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Reflections on Racism and Immigration: An Interview with Victor Villanueva

Brian Bailie, Collette Caton, Rachael Shapiro, Syracuse University

Victor Villanueva studies the intersections of rhetoric and racism. He is the recipient of the 2009 CCCC Exemplar Award, which honors scholars whose work represents the best our field has to offer. Villanueva also won NCTE's David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English and CEE's Richard Meade Award for Research in English Education for his book, *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, an autobiographical tale that exposes the problems with literacy education in America based on his own experiences as a Puerto Rican growing up in New York. Though Villanueva does not often write specifically about immigration, his work illuminates the connection between rhetoric, racism and xenophobia, and encourages all of us in the field to consider how our conceptions of literacy oppress those not of the dominant culture.

On January 22 of this year, we huddled around a computer in our dingy office on the Syracuse University campus and held a wide-ranging, ninety-minute interview with Victor Villanueva via Skype. A portion of that interview is captured here. In this interview we were hoping to get a sense of the way in which a scholar of color and the son of Spanish-speaking, Puerto Rican parents sees the issues of race and immigration coming together to form a powerful discourse concerning xenophobia, linguistic diversity, and social power. We started by first discussing Villanueva's own experience as a colonized individual and then moved on to larger issues related to race and immigration.



C. Caton: I want to talk about the concept of home, which is often a loaded concept. Can you describe for us what you think home to mean and what you would identify your homes to be? That is, to what extent do you feel that you occupy a borderland and how does being mistaken for an immigrant help to influence your concept of home?

V. Villanueva: Home is a funny thing. It's not borderlands that become the issue, certainly for a Puerto Rican, surrounded by the sea, encased by the U.S. It has to do really with colonialism in my case, and the degrees to which long term colonialism like that which Puerto Rico has experienced for close to 600 years, so that there's almost no escaping it—even the assertion of one colonized language over another.

What I find is that having been born in the United States, during a different era when bilingualism wasn't even an issue—assimilation into English was simply a given in the '50s, to the extent that even in school, the children's names were translated into English. So Carlos Bermúdez became Charles Bur-mew-dezz, and we all pronounced it that way; that's how we were taught to do it. I had a friend whose last name was Jiménez, but he was Jimmin-ezz, and nobody corrected it. And I was Villain-new-eva until my father heard about it and got pissed off and insisted that I insist on Via-nueva, which I've done ever since . . . and even that is not quite right. Even that is a link to another colonization, because the Puerto Rican pronunciation would be Bee-ja-nueva, but I was not to do it that way; I was to do it in the "finer" Spanish.

In the Albizu Compos essay, the one that will show up in *College English* in July, I write at the end of that article that I feel a kind of fear, a kind of shame, in going to Puerto Rico. There is a kind of estrangement. African Americans know this one, too. African Americans can't go back to Africa; it's not theirs. Eldridge Cleaver tried, and after living in Africa for a time, he came back and became an ultra, ultra-conservative, a religious fundamentalist, because he would say anything, do anything, to come back into this country. And



so all that Black Panther stuff got repudiated in that process. So in my case, I find that I'm likely never going to face that demon, which is my estrangement from Puerto Rico. This is my parent's home, but because Puerto Ricans have been racialized—it is a racialized distinction, I *have* to own it. And it's a part of my cultural upbringing, after all. I was raised Puerto Rican. I am Puerto Rican. But the place, Puerto Rico, is not mine at all, completely foreign.

So concepts of home are complicated when it comes to people of color because the people of color in the United States have been the colonized. And the colonized is very much different from the immigrant of another time, who gave up home to create a new home. For the people of color it's always imposed; it's *always* imposed. And perhaps there is a complication, there's a kind of alienation that I've had to experience. I'm not sure what that kind of alienation would be like for those who maintained contact with home.

