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Diving for Pearls: Mentoring as Cultural and Activist Practice among Academics of Color

For senior scholars of color like Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva, mentoring is more than an academic exercise. From them and their protégés, we may gain some understanding of the complexities and costs of building a multiethnic/multiracial professoriate in our discipline.

In a *New York Times* article that appeared fortuitously, on September 11 this fall, Harvard researchers Richard Chait and Cathy Trower referred to the continuing paucity of faculty of color in American higher education and the often-cited pipeline explanation, but with a twist: "The academy has long attributed the slow progress in diversifying faculty to a 'pipeline problem'—an undersupply of women and minorities enrolled in graduate programs . . . . [But] the more stubborn problem is that the pipeline often empties into uninviting territory." This territory, they assert, is characterized by "social isolation, subtle and occasionally overt prejudice, a lack of mentors and ambiguous expectations," making the academy a less likely choice of career even for those who do complete doctoral programs. Their view on work environment is supported by the recent and extensive study of faculty experience by Caroline Sotello Viernes

Turner and Samuel L. Myers, Jr., documented in *Faculty of Color in Academe: Bittersweet Success.*

In English language and literacy studies—specifically rhetoric and composition—some might be content to quote statistics and point to the relative

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absence (or presence) of faculty of color, using this as an excuse for neglect of the problem. However, introspection and critical reflection on the professional culture by others may cause us to consider what is "uninviting": all of the above factors, perhaps manifested most subtly and insidiously by forms of color-blindness, an assumption of sameness as a norm, a presumption of shared values and perspectives. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, identifies "the habit of ignoring race" as being "understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture" (9–10). This in a culture that in many ways represents academic hegemony through language, that requires assimilation, linguistic and rhetorical, if not racial and cultural, and that privileges particular discourses to ensure that assimilation. Clearly, those who chart their way through this pipeline and the territory beyond must do so through some perilous waters.

In CCCC, programs like the Scholars for the Dream Travel Awards reflect an acknowledgment of some difficulties with access to the profession. Instituted in 1993, this program is an effort to encourage at least initial participation in the annual conference among promising scholars of American Indian, African American, Latino/a, and Asian Pacific American backgrounds, groups that have been overtly and systematically oppressed in U.S. history, especially with regard to language and culture. Yet is this access enough? In light of the daunting nature of academic culture for European Americans who may have relatively easy access to role models and mentors based on dominance in the field, how much more incomprehensible does that culture become for those who find few to none? Projects and individuals concerned with faculty racial and ethnic diversity must be particularly wary of overlooking the cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic sacrifices—the "psychic payments" (Gilyard 11)—that some scholars must make to gain entry and achieve full participation as they make their way in academe (see, for example, Bowser, Aluetta, and Jones; Holloway; hooks; Padilla and Chávez; Reyes and Halcón; Sciachitano; Turner and Myers, Villanueva, *Bootstraps;* and Yamada). Our actions, unfortunately, lag behind our good intentions. Even the Scholars for the Dream Program, celebrating its tenth anniversary at the 2002 CCCC and with this issue of *CCC*, only last year at the 2001 convention saw the formation of a Dream Scholars

Network to organize former and current recipients as a self-supportive collective. Repeated admonishment from researchers (e.g., Blackwell; Bowser, Aluetta, and Jones; Luna and Cullen; Turner and Myers; and Willie, Grady, and Hope), together with common sense, point to the need for better support systems for scholars of color, particularly those aspiring to become members of the professoriate. Mentoring must become an activist practice in this context; it is critical to the survival and success of graduate students and junior faculty of color in the academic culture, especially in fields like English that attempt to perpetuate the discourse of that culture, and especially at predominantly white institutions, which seem, and in some ways are, uninviting and unfriendly to those who have been historically underrepresented or absent.

Diving for pearls

As important as mentoring may be among *any* compatible individuals, cultural similarity proves to be a primary though not exclusive consideration (Luna and Cullen; Willie, Grady, and Hope). One of the teachers in a study that I conducted several years ago on writing teachers of color likened the mentoring relationship between those who share a similar culture to divers searching for pearls: "If you're both skin divers and you know how to . . . find the pearls, then you can get into a deeper level—you can get on with the work. . . ." (203). How do mentor and protégé "get into a deeper level"? How do they "get on with the work"? Might culturally related mentoring practices be effective cross-culturally as well?

Luna and Cullen point out that research on "same-race mentoring relationships in both community colleges and universities" is "limited" (59), and they recommend study of "the specific benefits of mentoring programs for . . . minority faculty members" (v) at both levels. Turner and Myers affirm the need for mentoring of faculty of color as one of their top three recommendations for faculty retention, although they do not describe in detail the nature of those relationships. Assuming that mentoring scholars of color at both the pre- and post-doctoral levels would encourage their success in academe, we may look to established senior scholars in the language and literacy field like Geneva Smitherman, 1999 CCCC Exemplar Award recipient, University Distinguished Professor, and director of the African American Language and Literacy Program at Michigan State University, and Victor Villanueva, Jr., 1999 Chair of CCCC and chair of the English Department at Washington State University, to learn more about the nature of this process of pearl diving as cultural practice. I asked them to participate in this pilot qualitative study of academic

mentoring, in part because they have been long-time active and contributing members of the profession generally and of CCCC specifically, in part because they clearly identify with their cultural and linguistic heritages, and in part because, as a beneficiary of their guidance, I am familiar with their profound commitment to the mentoring process. What, I wondered, is the impetus for and the nature of that commitment? What aspects of mentoring are conscious and deliberate, what aspects are less conscious, perhaps culturally based? What influence does the mentoring relationship have on their protégés? What effect does it have on the mentors themselves? How are mentor and protégé perspectives similar and different?

What aspects of mentoring are conscious and deliberate, what aspects are less conscious, perhaps culturally based? What influence does the mentoring relationship have on their protégés? What effect does it have on the mentors themselves? How are mentor and protégé perspectives similar and different?

