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## Story to Action: A Conversation about Literacy and Organizing

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## Story to Action: A Conversation about Literacy and Organizing

Eli Goldblatt, with Manuel Portillo  
and Mark Lyons

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This is the first in a series of talks with community activists and educators I work with in Philadelphia. In each case, I hope to discover from my interlocutors how they think literacy figures in their work with people in under-resourced or marginalized neighborhoods. I'm also interested in what they think about their personal literacy histories and how their experiences may have affected their own life choices or modes of working. I have chosen to act largely as an interested interviewer in these conversations, prompting responses and asking further questions when I wanted to hear more. At the same time, I do have a point of view that may help academic readers understand more about the context for the following remarks. Although I have misgivings about adding my own voice to the voices of those I interview, I have appended some thoughts of my own to the interview in a way that seems the least intrusive. Both Manuel and Mark have reviewed my comments and accepted them in the spirit of our on-going conversation.

In the summer of 2006, Open Borders Project/ Proyecto Sin Fronteras, a small educational center in the heart of Latino North Philadelphia, sponsored a six week program to teach teens from Philadelphia public schools how to plan and conduct interviews, edit audio files, and write the necessary preparatory material to produce short pieces about people they know in their families and neighborhoods. In some ways the project was highly successful—46 students stayed through the whole program and produced audio files, many quite engaging and some truly stunning—but it was one of the hardest projects to manage and execute that Open Borders has undertaken in its short six-year year history. Manuel Portillo, the executive director, sat down with Mark Lyons, one of the teachers in the program, and Eli Goldblatt,

associate professor of English at Temple University and chair of the board at Open Borders. Manuel's training and experience is primarily as a community organizer. Mark is a physician's associate at a local health center and an oral historian who edited *Especjos y Ventanas/Mirrors and Windows* (New City Community P, 2004), a collection of autobiographical stories told by Mexican mushroom workers in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Eli's most recent book is *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy beyond the College Curriculum* (Hampton P, 2007).

**Eli:** I'd like to start by asking you two to talk about what Open Borders did in the 2006 summer program with nearly 50 teenagers and a handful of adult volunteers?

**Manuel:** The program was simple. We attracted 46 youth to come together for 6 weeks. Through the day we would teach them, on the one hand, to use computers and software to record and edit sound files. On the other hand they also learned to write better and conceptualize ways of telling a story.

**Mark:** I think we were trying to figure out what the focus of their stories would be. We had two ideas. One is that we wanted to get kids to tell stories that were real and personal. These kids were new to each other and had no history together so the issue of trust and feeling safe telling stories about their own lives and their family's lives felt like an important barrier to overcome. We thought that writing and telling personal stories would be a way to involve the kids. But we also wanted them to understand that their personal stories were in a social context. We were trying to get kids to think of the big picture and how their stories and their family's stories were affected by the world they live in. We felt that understanding the context could empower them to re-write their stories and have some control over their world.

**Eli:** Traditionally in American education, there's a split between telling personal stories and talking about the social situation, the two objectives you were pointing to, Mark. How do you make that bridge? What do we have to do in a neighborhood like Latino North Philadelphia to change the American habit of seeing utterances as either personal expression or public proclamation and political expression?

**Manuel:** I do believe that a personal story is not personal, that—if you pay attention—a personal story can give you indications of what's going on not only in one person's life but in a family and in an entire community. How do we help them realize

that what they are saying—whatever the details are—is part of a much larger story and thus connect and reflect the realities of an entire community? We don't want to push that point too hard, but that's the way I look at it.

One way of helping people to think through and reinterpret their own experiences has been to talk about issues and relationships, you know? If we focus attention on the quality of relationships they have in their lives, then a whole world comes out. You begin to see that people in stories are connected to relatives and friends, teachers in the school, even police—sometimes in a bad way—but there is this interconnectedness. The personal story is a collective story; the question is how do we reflect on it to better understand the lives of an entire group. We think that examining the relationship world of a person will also lead to the issues that affect everybody in the community, not just the person telling the story.

**Mark:** One of the exercises we did was a writing exercise we called the Memory Project. Kids wrote one-line memories of something that was really positive, something that was really frightening, something that was really sad in their lives. We had several prompts and they would write two or three memories about each prompt. And then we put all those memories together—a hundred, hundred-fifty memories altogether—and themes emerged from all these brief ideas for stories. Many memories had a theme of loss: a loss of a parent through death or separation, loss of family members, loss of friends. Another common theme was dreams deferred: parents who were depressed because they didn't have jobs, or people who had dreams of coming here but it didn't work out and they left their family to return home. Another common theme was violence in the kids' communities, either in their schools or on the corner where they live.

