Of Kin and Community

Victor Villanueva

1982–1985. Attend the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). I see the big names, listen to their talks, even take part in a panel of “names” as a respondent. It is heady stuff, but there is no real sense of belonging. They are big shots. My community consists of my fellow graduate students, and together we commiserate on which panels to listen to, look for the parties where there will be free food, share hotel rooms. My community comes with me. It extends no further.

1985. My first National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention. Philadelphia. Now I am a brand-new assistant professor. My fellow grad students are not at NCTE. So I am alone in a strange environment. Even the “names” are different, those in reading (as opposed to writing), those in English ed (a new term for me, who was literature and rhetoric and composition studies—all college-y stuff), the Whole Language Umbrella (as opposed to what, fragmented language?). This time, I am alone in my search for food. I walk into an exceedingly large room (likely a convention center, but I did not know how to think in such terms yet). Then a young woman, slender build, long curly red hair, the familiar hue of a Latina, comes up to me, grabs my ID badge, reads the name, and says “Follow me!” Bewildered, I do as I am told. She introduces herself as Kris Gutierrez and tells me to buttonhole any other “Hispanics” I see. I do not remember finding another. But we gather together, nevertheless, in what was then called the Hispanic Caucus on a Thursday night in a convention room. It is me, and Kris Gutierrez, and Roseann Dueñas Gonzalez. And the talk is about having our voices not only heard but known, about the work that is necessary, as anti-Hispanic hysteria seems to be on the rise (though we could not have known how shrill it would get in the early 21st century). The conversation is not about Spanish, but about Americans of Spanish heritage, that some of us have been on this land, speaking English, for more generations than others who are more comfortably American. There was no brio in the saying, no anger, no hostility, only urgency. The conversation had the potential to be divisive, but it was offered in terms of our commitment to English and to students.

Over the years, these two would become special friends, tied to some sense of culture, despite our cultural differences, insofar as I am Puerto Rican, and Kris is California Chicana, and Roseann is Arizona Chicana, each somewhat different from the other. Later, but not much later, I would read educational anthropologist Signithia Fordham describe what she would call “fictive kinship relationships” (qtd. in Villanueva, *Bootstraps* 40). And I understood a new kind of kin—Spanish English Teacher Kin.

Striving for Community

Although Fordham is writing of African Americans, it is a situation that obtains whenever our numbers are few. We all do it. Hispanics in an overwhelmingly white organization will gather together, women of whatever “race” in male-dominated situations, poor people among the middle class. We all do it. We find those with whom we believe we have a cultural or economic kinship and
act accordingly. We bond. It is even a truism, that as the world gets smaller, the basic social fabric gets more distant, so that we strive at community. Our community might be the globe, but we do not know much about our neighbors beyond a “Hey” and a borrowed mower, maybe. The family has become sub-atomic. If the basic unit was once the nuclear family, it is now too often the particle family, family members flung far and wide, a face and voice on Skype, a photo text messaged. Christmas dinners are seldom what they once were. Maureen Perry-Jenkins and Sonya Salamon have even found that the assumption that the working class in rural environments still enjoys closer kinship ties and a greater sense of community is false. Contemporary economic conditions make it necessary for adult family members in rural blue-collar communities to travel great distances for employment, thereby leaving little time for community and even for kin, apart from the nucleus or particle, the family at home. Photos through cell phones rather than dinners around the table. So few of us can enjoy a sense of community in terms of tangible, extended family or neighborhood.

But lack of a neighborhood notwithstanding I felt the beginnings of a community at NCTE in Philly, now so long ago. We were not only Hispanics; we were English teachers, believers in the wonder of language, not only politically tied to the political power of English, but aesthetically tied to the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton and Whitman and Cather and Oates and Hemingway (though I would have wished for more Anaya or Ortiz Cofer, those Spanish writers who write of being Spanish and American, during those times). Our histories might have been tied to a people we call the Taíno or the Aztec or the Incas, but we were—we are—Americans, tied to the principal language of this nation.

