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“It’s nobody’s business,” Mami would say. But I can’t just say nothing about how it is I come to know some things, come to regard some theories on literacy and writing and rhetoric as more tenable than others, and how I come to think the ways I do about racism and ethnocentricity and the class system, and why I can believe in the chances for revolutionary changes in attitudes about racism and ethnocentricity and class through language and the classroom. I can’t just say nothing. But there’s Mami and the Latino ways: private things should remain private. So, play out the tension.

Thoughts. The I speaking to its me.

The portorican boy (that’s how they say it—portorican) looks at the experiences of the African American and says, “That’s racism. They can’t escape their skin. No one will let them.” Mami always did carry on about his good hair—curl, but no kink—his *nariz fino*, a Roman nose, she used to say. *Blancito* on the block. Steven Figueroa looked Asian somehow. Enchi (enchilada) looked more Mexican. The others looked mulatto or black. He’s the white kid among the browns and blacks of Brooklyn’s Williamsburg and Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Long later, a beard, long hair. The hair is not intended as a political statement, only a response to too many years of “get a haircut” and “shave again”: dress codes in school, seven years in the army. Standing by a hamburger stand in the American midwest, someone speaks to him in a decidedly foreign tongue. Turns out to be Farsi. He must look Iranian. Trying to enter the All-American Crafts Fair in the Heart of America, the man behind the ticket counter asks if he is Indian, from India. He must look Indian. Sitting in a bus in Seattle, a Japanese-looking fellow handing out fliers for a Christian radio station says, “Jesus loves you, my little Jewish friend.” He must look Jewish. The white kid in Brooklyn ain’t just white elsewhere. He’s some sort of ethnic.

Shakespeare saw Othello as black. Othello the Moor, *el morro*. There’s a U.S. army base in Puerto Rico called *El Morro*. *El Blancito*,

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the white one in Brooklyn, not white elsewhere, is more the Moor than the Puerto Rican Boricua Indian or the West African black apparently, a hint of some ancient Islamic strain. “This is my son, Fidel,” says his dad. Fidel, the bearded, the white guy who would not be quite white on a Seattle bus, a Kansas City crafts fair, a suburban hamburger stand. There are other Caribbean Latinos who look like him, some famous (or infamous). He’s just not typical of the stereotypical. So many subtleties to the absurdities of racism.

“Congratulations on your book,” says a co-worker. The department’s brag sheet had announced his receiving a contract, a book on language and rhetoric and teaching from the perspective of a person of color: *Bootstraps*. But the colleague couldn’t just leave it at congratulations: “Still, I have a hard time seeing you as someone of color.” My guess is that he meant that as a compliment, likely having something to do with competence. The colleague must see “color” as brown and black and not quite as able (though the incompetence is a social problem, not a genetic predisposition, no doubt). With competence, the Moorish hue goes undetected.

I didn’t always see myself as a person of color. Nor did I question my competence back then, though the more the awareness of color, the greater the insecurity as I grew older. But in those early years I was *el blancito*, after all. I could see myself as poor, the working class. And there is a connection between class and color, some overlap, matters to be discussed later in this book. But “color,” back then, meant shades of brown, black. It hadn’t occurred to me that the Puerto Rican would somehow not be white, no matter the pigment. My father’s childhood friend, Archibal—no *d*—Sydney Radcliffe, Anglo named, blue eyed, blond haired. White? Likely not: many-generationed Puerto Rican, monolingual in Spanish. If not white, a Spic. No speak English, no speak, speak, spic. Language is also race in America. Spanish is color.

Yet color didn’t really strike me, not really, till college, as I attempted to move within the class system, and as more of America’s cultural heritage, seen through literature and through rhetoric, became clear. W E. B. DuBois told me of the souls of black folk and the degree to which education does not overcome racism. Faulkner introduced me to the octoroon, who for all his or her success, not being seen as black elsewhere, could not transcend a black genetic line. Of course the Puerto Rican is colored: what with *el morro*, and the West African, and Columbus’s Indians; what with my grandmother, Mama Pina, looking like the stereotypical American Indian; what with my brown-

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skinned, curly haired sister, and my brown daughter, and my Spanish surname. Octorican.

He sees himself as essentially of the same race as the majority, and knows that sometimes they do too, and he wonders how it is that what he hears and sees and feels and never seems able to escape is racism nevertheless.

He looks at the experiences of the Mexican immigrant and says, “That’s ethnocentrism; they’re Mexican; they’re immigrants.” His Dad would tell of co-workers who would ask if he had been in the portorican army. “The American. We’re American citizens from birth,” he’d say. “We’re citizens:” His Dad would tell of Operation Bootstrap, Governor Muñoz Marin’s Puerto Rican prosperity program. Corporations like Pfizer prosper, tourism does well, the Atlantic fleet does well—while the majority of the Puerto Rican people have the honor of ranking second in the nation for poverty and for food-stamp allotment, second only to American Indians. The Indian reservations: colonies within the U.S.; Puerto Rico, a U.S. possession, a colony; both have the inordinate economic dependence of neocolonialist states. Texas and Utah and Arizona and New Mexico and Colorado: colonies once. And California. The natives are not immigrants, yet not equal to other citizens.

