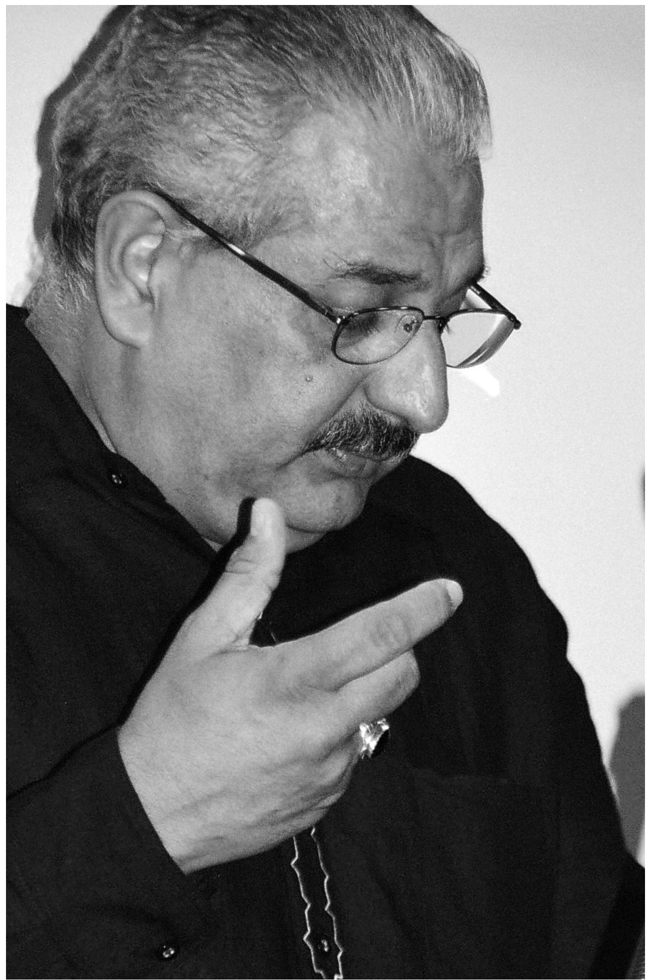

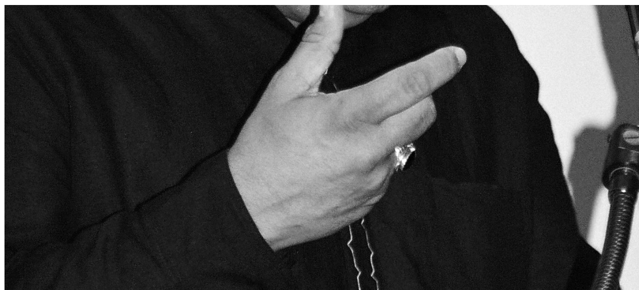

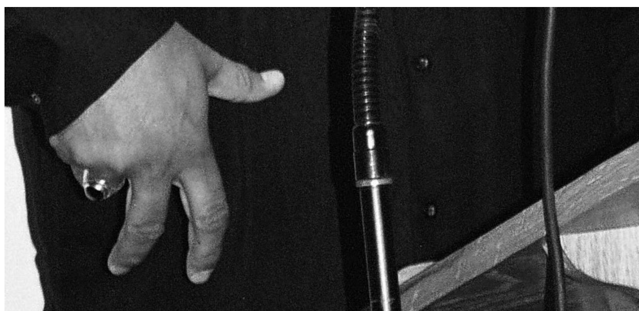

The Music That Is Yourself

An Interview with Victor Hernández Cruz

Victor Hernandez Cruz reading at Teachers & Writers Collaborative's annual Educating the Imagination event, September 29th, 2006. Photos by Susan Karwoska.

