

## Maybe a Colony: And Still Another Critique of the Comp Community

VICTOR VILLANUEVA JR.

YOU SEE, my ancestry is Puerto Rican. And so, even as I remain a stranger to the Island, really, even as I work at regaining the Spanish of my youngest years, try to learn, as I near the age of fifty, the ways of literate Spanish, I am a Puerto Rican. So I try to think about the things written about dependency theory and world systems theory, theories that attempt to explain how cores, the centers like the U.S., affect the peripheries, what an older modernization theory called the Third World. I can't pretend to have yet gotten beyond the surface of world systems theory, a field of sociology, but I can't help but think that it is tied to rhetoric and that it is tied to what we do in composition classrooms.

I think about Puerto Rico and a sensibility that says we are finally in a postcolonial era. Then I discover that in 1991 the plebiscite process that colonies undergo to decide their fates—independence, statehood, continued commonwealth status—failed to pass through Congress. Congress decided. In 1993 President Clinton decided not to allow Puerto Rico to keep the proviso that allowed major industries who located on the island a tax exemption. In effect, President Clinton decided how much profit Puerto Rico would make, Clinton having made a promise to keep pharmaceutical costs down, the Island's major industry, and Clinton's having made a promise to keep industry "home" (Bayer 128–31, 91). And it becomes clear to me that Puerto Rico, whatever its official status, is the contemporary version of a colony—dependent on U.S. imports and living at below subsistence with its exports. And then thoughts about the U.S. military in Puerto Rico. And mandatory English and English literature instruction. And folks like me, Puerto Ricans and Not. Americans, but we say Americans of Color, and others say "minorities." And I think about how we can make multiculturalism work when there is no equity in large systemic terms that show up even in individuals.

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"This essay was a first attempt to get the composition community to look beyond the theoretical lens handed to us by our coworkers in English literature, to widen its views to include the interesting perspectives other disciplines bring to discussions of racism and language."—vv

So here's what I want to lay out—a problem for which I don't have a solution. When we demand a certain language, a certain dialect, and a certain rhetorical manner in using that dialect and language, we seem to be working counter to the cultural multiplicity we seek. And I think that means that we will have to rethink the whole thing. The demand for linguistic and rhetorical compliance still smacks of colonialism, practices which reproduce, in effect, the colonial histories of America's people of color. What we need, I'd say, is a greater consciousness of the pervasiveness of the ethnocentricity from which we wish to break away. What I'll do, then, at least to open up the conversations, is to begin to lay out the problem through something of a historical and sociopolitical view of colonialism and racism.

I want us to complicate our thinking about multiculturalism. I want us to consider the multicultural in terms of its effects on literacy practices, literacy as the teaching of reading and writing and rhetoric (recalling Pattison's definition). I want us to consider the possibility that a colonial sensibility remains for us in the United States—in America—and that America's people of color are most affected by that sensibility. I want us to consider the possibility that traditional ways of teaching literacy have not only forced particular languages and dialects upon America's people of color, but have forced particular ways with language—rhetorical patterns—patterns that help to maintain American racial, ethnic, and cultural stratification, as well as gender and class.

In *Bootstraps*, for example, I present for our consideration the ways—and the history of those ways—of the Latino or Latina writer. The Latina or Latino is given to stylistic repetition—repetition of words, repetitions of syntactic strategies, repetition at the discourse level: *amplificatio*. The Latino or Latina writer is also given to the metaphorical, the poetic, the florid. And he or she is given to a kind of alinearity, seeming digressions from the line of logic with which to underscore an argument (79–87). The Latina and Latino reflect a long line of colonization: Spain's conquest of the New World, Spain's having been conquered by the Moors, themselves conquered by the Byzantines, Spain's conquest by the Byzantines as well, their conquest by Greece—their colonial heritage all linked by a way with discourse that is sophistic. One colonial ruler of Spain after another for over two thousand years was given to sophistry; the traces of the sophistic remaining among the descendants of Spain. A multicultural perspective that would at least acknowledge these and other culturally determined rhetorical devices would provide for the possibility of a new way of seeing multicultural literacy instruction, a perspective that would break from a too long standing colonial tradition.