The colonized. “You Spanish?” “Where you from?” “What’s your national origin?” “What’s your ethnic heritage?” Folks are quick to tell of their German or their Irish. They search for roots. Their roots are never exposed. No one seems to see their roots. Seems like everyone sees his. He doesn’t think to ask them roots questions in the way they’re compelled to ask him, and he doesn’t see that they ask each other as a matter of course.

A manuscript in the mail: “Would you please review this bibliography of Mexican American literature?” He enjoys the literature well enough, Galarza and Anaya and others. But he knows more of Chaucer and Milton and Yeats than of Puerto Rican writers like Piri Thomas or Tato Laviera or Nicolasa Mohr. He knows Mexicans less. He has been stereotyped again: Hispanic, a monolith, all the same—in everything; all know one another; all read the same things. He doesn’t even teach literature as a matter of course, ethnic or otherwise.

I teach writing, in English; and know next to nothing about bilingual education from a professional perspective. I teach and study the Greeks and the Romans and their influence on contemporary English discourse—American discourse. I study and talk about modern rhetoricians like Kenneth Burke or Wayne Booth, postmodern French cultural

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critics who speak in essentially rhetorical terms, like Foucault or Derrida. I am professionally distanced from the Hispanic in many ways. Not even Paulo Freire quite qualifies as Hispanic to me, insofar as I have come to know of him through non-Hispanic channels, and insofar as his Brazilian Portuguese is more foreign to me than Greek. I've probably learned more about the histories and the political economies of Mexico and Latin America from my non-Hispanic wife.

I have never stopped trying to assimilate. And I have succeeded in all the traditional ways. Yet complete assimilation is denied—the Hispanic English professor. One can't get more culturally assimilated and still remain other. People of color carry the colony wherever we go. Internal colonialism: a political economy, an ideology, a psychology.

And so he recognizes that despite the cultural differences between Puerto Ricans and the mainstream he sees himself as essentially of the same culture as the majority—even the transmitter of the majority culture—no immigrant. And he wonders how it is that what he hears and sees and feels and never seems able to escape is ethnocentrism nevertheless.

He looks at the experiences of the African American speaker of Black English, the Spanish-speaking Mexican American, Puerto Rican, or other Latino, and says, "They lack sophisticated speaking skills in the language of the majority." Then he remembers having spoken Spanish and Black English and the Standard English required at the school, seems like always, and he wonders how it is that he got sorted outside the mainstream, relegated to a vocational high school, a high school dropout. He is racially white, despite the subtle hue, a native-born citizen and lifetime resident of the continental United States, a quick study in linguistic code switching, a Ph.D. in the language and the literary traditions of the majority, a reproducer of those traditions. And still, other. And he realizes that there is more to racism, ethnocentricity, and language than is apparent, that there are long-established systemic forces at play that maintain bigotry, systemic forces that can even make bigots of those who are appalled by bigotry. Now to try to make that realization explicitly understood. It is an aim for what follows: this book.

He has made it by the bootstraps: GED to Ph.D.—an American success story. But he knows that for most like him the bootstraps break before the boots are on, that too many have no boots. So he tries to grasp at concepts like colonialism and ideology and hegemony and the ways they are imbricated with language, tries to figure this out: this book.

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So how come a GED? I'll accept some blame, sure. I remember giving up. But systemic forces had an influence, surely: matters of colonialism, old-fashioned and neo- and internal; matters of race and culture and class and their manifestations in speech.

Then how a doctorate? There are always some who get through. Some *must* get through, a matter of ideological credibility in the land of opportunity, the workings of hegemony. Yet internal colonialism remains, never quite equity.

How the doctorate? I deserve some credit, sure: maturity and motivation; the bliss of ignorance, not always recognizing the systemic; and with the naiveté, the edge in being critical, in recognizing the systemic. A contradiction. It plays out this way: I didn't know what I was getting into, but knew I was getting into something not intended for the likes of me.

There are always the contradictions. Antonio Gramsci makes much of them. So does Paulo Freire. In this case there is the contradiction of achieving the inaccessible through the combination of cultural literacy with critical literacy. They are not dichotomous, necessarily. Both are necessarily important to the American of color, the colonized, the one who is American and yet other.

Containing contradictions is difficult, sometimes crazy making—a mutual affirmation and denial. American academic of color. Fully an academic. I imagine what I would do were I among the truly wealthy: lottery fantasies. I imagine that after seeing the world I would settle down to reading and to writing, learning and teaching, likely about politics and language—academics. Yet fellow academics are foreign to me in many ways, and I think they will always be, that I will always be somehow an outlander. I am of color, now fully aware of the color, and I am of poverty (not just “from” poverty), never (not even now, economically) of the middle class, not even quite the colored middle class (who are not equal with the white middle class). So I often feel alone professionally. But I just as often feel a member of a professional community—a community that extends beyond the university that employs me, a community that includes all English-language teachers. Contradictions.