I interviewed both Smitherman and Villanueva, asking about their definitions of mentoring and their experiences with being mentored; I also asked them to suggest names of protégés whom I might contact. I conducted initial interviews with each mentee[1] and requested a narrative about the mentoring experience from each person. Collection of the narratives, however, was no small task, considering the busy lives of academics, and required persistence, cooperation, and patience among all concerned. Finally, from the initial group of ten protégés I interviewed, I collected seven narratives of varying lengths, the natural attrition leaving me with committed, self-selected participants. Although this methodology may have had limitations in exploring the breadth of mentor/mentee experiences, a goal perhaps better achieved by a survey of many participants as exemplified by the Turner and Myers study, what I hoped to provide is an attention to the nature of the relationships and interactions between individuals.

The narratives depicting the mentees' relationships with their mentor disclosed varying degrees of detail regarding the development of those relationships. As the researcher, I literally pored over the narratives, analyzing them repeatedly for images, metaphors, patterns, characterizations, and themes. Grounded in methods of narrative inquiry,[2] the study's data thus consisted of the mentor interviews, as well as interviews and narratives from different generations of their students, many of whom are now their junior colleagues.[3] Through such a narrative study, we may better understand the complexities and costs of building a multiethnic/multiracial professoriate in our discipline. In the following pages, I provide biographical narratives on the mentors, intro-

duce the mentees, and offer some observations in answer to the questions above on the trials and triumphs of the relationships and the mentoring process.

Dr. G: an inheritance

For Geneva Smitherman, mentoring is an inheritance. Born in Brownsville, Tennessee, she spent her childhood in "the rural, sharecropping South,"[4] before moving to the midwest and settling in "old Black Bottom Detroit." She describes her father, "a self-made intellectual kind of man with little formal schooling," as her earliest mentor: the one who raised her and her brothers and sisters "under the great hardship of being Black and poor in America," the one who made her believe in herself and her intelligence, "despite what the white, Eurocentric school system said," the one who set high standards for her— "pushed me to learn the hardest and longest verses and take on the most difficult roles in church events like the Easter Program, Children's Day Program, . . . pushed me to become the spelling bee champ of my school." While she was in elementary school, he helped her with her homework until she was in the eighth or ninth grade. "When I started algebra and Latin, he said, 'Well, shorty, this is as far as I can go, but I'll be praying for you!' . . . His spirit and unceasing quest for knowledge live on in me."

Smitherman entered Wayne State University one month after her fifteenth birthday and recalls no mentors as she pursued higher education under predominately white male professors—with one "clear exception": the late Dr. Robert Shafer.[5]

> Not only was he my teacher, more importantly he believed that I would someday be a great teacher who would contribute to the educational uplift of Black Americans. I recall that he wasn't the least bit uncomfortable or awkward when he talked about this subject and when he would ask about conditions in what we now call inner-city schools.

Were it not for Bob Shafer, reflects Smitherman, "I probably would not have gone on to become an English teacher":

> I recall with painful clarity when my white female supervising teacher from the university harshly critiqued my teaching, based on only one observation, and recommended that I be put out of the program. I was devastated! Shafer, who, as a full professor, was her superior at the university, intervened because he said he knew he had taught me better English methods than that (or something to this effect). Anyway, he came out and observed me and thought I was doing a great job and vetoed the recommendation for dismissal. I didn't know it at the time,

but Bob continued to follow my progress after he moved out to Arizona State, and I went on to the U of M[ichigan] grad school. He was the person who got me into NCTE.

Her father instilled in Smitherman a belief in herself and high expectations; Shafer practiced a mentoring based on action—belief in the student, intervention against injustice, entrée into the profession, and support. Smitherman's own definition of mentoring is multifaceted and holistic, deriving from her past experience and expanding on it through the metaphor of a journey. For her, the mentor has traveled the difficult path before and can aid in access, set high standards, and provide guidance toward a larger, future goal:

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> Ideally, mentoring should address the intellectual, social, developmental, and other needs of the mentee—helping the whole person to the extent possible. Since the mentor has been there before, she/he paves the way, points out the pitfalls, and hopefully can help the mentee avoid the mistakes and errors [that] the mentor made in their development. The mentor sets standards of achievement and excellence for mentees as well as motivates them to stay on task so they can complete the journey. On occasion, this might mean nagging and butt-kickin (especially when/if the mentee starts half-steppin—which is normal, but it has to be overcome). Finally, mentoring is a kind of nurturing whereby the mentor helps/motivates the mentee to construct a vision of possibilities beyond the present moment.

Victor: beyond teaching—explicating the (un)known

Victor Villanueva, Jr., relates much of his story in *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*—the Puerto Rican kid growing up "po'" in Brooklyn, being so interested in language and school that he graduated third or fourth in his eighth-grade class and even enjoyed spelling and parsing sentences until he was denied entrance to the local college-prep high school and tracked into a voc-tech. He dropped out eventually, just short of graduating, when fulfillment of school aspirations seemed hopeless. Unlike Smitherman who entered college in her teens, Villanueva came relatively late to formal higher education. After the GED, after military service in Vietnam, he tells me, he had "a friend who had a college degree. He wasn't exactly a mentor, but my association with him, in which I felt like a genuine peer, gave me a sense of possibility—the possibility to attend college." Then there was a community college

English teacher, Mr. Lukas, who helped him to "think my way into the University of Washington."

Focusing on academic and professional relationships, Villanueva refers to what he calls "protectors" like Anne Gere and William Irmscher, his professors, and Sharon Crowley, a colleague, who assigned him work or spoke on his behalf or leveled the playing field for him at different times. Supporters like Michael Spooner and Keith Gilyard encouraged him in his "desire to break from convention" in his writing as did Mike Rose, who "simply showed up at my talks at Cs, then clearly supported my proposal to do *Boots* by trying to connect me with his publisher." Lester Faigley acknowledged his positionality as a "Freireista" at a critical moment when Villanueva had been in the thick of writing about the subject: "Faigley, at a meeting about something or other, turned to me and asked how I would undergo whatever was being underwent—as a Freireista. That was important to me."

