

Embodying Mentorship and Friendship: A Love Letter to Villanueva's "Tradition and Change"

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Some people who change your life are consistently by your side, holding your hand as you stumble through your story's most gnarled passages. Some, like spectral mentors in fairy tales, appear only when you need them most. Your time together is brief but suffused by a mythical air that causes the encounter to reverberate for years. Victor Villanueva is the latter kind of mentor to me, and in this essay, I describe three pivotal interactions we shared, connecting them to ideas he proposes in his 2021 "Tradition and Change" *Composition Studies* piece. From one Latinx memoirist to another, I aim to show he not only espouses his scholarly ideas, but also enacts them through interactions with others. If this special issue is as much a looking forward as it is a looking back, my hope is that in the next 50 years we follow Victor's example of living like the teachers, researchers, and leaders we conceptualize in our scholarship.

The Laughing Apparition

I attended my first Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in 2009, during the first year of my PhD. Like countless graduate students before me, I shared a diminutive room blocks away from the conference hotel with three of my Purdue classmates. I flexed my body in a corner during my daily yoga practice while they tried not to trip over me, performing their own morning rituals of ironing dresses and poring over the conference program.

On the conference's opening day, I left the last panel feeling like the kid who moves to a new school halfway through the year. I called my husband and cried into the phone in some semi-secluded hallway. My sleeping quarters were too crowded, but I preferred them to the conference experience, which was teeming with people conversing animatedly and walking with purpose. Where were they going with such certainty? How come everyone knew each other? And what was this thing called the Latino Caucus? Being Venezuelan, it seemed like a place for me to investigate.

I showed up to the Caucus meeting early and, wanting to curtail my isolation, sat next to one of the few people already there. He acknowledged me with a smile, and I did a double take. He looked like the author of *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, the book I'd signed up to present about in my Minority Rhetorics class. The room filled quickly, and those coming to pay their respects confirmed I was, indeed, sitting next to Victor Villanueva. He

knew everyone's names and the projects they were working on. He asked about their recent predicaments and triumphs. He found a way to laugh—honestly and with gusto—with everyone.

As the meeting ended, I steeled myself and mentioned my impending presentation and how I'd love to ask him a few questions about *Bootstraps*. I wanted to tell him his book had made me feel like I could find my path in rhetoric and composition, in spite of being a filmmaker and fiction writer who cried in hotel hallways. Yet others were waiting for their moment with him. He glanced at the gathering crowd and said if I emailed him, he'd answer any questions I had. I did, and he did. On my presentation day, I beamed as I shared my PowerPoint filled with Victor's reflections on having written one of the most impactful books in our field.

Our student bodies have become more diverse since Victor published *Bootstraps* in 1993. In "Tradition and Change," he writes, "Over the most recent decade or two, I have met more students like I was: of color, first generation, from poverty, new to the culture of the university" (156). His observation is palpably true at meetings of what—honoring developments in gender—we now call the Latinx Caucus. While in 2009 we gathered in an intimate circle of chairs, we now fill copious tables at hotel ballrooms. As Victor points out, universities have tried to adapt to these changes. From "students' right to their own rhetorics" to "translingualism [and] counterstory" (156), administrative and pedagogical policies aim to accommodate the diversification of student bodies. As he adds, however, "despite a rising consciousness about diversity among students and professionals, the deficit presumption far too often remains in assessing students" (156). As academia attempts to make room for these new voices and perspectives, it has a tendency to treat them as being unprepared and in need of help. That perspective can blind us to how these students and the experiences they bring into the Ivory Tower can help transform academia into a place that reflects the needs and demographics of today's society.

As Victor reminds us, seeing diverse students as deficient springs from long and entrenched educational traditions. Still, he argues, there are faculty who "try to look at traditions differently, and in so doing, change the traditions, perhaps" (156). For me, he is saying that even if some aspects of the educational system are intrinsically flawed, those of us with some level of power inside it—particularly tenured faculty—can work individually to support diverse students. That work involves revising admissions criteria, curricula, and by-laws, but it also unfolds in less quantifiable ways. Keeping track of a graduate student's dissertation progress even though they study at a university across the country, helping a faculty member you only see at conferences articulate the value of their community engagement work for tenure. And yes, taking time from your unspeakably busy schedule to deliver insightful answers to ques-

tions from a first-time CCCC attendee—even if those answers will never be published anywhere, just shared with a few students you’ve never met. Making room for diversity in higher education requires a blend of the administrative and the personal, the tangible and the ephemeral. Victor has done both during his career, inspiring countless others to follow suit.