The ICE—Immigration and Customs Enforcement—they tried to send Chicanos down to Mexico, to be like spies. Everybody knew who they were, though. They were obviously not Mexicans to the Mexicans. So there is, I think, always in the process of racism and in the process of colonialism, there is always an estrangement, a kind of belonging to another world, a part of the colonizer, and apart from. Belonging to no home, in some sense, and no home to come to.

At the same time, what am I if not an American? I *am* an American. And even when the state does things that are appalling to me, America at its worst, I'm okay about being an American. I'm never not okay with it, really. I just wish that racism wouldn't be so damned entrenched in this society.

B. Bailie: How does the specter of immigration affect your credibility in the Academy, and your work, or the types of things that you're asked to speak on?



V. Villanueva: It's kind of funny because my knee-jerk reaction is to say that it doesn't, but that's not true. Immigration is one thing, but what happens is, it's the racism that affects my presence in a lot of ways, and it's a particular kind of presence. There is a way in which all Latinos become one thing, which is Mexican, and if Mexican then we're tied to questions of immigration past and present.

And so much of my work did look at the ways in which racism presented itself with things like what's going on again, which is the expatriation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. And I say it's going on again because the governor of Washington State, Christine Gregoire, has said that perhaps what they should do is deport all illegal Mexican immigrants who are in the jails right now. And you know, we've seen this before: it happened in the 1930s, it happened in the 1950s, here we go again. Anytime that the conditions are hard, there is this scapegoating, and racism is always a part of that scapegoating.

Now, my presence in this business . . . for many years it seemed that my presence had less to do with what I said than how I said it. Which was, on the one hand, flattering, on the other, very aggravating. So that folks would want to talk about why I write the way I do as opposed to what it is I was saying in what I wrote. So you know, that's kind of a quirky thing. I think that's dying down now, that the focus is more on what I am saying.

R. Shapiro: How does being a scholar and educator of color affect the way you teach rhetoric and writing, and what pedagogical choices do you consciously make?

V. Villanueva: First of all, being a scholar of color forces me to address questions of color. There's just no way to avoid it if one is conscious of the degree to which this is an institutional constraint. That's one of the conscious decisions that I have made, is that somehow not only should my writing mesh various discourses, but my teaching, my pedagogy



itself should do that. That makes it necessary for me to stay tied as much as possible to the cultures our students bring in, which are not just racialized cultures, but all the pop culture stuff. I have to learn a new vocabulary weekly. Anyhow, so there is a consciousness of being attuned to the degree to the culture of the youth that walk in without becoming part of youth culture, because I still need to maintain my own sense of dignity and the like.

The short answer is this: I'm always playing with language. With everything from foul language, though always with a caveat (I always tell my students that if they really dislike it let me know in private and I do have a vocabulary that could exclude that). So that includes that, and yet even with vulgarities and the colloquial, there is maintaining the seriousness of the subject matter under discussion, and the subject matter for me is always language, whether it's racism in language, xenophobia in language, class in language, gender, sexuality . . . it always has to be tied to language. And I mean it's always been my complaint about Composition Studies, that it continues to act as if it doesn't have a subject matter of its own, and so Comp is always doing this topic and that topic and the other topic, when the topic is always language and language use!

You know I just had to write a chapter for a retrospective on Stephen North's *The Making of Knowledge and Composition*, which used to be required reading back in the day. I had just gotten my first Assistant Professorship when that book came out. Well, that book is all about research and composition. Why are we worried about that? Why are we doing cognitive research, ethnography, this, that, and the other thing when we should be doing rhetoric? Our business is language; let's do language! Let somebody else . . . let the scientists do the science! Look at how poorly they do language. We've got stuff we could teach them! So anyhow, the answer is: always being conscious of language, language and its multiplicity. I've had to learn that and it seems to be a good skill to teach as well.



B. Bailie: Can you describe your travels through the States? And to what extent and in what ways and places do you relate to the struggles of immigration?

V. Villanueva: The thing is, I travel a lot, but as I travel what I'm doing is going from one university campus to another. So I get to see an airport, a hotel, and a university, and maybe a fine restaurant here and there. And what that means is all I'm ever really seeing is the degree to which immigration *doesn't* filter in to the universities.