"But I think of special folks who told me things I needed to know," he says. He refers to John Trimbur, "a careful editor, a patient editor":

> [He] wrote long, careful comments on an article that was important to me but which I had written in the discourse of the stuff I was reading—the discourse of radical left intellectuals. He more than anyone let me think that I could choose another way of writing (but he didn't tell me how much fighting I would have to do from that day forward to get published in that voice I chose). Although our writing[s] are almost polar opposites, he could ask the questions that would lead to revision—my kind of revision.

Significantly, Sandra Gibbs, Roseanne González, and Kris Gutierrez, colleagues who had been in the professional game longer than he, "each in her own way [told] me something about being an academic of color. And Vivian Davis . . . taught me all I could ever need to know about color integrity with academic dedication."

Perhaps because of his own "need to know" the unknown and unseen—this new and foreign academic territory—Villanueva defines mentoring in terms of explicating what is known to some but not others, certainly not to those who have been traditionally marginalized in and by academe. Mentoring for him is a process of conscious socialization of the mentee into an alien culture, a process that becomes perceptual and relational:

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There is a knowledge that is assumed, the kind of thing that Gramsci says the middle class knows by a kind of osmosis. Mentoring, then, is something beyond the teaching. It is the making explicit what is implicitly known, assuming nothing of tacit understanding of academic or white or white middle class workings, no matter who ends up being the mentee. And mentoring is being able to enter into an intellectual friendship.

The protégés

Three of Geneva Smitherman's mentees document in their narratives how they became beneficiaries of Dr. G's guidance, high expectations, and "vision." Identifying herself as an African American (with Irish and Cherokee heritages), Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad was born in South Carolina to a Geechee speaking family and was transported to Detroit before she was a year old. She describes her family as being poor and working class. Although she began a baccalaureate program in secondary English education at Michigan State University in the late 1960s, she interrupted her studies for seventeen years with a career as a political activist and a mother of five before returning to complete her bachelor's degree in 1989. Muhammad met Dr. G in the first class of her master's program at Michigan State. In her narrative "Keep On Keepin On, We Need You," she recalls that day—feelings of intimidation, self-doubt, fear:

> Haunted by the same Fear, more like the absolute terror, I felt the day Momma let go of my hand and gently shoved me into the kindergarten classroom, I walked into my first graduate class, a doctoral seminar on "Language Policy and Planning." Seated around the huge square table were scholars who knew books more than I could ever hope to read. Without the juice to compete, I felt that I would be lost. Anyway I was too old to be seeking a master's degree. Just as I was about to take flight, the course instructor walked into the room. While I was intimidated by her reputation and scholarship, the presence of Geneva Smitherman reminded me of the warmth I felt years [before] sharing Momma's hot buttered Sunday after-church biscuits.

Elaine Richardson, a 1994 Scholars for the Dream Award recipient, was born of West Indian parents in Cleveland, Ohio, and is bicultural but identifies as an African American. She grew up poor in inner city Cleveland, she tells me, though her parents were both employed. Her first attempt at Cleveland State University was unsuccessful; she "flunked out" but returned about six years later to complete her bachelor's degree, this time more than highly motivated. Experiencing great frustration with writing in college classes, Richardson grew interested in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the late 1980s precisely because of that frustration:

> . . . I got Fs and Ds on my English papers. When I would go to obtain help from an instructor, he would always look at my red inked papers and say "Where did that come from? I don't understand what you mean," referring to various AAVE structures and phrases I had used. I would always say to myself, "I'm not stupid, I know I can write."

The red ink came to represent low grades, the professors' failure to understand her meaning, and her feelings of inequality with her white classmates. Self-doubt and the instinct to survive academia a second time around led her to compromise her meaning and her resistance to injustice, but not for long. In her junior year, Richardson learned of Smitherman through *Talkin and Testifyin*, the scholar's seminal work on Black English, which inspired the student to probe linguistics and composition further. Continuing her study toward the MA at Cleveland State, Richardson encountered Smitherman "in the flesh" for the first time as a featured campus speaker:

> My turn came to ask a question. I had been reading Smitherman's dissertation, Farr and Hibbs-Morrow. I was stuck on dialect interference: does L1 (D1) interfere with acquisition of L2 (D2)? No research that we know of gives an unqualified yes. . . . After my question, the audience went silent. So, I capitalized on my opportunity to fill her ears with other questions that I wanted to ask her about ideas in her writings.

At the reception in the African American Cultural Center following the lecture, Richardson sat next to her and "tried to squeeze a word in edgewise each time I could." After self-introductions, "I told her that I had read everything she had written. I asked her about her being denied a teaching license until she took a speech correction class," an experience that Dr. G. had written about in *Talkin and Testifyin*. The next step was pivotal in Richardson's academic career:

> She asked me about my grades and if I was going to get a doctorate. I told her that I had excellent grades but I didn't "know nothing bout no dog gone doctorate." She said "girl you better come on up here and get your Ph.D." She said it like she was asking me if I wanted a piece of sweet potato pie or something. All I wanted to do was get off welfare, get a job, and get a regular paycheck every week or two, maybe teach in the Public Schools.

But that was the seed for that idea—sweet potato pie!

Mary R. Harmon, who identifies her background as being white, rural, and working class, was born and grew up in western Michigan in a Catholic family that was "literacy rich . . . and language rich," but an anomaly in a "Prot-

estant, respectable small town." She had taught English for twenty-two years in the Michigan public schools and other settings before beginning a PhD program at Michigan State in 1990. Like Muhammad, Harmon first met Smitherman when she took her course in language policy. She writes that she had "intended to do a theoretical Ph.D." when she entered the program and was "totally unprepared for the impact [Smitherman] and her class, and her methods of teaching, and the readings she assigned, and the discussions with the other students in the seminar would have on me."