The sophists themselves were the victims of a colonialism. We know that the first sophists were *metics*, immigrants to Athens from colonies in Sicily. And we know that among the reasons for the end of sophistry as honorable was xenophobia, a distrust—maybe even a hatred—of foreigners, including those who were citizens by way of colonialism. The great democracy that was Athens did not extend to the colonized. Though all native-born male citizens could take direct part in the workings of government, women, slaves, and *metics* were not allowed. *Metics* could only enjoy limited rights of citizenship, though the colonized were expected to learn the language and the customs of Athens (Barrett, Kennedy).

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Aristotle, not a native Athenian, learned the ways of Athens so well, he was able to inject his rhetorical influence throughout Hellenistic Greece, passing his influence on to the Western world. Yet as an outsider, one closely aligned with the colonial ruler of Athens, he must have felt the animosity of Athenians toward outsiders. He left Athens on Alexander's death, we know. So I always wonder at his definition of *enmity* or *hatred* from the second book of his *Rhetoric*. It makes me think of the difference between inordinate anger (what we think of as hatred) and the special hatred that is racism:

Enmity may be produced by anger or spite or calumny. Now whereas anger arises from offenses against oneself, enmity may arise even without that; we may hate people merely because of what we take to be their character. Anger is always concerned with individuals . . . whereas hatred is directed also against classes. . . . Moreover, anger can be cured by time; but hatred cannot. (II.iv.1382)

What Aristotle describes sounds a lot like race prejudice. Where he writes that "hatred is directed also against classes," I find it easy to add "races" or "ethnicities." The Stagirite would have some special insights into enmity arising from imperial social relations.

The empire of Alexander continues to live and spread long after Aristotle, of course, though it did eventually fall to Rome. Rome does not attempt the democracy of pre-Alexandrian Athens, however, trying instead to maintain a republic, but expansionism gives rise to military rulers, so Rome becomes decidedly an empire. Comes Cicero. For all that is Plato in our thinking, for all that is Aristotle in our ways with discourse, for all that is Quintilian in education, we, the West, are Cicero. His *de Inventione* was far and away the most read work on rhetoric in Europe for centuries. John Rolfe says that "Such movements as Christianity, The Renaissance and the French Revolution drew direct inspiration from this Roman of long ago . . . a living presence, real to members of the English Parliament, real to Thomas Jefferson" (qtd. in Micken xiii). We know a great deal about him because he was a prolific writer, downright confessional in his letters to friends. In one letter to Atticus he writes, sounding just like a bigot:

Do not obtain your slaves from Britain because they are so stupid and so utterly incapable of being taught that they are not fit to form a part of the household of Athens. (Aft. IV.15)

So where does this leave me, leave us? It leaves us with seeds of Western Civilization establishing rules of forced assimilation and limited access for those it colonized. British sociologist John Rex says flatly: "Racial discrimination and racial prejudice are phenomena of colonialism" (75).

Now, I'm not trying to suggest anything necessarily causal here, nor even necessarily hierarchical, but if there really is a connection among colonialism, assimilation, and bigotry then we have to think strong about what we do with the victims of past colonization—America's people of color—given ongoing colonialism by America symbolized (in a kind of Burkean sense of symbolism) in global English.



We have come to accept that language is a way of knowing, a means—maybe even *the* means—for thought. That’s why we watch for sexism in our language, for example. But we don’t give the same kind of care to colonialism. We’re even touting “postcolonialism,” as if there were such a thing in America. I’m not making a reference here to the body of study, just the term. The term *postcolonialism* has rhetorical consequences, ideological consequences.

*Postcolonialism* has too strong a potential to depoliticize a critical concept and social concern while using a political term. It’s a catchy term, posting along with postmodernity, poststructuralism, with postmarxism (which is also not a post at all). Well, postcolonialism is a body of literature, we know, something with a strong political bite, not at all naive, the literature from a body of writers and critical theorists that comes after Anticolonial Literature, after Third World Literature, literatures that recognize continuing classical colonialism.

