Building A Rose Garden: 
A Response to John Trimbur

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Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* has deservedly received unequivocal praise. In fact, the book's overwhelmingly positive reception suggests that Rose has managed to do what no one else has so far been able to accomplish: to get everybody in composition to agree on something. In this case, it is the power and eloquence of *Lives* to validate and reaffirm the potential of America's underclass, those who have much to offer but who inevitably slip through the (I think rather large) cracks of the educational system and who in the process become that system's casualties. These are the students who are consigned to the lower tracks, who are labeled "remedial" and sometimes harshly judged as "uneducable."

If it's possible to imagine a canon for composition, Rose's book, I suspect, would be a unanimous choice. Hence, I was impressed that John Trimbur was willing to take a seemingly unpopular stance in his essay "Articulation Theory and the Problem of Determination: A Reading of *Lives on the Boundary*" (JAC 13, 33-50) by initially questioning the book's charismatic status. In so doing, Trimbur sets out to reveal potential flaws in Rose's narrative. His concern is that *Lives* risks becoming, to borrow Trimbur's succinct summary, "another comforting American success story of an individual who, through the power of education and the guidance of more experienced teacher-mentors, takes the predictable road to self-improvement and upward mobility, from the mean streets of Los Angeles to the halls of UCLA" (35). However, this alternative way of reading *Lives* as another chapter in a typically American master narrative is only an apparent challenge, for Trimbur eventually rescues the book from any fall from grace by arguing that its potential liabilities stemming from reproducing another "bourgeois" narrative are actually its virtues.

Trimbur argues that Rose uses a conventional American narrative in order to communicate better with the wider public, yet Rose rearticulates that narrative pattern in a way that serves democratic and egalitarian ideals. Consequently, by the time Trimbur finishes rearticulating Rose's story, submitting it to a test of its class fidelity, so to speak, *Lives* achieves even greater status because, though it is a good book already despite possible
flaws, having passed severe critical scrutiny, it can only gain in stature. Interestingly, though, in first challenging the book's narrative status and then in subsequently recovering its value, Trimbur constructs an incipiently romantic ethos for Rose, an ethos which validates Rose the critic and ignores Rose the teacher and the way in which teaching is represented in _Lives on the Boundary_.

**Rose and Victimization**

Like Trimbur, I would agree that our narratives are necessary cultural forms performing powerful rhetorical work. They reacquaint us with our values and renew our sense of purpose. I can't imagine a reader unmoved by the book, nor can I imagine anyone not recognizing that drastic changes need to be made in our schools. But I can imagine other ways to represent teaching.

When I used _Lives_ in a graduate seminar, two of the students were teaching in public schools in Southern California. One actually was teaching in a high school not far from where Rose grew up. While both teachers enjoyed the book, both also felt left out. Much of Rose's teaching occurs in programs peripheral to typical institutional settings; yet, even though my students could acknowledge the institutional problems that Rose dramatizes, they nevertheless still seemed to feel that because good teaching was so much the exception rather than the rule and because teaching itself seemed to be swallowed up by a Foucauldian like system of regulations and professional discourses testing and labeling students (my interpretive summary of their remarks), their own efforts in the classroom were trivialized.

Since this is obviously Rose's autobiography, he can only speak from his experience; however, although he recognizes the difficulties that all teachers face in urban schools, the day-to-day struggles of these teachers nonetheless are excluded from the narrative. Despite this exclusion, I defended Rose to my students by claiming that he's not ignoring teachers: he's just focusing on the student victims of pervasive institutional practices. In fact, I think Rose intends to identify both teachers and students as victims. Rose, for instance, makes Harold Morton stand as the representative anecdote signifying both the students' and teachers' dilemma as they enact the drama of teaching and learning on the institutional stage.

Harold is the fifth grader who has accumulated a thick file of professional discourses diagnosing his physical and psychological problems and essentially concluding that he is uneducable, a diagnosis, in Rose's eyes, completely missing the heart of the problem: "He came to represent for me both the basic human conflict—that we are simultaneously heroes and prisoners—and the fact that our schools can respond to a child's misery as well as institutionally define him by it" (115).

After spending hours pouring through Harold's folder and discovering how he had been passed on from teacher to teacher and from expert to expert, Rose concludes that "The way schools are set up...—the loads teachers
carry, the ways they're trained to deal with difference, the vast patchwork of diagnostics and specialists—make it very hard for someone like Harold to get what he needs" (125). What I take Rose to be saying is that in the way that the entire educational apparatus is set up—from the knowledge constructed in the professional disciplines regarding education, from the universities that train teachers, from the way that school districts and their member schools are organized, from the way that educational performance is driven and measured by standardized testing—teachers are made victims of their own educations. Hence, Rose is not really blaming teachers in *Lives* as much as he is sympathizing with their struggles. The true antagonist is the educational institution.