The students loved seeing their memory in print. They started arguing. One would say, "Oh, that was my memory, I said that." Another would answer, "No, that was my memory, I said that." In fact, many memories were very similar. Our starting point, then, was with something very personal, but we tried to talk about that commonality of memories and also to recognize that sharing those memories was hugely risky. Because of the size of the group, we didn't take this

second step as successfully as I hope to be able to do in the future with a smaller group. When kids talked about those memories, the other kids really listened and took themselves seriously. So it was affirming of their collective experience. Identifying these themes can be a crucial taking off point.

Another example is the theme of violence. We would say: Well, here's a common very personal experience that for most of you is sad, often tragic, filled with loss. Why does such violence happen in this community? What are the elements that make violence a common theme? We analyzed stories, moving from the very personal to a social construct of what contributes to that in the community. That's certainly where we hope to be able to go. We had some of those discussion and in fact one of the kids who did nothing practically the entire class ended up doing a video story about violence, a sort of "say no to violence." It was very powerful and was completely out of nowhere because he didn't participate in any of the discussion or do practically any of the other exercises. He just started talking about a friend who had been involved in drugs and violence and then moved out to talk about the bigger issues on his own.

**Eli:** What I hear both of you saying is that you got the students telling personal stories but you tried to find ways to help them see their stories in a larger social context and, as you say, make the connections and interrelations that develop a critical perspective. What's the next step? Manuel, you are a community organizer by training and Mark you have long experience working in public health here in the neighborhood. How does storytelling function as a political force? Typically what happens in these programs is that students publish or record their stories, maybe the stories go up on a website or appear as a book in a local store, but what does that do for anybody? What would be the next step in the move to get people organized and take some action?

**Manuel:** I tend to not be too much of a contemplative person. I need to see my actions produce something, to have an impact. I think there are a number of steps we have to take now. Ideally what I would like to see is that we build an audience for these stories, not just a group of listeners who like to hear the stories but an audience where the stories have an impact. The impact I hope for includes not just educating and informing about issues and people's lives, but it has to do with the political—in this case, the impact should be on

how the individuals telling these stories get treated in the city of Philadelphia. You know, it's a long road and to get to that you have to do a lot of work. Beyond telling stories, you have to research issues the stories raise and then perhaps negotiate changes with people who have a degree of power to act on the problem. It's a complex thing, but I think we are positioning ourselves to do that. If we just produce stories—and I think there is an art and science of this, and I love it—but I think we will not have a complete picture unless we somehow bring attention to those realities that people live and then do something about the problems.

Telling the stories and learning together is already doing something because these are communities that are not listened to. People in the media or city hall do not pay much attention to our community, and when our neighborhoods do get attention, it's for the wrong reasons. You have heard how the media talks about Latino North Philadelphia as the “bad lands.” The prejudice is unbelievable. These are communities that need to be listened to & understood, and so the story by itself is action because it informs and educates. But more needs to be done, and I think that once we get to have an audience and a group of producers and excited people that want to tell their story then I think we'll be in a different place. If perhaps we don't do the direct organizing ourselves, we can certainly partner with many organizations who are already engaged in doing that. Maybe we can help them tell individual stories among their constituencies while they can help us do organizing and negotiate changes in the neighborhoods.

For those who don't know, Philadelphia has quite a double standard—I would call it probably a triple standard—of how communities are treated. You go to certain neighborhoods and you see all the city services are there and cool and fast. But if you go to other neighborhoods and you call the police or you need some city services, they don't get there or they get there very late. If it snows they never plow the streets. There are no recreations centers, no pools, sometimes not even libraries or at least well-equipped libraries. The schools are bad, to say the least. This is not to talk about the teachers, but the whole system. So these communities are not well served by the city. That's our context. Community stories have the potential to be instruments of change if we add to them collaborative efforts to really get involved in the politics of the city. Not the party politics that are so corrupt

people don't believe in them, but the real politics: building community identity and establishing relationships within and outside the neighborhoods in order to gain more power. We need to develop strategies collectively on the issues that matter.

That's actually the reason why we started doing this. We believe we have to start by giving voice to the community. Even if it's just a little, that's progress. And while we're giving voice to people, we're also helping them access the technology required to tell a story and distribute it over the Internet. And that's a lot. We want it to contribute to transformation in the community. We're not exactly an organizing project—we can't say we're organizing yet—but certainly we have the potential and the collaborative relationships with other organizations that will get us closer to the organizing aspects of this effort for the community.

**Eli:** Manuel, you said we're not exactly an organizing project. But can you talk about leadership building? How does that work? Because I think we *are* involved in building leaders among the students.

**Manuel:** This gets us back to the question you asked before about that continuum between individual story and the collective story. When people do leadership development well—the way we like it in the neighborhoods—it's a collective process. But it only works if attention is given to the individual, so the collectivity is built through the quality of work that focuses on building the skills of an individual. And those skills have to do, incredibly, with telling a story, being able to communicate yourself from the standpoint of your self-interest, which is viewed in community organizing and leadership development as a very positive thing. Contrary to what some people think, self-interest is not selfishness; it's just being aware of what motivates you to move on and take action and take risks. What we're doing as we train and educate people is to get them to think about being leaders, not just in their communities, which often times exist in isolation in their own little corner of the world, but leaders for everybody, the way other people think about leadership. And so we are discussing with both adults and children at Open Borders the realities that affect them and what their self interests are, how the self-interests of an individual is a collective self-interest. A leader is someone who realizes her self-interests are connected to those of other people.

