

When the Spanish writer Federico García Lorca lived in New York City for six months in 1929, he saw a metropolis identified by the extremes of wealth and poverty. He spoke no English, and in recalling his walks throughout the city he would boast that he always wore a sign around his neck that indicated the address of his destination and beneath it the words “Hablo español,” “I speak Spanish.” While we recognize that García Lorca had a flair for the dramatic, this anecdote says a great deal about a man accustomed to living between two worlds: Between the gypsy culture of his beloved Granada in Southern Spain and his own Castilian ethnicity, between his passion for writing, painting and playing the piano and his father’s fervent desire that he carry on the family business, between his homosexuality and traditional gender roles, between insecurity and poise. The street address and simple phrase “Hablo español” written on that small piece of cardboard hung around his neck represented this dual life that he inhabited, projecting out *who* he was and, at the same time, doubling back, reassuring himself of an identity made solid by fragmentation.

While none of us here today may have lived through that period of time in New York City, in many ways I believe we all wear signs around our necks that ground us and proclaim for the benefit of the outside world who we are. “Hablo español” may easily be “Hablo Nicaragua,” “Hablo Heidegger,” “Hablo Beckett,” “Hablo contemporary Irish politics,” “Hablo Islam,” “Hablo chaos theory,” and “Hablo information systems.” These languages, *our* languages, are not necessarily born out of loneliness and uncertainty—as was the case with García Lorca—but out of the very human desire to communicate, to

connect with family, friends, colleagues, and students in an attempt to bridge the widening gaps.

I stand before you today because I have been honored with the Roger A. Fortin Award for Outstanding Teaching and Scholarship in the Humanities. Recalling my time here at Xavier, I think of the joys and tribulations of the past eighteen years and I am reminded of Richard Polt's words last year, under these very circumstances, when he described his preparation for these remarks and noted that he seemed always to return to what he *doesn't* do and *can't* do. As educators, this hollow would appear to influence much of our work. Who we are as teachers and scholars is implicitly formed and informed by who we are not. As the poet Frank Bidart wrote, "There is a king inside the king that the king / does not acknowledge."

I would like to thank Roger Fortin and his son Michael. In the time that I have been at Xavier, I have seen Roger wear many hats: History professor, academic officer, institutional spokesperson, and now, the most esteemed of roles, Distinguished Service Professor. Thank you for your selfless contributions to Xavier. And thanks, too, to Michael. Your support for faculty scholarship and teaching in the Humanities here at Xavier is an appreciated breath of fresh air, as we are only too frequently being reminded that the direction and purpose of higher education are changing and being called into question as we speak. Thank you for recognizing and supporting what we do.

Here at Xavier, the work that we complete as teachers and scholars is frequently fraught with trials, tribulations, and desires. The short story "The Kugelmass Episode" by Woody Allen humorously reflects these, I believe. In the story, Kugelmass, a bored and

unhappily married professor of humanities at City College, arranges to meet The Great Persky, who offers him the possibility of bringing some exotica into his life. One afternoon, Persky brings Kugelmass into his apartment and shows him a large Chinese cabinet, ordering him to get in. Once Kugelmass is inside, Persky tells him that, for \$20, he will be projected into any book he throws in, whether it is a novel, short story, poem, play, travel guide, etc. After paying him, Kugelmass enters and asks him to toss in a copy of *Madame Bovary*. Once in the novel, Kugelmass meets Emma Bovary—who speaks “in the same fine English translation as the paperback”—and proceeds to have an affair with her, visiting the cabinet in Persky’s apartment as often as possible. As the months pass, however, Emma becomes restless and demands to be taken back to the twentieth century so she can see *A Chorus Line*, meet Jack Nicholson, and take acting classes. After Kugelmass brings her back with him for a romantic weekend in New York City, the cabinet breaks down, and soon Emma becomes dissatisfied with her suite at the Plaza and the visits paid by Kugelmass. Persky finally repairs the cabinet, asks Kugelmass to bring Emma over, places her unceremoniously in the box and, with a pop, finds that she has, in fact, returned to her novel. Although Kugelmass swears he has learned his lesson, he is, of course, hooked, and three weeks later arrives at the apartment with a copy of *Portnoy’s Complaint* and asks Persky to again do his stuff. The magician introduces him into the box, raps three times, and finds that, instead of a popping noise, the cabinet bursts into flames and burns. The Great Persky drops dead of a heart attack and the story ends with Kugelmass forever “projected into an old textbook, *Remedial Spanish*, [...] running for his

life over a barren, rocky terrain as the word *tener* ('to have')—a large, hairy and irregular verb—raced after him on its spindly legs.”

I imagine that this is how my students must feel sometimes as they read the poems of Pablo Neruda or the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges and come upon the verb *tener* and the many expressions and permutations of the Spanish language. Hairy indeed. Like Kugelmass, how many of us would pay \$20 to ride alongside Don Quixote through the Spanish countryside, have a glass of wine with Jean Valjean or, over dinner, try and talk some sense into Humbert Humbert? Scholarship and teaching are informed by this possibility: the possibility to reach out and encounter our discipline, to follow our instincts and our passions and, by the application of critical methods, to bring it to life. Through our work as teachers and scholars, we construct and project our own narratives and sometimes even secretly long for our cabinet to crash and burn so that it forces us to change, to look and be elsewhere. This, I believe, is the crucial feature of our work, a constant “looking elsewhere.” Our teaching projects horizons. Our publications bring our work to life. Personally, I have always thought of my teaching and scholarly activity as a natural consequence of my own search for purpose, a gradual and often challenging exploration of myself through issues of biculturalism, nationalism, and liberation. This search is, more often than not, shaped by the uncertain convergence of discovery and frustration. As a country song says, if you want to fill your bottle up with lightning, you’re gonna have to stand under the rain. Upon reflection, I now realize that the parallels between my teaching and my scholarship are represented by the delicate balance struck

by my inescapable ignorance and my own evolving knowledge. The tension between these is, I believe, what makes us; and it is, in the long run, what makes our students.

Considering all of our fields, specialties, interests, and explorations, we are, in essence, cartographers. As scholars, through our publications, presentations, and reviews, we participate in redrawing the territory of our specialization; as teachers, we ask our students to accompany us as we negotiate a specific yet distinct landscape every single day of our careers. And often what we do is best characterized by what we *don't* or *can't* do. As T.S. Eliot wrote, "In order to arrive at what you are not / You must go through the way in which you are not. / And what you do not know is the only thing you know. / And what you own is what you do not own. / And where you are is where you are not." The Spanish or Heidegger or Beckett that we speak is geosynchronous with the satellites of our lives. And our address, the one written on a sign dangling around our neck, represents not a construction of brick and mortar but a distant location illuminated by the light of permanent possibility.