It is not then that teachers' efforts are trivialized as much as they cannot avoid being ineffective when going against the grain of the anonymous and out-of-control (and therefore all the more powerful) educational bureaucracy. There are implications, though, in casting teachers as tragic heroes struggling futilely within the educational establishment. For example, the high school teacher who was a student in my class is not unlike the Rose I find in the pages of *Lives*. He, too, is a gifted writer, a frequently published poet in Canada, and a creative, sensitive teacher. His students comprise the lowest track. They are predominantly African-American and Latino males and several are in gangs. This teacher struggles daily just to keep a lid on the tension that threatens to erupt into violence, yet he has made progress with his students in working through a series of reading and writing activities dealing with gangs and how they are depicted in the media. But when teaching within the system is cast as inevitably futile because this teacher's students will be passed on to other teachers less likely to be as sensitive to their needs, and because these students will be subjected to the same standardized tests that will typically label them unfit for college, then, despite this teacher's individually creative efforts, his work will have been in vain.

*Lives on the Boundary*, while it eloquently depicts victims and the process of victimization, does not show a way out of this process. Instead, we have an image of teaching that is individual and heroic with Rose's few successes showing by way of contrast the dismal failures of countless others within the system. Rose, the teacher in *Lives*, usually works on his own. He occasionally seeks advice from his peers, but the prevailing teacherly stance is of a caring individual who performs his devoted labor unceasingly on the margins of the system. And in his labor he always manages to figure out a given student's problem, a problem that those in the mainstream setting appear to be incapable of seeing, let alone solving. This work Rose performs alone.

**Trimbur's Analysis**
Perhaps that's the way it was for Rose. Yet, if we are to read *Lives* as argument as well as autobiography, we have to consider just how representative his teaching is to be and consider as well the possibilities for the sorts of changes
in the system that Rose advocates. I would be willing to bet that no change of significance will occur with teachers acting alone. The passing on of Harold from one teacher to another from one expert to another with each offering his or her own diagnosis cannot successfully be countered without teachers working together and sharing their perceptions of their students and then collectively challenging institutional practices. Schools are cultures and cultures can be changed when members form communities and begin inquiring into the realities of their particular contexts.

Because Trimbur is more interested in Rose the critic than in Rose the teacher, he inadvertently validates this image of teaching in *Lives*. In fact, Trimbur seems more interested in constructing an ethos of the teacher as social critic because he obviously agrees with Rose's representation of schooling and therefore wants that critique to stand. Yet as an insider in the academic establishment, Rose's criticism risks diminishment if he is found to have betrayed his class origins. Thus, Trimbur's explication of Stuart Hall's neo-Marxist theory serves to prove that Rose was free to articulate *Lives* in any way he wanted; hence, it is to Rose's credit that he retains his class identity by remaining "open to the pressures of the milieu in which he grew up—the frustrated aspirations and ambitions of the people he knew along the way." Essentially, Trimbur's analysis rescues *Lives* from being located "within what Kristin Ross calls the 'exemplary bourgeois cultural project.'"

Trimbur claims that Rose retains his class allegiance and continues to identify with those with whom he grew up in South Central LA. He also compares Rose's autobiography with Rodriguez's and Richard Wright's and finds the latter two lacking because they deny their class origins. In what sense, however, is Rose's education comparable to a Mexican-American who is also gay or to a black man living in the racist South in a different historical period? Why should such differences based as they are on quite dissimilar experiences not lead to different articulations? And would we not then have to evaluate these narratives on their own terms and based on what their authors claim about their lives? Does Trimbur gloss over these crucial differences because they complicate the ethos of the teacher-critic he wants to construct?

What emerges in Trimbur's argument is an ethos of the critic who can speak powerfully to the general public about an agenda that Trimbur promotes. It is really an agenda not about teaching but one pushing a certain kind of criticism that Trimbur advocates through Rose. Indeed, Trimbur appears to be speaking with and through Rose's project when he concludes that Rose "seems to suggest ... that the task of radical democracy is not just to speak as critics against the master narratives of American culture but to speak as rhetors through them—to rearticulate the social and ideological force of the American *mythos* in the name, the voices, and the interests of the many." Evidently, Rodriguez and Wright do not fit the sort of democratic ethos Trimbur projects.
But what is the cost of losing their "voices"? What is the cost of ignoring the voices of teachers within the institution? The "critic" Trimbur is at pains to construct does not speak from within the institution. Rose's book, Trimbur tells us, is located neither inside nor outside the institution, neither within the underclass nor completely outside; rather, Trimbur announces, Rose's project is located "at the boundary of the dominant culture... where the lives of the dispossessed encounter an educational system that sorts individuals into a capitalist division of labor..." But the "boundary" serves a dual purpose for Trimbur: it is at once the site where the institution produces its victims; yet, curiously, it also becomes the symbolic location where the cultural work of renewal will take place. For it is exactly the experiences that the dispossessed bring with them to this boundary that "can be tapped for the purposes of human development and liberation." How this happens, though, Trimbur doesn't say.

The stance of the critic Trimbur advocates should remain aloof, poised somewhere not quite outside and not quite inside the system. In this magical space, one not occupied by teachers, the critic can speak for all those who find themselves victimized. On the other hand, this marginal stance may undercut the force of any criticism because, unlike the teacher in the mainstream classroom who must continue to work and make moment-by-moment decisions about what to do next, and unlike Rodriguez who found himself caught up in a mainstream school, and unlike Wright who was trapped in a very real racist society in which the repressive practices of that society were reproduced within his own family, the critic Trimbur imagines must be free from any danger of possibly implicating himself in repression or in maintaining the status quo. And having achieved a somewhat morally superior position, criticism from the boundary risks not being heard by those who may most need to hear it because they do not recognize themselves as the ones being addressed.

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