All three of these protégés completed their doctorates under Smitherman and maintain their relationships with her: Muhammad is currently a university professor of English and Secondary Education and Academic Coordinator of the English Programs at Governors State University; Richardson is Assistant Professor of English at Pennsylvania State University; and Harmon is Professor of English and the director of the Freshman Writing Program at Saginaw Valley State University.

Four of Villanueva's mentees wrote narratives portraying their relationships with Victor—how he has demystified their academic unknowns. Three of them were Dream Award recipients in different years and from different institutions: Maria de Jesus Estrada, a 1997 Dream Scholar, identifies herself as Mexican in culture and American in nationality. Born into a "poor, farmworking family" in Yuma, Arizona, she is among the first in her family to earn a college degree—one that did not come easily. She had originally majored in chemistry at Northern Arizona University with the idea, not unlike other first-generation college students, that this might lead to a lucrative career, perhaps "an opportunity to rise in class." In her narrative she writes, "the problem was that I hated Chemistry and I really wanted to be a writer." Estrada's description of her first meeting as an undergraduate with Villanueva resembles the warmth of Muhammad's hot buttered after-church biscuits. Since her chemistry advisor was not only cold but indifferent towards her and her dilemma, she sought out the English professor after seeing his picture in the campus newspaper:

> I had never [before] walked into a faculty member's office just to *talk*. I always went in for advisement or student conferencing. So, I walk into this dimly lit office. And he says, "Hi!" Victor has a particular hello that fills a person up and makes them feel good. That was the kind of greeting I got and not the expected, "Who are you?" or "What can I help you with?" He waited for *me* to talk, and I told him who I was and why I had come in to see him.

Like Estrada, Amanda Espinosa-Aguilar identifies as a Mexican Ameri-

can; although she was born and grew up in Seattle, she considers New Mexico her cultural and familial home. Though her father was employed in a mill, she remembers food stamps and free lunches during her childhood. A 1996 Dream Scholar, she is a first-generation college student, attending universities in Washington and Nevada where she completed her bachelor's and master's degrees, respectively, and was working in Nevada on a PhD in the early 1990s. Also, like Estrada, Espinosa-Aguilar sought Victor out because of feelings of isolation in her existing situation. After reading *Bootstraps*, she contacted him by email and, like Estrada, was surprised by his openness and warmth, his willingness not only to discuss her work initially but to continue discussion of it.

Born in New York City of Puerto Rican immigrant parents, Luisa Rodríguez Connal eventually moved to the West Coast where she attended a community college in the 1960s, raised her family, and returned to finish her bachelor's and master's degrees in the 1980s. She had entered a doctoral program at the University of Arizona when she was among the first Dream Award recipients in 1993. She writes that she was "filled . . . with pride and hope" when she first met Villanueva at the 1993 CCCC, "the first Latino scholar I'd met who worked in and had a strong interest in rhetoric and composition. . . . For the first time I felt I was not alone."

The fourth of Villanueva's protégés in this study, David Martins describes himself as a "white male" of Irish, Danish, Cherokee, and primarily Swedish heritage. Born to a professional, upper-middle class family, he grew up and was educated in the Midwest. Unlike Estrada, Espinosa-Aguilar, and Rodríguez Connal, who found Victor by happenstance, Martins was introduced to Villanueva by his college advisors when he was a senior at St. Olaf College, exploring prospective master's degree programs in composition and rhetoric. He writes that he "felt pretty confident" about his first meeting with Victor—a confidence born, perhaps, of a relative comfort with the academic environment. Yet of that initial encounter, Martins recalls,

> As we talked, I told him about my background and interests. I remember feeling as though he was watching me all the while we were talking. He seemed to be weighing everything I said, considering my questions and comments carefully. When I asked him a question about the work that I wanted to do, without any sort of noticeable shift he said, "Why the fuck not!"

The contrast between Villanueva's careful considering and weighing of words and his casual, iconoclastic style was to set the tone for their future conversations and relationship, and this talking and listening become thematic in

Martins's narrative as in Estrada's. In no other case besides Martins's was a protégé I studied introduced to Smitherman and Villanueva formally. Rather, relationships developed largely because the professors were open and welcoming towards the students, several of whom were themselves quite assertive.

Villanueva's protégés worked on or completed their doctorates at different institutions, but all four have maintained their relationships with Victor. Estrada is currently a PhD candidate at Washington State University; Espinosa-Aguilar, new Director of the Writing Center at Washington State University, Tri-Cities; Rodríguez Connal, an associate lecturer at Arizona State University; and Martins, Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Chico.

Creating spaces: observations from within and without

As scholars, both Smitherman and Villanueva have been academic pathfinders in their work, having taken risks particularly in their writing—in genre and discourse—largely without existing academic models. Fueled by their own mentors, an activist awareness of a community need, and a personal need for community, they have etched out spaces for themselves and those who would follow them.

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In examining the intricacies of the mentoring relationships revealed by the narratives in this study, I find that the process is paradoxically both linear and cyclical in that it is intergenerational (handed "down" and vertical) and inherited (in a sense, embodied)—even cross-culturally. Smitherman internalizes values and expectations from her father that sustain her in her own education and gains access to some of the ways of the profession through Robert Shafer's interest and support. Her protégés benefit from a mentoring process that has naturally incorporated these values and actions and that has been further enhanced by the mentor's personality (individual and cultural), her research, and her first-hand knowledge of and experience as a woman of color within the academy and the profession at large. Villanueva sees his academic inheritance as knowledge gained from numerous faculty and colleagues, yet his protégés become beneficiaries of much more; not only does he make hidden knowledge known, but he exposes it through a mentoring process shaped by his evolving awareness of that knowledge, his research, his personality (individual and cultural), and an intense ideological understanding of the academic culture from an outsider's viewpoint.