But I worry about us, those of us who teach the language of a certain community, that we ourselves believe that we are postcolonial, rather than enjoying the critiques of new colonialism which falls under the head of postcolonialism. I worry that if we hear the term without having read the substance that we’ll stop problematizing what we do in our assimilationist teaching. Ella Shohat, for instance, reminds us that “Formal independence for colonized countries has rarely meant the end of First World hegemony” (100). A kind of colonialism, most often the economic dependence of neocolonialism, remains after formal classical colonialism has ended. Egypt’s independence in 1923, for example, did not prevent a 1952 revolution, a revolt against British influences, among other factors. Arab intellectuals read Anwar Sadat’s efforts at Camp David as a return to pre-Nasser imperialism, saw the same when Egypt went along with the U.S. during the Gulf War (Shohat 100). The term “postcolonial” apparently has none of the currency in Africa or in Latin America that it has here. There, they are painfully aware that their countries are subject to the neocolonial, to the economic dependence which necessitates social and political compliance with the core. Formal independence notwithstanding, neocolonialism triggered revolutions in Nicaragua and in Cuba. Independent states with democratic governments nevertheless feel the pinch from the economic and hegemonic core—and America is at the center of the core.

We really don’t have to venture far into world systems theory to think about America and colonialism, though. Apart from America’s market control, America still has over four hundred military bases throughout the world and continued colonial holdings in the Pacific and the Caribbean. There is nothing post to America’s colonialism.

And America’s people of color feel that colonialism, a legacy from histories of colonialism, histories that often affect our self perceptions, histories that can affect how we are regarded. Those effects, the ways in which we people of color conduct ourselves in response to the ethnocentricity which has its roots in a colonial history, is *internal colonialism*. The term is not new. It was popularized by Frantz Fanon, a figure who has almost disappeared from discussions of race, but who has been taken up by the interdisciplinary study of world systems. But even before Fanon, there was the recognition that there was an internal colonialism: Lenin’s *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Gramsci’s 3 January 1920 editorial of the *Ordine Nuovo*, in reference to northern Italian attitudes concerning the southern Italian peasantry (“The South-

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ern Question" 28). And "internal colonialism" is the term used by Latin American sociologists in describing Amerindian regions (Hechter 8–9). In the U.S., according to Robert Blauner, Harold Cruse referred to "domestic colonialism" in a 1962 essay, reprinted in a 1968 collection. Kenneth Clark, in 1965, drew parallels between colonialism and conditions in Harlem. Then Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton told of parallels between African American oppression and colonialism in *Black Power*. By 1968, Senator Eugene McCarthy was referring to African Americans as a colonized people (Blauner 177). But hegemonic forces being what they are, social scientists objected that the term "internal colonialism" was being used metaphorically and thereby misleadingly. And now we sometimes argue that empiricism is itself a metaphor. Still and all, by 1975, references to internal colonialism in America, with the exception of American Indians (no minor exception), were all but gone.

Yet America's people of color reflect an ongoing internal colonialism. There's no way to deny that American Indians reside in colonies within America's borders. That's "internal colonialism" in its uncontested sense as a geopolitical term. But there is also the colonial consciousness among the still colonized Latinos from Puerto Rico and from the Latinos from a Puerto Rican heritage. There remains the victims of an earlier colonization: Latinos from Mexico's and Spain's ceded lands of the West and the Southwest, African Americans. Our narratives tell of being split.

I think the word that has come to replace "internal colonialism" is *hybridity*. It lacks a punch, though. Hybridity can mean a creative transcendence, an affirmation of cultures and histories that are both of the mainstream and other, but it also tends to include the cultural mimicry that the other is forced to undergo before creative transcendence is allowed expression. For most of the colonized and their descendants, hybridity means little more than—and these are someone else's words from 1992—"forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism" (Shohat 110). I like citing the Puerto Rican poet Tato Laviera, for instance, since he speaks so clearly to me, who is of his same generation, of the more typical manifestation of hybridity. He writes,

*i want to go back to puerto rico  
but i wonder if my kink could live  
in ponce, mayagüez and carolina*

*tengo las venas aculturadas  
escribo in spanglish  
abraham in espanol  
abraham in english  
tato in spanish  
"taro" in english  
tonto in both languages (qtd. in Flores 214)*

Acculturated veins ("*las venas aculturadas*"), yet not American in some sense and no longer quite Puerto Rican, linguistically a fool in both English and Spanish ("*tonto in both languages*"). This is the hybrid of internal colonialism.