The question of leadership development is first identifying the self-interest of an individual and then how these so called “self” interests connect with other people. That’s where you produce the glue—the relationship—that is the essential element of an organizing effort. That’s the essence of power. If you don’t have the bond between people based on self-interest, you don’t have power. You live by yourself, basically. It’s not about friendship, and it’s not about being nice to others; it’s about understanding self-interest. And everything is driven by what motivates people.

An important principle for leadership development is that all self-interest comes back to the family. Although it can be defined in many different ways, it will get back to the family. Whether they’re here in the neighborhood with you or back in the home country, it doesn’t matter, our lives are about our families. I’m not talking about family in conservative terms like the Republican Party does, you know, but whatever you understand as your family, that’s where your self-interests are. It’s a universal value, indeed. So when we discuss with students the need to have power, and we discuss what power is and the misconceptions about power, we explain to people that power is built through relationships. We focus on examining the relationships in their lives, and sometimes we get to think critically about how you build relationships, even with people you don’t necessarily like. Once you understand the importance of relationship building as a way of gaining power, then you become intentional. You go around the world with a plan. Your plan is to get to meet and get to understand the self-interest of those around you so that you can build better relationships with them. So that’s the leadership development part, in theory.

In practice it takes a lot more than what I’m saying because there are many obstacles. The organizing piece is a component we don’t do yet because it has to do with public action and we haven’t gotten to that stage. But certainly we are positioned to take that next step and join forces with other organizations. We’ve done so in certain instances. We participated in so-called public actions with other organizations like Mexicanos Juntos and EPPPOP [a city-wide community organizing agency], Dominican Grocers Association, Acción Colombia, and the like. We also participated in the marches against policies the US government and Congress were thinking about putting in place against immigrants. That’s my take on what we’re doing now.



**Mark:** This issue of how you move from the highly personal to the public is crucial in terms of our goals, but I also want to stress the need for people in our community not to see themselves in isolation. The stories themselves are kind of a monologue. They have their own power, and when you have the students listening to their own stories and taking their stories seriously, that is empowering. Feeling that they had something to say was in itself an important act, and I don't underestimate that. But we need to learn more about how to go from a monologue to a dialogue. One place where I think dialogue was created—speaking in terms of the family as Manuel was saying—was in writing exercises involving families. Whether it was an interview with somebody in the family, or stories that they wrote about their family, such stories broke the pattern of monologue. Certainly this was true while they were preparing for their interviews, when they actually asked questions and heard responses, and also afterward, when we listened to the interviews and reflected on the stories parents, siblings, and other relatives told.

Another instance of creating dialogue was when we pulled all the families together with their students and played the edited audio files. It was clear by the reaction that there were things said in those interviews that had never been said to each other before. For example, this pretty tough kid, who was actually also pretty tough in class, was asked in one exercise to write about the most important thing in his room. He picked a picture of his mom taken thirteen years earlier when she was twenty-seven. He said, “The reason this photo is so important to me is that it’s the last time I remember my mother being happy.” He told a story of memories when the family was together, before his dad left thirteen years ago, and he talked about what his dreams were—not for himself—but in fact for his mom to be happy again. Well, it was amazing to see her reaction as well as the reaction of the other families when he played that for her. I talked to her afterward and asked her if he had ever talked to her about this, and she said no. For her to understand that her kid cared about her so much and had so many insights into her life was really important for building family and dialogue.

I hope we also generate a dialogue among the storytellers themselves. For example, among people who tell stories of loss or violence, to talk about the commonality in their stories—there’s a power in that—but then to analyze why they have the same kind of experiences and to imagine what

they could do collectively and individually to re-write their script. That's something we're just starting to think about. I would love to see people saying here's the story I told and here's the story I want to be able to tell. And then there's a further dialogue, the one with people who control structures that need to change. The storytellers need to learn to talk to people who have control over the educational system, over safety in the streets, over the lack of jobs in our community. How can we negotiate with people in power to get things we need for our community, to rewrite our script and create the stories we want to tell?

**Manuel:** In this community, every time I ask a person if he or she has ever told their personal story to anyone else, I get the same answer: no, nobody has shown much interest in listening. It seems like a simple fact that perhaps in other communities people do get asked, but in this community it is not a common practice. The fact that a person has the opportunity to tell a story is already such an important thing, and it's some sort of signal that there is a little bit of development, in a sense. We wanted to do this because it's a community that doesn't get that question asked to them.