Pearl diving from the mentee view

Like both Smitherman and Villanueva, most of their mentees in this study—Muhammad, Richardson, Harmon, Estrada, Rodríguez Connal, and Espinosa-Aguilar—are first generation academics in their families. Pearl diver status. In their narratives, several mentees depict experiences that reflect similar difficulties with the Ivory Tower culture—as students and in common with their mentors. Whether from "the hood" in Detroit, the "streets of Cleveland," or a rural community in Arizona, several have shared

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an initial, often recurring, dissonance in their academic journeys. Perhaps the most pervasive experiences are those related to an absence of self-confidence—a fear of not having the "juice" to compete with others, as Muhammad puts it. Many expressed persistent questions about belonging in the university, suffering from the "imposter syndrome" (Rodríguez Connal)—about having a legitimate place or space in the institution, given their academic and political concerns or their written or spoken discourse. Each mentee of color, Muhammad, Richardson, Estrada, Rodríguez Connal, and Espinosa-Aguilar, raises this question in her narrative. Some have difficulty balancing family responsibilities with their academic obligations when family considerations have virtually no relevance in the culture of the academy (Muhammad, Estrada, Espinosa-Aguilar). Further, there are questions about developing an identity in academe, about enduring the demands of an alien culture (Muhammad, Richardson, Estrada, Espinosa-Aguilar).

Differences of culture, language, class, and gender abound and highlight the continued difficulty faced by many academics of color. Then, too, as bell hooks points out in *Talking Back*, there is the feeling of betrayal—the nagging doubt of participation in a questionable venture, being "concerned about whether we were striving to participate in structures of domination and were uncertain about whether we could assume positions of authority" (59). As African American women, Muhammad and Richardson, for example, had battled individually with the same Eurocentric school system that Smitherman had previously encountered. Pearl diver status again. They may not have continued in academe—or endured it—without her.

In most cases, the students "discovered" the professors through their books *Talkin and Testifyin* and *Bootstraps* or their other writings—reflections of each scholar's cultural, intellectual, and ideological identification—before they ever met the authors. As a nontraditional student who struggled with her

writing as an undergraduate, Richardson was "proud to read [Smitherman's] words," felt they gave "hope to the hopeless like me." Reading the scholar's words gave the student information and understanding that helped to balance out her feelings of self-doubt and inequality in the academic setting. They provided views of language that gave her a different view of herself and, significantly, her academic and rhetorical purpose:

> [Smitherman's work] made me feel equal to the white students whose papers weren't filled with red ink. Her book changed my view of myself. Before, I used to think something was wrong with me because teachers' eyes would glaze over when they looked at my words on the page. But her words made things click for me. I began to understand that definitions belong to the definers and that Black people had a linguistic/cultural history just as did other peoples of the world. . . . I became an English major with an emphasis on linguistics and composition. I began to make all of my research papers and coursework relate to that area of interest. I searched ERIC, MLA bibliography, FIRST SEARCH, Worldcat, everything in the catalog for Smitherman's articles. I read as many of them as I could get my hands on. I loved her style and the titles of her work: "English Teacher, Why You Be Doing the Thangs You Don't Do?". . . and others. It made me proud to read her words.

Smitherman's perspective and code-switching style inspired in Richardson a cultural pride that was political rather than romantic; theory became practice for her as she began to see a "way." Like her, Muhammad, Harmon, and Espinosa-Aguilar could learn about and, in some sense, identify the writers' different central issues and concerns, as well as identify their own interests. The texts led Muhammad and Harmon to take Smitherman's classes. And Espinosa-Aguilar was inspired to email Villanueva for the first time. Later, in association with Smitherman and Villanueva, these mentees, together with Estrada, Rodríguez Connal, and Martins, who had met Villanueva before reading *Bootstraps*, came to define more clearly their personal cultural identities by interacting with their mentors and the scholars' texts. When *Bootstraps* was first published, for example, Martins immediately "bought it, dropped all that I was reading for classes, and read it twice."

> . . . I was reeling. I had never before read anything like this man's, my professor's, autobiography. The sense of purpose and engagement with others that he expressed in the book, and the understanding that he had made of his experience motivated me and moved me. . . . I saw how his commitments were instrumental in the work that he was doing, and saw how commitments and experiences and interests can function to pose difficult and important questions.

In their narratives, all mentees of color reveal the need for and appreciation of particular kinds of relationships—for faculty who understand and validate their cultural views and values, such as their responsibility to family or heritage; for models of scholars with similar or related intellectual, social, and political concerns and especially, as Rodríguez Connal puts it, those with "both academic and lived experiences with difference" (also Muhammad, Richardson, Estrada, Espinosa-Aguilar). They need to know that there is a space and place for them and their work, and a path—marked by a beacon—to get there (Richardson, Muhammad, Estrada, Espinosa-Aguilar, Rodríguez Connal).

And in their narratives they also show how Smitherman and Villanueva fulfill those needs many times over. Rodríguez Connal describes Villanueva as "look[ing] like friends and family I'd had in New York. . ."—someone who looked familiar, sounded familiar, and whose behavior was familiar. In their mentor-mentee relationship, which evolved mainly through email,

> [Victor's] responses to my questions reveal the ethics of care about issues that confront us. He takes time to give a thorough, but not overwhelming, response. I believe he understands that there are times when I'm hesitant and feeling uncertain about points I make. His answers essentially say, great idea! Go further! So I don't feel as if I'd asked a "dumb" question or otherwise wasted his time. Victor has validated my thinking by sharing that he too thinks [about] the same issues I explore, such as identity, literacy politics, issues surrounding the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States.

Estrada also explains Victor's understanding about her family obligations discussed in their far-ranging conversations:

> Most especially, I would talk to him about family. For a Latina student, leaving her family can be a tremendous adjustment. I always felt guilty because I couldn't be at home to help my parents solve their problems. My parents only speak Spanish, and as I said earlier, they are poor. Financial support isn't enough. I was their translator and their link to dealing with English speakers. I couldn't do anything being so far away. . . . But I could talk about these problems with Victor, and he understood.