There is the more than worthwhile goal of multiculturalism: the cultural and historical affirmations among all of America's citizens, both from people

of color and from America's descendants of immigrants; but as long as we continue to follow an assimilationist model, we will fall short; and those who will be most affected negatively will be America's people of color, most of whom were not immigrants to America but were taken over by America. Assimilation runs counter to multiculturalism. Assimilation is a cultural flattening. And even when assimilation is achieved, full participation still tends to be denied the internally colonized.

I believe that we still haven't really begun the conversations about equity. We have railed against cultural literacy, but we are still colonial schools. The schools of the colony tend to have curricula that aim at achieving cultural assimilation, a limited assimilation, an assimilation that best serves the needs of those who hold power. An example comes from Gail Kelly in relation to the Vietnamese under French rule. In the search for something like a multiculturalism, the French taught Vietnamese culture to the Vietnamese, though through French eyes and through the French language. The analogy that jumps to mind would be someone who taught African American literature without knowing the ways with words or the ways of being of African American cultures—or worse, without allowing expression in the ways with words of the students' cultures. Since, to use Frantz Fanon's words, "[t]o speak a language is to take on a world, a culture," the Vietnamese children found themselves ostensibly without a world or a culture: somehow distanced from their original cultural ways and somehow kept at a distance from the colonizers' in the manner of a Tato Laviera or a Richard Rodriguez, hybrids (38). In America, the result has been too often the anger of a Laviera or the resignation of a Rodriguez, a hopelessness or a playing along, allowing social cooptation or a social mimicry, attempting little beyond economic success. Yet we find that making the big money, too, is insufficient, with even those who achieve great economic success still feeling outraged at the ongoing inequity, as Ellis Cose documents in *The Rage of a Privileged Class*. Cose tells of an interview with Hofstra's Dean Haynes, for example:

Ulric Haynes, dean of the Hofstra University School of Business and a former corporate executive who served as President Carter's ambassador to Algeria, is one of many blacks who have given up hope that racial parity will arrive [in] this—or even [in the] next—millennium: "During our lifetimes, my grandchildren's lifetimes, I expect that race will . . . matter. And perhaps race will always matter, given the historical circumstances under which we came to this country." [And he's angry, he says] . . . "Not for myself. I'm over the hill. I've reached the zenith" . . . "I'm angry for the deception that this has perpetrated on my children and grandchildren." Though his children have traveled the world and received an elite education, they "in a very real sense are not the children of privilege. They are dysfunctional, because I didn't prepare them, in all the years we lived overseas, to deal with the climate of racism they are encountering right now." (8)

It is a commonplace, after all, that the numbers are never equitable, the percentage of economic success among those of color never on a par with those not among the people of color. And this, too, is within the colonial frame. Altbach and Kelly write of the two great reasons for the colonized's acceptance of colonial education: economic ascension and cultural resignation.



Cultural integrity and something greater than mere racial tolerance, as well as the possibility for economic self-betterment must become realized.

I say matters of integrity and parity must become *realized* rather than desired or aimed for because I believe that, for the most part, the desire already exists. It's just that the way has not quite been found.

So here is where the essay runs out, limping to a halt. I don't have a conclusion. All I have, I hope, is the beginning of a conversation. I just want us to begin talking about, writing about, the problem in our simply avowing multiculturalism without problematizing it more than we seem to have to date, looking at the combat zones as well as the kinder contact zones. A simple celebration of cultural multiplicity while maintaining the literacy practices that have maintained the subjugation of too many of America's people of color is insufficient. But subverting the *lingua franca* of the planet when we are at the core doesn't sound feasible or reasonable, either. Our best bet, to this point, has been to attempt to engender a multicultural perspective through Paulo Freire's theory of a critical consciousness. This has been an honorable turn. I can think of none better as I write, have thought of none better as I have taught. It best serves the needs of multiculturalism in exposing the degree to which the multicultural finds resistance in entrenched caricatures of difference, facile stereotypes, rather than in a bona-fide politics of difference, in which there is a constant dialectical interplay between the things we all have in common and our cultural and historical differences.

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