**Eli:** I come from the university, and many people who will read this come from universities. What does the university have to do with this process? How can academics support this process, how could they hinder it? I'm particularly interested in this question of leadership. Manuel, for instance, we've talked about your desire to finish your undergraduate degree and complete graduate work. But that would require a university to have a different kind of flexibility than it usually does to allow you to do the work you want to do while finishing your studies. Mark, I know that you're hoping to change your career, shifting from health care to writing and teaching. What could a university do to support you?

**Manuel:** I went through school in Guatemala, and even university, but the experience was mixed most of the time. Too often we see teachers just standing in the front of the class and delivering lessons. Teachers have to be involved and we don't see much of that. So it's the teacher in the front doing his or her job, just delivering whatever lecture or whatever they came to explain or present and then class is over, doors are closed, teacher goes home. For communities like ours, education has got to be something else. Universities are such

a powerful presences that they are overwhelming. Powerful not in terms of the knowledge a university teaches but in terms of the money that it handles and the political power that it represents. In relation to communities that are disempowered, low income etc, there's no way that a real mutually beneficial relationship can be built. You have a major imbalance of power. I can understand the willingness of academics to say that a university is going to be a partner, but it will require restructuring the power dynamics between the community and the institution. In the case of the university, that restructuring may have to do with a redistribution of resources, sharing of resources. Universities are like meccas and everybody has to travel to Mecca. No. We need those centers in local neighborhoods. What makes the university to be a mecca if not class, an imbalance of resources? Teachers can be instrumental in changing communities by making sure that resources concentrated in the university are actually accessible to communities. That way there is no Mecca—everybody with a little bit more access to each other, in a sense.

We started Open Borders five years ago because we wanted to do away with the formal aspects of education, of learning experiences. We wanted education not to be about class and power centers but to be about relationship building, about increasing our understanding of who we are as we live our lives in the US. Most of the people we work with are immigrants who have arrived here in recent years. There is a segment of the community that has been here for decades, but most of the people who come to us are recent immigrants. We are in the process of developing a sense of community ourselves, having left our communities back home. We find ourselves in Philadelphia, in the US, struggling to develop that sense of the community we once had. It's not about transplanting anything; it's about developing that fabric, the set of connections that makes a community. What all of this means to me personally is a true opportunity to have access to myself. I've been in the US for a little over 20 years, and you won't believe me but it takes so many years to be able to—and I haven't gotten to that place yet—to feel like I'm like everybody else. I still have in my life a need to complete my sense of being. I have never been able to feel the same way I felt when I was in my own country. I have lived many years here, and I have not accomplished that. It's a major issue. I talk to other people who feel the same way, and it's

amazing that it takes so many years to sort of feel yourself. You know, like, this is your life, this is who you are.

**Eli:** You say you don't feel the way you did in Guatemala, in your home country. What's missing?

**Manuel:** I think it's probably that I'm more aware now of the diversity, of all the experiences that make a person's life. Yeah, my life was half in Guatemala and now this half is here. It should be normal to accept that that's how it happened. You lived half your life in one place, and then you moved to another place. Being in that other place, that's your life and that's who you are. For many immigrants it's a contradiction in a sense, because it takes a lot to accept that this is the person you are. It's more a struggle to expand your point of reference. My point of reference is my life in Guatemala. I haven't been able to integrate my twenty plus years of experience living in the US into that sense of togetherness that you experience when you grow up in one place, when everything seems to be combined and in its own right place. I have heard different terms for this, but when they talk about "displacement," that's what I think about. I don't mean displacement in terms of a person moving from one place to another. Something truly deep happens in your soul that makes you feel like you are two persons. It's a very weird feeling. Especially if you feel that in the new land where you arrive things are not exactly, how should I say? Not only do you feel unwelcomed, but you don't feel necessarily appreciated like everybody else. People have put that in many different terms. Deep inside that is the feeling that I have. And so to me all this work and the telling of stories, building relationships with people, and being connected and having a community is an attempt to fulfill my own life. It's very deep and so I invest my life in that. We work many hours, we commit our lives to it, we do everything it takes because it's personal. It's about your life, not so much other people's lives.

I'm the director of Open Borders Project, and there are various universities around here. Especially Temple is so close by. Obviously from the standpoint of the interests of the organization I represent, certainly I would love to see a university be a true partner, where there is a sharing of resources and respect of knowledge. We have a type of knowledge that the university doesn't recognize, broadly speaking. There is an attempt to make us believe that a person needs the university to be somebody decent and

that true knowledge emerges out of the university. That's bull, you know? Only immature people would believe that. [Everyone laughs.] That respect is the underlying thing. It's about respect and sharing resources and building a true relationship with the community. I think if universities were able to do that, they would be more successful than they are at this point. The drop out rate and all the issues the university experiences are huge. If the university were more embedded in the community, there would be ample opportunity to explore knowledge more deeply. Graduates come out of college without knowing the true essence of life, you know? Basic stuff that you can learn other ways, not just in the books.