From Community to Political Action

Then in 1986, somehow (likely through one of my mentors, the recently deceased former president of NCTE, William Irmscher), I find myself a member of the NCTE Resolutions Committee. I am off to San Antonio for the NCTE Annual Convention, having to begin two days prior to the convention, dinner with the executive director and the president, folks whose status left me in awe (not “awesome” like kids use the word today but genuine, open-mouthed awe). We meet, a committee that has as its chair the most-outspoken and learned Vivian Davis, and which included a future president of NCTE, Kyoko Sato, and a future executive director of NCTE, Faith Schullstrom. And while we are meeting, we read the news that California had passed an Official English law. We not only consider the resolutions that come in, but we create our own resolution, “On English as the ‘Official Language’”:

RESOLVED, that the National Council of Teachers of English condemn any attempts to render invisible the native languages of any Americans or to deprive English of the rich influences of the languages and cultures of any of the peoples of America; that NCTE urge legislators, other public officials, and citizens to oppose actively action intended to mandate or declare English as an official language or to "preserve," "purify," or "enhance" the language. Any such action will not only stunt the vitality of the language, but also ensure its erosion and in effect create hostility toward English, making it more difficult to teach and learn; and that NCTE widely publish this resolution to its affiliates and other professional organizations through news releases, letters to legislators, boards of education and other state officials, especially in those states attempting to legislate English as an official language. ("NCTE to You” 45)

In 1986, and still no less relevant in these times, I learned about resolutions, and about political action, about the potential power of NCTE. And I learned that fictive kinship relationships can be broader than racialized or ethnicized (a clumsy word I am coining here) notions of culture. I learned that among the teachers and scholars of NCTE were others watching our backs—all of us watching out for all of us—as the resolution passed. And that night, we went to dinner, Vivian, Kyoto, Faith, and I, and we laughed uproariously (after the waiter gave me a tie and a jacket for the dinner table, his having no way of knowing that my wife and I had bought the clothes I was wearing at the Sears “Seconds” store with the few bucks in our pocket, so that I could be presentable). We joked about matters racial and linguistic and deeply personal. I had formed a kinship, had become part of an even larger community than that
which Signithia Fordham discussed, larger than (though never exclusive of) the Hispanic Caucus.

A Community Grounded in Literacy

Benedict Anderson tells us that communities are really imaginary. He writes that the creation of the nation state and the popularization of literacy through the printing press coincided, and their appearing at about the same time as the literary is what gave rise to a common set of cultural assumptions that we think of as *nation*. Our nation is Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman. And then someone realized that women were a part of a nation, and there came Emily Dickinson and Edith Wharton and others. And the nation remembered its black folk. And then its Latinas and Latinos, its Native Americans, its Asian Americans, its Jews, its Muslims, its many others, this wonderful thing that is not quite a melting pot but which shares something, a commonality that we can call a nation or an overarching culture despite its many cultures. Now this is interesting, because if we accept the basic premise and shrink it down a bit, we can shrink this down to our professional organization, which claims to be a *National Council* whose commonality is a shared responsibility to the nation’s (and many of the world’s) youth through literacy. We are a community, bound by a love of language, through reading, writing, and rhetoric (the effective use and interpretation of what is written and read). When that became clear to me, my sense of kin and community became clearer to me. Of course there is my family, the parents, the sibling, the wonderfulness of a mate, our children. And there is the community one forms in a workplace, but the “imagined community,” to use Anderson’s phrase, is that which is tied to literacy. And that community, those communities, were NCTE and CCCC.

After that resolutions committee in 1986, doors opened for me. I ended up on the Minority Affairs Advisory Council, which eventually became a committee. I ended up in the Commission on Language, from which Smokey Daniels wrote a book on English-only legislation for which I wrote a chapter. I ended up on the Committee on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English, on the Rainbow Strand Committee, going to NCTE Headquarters in Urbana, Illinois, at least once a year to take an active part in my communities—the Latinos, the Latinas, the people of color, the teachers of English—and my community: the National Council of Teachers of English. All of it, all of them became my kin and my community in such important ways. And the publications came because of my interactions with my community. *Bootstraps* and *Cross-Talk* and other bits of speculation and consideration. By 1997 I had been elected to be among the officers of CCCC, and as such, a member of the NCTE Executive Committee. We squabbled, as family does, but we squabbled about differences within a common goal—the linguistic and rhetorical success of our—all of our—youth.

None of it—the friends, the kin, I find across the nation—was possible without this Imagined Community. Yet even that phrase, as much as I agree with Anderson, is not quite right. This is not “fictive” or “imagined,” in the sense of not quite real or true. Leila, Faith, Ralph, Alfredo, Marycarmen, Bobbi, Ceci, Vivian, Kyoto, Gail, Sheridan, Anne, Amanda, Sandra, Bill, Geneva, Malea, Roseann, Kris—so many other names that I can and would name (so that no one of you all should feel forgotten because you are not)—all are real, flesh-and-blood people, different and contentious and loving, my friends, my community, my kin, my brotherhood and sisterhood of teachers of English.

We are a community, bound by a love of language, through reading, writing, and rhetoric.

**Works Cited**


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