Similarly, Muhammad describes how Smitherman served as both a facilitator and interpreter of her mentee's unspoken intellectual and emotional yearnings:

> Issues of culture and language resurfaced as major factors when I was writing my dissertation. Dr. G. understood what I did not understand, but only felt—that

deep need to connect with my ancestral voices to tell my story. For me my dissertation had to echo the voices of those left in Africa, the voices of those lost in the middle passage, and the voice of the slave mother whose arms were too often left empty. As my sister, Geneva Smitherman understood my need to write my (hi)story in my dissertation.

Under such tutelage, all mentees delineated their political concerns about race, class, gender, language, and ideology. They formulated their intellectual

> **Under such tutelage, all mentees delineated their political concerns about race, class, gender, language, and ideology.**

interests and desires to do research and teach in rhetoric and composition, English education, African American language and literacy, and/or sociolinguistics—in some cases because of, in others notwithstanding, racial or social differences. They also could explore the range of their and others' language varieties—AAVE and Spanglish, English and Spanish—*within* the academic context because their mentors had paved the way.

As graduate students, mentees like Estrada, Martins, Muhammad, and Harmon, who are "on site" with their respective mentor, also describe the opportunity to observe the pedagogy of masterful teachers, ways of teaching subjects and ideas important to them as students. Harmon was a veteran secondary teacher when she entered the doctoral program in English at Michigan State and recalls being touched by Smitherman's genuine interest in and acknowledgment of her students' work—how her "teaching impels student engagement." In outlining her recollections of work with her professor, she shows how her developing relationship with Dr. G "opened up a new world of thought for me" and led her to make language and sociolinguistics her "calling." Martins, too, recognizes his tutoring with one of Villanueva's summer classes as an apprenticeship with "a master teacher."

Still, there are times when the mentee might lose heart or "start half-steppin," as Smitherman mentions. For Muhammad, Dr. G served as a motivator by way of her high expectations. She tells the story of one moment of weakness:

> One night I was stretched out on her office sofa whining about the stresses of trying to balance family life with the demands of graduate school. Finally I said, "I should just quit." While Dr. G. offered suggestions for working out my schedule, when it came to a question of quitting, she would not hear of it. "What do you mean 'quit'? You got a job to do here." When I completed my master's degree, there was never any question that I would apply for the Ph.D. program in English.

In this case, quitting becomes inconceivable for Smitherman not because it is an affront to her own ego (she has "invested" in the student), nor simply because it wouldn't benefit the student as an individual, but because the "job" is a social and political one; both of them understand the gravity of the obligation. Although little if any mention is made of interpersonal friction in the data, possibly due to the necessary absence of anonymity in this particular study, inevitable strains in relationships or outright conflicts in expectations between mentor and mentee seem to be resolved out of the deep trust, caring, and cultural, social, and/or political values shared between them. Perhaps the shared values allow mentors and mentees to willingly suspend their disbelief, distrust, and doubt in an uncommon way.

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Significantly, through their developing relationships with their mentors, protégés experience profound changes not only in exposure to new information and knowledge, but, in some cases, transformations in views of an individual self. Richardson finds hope that she might "sing America in my own key," not only as a reader of Smitherman's books and articles but later as a doctoral student; Muhammad evolves "from an intimidated student into a confident professor"; Estrada feels "nothing is impossible" with Victor as a mentor; and Rodríguez Connal feels that she has "something to offer the field of rhet/comp." Each a culturally affirmed self. For Martins and Harmon, their mentors touched their world views as European Americans to the core: As Martins writes, "working with Victor and reading his book, changed how I understand my experiences, changed how I think about my relationships with others, changed how I think about language and how language affects how we think—working with Victor changed the questions that I asked." Harmon portrays how profoundly affected she is by a new-found awareness of language imperialism and language politics in Smitherman's language policy class:

> The power of some groups to use language as a tool to silence instead of enrich, to use language barriers and policies as a means for ensuring the economic, political, and social inferiority of other peoples was unmasked in that class—an awakener for me, the kind of awakener that lasts and lasts.

Each a more culturally conscious self. Together with developing individual confidence and consciousness, each mentee in this study also reflects a grow-

ing sense of herself or himself in relation to others, in terms not only of personal growth and integrity, but of social awareness and responsibility, especially in matters of language and the politics of language use. Mentoring from Smitherman and Villanueva instilled in them a belief that it may be possible to make change, to establish their own worth with*in* the context of the academy and the profession. This becomes a collaborative, activist practice. Especially for those with recurring doubts, the presence and consistent support of the mentor is essential.

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Pearl diving from the mentor view

In addition to Smitherman and Villanueva's definitions of mentoring and the brief descriptions of their experiences being mentored, we may learn also from the mentee narratives about the practice and beliefs of their mentors. Though Villanueva defines mentoring as an explicit socialization process, to the extent that it may involve unconscious socialization and socialization into the elitist academy at that, there is always a danger—without wariness—of perpetuating old forms of colonialism. Neither mentor, however, has any illusions about the role of the English language as a transmitter of the dominant culture. Each takes care not to erase home cultures or language varieties in the course of their mentoring relationships and mentee "training," as illustrated by the experiences of each of the mentees of color (Richardson, Muhammad, Estrada, Rodríguez Connal, and Espinosa-Aguilar). Rather, linguistic versatility and code-switching allow for fluid movement between worlds and worldviews—by both mentors and protégés, allowing for language maintenance among them. In her narrative, Estrada refers to speaking Spanish, Spanglish, and English with Villanueva—"usually all in the same sentence"—and Rodríguez Connal demonstrates this freedom in her own discourse when she describes her first Latino Caucus meeting at the 1993 CCCC:

> Seeing Latino professionals was a novelty for me. Anytime I [had] heard discussions surrounding minority issues or needs the words came out of white, middle-class mouths . . . . I recall more of Cecilia's *"Mi amor" y "Mi vida"* and other expressions that returned me to scenes from my past with my family who use terms of endearment as Cecilia does. I was impressed because people at the Caucus were more like me than any other professors I [had] worked with since enter-

ing academia. The meeting, conducted on what Victor called P.R. time, allowed for all participants to behave *como en su casa hablando espanol y Spanglish.*

Along with bell hooks, Smitherman uses "various speaking styles in the classroom as a teacher," believing, as hooks states, that "learning to listen to different voices, hearing different speech challenges the notion that we must all assimilate—share a single, similar talk—in educational institutions" (79). Harmon describes the impact of Smitherman's practice on her as a European American:

> Maybe it was because she spoke in both BEV [Black English Vernacular] and standard English; maybe it was her pride in what she'd become and in what she'd come from; maybe it was because she seemed genuinely interested in the thoughts of her students and in what their research projects uncovered, or because she knew just the question to ask to help me focus and redirect my thinking. I'm not sure what it was—but soon I knew that here was someone from whom I could learn a great deal and someone with whom I wanted to work.