**Mark:** It's very interesting what Manuel is saying about legitimate knowledge. I think it's very hard for universities not to be colonizers. Not that there are not people within universities who have a very different perspective and who can work with communities in the way Manuel is describing, but I think universities as institutions tend to take a colonialist attitude. It starts with what is legitimate knowledge: what are the assumptions they make about the communities they're working with? Temple is in some ways a unique university because it is in the middle of a poor African-American/Latino community in a Northeastern city, but on the other hand their attitudes are very much Ivy League. Communities are usually seen by universities as subjects to be studied, to be understood from the academic point of view. Communities can provide experiences for students in the university, but they are not seen as sites to learn from—they're seen as sites to learn about. I think that's a huge barrier to be broken. It's not only the university; this is an attitude in the larger world as well. The larger, more educated world has a class problem seeing and learning from poor communities, especially poor communities of color, and especially poor communities of immigrants. They don't understand how profound is the experience of people in such communities, how much in fact there is to learn from them, how much can be taught from those communities. And that's a huge task for universities: to change their colonialist institutional attitudes and the attitude they have inculcated in their students.

On the other hand, universities have unbelievable resources. What seems like a lot of money to an organization like Open Borders—15 or 20 thousand dollars for a project for example—is pocket change for a university. Often when

universities get involved with communities, they do have this colonialist attitude. Especially if they're providing resources, they think they have the right to define the process and what the agenda is. Although there is this give and take of a dialogue with community partners, a university has its agenda, and—from the university's point of view—the agenda isn't irresponsible. Their agenda is primarily to promote their own research about something they think is important. If they're progressive, they also want to provide experiences for their students. But with that agenda comes attitudes that make for a very unequal relationship. Because ultimately the universities have the resources, they can play hardball and often do.

Although I agree with Manuel that, for an immigrant coming here, university education is not the only way to live out your dreams, a lot of people do see the university as a way to gain the tools to achieve their dream. Certainly universities that have financial resources to support immigrants to develop their skills—that's a huge potential collaboration and contribution. But there are so many people in this community who are undocumented, and there are very few universities around the country who will take students without documents. There are all these people with skills and experience that can't go to college. There are some colleges where you can go, but they are private and cost a fortune. Especially among public schools like Temple that are relatively affordable, to offer financial aid and accept students without documentation would be a major door that could open to people in the community.

**Manuel:** If the child of an immigrant is in a public elementary school, the school district cannot deny that child access to education. By law, they have to admit the child into the school because education is considered a fundamental right of a child. I want to know when we lose that right. At what point, at what age? [laughs] You turn 18? You go to the Army? It's an interesting way of thinking, that a human being at a certain point doesn't have a right to education, because that's really what it is. Papers decide if you're a human being or not. In order to be a human being you have to be legal. If the legal process isn't finalized, you're not a human being. It's an interesting way of thinking, and universities perpetuate that thinking.

**Eli:** Mark, you're making some changes in your professional life. Traditionally people say they're going to go back to school and take this course or get that degree. But I think your ideas and goals call for a different kind of education, a different kind of knowledge infrastructure.

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**Mark:** I would love to be working in this community with an organization like Open Borders, helping people to tell their stories, to develop a collective identity around stories and use that identity to make changes in their lives. I have experience doing oral histories, having compiled a book of oral histories of migrant farm workers. I've been working with Manuel, doing digital stories with youth and some with adults here. I also work in the community as a health provider—I have for 25 years, mostly in the immigrant community—but there are ways I feel I'm illegitimate both at Open Borders and at the university. Although I have a lot of skills I use regularly, my skills aren't academic and I don't have the sort of degrees most respected within academe. On the other hand, I'm not Latino, and I feel sometimes on the edge of Open Borders. It should be the legitimate goals of such an organization to promote and train people from the neighborhood in the communications skills I'm learning at Open Borders.

I would like to see the university legitimizing skill sets you find in a neighborhood like North Philadelphia, whether they're skills like the ones I have or the skills Manuel has achieved. He has remarkable skills; he could teach many classes at Temple from what he's learned. People in this community have skills to teach and organize and run organizations, but they don't have the degrees that are required in the university. I think it would be a major shift for the university to legitimize those skills, not just support them but in fact bring those skilled people into the university to teach their students. I think that would be a huge step toward developing a collegial relation with the community. It would be a way of saying to us that our experience and knowledge is as important as what university professors teach.

One thing that I thought about when I was out in California recently, presenting immigrant oral histories at the Cesar Chavez Center, I was talking to students, some of whom were starting to do oral histories of the immigrant experience.