URAYOÁN NOEL

For forty years now, poet Victor Hernández Cruz has been mining—and altering the context of—the landscapes and rhythms of his native Puerto Rico and assorted adoptive homelands: New York City, Morocco, and points in between. From the bilingual, jazz-inflected street tableaux of Snaps *(Random House, 1969) to the visionary lyrics of his latest collection,* The Mountain in the Sea *(Coffee House Press, 2006), Cruz's transcultural music has expanded the language of poetry while delighting and challenging generations of readers—The Judges' Citation for the 2002 Griffin Poetry Prize International Shortlist calls him "the defining poet of that complex bridge between the Latino and mainland cultures of the U.S." Cruz's relationship with Teachers & Writers Collaborative dates back to his days as a high school student in Spanish Harlem when, at Herbert Kohl's insistence, he began teaching poetry and leading workshops in the schools. In late September 2006 we met on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and over brunch at a bar on the Bowery, Cruz reflected on his poetry, his teaching, and his unique trajectory.*
— Urayoán Noel

Urayoán Noel: You left Puerto Rico when you were five years old, I believe…

Victor Hernández Cruz: I was a month or two away from my fifth birthday.

UN: What do you remember of that time?

VHC: I have some imagery—only imagery, not content—of what was happening. First thing I remember when we got here is the smell of the hallway of the tenement building which we moved into on Manhattan's Lower East Side. It was November and the contrast in weather was phenomenal—I don't think we had any notion of that. I remember the smell, the odor all of a sudden was very different—the smell of cold and steel mixed with brick—and the colors were very different.

UN: When did you start writing poetry?

VHC: I don't know when specifically, but I must've been sixteen or seventeen years old.

UN: Did you read a lot as a child?

"Sometimes being a bilingual writer feels like being a runner between first and second base. In my case, first base is Spanish and second base is English. You are not safe on either base but they cannot tag you out, so you dwell there in the middle creating out of the chaos of sounds and grammars. It's a limbo that I've learned to cultivate."

VHC: Yes. The first book I read was a book about geography, *A Child's Geography of the World*, by V.M. Hillyer, that talked about all the cultures of the world: China, Asia, India. I was really amazed because it was the first book I'd read from cover to cover. Later, when I was about fourteen or fifteen I used to go out and read on my own without it being an assignment for school. I lived on the Lower East Side, and right around Third Avenue and up on Broadway there were all these book stores from 13th Street down to 8th Street and all around that area. They'd have used books stocked on wooden tables and you could go out there and buy five paperbacks for a quarter or something.

UN: Were you reading in English or Spanish or both?

VHC: I was mostly reading in English because I learned to read and write in English. When I came here I had my Spanish language—the first part of language I suppose is listening, the second is speaking—but I didn't learn to read and write in my first language of listening and speaking. I came here at the age of five and my mother didn't know anything about kindergarten so she kept me home for a year and then put me in the first grade. Up to when I was six or seven, I was talking mostly in Spanish, and consequently I have a heavy accent.

UN: Were there any teachers who particularly inspired or influenced you early on?

VHC: I remember when I first came on the writing scene, I met some African-American writers who encouraged me to write, and I hung out with African-American writers: David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major. I was able to relate to them much better than I could to white writers, and so I made community with them and started hanging around with them, to the point that some of my work disappeared into some of the black anthologies of the mid-sixties. It just shows how close the Puerto Rican community was to the African-American community.

Another important influence was the work of Amiri Baraka when he was called LeRoi Jones. One of my favorite books of his was *The Dead Lecturer*, a phenomenal book. And who else? I read Federico García Lorca and Pablo Neruda, both in their English translations first, and I was amazed and very influenced by their work. Then some years later I ran into the work of César Vallejo, which inspired me to get back into my Spanish and read more in Spanish, but the first Latin American things I read were in English translation.

UN: In a classroom context, was there ever a teacher who influenced you?

VHC: There was a woman named Mrs. Jacobson who was my high school teacher; she had us read Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, and also she encouraged us to read all kinds of poetry such as W.B. Yeats and Walt Whitman. She was quite radical, quite a daring teacher; she went up against and defied the status quo of the Board of Ed and the heavy emphasis on discipline in that Spanish Harlem high school.