Then again, I was in Salt Lake City a couple years ago to talk about the new racism, which is what I think about a lot these days. I gave my talk, took part in a town-meeting thing, did a TV interview and a phone-in radio interview, and then I was supposed to do a public reading from *Bootstraps* at the city library. That afternoon, somebody blew a bomb at the city library. It likely had nothing to do with me. There's no way I'll ever know. But I do know that the night before, the entire conversation in a large town-hall type meeting I was asked to be a part of had to do with immigration, and my argument at that time was that immigration itself is a scapegoat, and I'm thinking about Kenneth Burke's ways of talking about scapegoats in *Permanence and Change* especially, a diversionary tactic for other grander concerns that were going on. So it was a very political kind of setup conversation.

There are also the ways in which immigration doesn't affect me and my family personally, since we have the wonderful status of being colonized. [laughter]. Anyway, the short and long of this is that in my travels around the country immigration just isn't something that I'm confronted with regularly. Yet it's there. I did see that while I was in Chapel Hill, and I have the same kinds of stereotypes of the deep South as everybody else, but the schools, if I remember correctly, were entertaining bilingual ed. So of all of the places I've been, the only places I've had heard anyone thinking about not just bilingual but cross-directional bilingual ed—where the white kids had to learn



Spanish as well as the Spanish kids having to learn English—was in North Carolina.

R. Shapiro: Can you talk about the state of the English-only movement versus the language diversity movement?

V. Villanueva: At the governmental level it's been English-only versus English-plus. Geneva Smitherman is one of the folks behind English-plus. You know the sad part is this really is an immigrant question, because to me it is one of the most backward things that we've got going. There were even students here, at WSU, arguing for English-only, to which I could say you could be ignorant for free. You know? Why pay all this tuition if what you're demanding is ignorance [laughter] which is very low cost? I mean, it's amazing to me! No, I think this one is really . . . I can't think of the word . . . well, probably the best word I can come up with is "retro." But you know, retro can be cool—this is not cool.

I think at this point there are 28 states. In maybe 1990, 1991, somewhere around that time, Florida started this English-only thing, but it was California that picked it right up. So at that time, 12 years ago, 15 years ago, there was one state—California—with English-only legislation or official English. They always argue that no one is telling folks what they can speak at home but only what they can speak in governmental situations. Well, the problem with that of course is that that goes against free speech, and it surely goes after the 14th amendment, which is equal representation under the law. If you can't speak the language and you are forbidden from speaking the only language that you can learn then you're not getting representation. And no law can change cognitive processes. It takes time to learn a language. Just because it's been mandated, as if anybody doesn't want to learn English in America! That's absolutely crazy, this idea that somehow putting in a law is going to change all of that.



So I think it is hysterical, and not funny, that it really is hysteria and xenophobia. There's somehow this phenomenal fear that the strangers are going to change the country. And what's interesting about that is 1) industry sees a market and knows how to deal with it—the banks are bilingual, the commercials are bilingual, you know, everything . . . they know how to deal; and 2) those who wield the power will be the ones who will wield the power of language as well as everything else. So English is never in any real risk, and certainly not at risk from all of these Latin American and Mexican immigrants. They want to talk about the risk? My grandson's learning Chinese. Where's the next hegemon? China maybe, United Arab Emirates maybe, I don't know. But we know that all empires fall and this one is no longer what it was. But its fall is not likely to come from folks much more interested in eking out a living than in tumbling empires.

To me, there is a greater understanding of bilingual education, a realization that that is necessary, but most of the bilingual programs out there right now are transitions into English. So, no, I think that one is not in good shape, and I think that folks who choose not to learn a language insist that those who don't speak English learn a language. It's a funny hypocrisy because the only reason it's a problem is because so many monolinguals in English aren't willing to learn Spanish. That one just annoys the hell outta me! [laughter] And in my own case, when I went to school, we had to learn English; we weren't allowed to speak Spanish, and then I got into college and they say you need a foreign language. I said "What? If you'd have left me alone when I was 6 years old I'd have had it!"