Something that's becoming insidious, in a sense evil, in the country is that the anti-immigrant community is telling the stories of immigrants—writing the script for immigrants. In Hazelton [PA], they're painting the immigrant community as people who do drugs, who are coming here to use the hospital system, who are lazy, who give nothing to the community. The reality is they saved that community. It was dying, and the population increased by 30% because of the immigrant community. There are 70 new businesses, an increased tax base. Hazelton was a dying town and now it's thriving. The crime rate in the immigrant community is not any higher than anybody else's. The anti-immigrant community tells stories about immigrants in terms of terrorism and being anti-American and criminals. That makes it even more important that the members of the immigrant community be able to set the story straight, literally. They need to give a countervailing story, another version—the true version—of who they are and why they come here and the role they play in American towns and cities.

**Eli:** That's an interesting point. If you look at the history of immigration over the last 100 or more years you'll see a constant struggle over who gets to tell the story. Think about stories that mainstream people told about the Irish or the Jews, the Catholics, Italians and certainly about African Americans. Perhaps the most important struggle for immigrants is the struggle over the story that gets told about them, because once you can establish a different kind of story for your group, you can move forward, claim your rights, run for office, and so on. As long as the stories are arrayed against you, it's hard to claim a more legitimate place. I think for Latino immigrants, Asian immigrants, this is the struggle today, the struggle in our generation. There are still struggles to tell the story in the African American community as well, but it's a much more advanced and sophisticated struggle.

**Manuel:** You know I wish in the community where we work we could have this kind of discussion. With students we talk about the importance of the story somebody tells. I ask the question: "You think somebody will listen?" or I ask: "Why is this important?" It takes a lot for people to understand. In organizing there is a principle: he who defines the environment defines the outcome. People don't always understand why we are trying to provide a means for people to tell their stories. We think that by telling the story they



will begin to have impact toward defining outcomes, both in their lives and in the community. This is the kind of context that people need to know and discuss, that gives meaning even more to the fact that some person who has never been asked to tell her story can do so. It's meaningful and deep.

## ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ **Postscript**

Preparing this interview for an academic audience, I began to think more and more about translation. The learner population, the work objectives, the institutional setting, the funding base, the training for professionals, so much of the cultural context for the work that Manuel and Mark are doing is radically different from the context in which academics live and work. Even for academics with interest and experience in community literacy or public rhetoric, the language spoken by organizers and community educators is more unlike academic discourse than we might always recognize. We can read the words and think we grasp their meaning, but one problematic element of university/community partnerships is that participants can too easily assume they understand one another, too readily look beyond differences in meaning formed in one or another work environment. We might have conducted the preceding interview in Spanish to highlight language differences, but that would simply have muddied the waters. The real language barrier for this interview is not linguistic but cultural.

This growing intuition about my interviews with activists has led me to consider them in light of the work of my colleague Lawrence Venuti on translation. Venuti not only translates from Italian and other languages, but he is an active participant in shaping the field of translation studies, a cross-disciplinary effort to explore what it means to carry thoughts shaped in one culture over into another. He has compared translation, for example, to the process of adapting a novel to a film. When translation is considered in this light, it becomes clear that every decision in the shift from one cultural environment to the next involves interpretation that proceeds by “detaching its prior materials from their contexts” (“Adaptation” 29). The translated text or adapted story we encounter in the new medium or target language is now embedded in conventions and expectations other than the ones that generated the source text. He has argued that “translations never simply communicate foreign texts because they make possible only a domestic understanding, however much defamiliarized, however much subversive or supportive of the domestic” (“Translation” 483). This view highlights how much the translated text must be judged not so much by its accuracy to the original but its impact on the target culture.

The conversation I had with Manuel and Mark both is and is not a text in need of translation. In one sense it is a fairly straightforward record of the concerns, hopes, and personal investments that two intelligent and committed people bring to their work in Latino North Philadelphia. I don't mean to suggest that they are exotic characters or unfamiliar with university ways; both of them have studied in American colleges and are people who get along

fine in academic gatherings. Manuel gave a terrific speech about his work at Open Borders without notes to a large audience at the November 2005 NCTE conference in Pittsburgh, and Mark regularly attends conferences about oral history as well as professional meetings on health care. And what they say may not seem so strange or foreign in an academic publication. After all, many in the academic world share a politics and a theoretical perspective that highlight power relations; many colleagues attempt, both with their research and their volunteer time, to address the needs of marginalized people and fight inequities in this country and the world.

Yet for all the ease by which a scholar or student might read through the interview, I think it worthwhile reminding the academic reader to slow down and consider the vast distances between Open Borders' row house, with its bad roof and an overloaded electrical system, and the nearest university outpost, the concrete towers and new brick dormitories of Temple University only twenty blocks away. So much about life at Open Borders differs from my life at the English Department on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of Anderson Hall that at moments I have to stop and catch my breath, remind myself that the gravitational frame has shifted in the eight minutes it takes me to drive up Broad Street, turn right on

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Erie Avenue, right on 6th, and park in front of the Christ and St. Ambrose Church at the corner of Venango. In my world the Dean has her office two floors above me, the Provost is three blocks away in the old brick building that once housed most of Temple's classes and its gym, and the President is not far from the Provost in an ornate stone structure that once housed the College of Liberal Arts. Whatever I might think about the administrators above me at a given time (and at this writing I'm surprisingly happy with them all), they stand between me and the financial winds outside. I have my salary and the budget for my programs—no matter how illiberal I may think the funding is—and when the roof leaks we can reasonably expect someone will come to fix it. No such luck for Manuel, who has had to postpone paying himself at least four or five times over various crises in the last five years.