UN: What kind of effect did growing up in a bilingual context have on your work?

VHC: Since I've been back in Puerto Rico, and even before maybe, I have stopped writing as much what is called "Spanglish." I think U.S. Latino writers write mostly in English and that it's an error to call this literature "Spanglish literature." There could be a sprinkle of Spanish words here and there, but that's something that even North American writers do; if you read Robert Stone he's doing it in his novels, and Elmore Leonard's popular novels are full of Spanish words. Spanish arrived in the New World before the English language. It's a language that helped form this place, especially in the Southwest.

Sometimes being a bilingual writer feels like being a runner between first and second base. In my case, first base is Spanish and second base is English. You are not safe on either base but they cannot tag you out, so you dwell there in the middle creating out of the chaos of sounds and grammars. It's a limbo that I've learned to cultivate. I tell you, what's more important is what I want to say. The question is, can I say it with more strength in English or in Spanish? I feel the subject itself, the content, will call forth the language it needs; the language chooses itself. This being which is a poem, which is a group of words, has to become something, and it will show you the direction. It's not even a decision that I make; it makes itself.

"Herb Kohl saw potential in me very early on and said, 'Jump! Go do it! Read! Write! Teach!'"

UN: You've been involved with Teachers & Writers Collaborative for some time now. Can you tell me how that came about, that relationship?

VHC: That came about through Mr. Herbert Kohl, who is one of the founders of Teachers & Writers Collaborative. He always tells me that I was one of the first poets to go into the schools—I suppose I should take his word for it. I met him when I went to high school in Spanish Harlem. I was at Benjamin Franklin High School and he was working with a group of people in an alternative school in a storefront in the neighborhood. They came looking for students who wanted to participate in these after-hours creative writing and drawing classes and I was very interested in all of that, so I started going there to take classes. After a while I started to lead little workshops and to talk to students about writing. And this all came about because of Herb Kohl's encouragement. He saw some potential in me very early on and said, "Jump! Go do it! Read! Write! Teach! Whatever level you're at, you have something to teach to the person who's at another level, who needs the information you have." He gave me that kind of encouragement. That was many years ago, and New York was in a sense a different place. It was a good experience: It gave me a connection with those first days of Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and experiences that helped develop my teaching skills.

UN: How do you think teaching has informed your writing?

VHC: Well, when you discuss the work of other people it makes you see your own work more clearly. You learn what other people see in your work, and how your own work can be misinterpreted. Once I used a quote from a Cheo Feliciano song, "*Échale semilla a la maraca pa' que suene*"—toss seeds in the gourd so that it can sound—and this critic thought I was referring to a drug experience; but I was referring to language, that the seeds were language shaking inside the maraca. And that's why when you're teaching in a class and talking to students, what they get out of the poem helps you see if the spirit of what you were writing got through or not. Because poetry is multileveled, there are a variety of possible interpretations. Sometimes I say, "Oh, I'm changing my mind right in front of you"—because sometimes I do that—"Okay, I now have a different opinion after I have heard you speak about this poem."

UN: What about your writing process? Do you have a specific routine? Do you revise much?

VHC: I write into a notebook; I still write with pencil preferably, sometimes with pens on the road. The poems usually go through two to three revisions, because when I take a passage from a handwritten notebook to what used to be a typewriter, now the computer, the word processor, and I can see it on the screen, I make some changes there, eliminating some words, editing. Sometimes the changes are subtle, sometimes they're more substantial. And then for some reason I have to see hard copy; I make a hard copy and let it sit for a while. A week and a half later, after that rush is finished, in the past, I can go back and do a little touching up, I can add or take away again, and then the poem should be there. But a poem like "Problems with Hurricanes," this poem came to me pretty much written; the way I had it the first time is the way it was when it was published. I might have changed one or two words to tighten the whole thing up, but it came out already made. So the revising depends on the occasion and the quality of the inspiration, the charge.

