheim, who comes up with crazy interpretations of Cinderella as going through Freudian puberty rites, others who write about fairy tales and archetypes, Plato and his notion that fairy tales should be used to indoctrinate children into proper attitudes about life and the gods (a passage quoted by Hirsch favorably, I might add). I have the students do research about the historical or cultural conditions which existed at the time and place of the various versions. They become exposed to academics and academic discourse on a kind of literature they know intimately. They feel comfortable being critical of the great authorities. With the junior high and high school kids I've visited on short stints, I have provided the histories and selected the critical analyses; otherwise, the assignments have been the same.

Students resist being critical of fairy tales. They want to say that fairy tales are simply diversions for children. And this is okay as a jumping-off point for discussion. Resistance is a good thing, an assertion of authority, an opening for dialogue. So it tends to go that through the dialogue some begin to question what else might be contained in those simple

diversions. A student writes about Rosy the Riveter during World War Two, women not just entering male-dominated jobs, like business and medicine, but performing "man's work," physical labor--and doing well. Then she wonders at Disney's Cinderella, which promotes the house wench whose only hope for the future is to marry well. She wonders if Disney's version didn't help put Rosy's daughters "back in their place." Another writes about the Chinese version, about foot binding as a way to keep women in their place. She wonders if having Cinderella wear glass is a kind of modern foot binding. Another notices how Red Riding Hood's stories become more and more sexual as they approach the Victorian era. Another student: Is Jack and the Beanstalk a promotion of laissez faire economics, get rich however you can? Robin Hood a proto-socialist? Students look at fairy tales and children's stories, and in looking, begin to question the obvious and the natural, begin to question ideology.

Another way we look at ideology is by using Roland Barthes' little book Mythologies. The book contains a series of articles Barthes had written for a popular French magazine in the 1950s. Here, again, the idea works for high school and for college. The college students are asked to read and work with the theoretical essay at the end of the book, where Barthes explains semiology. Others get the idea without the thick theoretical language. But I want to introduce the college students to the esoteric language of "pure" theory. They resist.

But, generally, they do tend to respond well to the essays.

In one essay, for example, Barthes explains the popularity of professional wrestling as a spectacle, as containing the elements of ancient Greek plays. Students get the notion of the spectacle. One student writes about how wrestling in the 1990s exploits stereotypes, exploits and promotes existing prejudices. A videotape of contemporary wrestling backs him up. In terms of ideological mythologies, another student, a retired policeman, writes about TV ads to help the hungry as maintaining the myth of American prosperity. The poor and hungry children are in Latin America or in Africa, never in America's cardboard shacks, dying of hunger or disease. A sophisticated literary theory is introduced--traditional academic discourse--and critical questioning arises--a possibility for change.

The basic idea is to present the cultural in such a way as to have students question worldviews, become critical. Action presupposes a need for action. Questioning the commonly accepted makes clear the need for action. Among the commonly accepted is the canon.

Literature can be set up so as to create a dialectic between differing worldviews, between the national-cultural and the critical. Students read Hemingway, for example, as male, white, middle-class as they come, skeptical, perhaps, but no radical. Then they read Buchi Emecheta, Double Yoke--a story of a black African woman trying to get through different value systems, cultures, different ways of viewing the world, her struggles at gaining a college degree. Men and women are at issue, black and

white; the tribal ways that the main character, Nko, was raised with against the modern Western ways of the university. White students confronting the college community, women, African American students, American Indian students--all have a portion of Nko's pains, and since the story takes place far away, the defense of bigotries does not come up immediately, as it often does in more explicitly African American or Latino or American Indian literature, though often it is good to have these prejudices present themselves. Nko and Hemingway's Nick Adams handle things differently, confront different obstacles. Ideologies peep out of the classroom discussions (which usually begin with moral questions--Nick's sense of responsibility; Nko's integrity). What is it about where the characters come from that causes them to behave and believe in different ways? We can look at Steinbeck and Ayn Rand, Rodriguez and Galarza, Louis L'Amour and Leslie Marmon Silko. Students sometimes shock themselves concerning their own prejudices--anti-color and anti-white.