He has no institutional mechanism except his Board to ask for funding help, but no one on the Board can give enough money to make much difference. He can commiserate with Father Carlos in the church next door, but St. Ambrose gets little or no support from the Episcopal diocese and faces major funding challenges of its own. Open Borders lives and dies by grants Manuel writes while also running the day-to-day operations of the center. Just recently a program officer at a local foundation, who had promised a renewal of last year's significant grant without a new proposal, suddenly quit without telling Manuel. When Manuel called asking about his check, the new officer

informed him he'd never heard of such a deal and Manuel needed to prepare a whole new proposal before the Board would consider a renewal. Luckily Manuel managed to talk them into giving him an emergency grant but not until the organization nearly ground to a halt for lack of funds.

But material conditions, like linguistic differences, aren't the main obstacle to understanding this interview. If you listen to the argument Manuel and Mark are making about stories, the conception of what can happen—what *needs* to happen—in a classroom is entirely different from what we usually see in a college course. Consider these four statements from Manuel, falling within a few paragraphs of one another:

“Telling the stories and learning together is already doing something because these are communities that are not listened to.”

“A leader is someone who realizes her self-interests are connected to those of other people.”

“If we focus attention on the quality of relationships they have in their lives, then a whole world comes out.”

“Not the party politics that are so corrupt people don't believe in them, but the real politics: building community identity and establishing relationships within and outside the neighborhoods in order to gain more power.”

If I understand the logic of Manuel's process for building leadership in the neighborhood, he has embraced storytelling in order to set up this concatenation of cognitive events for students, both youth and adult, in the program:

- Storytelling breaks the isolation of individuals separated from one another and the dominant culture around them.
- Leaders are people who emerge from their isolation recognizing that the needs they have recognized in themselves are shared with others around them and that leadership means articulating those needs and acting on them.
- Using the stories as a starting point to identify and embrace the many relationships around them, people can begin to think and act in coalition with one another rather than as isolated agents.
- The greater the network of relationships, the more likely that people will realize their power to effect change in their neighborhoods and meet challenges in their daily lives.

At the center of this process is the driving force of *relationship*. A focus on relationship may be the biggest difference between the learning environment at Open Borders and the environment in most colleges. Academics tend to invest power in knowledge or theoretical modeling; they want to produce written work for their field and move students through programs to prepare

them for later individual achievement. Relationship hardly registers as a phenomenon, let alone a central objective for education. We teach groups but we assess individuals and, in the occasional instance when we grade group projects, we do not take interpersonal relationships as relevant criteria for evaluation. Of course relationships matter a great deal in institutional politics, in recommendations for jobs, and in the informal networks that still exist despite blind submissions and rigorous oversight procedures. But the values that inform Manuel's approach to leadership development and community empowerment are significantly different from the one's that define schooling, publication, hiring, and promotion in the academic world.

A second example might be Manuel's comments on the inner life of an immigrant, the exile trying to establish his consciousness in a new country:

I've been in the US for a little over 20 years, and you won't believe me but it takes so many years to be able to—and I haven't gotten to that place yet—to feel like I'm like everybody else. I still have in my life a need to complete my sense of being. I have never been able to feel the same way I felt when I was in my own country. I have lived many years here, and I have not accomplished that.

The difference between Open Borders and the academy highlighted here is not due to professional priorities or contrasting vocabulary. American institutions of all types operate as though English were the only significant language in the world and the U.S.A. were the only real country; foreigners represent exceptional and inconvenient challenges to the system. We assume a native sense of place shared by those we live and work with. We talk a great deal about the stress on first-year students as they adjust to college life and first-year grad students as they learn about disciplinary expectations. During the period of national debate over multiculturalism, some schools made more of an attempt to be sensitive to cultural differences, but we seem to have largely left that “politically correct” period behind as a distraction or a legal morass. Manuel is naming a dislocation far more profound and far less susceptible to standardized remedy. The curriculum he searches for must take into account not only violent personal experiences but massive insults to the collective well-being. Again relationship stands at the center of his thinking, but here he gets at it not for the sake of his goals as an organizer but as an expression of his own long-standing personal pain, a pain which he characteristically understates. He would not himself make much of his own story, but I can assure you that the immensity of tragedy in his family and his country during the 1980's shapes his American life and his professional practice as an organizer and educator. Again, there is little place for such “sentiments” in academic discourse, but it figures prominently in the urgent tone and casual seriousness of our conversation.