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I'm rewriting more and more, especially with my portrait poems, which mix a certain amount of biographical data with my own flurries, my own inspirations about the person I'm writing about. Portrait poems are portraits of human beings, men and women who have achieved in the arts or philosophy or history. And I've also written poems to my old friends, like the poem for Vigo Martin, one of the guys I knew from the Lower East Side, and for the Andalusian-Arab philosopher Averroes, and Jorge Luis Borges, the writer. A portrait doesn't have to be like a snapshot, it's not a photograph—you can distort a little bit, add your own feelings about the nature of that person and their artistic contribution. I filter it through me.

UN: What is your sense of what poetry can do, either inside or outside the classroom, that maybe a short story or a novel can't do?

> "What I do in my work is to take things out of context. . . . I have spoken of New York as a place where palm trees have sprouted, skyscrapers all of a sudden look like palm trees, and mango seeds have been thrown out of windows."

VHC: A poem can invoke a certain form of awareness that you don't find in prose because writing poetry and prose are two different processes. I am different when I write a poem than when I write prose. In poems I'm mostly in the present, maybe shooting towards the future, but with prose I'm thinking of the past constantly. I'm aware of the present, but have to go to the past and also know where the line is going into the future. I don't feel those three tenses when I write poetry, I feel just the present. In poetry you really ground yourself in the present more than in any other art form, because there is something you want to invoke, to bring back, to make live. You want to flow into a word to make it represent what you are living; because what you are living is not those words, you are living a sensorial experience, with memory. Memory, in whatever place you are, in whatever cultural context you are, must become for you that living animal that is the poetic flurry. Some people do this naturally and some people go through great effort doing it. I'm more of a natural poet than I am a natural prose writer. I do write prose, but for me it's a great effort to mold it right. There's a great difference between the two forms but I like to cultivate both.

UN: You have traveled widely and there is a strong sense of place in your work, whether that place is New York or Puerto Rico or California or Morocco. Can you comment on how geography has influenced your work?

VHC: What I do in my work is to take things out of context, to take geographic zones out of context. I have spoken of New York as a place where palm trees have sprouted, skyscrapers all of a sudden look like palm trees, and mango seeds have been thrown out of windows. I dislocate tropical fruits and vegetation and temperature, climate zones. In my poetry I am also a student of history and, as I travel, I travel with that in mind. For me, traveling is just as important as investigation or reading texts because it's seeing *cultura viva* (living culture). So when I'm passing through Andalusia or North Africa I'm constantly aware of my relationship to those places as a Caribbean-Latino person, knowing that the culture I'm seeing is the culture that came on the boats right after Columbus, knowing that there was a mestizo Spain that was full of Berber and Arabic culture, that the music and cuisine and also the language that was brought over was full of this Arab culture. I'm always interested in the fusions created by the *mestizaje*—the mixing of the races defined by a Cuban anthropologist as transculturation. For me, *mestizaje* is more important than nationalism. We are part of the Caribbean *mestizaje* which in turn is historically related to the Andalusian *mestizaje* experience—the fusion of the Visigoth, the Romans, Roman Hispanos, the Berbers and Arabs, the Jews, Gypsies—

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mixtures of peoples and cultures. Following this further ultimately leads us back to Morocco, which influenced Spain as well, so the mother country is also North Africa, not just Spain. I'm trying to follow the poetry I find in that stew and bring it back; to make people aware that we are living history, that we are in a historical process that is still going on. You can see it in the kinds of food you eat, and in music influenced by this guitar or that melody. When you see the flamenco element in the African bomba, Puerto Rico's most authentic African dance form, it's there, it's happening now. I am a follower of the threads that have come together, tracing the weavings, the historical labyrinth of the voyages so that I can better see the connections and write about them, and keep them alive.

UN: A salient feature of your poetry is its musicality. What are your thoughts on the relationship between poetry and music?

