

# Ms. Smiff and Rodriguez Bridge the Crain-Cracks Gap

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In the Deep South, school desegregation was accomplished at a snail's pace, nothing like the deliberate speed prescribed by federal courts. Nearly twenty years later, ironically looking forward to a decade when proportionately more white educators will teach proportionately more minority students, the sensitivities and skills of white teachers will need to be well-developed. When my friend and colleague Connie Smith submitted, in one of my education courses, an account of her recent year (1986) in Hillman High, she raised in human terms some of what it means to work effectively with minority teenagers.

*Rodriguez and I used to jank on each other. I'd walk down the hall and he'd say, "Here come Miss Hillman," and he'd run to open a door, or he'd gesture for me to pass, all with great ceremony. His friends were watching. One day he had on a grey suit and tie, and I had worn a grey skirt, so he stuck his elbow out and escorted me to my door.*

*If I wore something unusual, Rod would suggest that I stop shopping at K-Mart for my clothes. If I were sleepy or tired, he'd say, "You shouldn't be out so late, Ms. Smiff."*

*He took great sport in calling me "Ms. Smiff."*

*One day I was sick with a cold. I looked a sight and didn't care. I was feeling mean. Rodriguez said, "Good Lord, Ms. Smiff. You been out with the garbage man?"*

*I said, "I don't date your daddy."*

*Rodriguez said, "You got me that time. I'd get you back, but I don't want to have to make you cry."*

*I told him he couldn't make me cry with an onion.*

*Well, after that it was open season on Rodriguez. People were ripping him up, coming and going. He couldn't say anything without somebody coming back with a smart reply. Kids can be cruel. I sure was. I fell into it with the rest of the students. I'd ask him where he stole those shoes and if he needed money for a hair cut. I told him there was a plastic surgeon in town if he ever wanted to do anything about his face. He made a low grade on a test and I started calling him "sweat dog."*

He and his friends became sweat dogs. One was "cheat dog" (I caught him with a cheat sheet); another "prep dog" (he wore Izods); yet another "boogie dog" (he could dance); and, finally, there was "gigolo dog" (he had all the girls).

I asked Rod, since he was so ugly, why they didn't call him "ruint dog." Ruint means too ugly for words. The more I picked on him, the more "to do" he made in the hall and the more he seemed to like me.

"There goes my favorite teacher," he'd say in an "iffy" voice. Trying to make life a hell of sorts for Rodriguez and friends gave me some wicked satisfaction. I always corrected his grammar.

Here's my favorite Rodriguez story.

He said, "Ms. Smiff, you ever eat at the smug-a-bug?"

I said, "smug-a-bug?" and gave the class my Rodriguez-is-saying-something-stupid-again look.

He said, "Yeah, you know, the Farmer Market Smug-a-bug. Looks like you like them all-you-can-eat places."

I said, "Oh, smorgasbord. You know what you're talking about after all."

Then Gigolo Dog said, "You got to excuse Rod, Ms. Smiff. He live over to the crain cracks."

When graduation time came, the sweat dogs barely pulled their respective 70's out of extra credit and late work. They had all applied to colleges, except Boogie Dog, who was joining the army "to get some discipline about him." I couldn't believe my ears.

Rodriguez said he wanted to be a paramedic. "If I ever see you in a wreck, Ms. Smiff, I'll make sure everybody take real good care of you." He was smiling. I wondered what I would do if I ever woke up in a ditch and saw that face over me. Then I thought how it could be a lucky thing.

Rod had on his cap and gown, as he and 270 of his classmates lined up to march into the municipal auditorium. The tassel was hanging in his face. He was nervous. He said, "I hope I didn't make you mad, Ms. Smiff. You my favorite teacher." His eyes were bright.

I said, "Mad? You were my favorite student, Rodriguez," and I thought, my God, that's almost true. He had made a whole year fun.

How does Connie, a veteran, liberally educated, white teacher, and others like her, make a difference in the lives of black teenagers in a Deep South, culturally and economically mixed school? Many such schools — many such teachers — in Georgia and across the South, faced forced busing grimly in the early seventies, because they had to and knew it was right; schools that by hook or crook held onto much of their middle-class enrollment; schools and teachers that educated

one black and white generation as best they could, uneasily, though generally unprepared for the task.