The Gracious Host

After graduating from Purdue in 2013, I became an assistant professor at Michigan State University. I completed *Vanishing Borders*, my first feature documentary, a year later. Like he does with so many of us, Victor followed my career. In 2015 he invited me and author and scholar (and dear friend) Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés to come to Washington State University. I screened my film, Ceci read her work, and we met with students and faculty. It was the first time anyone took my work seriously enough to bring me to campus. Not only did Victor take a chance on me, he didn’t flinch when I said I’d need to bring my youngest son, Santiago, who was still breastfeeding. Victor arranged for a hotel room that was sizable and equipped with a kitchen. He found (and covered the cost of) a student to babysit Santiago while Ceci and I were presenting. During every other moment we spent together, he also seemed genuinely pleased by the presence of my dark-eyed baby with the mischievous smile.

He gave Ceci and me tours of campus and the town and shared scrumptious meals with us, asking questions, telling stories, laughing as we sipped red wine. I felt like my work and the person who made that work mattered to him, and by extension to others in the field. By bringing me to Washington State, he was sanctioning my documentary as valuable to rhetoric and composition, even though it isn’t a theoretical piece. It tells the story of four immigrant women living in New York City, whose professional accomplishments and personal interactions leave a positive mark on the city. When Victor invited me, I was theorizing the process of making the film into what would become my 2017 video book, *Cámara Retórica: A Feminist Filmmaking Methodology for Rhetoric and Composition*. The conversations I had with Ceci and him allowed me to deepen my ideas about what the filmmaking process could offer our field.

Victor argues that “it is important to know something of one’s philosophical framework in order to act—in scholarship, research, teaching, in all one does—within the consistence of a conceptual framework” (159). He invites us to identify and weave together the intellectual, ethical, and affective threads that make up our backbone as human beings. Once we identify those threads, we can return to them over and over as we decide how to act and what we want to say through our intellectual, pedagogical, and creative work. I couldn’t have articulated it back in 2015, but I now know that my framework involves

fostering and nurturing relationships in my personal and professional lives. Through the exchange of ideas, feedback, and affection with those I collaborate with in work and in life, I produce artistic and scholarly pieces centered around storytelling and intersectional feminism. The making of *Vanishing Borders* and the film itself abide by that framework, as does *Cámara Retórica*. Victor's invitation to find our guiding framework allows us to explore a variety of intellectual and creative outlets while maintaining a cohesive thematic trajectory in our professional and personal experiences. Of course, that doesn't mean our framework can't evolve. Mine certainly has, and it will continue to be revamped by projects and collaborators. However, articulating that framework allows us to create a larger narrative around our work and our lives, synthesizing what they accomplish for others and ourselves.

Victor warns that while developing our framework, we should avoid getting lost in the mounds of scholarship that surround us. He explains that as a student, "I went out of my way to review the lit for whatever I was writing. I was thorough, every source till the sources started looping back" (157). Mentioning that he sees a similar approach from early-career scholars, he warns that "thoroughness in and of itself can be a problem. It can lead to contradictory sources" (157). It can also make us reticent. We wonder what we can add to existing conversations by others who seem more erudite and eloquent than we are. Yet at some point we must take the plunge and trust we have something significant to say. Having metaphorical stamps of approval from mentors like Victor—ranging from words of encouragement to campus visits—can give us confidence to develop our own framework and explain how it fits with what came before us and with the intellectual future we want to inhabit.

The Breakfast Companion

Until the pandemic shut everything down, I would email Victor before each CCCC and ask if he had time to get together. He always made room for a meal, usually before the Thursday morning Opening General Session. We'd become friends and now told each other stories about navigating parenthood and romantic relationships, about our parents and the knotty richness of being Latinx in the US. I looked forward to this deep personal connection during a conference that was now crowded with professional interactions. For years now, I've been one of those attendees who seems to know everyone and who is always rushing from panel to meeting to interview to lunch. Having a moment to be a full-fledged human (not simply an academic) friend to someone I care for and admire was one of the conference's joys for me.

As he wrestles with the fact that his intellectual fascination with Marxists like Gramsci and Freire makes others assume he has no room for spirituality in his framework, Victor writes, "I cannot accept materialism to the exclusion of

the spiritual. No spiritual equals no faith (even faith in humanity is spiritual). At bottom, I'm a teacher. A teacher has to have faith, faith in the possibility of something better" (158). Victor's expansive brilliance comes through in everything I've ever read by him, but what I miss in his writing is his delicious wit and his ability to navigate personal, theoretical, and societal conundrums through humor. His laughter comes from a deep-seated faith that no matter what calamities we're slapped with, our work as scholars, teachers, and friends can make our tiny fraction of the world a little better. He certainly did that for me and for many who have the fortune to count him as a mentor. As we embark on the next fifty years of this journal and of the scholarship and pedagogies it documents and theorizes, I hope we can do so through our own version of Victor's geniality, generosity, and hope for a better future. He embodies the approach to composition I hope to share with others, whether we spend years or a few formative hours together.

Works Cited

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