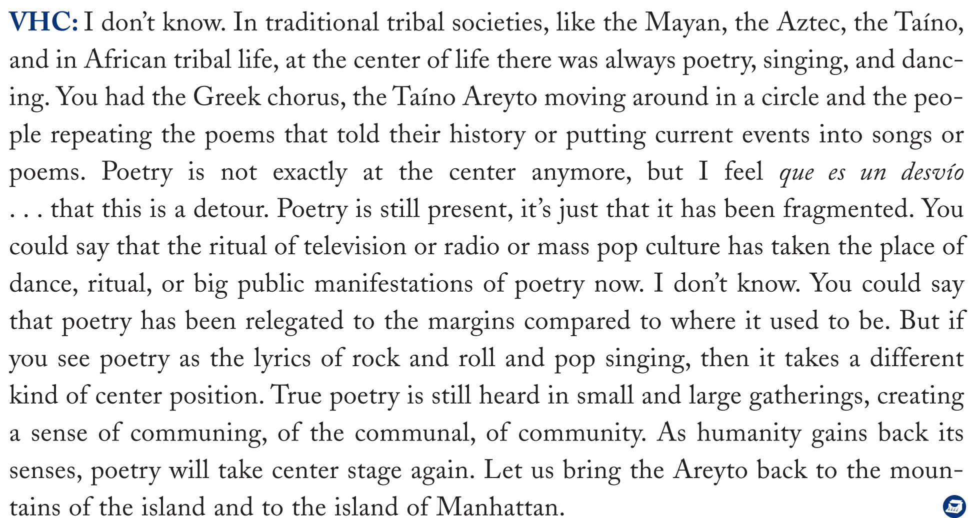
VHC: You gotta have music to be able to write. I heard a beautiful English language poem written by a Puerto Rican girl from Chicago who was visiting Taller Boricua in East Harlem. It had such a beautiful cadence, a Caribbean cadence; it had all these *matices*, nuances that you could pick up. She read it in English and it sounded or felt like Caribbean Spanish. It's almost like detecting an accent on the page. You know, some people say when they read my poetry in silence they can detect the accent, because there's something awkward in the way the English is coming down. Those things to me, they're very important, and they're part of that musical tone that one has. You see it in some of the Chinese-American poets, you feel this soft thing, like rice paper, wind coming through bamboo shoots. You can feel geography and culture in the cadence of the poet's language—the singsong jazz that happens in African-American poetry and in Caribbean poetry as well.

It used to be that you could close your eyes and without looking you could tell what orchestra was playing. You knew if it was Machito or Tito Puente or Barretto because they had a flavor. Language is a shared social experience, and if you speak Spanish or English, there are many other people who speak those languages as well. How do you make it individual? How do you make language your own? How do you give it tone and texture? That's the task of the poet. Something has to be there as a seed for that to be able to happen and then you have to cultivate it, you have to cook it, to craft it—to produce your voice, your personal rhythm of awareness. You have to work it constantly to get the music that is yourself; steal words from the dictionary, the public, and make them yours.

UN: So do you think that voice, that inner music, is something that can be taught? And if so, how?

VHC: I think when you teach writing it's not like teaching how to fix an electric contraption, or teaching mechanics. You teach awareness, you make people aware of the subtleties of the written and phonetic aspects of a poem, the silent spaces and musical sounds. It dawns on them after a while that there is a moment when you get the flurry of the poem and you write it down, but even then there's a distance between your fingers writing and the place where you're experiencing the poem—don't forget I said that poetry was an experience. You're having an experience that you have to translate into the physicality of language—the physical act of writing. Even there, *hay algo*, there's something really immediate that doesn't quite get captured. It doesn't matter whether you're writing on a computer or some other way. The separation is still there between what has actually happened and what you have rescued, what you have been able to bring back from that experience and put into words. You always lose something, and I'm always aware of that. But that first rendition has to have enough of the experience of what occurred for it to be felt and then transmitted to the person reading the poem, with whatever interpretation they bring to it. And that's what's fascinating, that the event doesn't have one standard meaning; it all depends on the circumstances. It is in this way that a poem has a greater radius than prose fiction.