Closely related to their commitment to language maintenance, both Smitherman and Villanueva bring to the mentoring process a consciousness of the historical context of African Americans and Latinos in the U.S.—their cultural, political, economic, and linguistic histories. In fact, they embody it. Both recognize and share in the experience of racism, inherited exclusion, the "damage" that JanMohamed and Lloyd (4) see as a common denominator among oppressed peoples in this society. And, consequently, both actively nurture their mentees' sense of identity and encourage biculturality as opposed to assimilation into the dominant academic culture.

Smitherman culturally and linguistically identifies with being African American and bidialectal and, in this way, shares a cultural, linguistic, and religious tradition with many of her African American students. Through her scholarship and her very presence, she keeps bonds with African American tradition, language, and culture alive and viable. Villanueva identifies himself as being culturally and linguistically a Puerto Rican from Brooklyn; however, as a mentor in an academy and field where he is one of few if not virtually alone, his identity shifts cross-ethnically and becomes fluid because of those very constraints. While maintaining his Nuyorican roots, he also becomes a "Latino" as the common denominators of Latino cultures become operative and facilitate his communication with protégés from non-Puerto Rican backgrounds. For example, despite culturally shaped differences in varieties of Span-

ish or forms of Spanglish among speakers of Mexican, New Mexican, and Puerto Rican backgrounds, the linguistic commonalities surface in ways depicted in Estrada and Rodríguez Connal's experiences cited previously, as well as that of Espinosa-Aguilar, who was mentored primarily through email:

> Victor understands what it means for me to maintain my identity (cultural and otherwise) as I progress through academe. From first hand experience he knows the price linguistic, cultural, and social assimilation costs ethnic scholars like us. Because of his understanding he fosters communication between us in Spanish, he makes reference to practices and beliefs that are similarly shared between us that neither of us wants to lose.

Cultural commonalities in family structure and responsibility, priority of relationships, and other values further enhance possibilities of understanding and bonding between mentor and mentee as Espinosa-Aguilar's experience further illustrates:

> In the years that have passed since that first email exchange, Victor has influenced me more than any other member of the profession. He cares. He takes time. He listens. He advises, criticizes, praises. He has become a driving force behind my decision to remain in academic life. . . . While I will always be thankful for all of the help he has given me career-wise, nothing compares to the compassion and empathy he has shown me when it comes to my feelings about mi familia. They matter to me more than anything else in the world. Victor knows this and instead of judging me for it, he supports my need to make my family the priority in my life. When I had some family crises [over] the last two years, Victor supported my decisions to put them first, and helped me when no one else [in my graduate program] understood.
>
> When mi abuela back in New Mexico was sick, I needed to take my mom home to see Grandma before she died. At that time I was preparing to take my last comprehensive exam, one year late no less, since I had gone back [home] with my mom the previous summer when mi abuela injured her back. To the dismay of local colleagues who were already frustrated with my slow progress during my doctoral program, I went [to New Mexico] and wound up defending my comps three months later instead. Two months [after that], I was back in New Mexico with my mom for mi abuela's funeral.

At the same time that they foster mentorships with students who share similar cultural backgrounds, both senior scholars show that they are willing and able to encourage cross-racial relationships, illustrated by the experiences of Martins and Harmon. Although they do not share ethnic, cultural, and linguistic histories with their mentors, course work and discussion with them

from the first encounter forward change the direction of their lives and careers. Martins's narrative vividly portrays the intricacies of his conversations with Victor, clarifying how the mentoring relationship acknowledged and transcended cultural and class boundaries. The findings of Willie, Grady, and Hope support "the observation that the hiring of faculty of color should be a matter of the highest priority to support students of color" (71); however, it becomes clear through this limited study that European American students too may benefit greatly not only from the cultural practices of mentors of color, but by the nuanced process by which this may occur.

Time factors

One of the most striking results of this research concerns the element of time. In their definitions of mentoring, neither Smitherman nor Villanueva refer to time as a factor—let alone a significant one—in their mentoring, in what they do, yet they give of time generously to their protégés, as several of the students portray explicitly or implicitly in their narratives. When the mentors make themselves highly accessible and available to their mentees, this accessibility translates, from the mentees' view, into presence—in person or on the phone or on email: contact time.

Viewing this process from different perspectives, I've noted that the mentees see time taken as a gift given, an end in itself, while the mentors instead see it as a vehicle, a means to an end. The junior member (student or faculty), who is in the training process, feels a natural vulnerability and needs support and continual reassurance, responses that might be attrib-

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uted to a limited vision—seeing only the part (the immediate task), sometimes being overwhelmed by the extent of the challenge, especially in the early stages of a career. So each gesture is a gift. According to their protégés, Smitherman and Villanueva have given them unlimited understanding, care, advice, love, and motivation. They also have provided models of pedagogy, physical space, and cultural support. Most of all, they have established a bond between themselves and their mentees—a trust based on mutual self-disclosure and sharing. While in some instances mentors may serve as the "link of trust between individuals and institutions" discussed by Willie, Grady, and Hope (72), implying the mentors' role as intermediary, for their mentees, Smitherman and Villanueva come to *embody* feelings of trust, not only as mediators between students and institutions, but as interpreters, advocates, and allies.