C. Caton: So how does the idea or the myth of literacy construct immigrants as deficient, and how does one's submission to the myth of literacy further internalize racism in US education?

V. Villanueva: Oh, that's a big one, isn't it? I think I addressed that 20 years ago, when the orality/ literacy debates were a very big deal in



our business, in Rhetoric and Comp, and actually in education also. To my way of thinking, the problem that I was addressing when I spoke about the orality/literacy business was the idea, first of all, that orality and literacy had different cognitive capabilities. And that to me was so wrongheaded, to have this stupid cognitive argument attached to people who are parts of oral cultures. And it was a kind of a flip on something that black folks in particular took pride in, that they were tied to the oral, to the griot. And every society has had its heroes as oral tellers. The bard is an oral teller by definition, not Shakespeare. So the problem with cognitive dysfunction was a problem with the way that orality and literacy were being discussed prior.

The problem with orality/literacy now, more directly tied to your question, is that what's not being said is literacy *in English*. And not only literacy in English, but a certain genre of literacy in English. Not only a certain genre, but a certain register, and a certain dialect of English literacy. So it becomes racialized because of the degree of narrowness that's implicit and rarely discussed. And that's what's particularly interesting to me about John Trimbur and Bruce Horner's work: that they're making the case that there are all kinds of literacies and the question is how do we do cross-transference, how do we learn from the literacies of others as well as teach the literacies that we have out there ourselves? So I think that the minute that we confine it to standardized English or to Edited American English, and Edited American English is code word the prestige dialect, for standardized English, without the personal, then we are reinforcing old racist and xenophobic ideas. I mean, the only way to take care of the fear of the other is to force the other to be us.

C. Caton: In a post-9/11 era, US citizens who are visually marked as "other" frequently face the same racism as immigrants. To what extent is racism being conflated with xenophobia?



V. Villanueva: Yeah, well that's an interesting one. I think they've always been. The only ways in which black folks could survive for about 150 years was by being mild, reducing the fear of the other. Because you know xenophobia is not just fear of foreigners, xenophobia is just fear of the other. Folks get marked phenotypically and linguistically, because there is a way in which if you are European, Western European, and a particular brand of Western European, and you speak with an accent, you're charming. Any other accent is an outsider.

I just think that the answer is "yes." The way I think of the construction of racism, and I'm reading about that right now, is tied to needing to make the other subservient. It's tied to notions of colonialism. Xenophobia is this fear that the other will not be subservient. Post-9/11 in particular becomes the case in point, and the rising fear of black men in the post-Civil Rights era. So, very similar kinds of things. People of color or people who have been colored are supposed to be in a subservient position but no longer act subserviently, if there is such a word. Xenophobia kicks in; racism amps up.

C. Caton: Okay, so let's take this issue of racism into the institution and what we can do as teachers. How can community outreach help teachers in our discipline undo institutional racism towards immigrants?

V. Villanueva: Okay, well, toward immigrants, towards anyone, because you know this immigration question's a funny one. What I'm thinking of, for instance, is Katrina. Or let's talk about Texas. When folks talk about immigration, it's always a racialized notion of immigration, and it's a funny racialized notion of racism, too, because it's always anti-Latino; it's focused almost exclusively on Mexicans, even when the Latino is not a Mexican. He or she becomes mexicanized. Yet we have a phenomenal number of African immigrants in the country. And we make a distinction between African-Americans and Africans that we don't make among Latinos. We all become this undifferentiated other that is Mexican, so it's a funny thing.



And let me do one thing more. It is true that in the literature "institutional racism" and "structural racism" are interchangeable as terms. I prefer the term "structural racism," because this is a country that was founded at the time of the need to have a rationalization for racism. I mean, it was economically necessary with the institution of this country to create this second- and third- tier citizenry: women, and black folks, the slaves. And that's after they killed off the Indians. So, it's at the point that it's built into the structure.