UN: There is much concern these days over the decline in serious reading in the U.S., but it seems that poetry, whether in print or on the stage, is in the midst of a renaissance. What is your take on this seeming paradox?



VHC: I don't know. In traditional tribal societies, like the Mayan, the Aztec, the Taíno, and in African tribal life, at the center of life there was always poetry, singing, and dancing. You had the Greek chorus, the Taíno Areyto moving around in a circle and the people repeating the poems that told their history or putting current events into songs or poems. Poetry is not exactly at the center anymore, but I feel *que es un desvío* . . . that this is a detour. Poetry is still present, it's just that it has been fragmented. You could say that the ritual of television or radio or mass pop culture has taken the place of dance, ritual, or big public manifestations of poetry now. I don't know. You could say that poetry has been relegated to the margins compared to where it used to be. But if you see poetry as the lyrics of rock and roll and pop singing, then it takes a different kind of center position. True poetry is still heard in small and large gatherings, creating a sense of communing, of the communal, of community. As humanity gains back its senses, poetry will take center stage again. Let us bring the Areyto back to the mountains of the island and to the island of Manhattan.

VICTOR HERNÁNDEZ CRUZ

Eisenhower

How did the bold skull of Eisenhower enter my life,
his head like the moon inside the black-and-white
television sets of the tenements.

Caribbean mountain Spanish phonetics
came up with versions of his name,
who could pronounce such letters?
To some it sounded like "ice in shower" others
said "eye in hour" listening
to the English as if it were music you see,
in the morning of immigration.
Simultaneously Trio Los Panchos lifted
curtains at the Teatro Puerto Rico in the Bronx.

His D-Day European theater performances
still lingering below and above the Popeye
cartoons.
Animation of bombs coming out of the
East River, newsreels of a recent past
Europe's barbarous cold murder
at the same time my grandmother's
brown hands spliced tobacco leafs
in the tropics.

In the apartments of the immigrants
Straw hat brown skeletons stood
next to wooden houses
Flamboyans in black and white
drooping onto the zinc roofs framed in photos
upon shelves staring out the windows
at the snow.
I fancied missiles shooting out of
Hopalong Cassidy's black sombrero,
Coco spilling out of an ink jar
onto the green lush forest of my memory.
We materialized like wild calabaza
foliage into the urban sprawl.

Eisenhower was one of the first faces
we came upon beaming out of the
television.
The king of a new land
That did not feel like earth,
but like boxes of cement
Reaching into a dim gray sky,
We found so many people
already screwed and nailed
into the walls
Immigrants from holocaust
barbed wire

terror still in their eyes
and in the nervous lilt
of their fragmented inglish.

At first we saw the place without the words
it was just image and sound,
not knowing the names of things
in their local whats,
We ate the scenery with our eyes
without pronouncing it.
Practicing the sensation of newly
occupied syllables.

What was Eisenhower saying
coming out of the radio,
A line of tanks lined up as words,
splattering into our Caribbean ears
of amphibian melodies.
So many birds left their nest
falling into severe industrial
gravity.
Fruits showed up behind cellophane.

Along with the Korean War,
thick cans of Rheingold beer,
A chocolate syrup in a jar called Bosco,
Willie Mays in the outfield,
Juicy Fruit girls from the suburbs,
serial novellas through Spanish radio,
In the public schools we did
bomb drills,
Diving under the tables in tune
to the sirens from local fire stations.

It was the cinema of arrival
Eisenhower was the star of the movie.
As my English got better
the old bold man disappeared
we saw him no longer.
Parrots kept arriving from the tropics,
piece by piece colored feathers
into the northern drizzle.
Lizards came through bamboo shoots,
Seeds from the center of guavas
tamarind of abandoned soil.
The city skyline become melted
vocabulary
Reaching into the sky's efforts
to become blue.

— from *The Mountain in the Sea,* by Victor Hernández Cruz.
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