What Connie Smith knows about teaching black students like Rodriguez is rarely the up-front subject of lessons in methods and materials courses. Indeed, I'm not sure it could be in more than a superficial way, for the sensibility required to cross the teacher-student gap here is not something transmitted by a lecture or a sermon; it only grows out of some lived experience. True, I taught Connie her English ed courses in bachelor's, master's, and sixth-year programs spanning a decade or more, and I believe in the ideas subtly conveyed by her narrative. But if I taught her these insights, it was probably incidentally. And I suspect she learned them the same way, by indirection from me, from her fellow teachers, and from her students.

Connie and teachers like her delight in their students as people, as individuals. As a consequence, this means that in her teaching she focuses on the psychological dimension as much as the academic.

*Every year there are several Rodriguez's. They impress me because they defy categorization. They get stuck in low-level classes, but their imagination and humor make them special on a high level.*

Rodriguez embodies much that would lead some to categorize him as one of "them." Once put in such a box, history and experience indicate, it's hard to get out. At their best, though, teachers see people, not labels and categories. The school system may track Rodriguez, but Connie Smith doesn't.

A concern for the student as an individual means being interested in student culture, especially as it's embedded in their language. This attempt at understanding, however, is never patronizing, nor pedantic. Rather, it is simply human. Connie, quick-witted in any social setting, janks with her students at school, then, switching registers, tosses puns around with fellow MENSA members in the evening. She knows that each language game she plays is only appropriate depending upon the specific speech community and setting.

While Connie has an ear for dialect, "smug-a-bug" and "crain cracks" (train tracks) are not always immediately decipherable. Still, there is no hint that non-Standard dialect impedes communication between her and Rodriguez. If anything, this language game played around dialect enriches the classroom connection Connie is trying to build for her students. Skillfully practicing bi-dialectalism, while others merely preach it, she plays the street game of janking and thus fosters an atmosphere of trust which allows her to work more effectively with Rodriguez.

Often I admonish my student teachers, "Don't let the kids gross you out," for teenagers test their teachers in many ways. They want to

figure out whether a teacher-to-be is generally with it, has a grasp of who adolescents are, and knows when to grin and bear their antics. Over-reacting to adolescents being adolescents can be a costly teacher tactic, especially for beginners. And when the distance between teen and teacher is widened by cultural differences, the need to grasp where Rodriguez and his verbal jibes are coming from is all the more critical. In an ethnically and culturally desegregated school, it is the good teacher who cuts down this distance naturally.

Connie and teachers like her display their sense of humor. Whether we laugh at or with Rodriguez (for me it's both), Connie knows that what's funny at school can help both teachers and students endure what isn't, the tedium, the pressure of grades and standardized tests, the general depersonalization which below-average students come to see as the norm. In a related vein, it's hard not to notice that Connie is open, vulnerable, and willing to reveal her own flaws and foibles. On occasion, she comes to school tired and "feeling mean," and it shows. Yet her willingness to reveal her own fallibility is part of her capacity to accept it in others.

Today as in the past, there is much that separates English teachers from their students — education, experience, age, money, among others. Skin color and all it may imply culturally further can create a chasm between teacher and learner. With the sweat dogs Connie has come to use these divisions to her advantage.

*Rodriguez and his friends reminded me that the most important thing a teacher can do is to make learning enjoyable and personal. My students, black or white, are like me in many respects. We hate to be bored, we love to laugh, and we need to feel accepted and appreciated for who we are. I teach them standard English, but I jank with them too. We respect each other by smiling when words might seem sarcastic to others. It's easy for us to shift from janking to standard English and back again — and to learn in the process. It's no more complicated than shifting from discussions of real-life situations to literary themes.*

*When former students come back, they always say the same thing, "You miss our class, don't you, Ms. Smith?" I always say that there'll never be another one like it. Knowing that they remember me that way helps me greet each new group each year knowing that we'll do more than "get graduated." We just might let ourselves become friends.*

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