I met English-language arts teachers for the first time while I was involved with a National Writing Project site. I discovered their legitimate concerns for those students of color who studied in their classrooms in numbers far greater than those of the college classroom. I also discovered how much the teachers could not understand about being of color and of poverty, but how much they would change if

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they could make real changes. I discovered teachers' desperate struggles to understand. Teachers' struggles to understand helped to explain their acceptance of Richard Rodriguez: the second-generation child of Mexican immigrants whose own struggles made him a popular writer at the expense of his ties to his family and to his culture. He said this great expense is simply the cost of becoming American. The teachers know of this, from the stories of their own forefathers and foremothers. But there is a difference between him and them. They assimilated. Yet, for all his fame as an American writing in English about assimilation, his attempts at assimilation failed. He is called upon to explain the Latino; he has not melted into the American pot.

Classroom English teachers' struggles explain their acceptance of Mike Rose as telling of the minority. He does tell about the person of color. But his tellings are the observer's tellings, even if told with passion and compassion, with academic rigor and with empathy. His remains the story of the immigrant, of bumpy roads into the middle class. His story is not typical of the college kid, but he was a college kid nevertheless. The teachers' struggles explain their acceptance of E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, a theory espousing good old-fashioned assimilation, what all immigrants go through. None tells our story. Us: those who are not immigrants but long-time citizens and residents who never quite assimilate, even when assimilation is sought after and all the explicitly mentioned preconditions are met. There are so few of us outside of "our fields" (like Latino literature or bilingual education). The scarcity explains how traditions continue, good old-fashioned traditions which have excluded too many of us for too long or else have alienated us from our own traditions. One story follows.

But, in the telling there won't be all that much about Monday morning and the hundred-plus students the English language arts teacher will face. There will be some. But my experiences at teaching are limited: a decade, almost exclusively at the college. I wasn't even a student in the English language arts teachers' classrooms. Yet I can tell of my journey, and I can tell of the theories, some mine, some others', that help to explain such journeys. The theories are important, can provide the bases for classroom practices, can suggest why some practices might work better than others, how some practices might work counter to what's intended.

In what follows I will tell of systems and of anomalies, of contradictions, of how the things that happened to me were systemic, and how I managed to slip through the cracks in the hegemonic bloc. I will tell of hegemony. What it means. How it operates. How, maybe, to counter it. What follows will tell of the pleasures and frustrations I

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experience in working within an institution that constantly seeks change and continually impedes change, of my respect and affection for nice people who are too often unwittingly unkind to people of color. Respect and affection—and a belief that most would do better by people of color—provide the impetus for this book. What follows tells of how events and observations and speculations suggest matters for further consideration by those who would do better by those of us who are of color.

My views are grounded in experience, elaborated upon by theory, and tested in research. The theory has many sources, but at bottom there is Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci tells it best, to my mind. He appeals to my sense of what rings true based on what I've known. Of all those who prompted me to write this, Gramsci resounds the loudest. For he says in his *Cultural Writings* that

Autobiography can be conceived “politically.” One knows that one’s life is similar to that of a thousand others, but through “chance” it has had opportunities that the thousand others in reality could not or did not have. By narrating it, one creates this possibility, suggests the process, indicates the opening. (132)

Perhaps in narrating, the exception can become the rule—boots for everyone, strong straps.

Another theorist who stands out for me is Paulo Freire. In his ideas of how literacy instruction should take place he writes of “problematizing the existential.” My sense is that he means generalizing, theorizing, and questioning the systemic based on the personal. This is what he calls *praxis*: reflection and action through language. Praxis is what I’m attempting to do here, more than providing a self-serving story, either glorious me or woe-is-me. What I’m attempting is to provide a problematic based on sets of experience: an experience which leads to a theory, a theory that recalls an experience; reflections on speculations, speculations to polemics to reflections—all with an aim at affecting what might happen in classrooms, the sites of action.

Going from experience to theory to reflection and so on will make for a text that cannot be neatly linear. Besides, linearity does not tend to come easily to the Latino. There is a rhetorical predisposition to the Latino which reflects ancient sophistry going back to the empires of Alexander, Byzantium, Islam, Spain. I will tell of this too, a glimpse at the history of rhetoric and its links to imperialism and colonialism, and a branch of applied linguistics called contrastive rhetoric. For now, I would just have it known that the alinearity is intentional, even crafted, that there is a logic. I am never *just* emoting, never *just*

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displaying the free associative workings of a mind. I am presenting my “ideograph,” to use a term by yet another theorist I enjoy, Fredric Jameson, presenting my own ideologically influenced dialectical processes. I hope for some enjoyment for the reader in the byways which always return to the main road. Along the way, the reader will meet one Latino’s mind as it is manifest and constituted in language and discourse and rhetoric.

This is an autobiography with political, theoretical, pedagogical considerations. The story includes ethnographic research. The story includes things tried in classrooms. The story includes speculations on the differences between immigrants and minorities, the class system and language, orality and literacy, cultural and critical literacy, Freire, ideology, hegemony, how racism continues and the ways in which racism is allowed to continue despite the profession’s best efforts. And in its inclusions the story suggests how we are—all of us—subject to the systemic. This is the personal made public and the public personalized, not for self-glory nor to point fingers, but to suggest how, maybe, to make the exception the rule.