That's how we have this inequitable distribution of labor, this inequitable division of incomes. If we no longer talk about racism and point to the man who made it to the top [President Obama], then we don't look at all those who can't even make it halfway up. And it's always disproportionate, the numbers of people of color who are at the lower ranks than white folk. So it's built into the entire structure. The institution would have to be the institution of the United States.

In terms of teaching, I think that students are more willing to listen, even though they come in with sets of beliefs that are passed on to them. If you have never been exposed to the ghetto, it's easy to believe that things are getting better. If you see more middle class folks of color, it's easy to believe that things are getting better. And maybe in some sense they are, but better is never good enough. I mean, there's that quote from Malcolm X that goes something like "You can't drive a knife nine inches into a person, pull it out three inches, and call it progress." [laughter] That's Malcolm's. But that's where we're at—the blade is still in there, but we've pulled a little bit of it out and think everything's cool. But I think that students, once they're exposed to it, exposed to the very idea of going out and finding the instances in the news media, they have to grapple with the idea that just because it doesn't look like it did 30 years ago or 40 years ago doesn't mean it's gone away. And the ways in which racism is built into the language is so damned interesting, and students will receive that.



C. Caton: So can community outreach, or service-learning, or teachers going out and working with those who don't have access to the higher educational institutions, to remove some of that class barrier . . . can that help? What do you see as the role of the academic?

V. Villanueva: Yes it does. It depends on the kind of work it is, though. I mean, part of the problem with service-learning, back in '98 when I was chair of CCCC, that was the beginning of service-learning presenting itself in our business. And what I asked of the service-learning folks was for them to theorize what they were doing, and to begin to look at its downsides as well as its upsides. The downside I see is that it can be too easily converted into social work. And I don't mean that there's anything necessarily wrong with social work, but I do mean that there's a perception by those of color and in poverty about bureaucrats, about do-gooders, and you don't want to fall into that because all that you're going to get then is bullshit back. And so you will be taken advantage of, the service-learners will be taken advantage of, at the same time that the real learning isn't allowed to happen. Paula Mathieu, she's got a book on service-learning that shows the ways in that service-learning can really work. It's really great stuff, and Ann Feldman and her work in Chicago is also really interesting work. So yeah, I think there's a lot that can be done on that end.

I'm in a program now where we're not just preparing students to go on, you know, it's not this little incestuous thing, where you prepare students only to go into universities and do what we do. But among the students here are students who want to go into NGOs and work in the neighborhoods and the like, and I think that it would be good for us to change—and "us" means English-types, or in your case, Writing Program-types—to include that in how we talk about our business. That our business isn't solely to produce little clones who will go into universities and write diatribes that will be read by our clones again, but that we can—and should—get things happening in the neighborhoods.



Our Southern 'Roots' in New Orleans: Early Latino/a Immigration and Its Relevance to a Post-Katrina World

Cristina Kirklighter, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Research on early Latino/a immigration in the deep South is minimal largely because of the Black and White racial dichotomy that pervades the South. New Orleans has a rich Latino/a and Spanish presence, yet little research covers Latino/a immigration from the 1700s to the mid- 1900s. This paper will trace the early history of Latino/a immigration in New Orleans to help foster deep Southern Latino/a "roots" for this growing immigrant population. The paper will also focus on the largest New Orleans Latino/a community, Hondurans, tracing their early history and current immigrant experiences after Hurricane Katrina.

The presence of Hispanics in Louisiana is too important to be passed over unnoticed. Unfortunately, the information is scattered and inadequate. The Latin American Apostolate wishes to assemble this information and hopes that this publication will contribute to an awakening of interest and commitment

(Foreword to *The Hispanics in Louisiana* (1982) by Luis Emilio Henao)

It was then the year 1980 that I started to look for documentary sources, any source of information related to Hispanics in the past and the present, studies which have been conducted by Tulane University, Loyola University, and LSU in Baton Rouge. I went to the libraries, to the archives to look for any investigation