I will point out only one other example of an idea that surfaces in the interview but that an academic reader may not register as crucial. Like hospitals and courts, universities represent a sector of the dominant culture that looks

as if it might be there to help people, but folks from North Philadelphia more often than not experience a university like Temple as a force of repression or a symbol of exclusion. Both Manuel and Mark have specific ideas about how the university could help them, but they are both too polite to push directly and too savvy to expect much to change. Mark emphasizes the considerable expertise Manuel has, but he himself would also like more recognition and legitimization for what he can do and has done. He recognizes that this will be a “huge task” for American higher education to shed its “colonialist” outlook, and they both recognize how little is forcing universities to confront their privileged position, but they do not express open anger or frustration. The most they will allow themselves is Manuel’s gentle joke about universities:

There is an attempt to make us believe that a person needs the university to be somebody decent and that true knowledge emerges out of the university. That’s bull, you know? Only immature people would believe that.

Here translation is particularly tricky. Most academics with a social conscience would deny that they look down on those who do not have a college degree, but

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most also assume that their children will graduate college and expect their children to marry college graduates. We might hasten to cite statistics about life-time earnings of those with a bachelor’s degree versus those with a high school diploma, and certainly universal college access is a legitimate good for which to strive. However, the ethnocentricism of

educational privilege runs deeper than truisms about a mind being a terrible thing to waste. Manuel is speaking from a place where college is not the norm, where knowledge must be built, bartered, and battled outside the sanction of degrees and CV’s, where one’s decency is judged by day-to-day interactions and long-term commitments to family and friends. In such an environment it is more than an insult to judge a person primarily by her educational level; it is the wholesale dismissal of a common human world. His remark about “immaturity” is said in humor but not in jest: if maturity is based on wide-ranging experience and comprehensive perspective, then a mature person would indeed know that men and women can develop “decency” and “knowledge” without the benefit of tutelage in an American post-secondary institution. He indicates with his later remark about schooling that he still regards access to college a civil right worth fighting for:

By law, they have to admit the child into the school because education is considered a fundamental right of a child. I want to know when we lose that right. At what point, at what age?

Public education should be for the public, and in a culture that requires higher training for economic advantage, that training must be available to all. At the same time, Manuel's approach rests on a rockbed respect for men and women no matter what diplomas or certificates they earn. This sounds like an understanding academics should have without saying, but it is not an orientation reinforced by our tenure and promotion structure, our informal way of judging people by the colleges they attended and the publications they produced. To understand Manuel's remarks fully we need to be able to think about characteristics such as wisdom, compassion, and perseverance as central human traits worthy of honor equal to or exceeding the honor we accord to publication records or administrative rank. Yet these traits are not explicitly valued in the culture of university or college life, and that may make it hard for us in the academic environment to give such qualities the respect they deserve.

But why use that lens of translation if we need no facing page text to accompany the above interview? Is this merely a cheap metaphor to remind readers that they are reading words by people they don't know? Do I really want to argue that Mark and Manuel are so foreign that enlightened grad students or professors cannot understand what they are saying? No, no, no—I do not mean to insult anybody's intelligence or distance 6<sup>th</sup> and Venango further still from the college campus. I do insist, however, that publishing this interview in an academic venue requires a translation of sorts, not of language but of orientations, and readers who are not challenged to look at expectations generated silently by their institutional affiliations are doomed to misread the text.

Venuti pushes us to consider the social commitments the act of translation demands:

To translate is to invent for the foreign text new readerships who are aware that their interest in the translation is shared by other readers, foreign and domestic—even when those interests are incommensurable (“Translation” 495).

This awareness of “interests” reminds me of Saul Alinsky's principle that organizing people requires identifying their self-interests and one's own (see Manuel's comments above on p. 6 and Goldblatt 282 ff.). In short, translation has something compelling in common with organizing, for the thoughtful translator must know both the origin and the target cultures well enough to focus on common self-interests, the striking elements of one culture that may have profound resonance with the other. Community/university literacy partnerships require that we maintain both a sophisticated sense of the inner

logic driving academic culture as well as a fresh mind to engage the values and urgencies of home cultures we meet in neighborhoods and schools. We must translate on both sides, but we must never forget that we *are* translating, that elements will be lost and new meanings in each environments will be found.

The organizing side of translation is that, as Venuti says, interacting with an original text requires finding within it qualities that can challenge, enhance, or reinvent values found among the target readership, even if these values cannot be shown to map exactly onto those in the culture of origin. When he uses that harsh term “incommensurable,” he seems to me to be challenging us to push beyond a perceived limit. Differences based in social context can be so profound as to appear insurmountable. Still, I believe that a text arising in one place can find some common interest with a readership in a very different environment. I believe equally that people speaking out of one set of cultural imperatives can be heard by those in a context informed by radically dissimilar practices and ideologies, even if one set of practices has traditionally received greater benefits from the dominant economy.

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