The students write about how they too must confront conflicts, the sources of those conflicts. These aren't always in grand cultural terms, but the cultural is always present, coming out in discussions often. They write autobiographies (or narratives if culturally uncomfortable with the autobiographic). The things they are to write about concern their own experiences, experiences that are tied to the things they are reading. Toward the end of the semester they are asked to downplay the autobiographical elements. Keep them in mind. The

autobiographical is an important assessment tool, even essential, always there, really. "[A]ll writing, in many different ways, is autobiographical," says Donald Murray, even "academic writing, writing to instruct, textbook writing." But outside the English classroom the autobiographical, the narrative, is not usually appreciated. So we look at how the personal is impersonally imparted in writing, still looking to different worldviews espoused in standard written form. We look at Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, then find out about their backgrounds, how two African Americans living in the same time can come to polar viewpoints. Or we look at Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Throughout, there are the culturally literate and the critical, both in what they read and in what they write.

Some students--even a lot, even those who come from poor minority backgrounds--reject the critical views. People don't change overnight. But the goal is not to relinquish national-cultural myths, necessarily. The goal is to expose them to differences and similarities within the literacy conventions they have to contend with, to know the traditional norms while also appraising them, looking at the norms critically. It's a directed process, not propaganda.

All of this is to say that it is possible to have our educational cake and eat it too. It is possible to do our jobs as others define them: provide haute couture, "high literacy," literacy skills, standardized-test-ready cultural literacy. And it is possible to do our jobs as we believe they ought to be

done: with students recognizing that education should carry social responsibility. We can do critical literacy. And what better to be critical of than the cultural norms contained in tradition? Start with what they know or have been told they ought to know or have been told you must teach. Allow and encourage a questioning of the norms. And maybe look to how things might be--and ought to be--changed.

You see, those of us who have had to juggle our American-ness and our other-cultural-ness can't afford to be glib about the need for convention and cultural literacy. They are necessary, particularly in conservative times. But we stand to lose if we simply accept cultural literacy without a critical edge, if there isn't both the tradition and the change. Many of us throughout this country's history have become monolingual, standard dialect speakers and writers, have enjoyed successes, yet we remain somehow other--the successful African American, the successful Latino, never just the successful. We need to remain critical, recognizing our similarities and our differences, culturally and critically literate, recognizing the need for social action and having the tools with which to take action.

The Summer of 1992. The dropout-turned-scholar types the manuscript that will be Bootstraps. Not enough pay to stretch over twelve months. It's that simple, not a matter of excessive spending, excessive consumption, having never qualified for a

middle-class plastic passport--they call it a Visa. Not subtle. Uncertainty is simply his family's summer lot. He'll qualify for food stamps, get a part-time job as short-order cook for a local greasy spoon. The published college professor, still eligible for state aid despite a state salary. Welfare! Stalking about at Safeway at six in the morning so as not to be seen with the food stamps legally tendered, ashamed despite full knowledge of the economics of color, the workings of hegemony.

Then comes Fall. It always does. And the economic cycle begins anew. The salary is gone in repairing summer's economic damage, trying to keep the promises made in those demeaning calls to the landlord and the utility companies. And there continues the caring for children, their subsistence needs, their not-to-be denied needs for Halloween or Christmas or Easter, the birthdays--all magical days, the joys the parents get in providing the magic, but the expenses nevertheless. And then come the ill-afforded trips to conferences, in part because they're necessary to job security; in part because they provide yet another instance of teaching and learning. And economic ascendancy continues to seem so close, the carrot touching lips.

And with the Fall come the students. There comes the fun of the performance, expression of the need to pass things on, the learning the students pass on to him, the hope for a better future for all. And he knows again that the suffering is worth something few enjoy: the children and the students providing a life filled with meaning and possibility. He'd rather have

skipped how he came to know the things he speaks about and writes about, still hankering after a piece of the pie while believing less that there are pieces left, but he knows he could not be who he is, finding pleasure and promise in what he does, without having lived as he has to this point.