From another vantage, the mentor has run the gauntlet in terms of productivity to reach a senior status in the academy, has earned professional respect through her or his high level of scholarship, has met a rigorous standard, and now sees the larger picture, *can* have a knowledge of the academy to explicate or a "vision of possibilities beyond the present moment," as Smitherman says. The time that appears to the mentee to be freely given is also a factor of the collaborative, communal process of moving toward the goal of the protégé's success, getting what Smitherman calls "the job" done.

Another explanation may be related to differing political views of time. If time is conceptualized in the European American sense as "a valuable commodity" (Lakoff and Johnson 8; Hall), then it follows that it can be quantified and measured out. In this regard, Bonnie J. Barthold, in *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States*, asserts that those in positions of authority are "owners of time" (15). Unlike slave owners or bosses in a capitalist system, however, Smitherman and Villanueva choose to give it and, from the recipients' perspectives, give it magnanimously, regardless of the race of the mentee; neither uses time as a weapon. In fact, both favor egalitarianism in their relationships and pedagogy as well. If time is a commodity, they invest it toward the goal of emancipating their mentees from the constraints of the dominant academic culture. Perhaps their choices have to do with a responsibility to community that is more powerful than the structures of academic systems, for both scholars are intellectually and personally committed to reaffirming and maintaining connections with traditional cultures through language and relationships—in the context of the academy. They are part of a revolution, involved in an anti-colonialist act.

But they are not engaged in only a one-way relationship; both Smitherman and Villanueva make clear the reciprocal nature of the mentoring process, that it is shared, reflective, and democratic. For Dr. G, with the realization of her role and responsibility as a mentor came a consciousness "of the opportunity to learn from my mentees": "As I witnessed their growth—intellectually, socially, in terms of personal confidence—I also grew and learned not only about subject matter, but about ideas, the power of human interaction, and life in general." Similarly, Victor has commented on how his individual mentees may have kept him connected to the Puerto Rican diaspora, or "saved him from arrogance," or provided him with intellectual challenges, friendship, and love to be cherished and respected. They "have allowed me to learn, to feel a sense of doing something tangible for people of color, and to feel a sense of community in an environment that is so often alienating."

Getting on with the work

Academic mentoring, then, can serve as cultural *and* activist practice. Especially among scholars of color, the cultural terrain can be heavily political, the political aimed at achieving a more—or less—socially just society. Both Villanueva and Smitherman, in a sense, practice transculturation as Pratt defines it, "processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmit-

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ted by a dominant . . . culture" (36). In appropriating and adapting the discourse of the academy to their ends and in passing on this practice to protégés who share similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they are pearl divers finding greater depth, getting on with the work. Together, they may construct a scholarly tradition which inevitably becomes autoethnographic[6] in purpose and nature. At the same time that these scholars take seriously their charge for fostering neophytes from shared backgrounds, they also serve as examples for mentoring across groups; they not only cultivate intraethnic, intracultural, and same gendered relationships, but also encourage cross-ethnic, cross-cultural, cross-class associations.[7] In contrast to a generic mentoring of students into an assumed homogeneous academic culture, we can witness through these stories the process of mentoring as a form of activism.

Those of us in CCCC who are committed to including scholars of color in the language and literacy/rhetoric and composition professoriate for the benefit of all students and faculty, who wish to reduce the isolation that many (of us) still feel, must understand the complexities of the task—the conflicts, sacrifices, and contributions that append to becoming a teacher and scholar in this field so fraught with colonial practices and relationships. With such understanding, mentoring can take on a new role and significance in changing the staffing and nature of our profession. The experiences of Smitherman, Villanueva, and their protégés reveal the possibilities. Muhammad, Richardson, Harmon, Estrada, Martins, Espinosa-Aguilar, Rodríguez Connal—all have earned or are on the way to earning their doctorates; five are in full-time tenure track positions; two have tenure.

Further study would examine the nature of mentoring among other senior scholars of color, among scholars in the mentee generation, among recipients of Scholars for the Dream Travel Awards. Further research might also explore the difficulties of same- and cross-ethnic, same- and cross-racial mentoring relationships, using a research design that allows for anonymity of both parties. As Toni Cade Bambara wrote to women of color over twenty years

ago in *This Bridge Called My Back*, it "takes more than a rinsed lens . . . . We have got to know each other better and teach each other our ways, our views, if we're to remove the scales . . . and get the work done" (vii). What seems critical is our willingness and watchfulness to "know each other better," to "teach each other our ways, our views"—within and across cultural groups, not for feel-good liberal reasons but for survival as a democratic society.

Notes

1. The terms *protégé* and *mentee* will be used interchangeably.

2. A considerable body of literature exists on narrative research methods; see, for example, McLaughlin & Tierney, Mishler, Riessman, and Tierney & Lincoln.

3. As an Asian American and a relatively recent graduate student and junior faculty member at the time this study was conducted, I also had been mentored by both scholars and, as a researcher, had the advantage of insider status—an established working relationship based on trust with the senior scholars, as well as a common experience with other mentees. At the same time, my outsider status, based on cultural and linguistic differences, provided the opportunity for me to maintain a vigilant awareness of my own subjectivity.

4. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in the text are derived from mentor interviews, mentee interviews, or narratives written for this study and will be attributed to the speaker/writer.

5. Robert Shafer was aptly memorialized in *Ideas, Historias y Cuentos: Breaking with Precedent*, the 1998 CCCC Annual Convention program book, "for providing the world community of English teachers with insight into how cultural diversity enriches our personal and professional lives" (21).

6. Borrowing from Pratt again, an autoethnograph*ic* scholarly tradition may be seen as cultural discourse "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them . . . . self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan [dominant] modes of understanding" (35).

7. Although I can only touch on this here, my experience being mentored by Dr. G and Victor as an Asian American graduate student and junior faculty member points especially to the largess of both senior scholars in working cross-racially, to the possibility of profound cross-cultural learning, understanding, and respect, and the power of such mentorship to encourage further layers of cross-racial mentoring as I work with African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native students of my own.

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