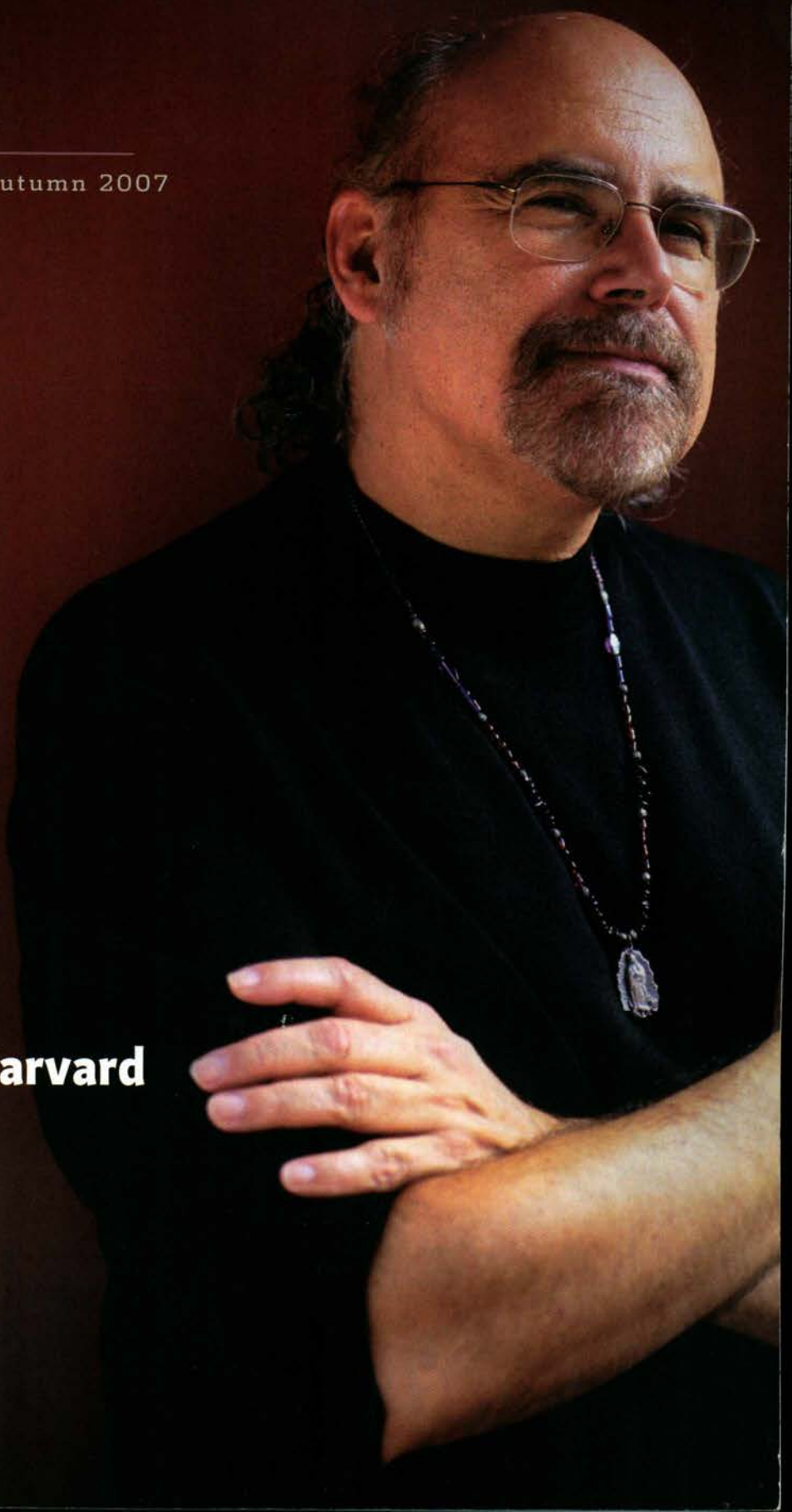
The Hill

McDANIEL COLLEGE | Autumn 2007



The Outsider at Harvard

It's a sunny day in late September and students surge across Massachusetts Avenue from Harvard Square into the quad where the glossy green ivy climbing up the brick buildings is just beginning to edge toward red.

The historic brick buildings are at the heart of America's oldest and most celebrated institution of higher education, Harvard University. Under its arching canopies of stately trees have strolled students who became American presidents — seven of them, in fact — or who governed other nations; students who went on to become literary, intellectual and cultural luminaries, such as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Benazir Bhutto, T.S. Eliot and Yo-Yo Ma, William Rehnquist and W.E.B. Du Bois.

¿Quíen Es Davíd Carrasco?

He is American.

He is Mexican.

He is an esteemed Harvard University scholar.

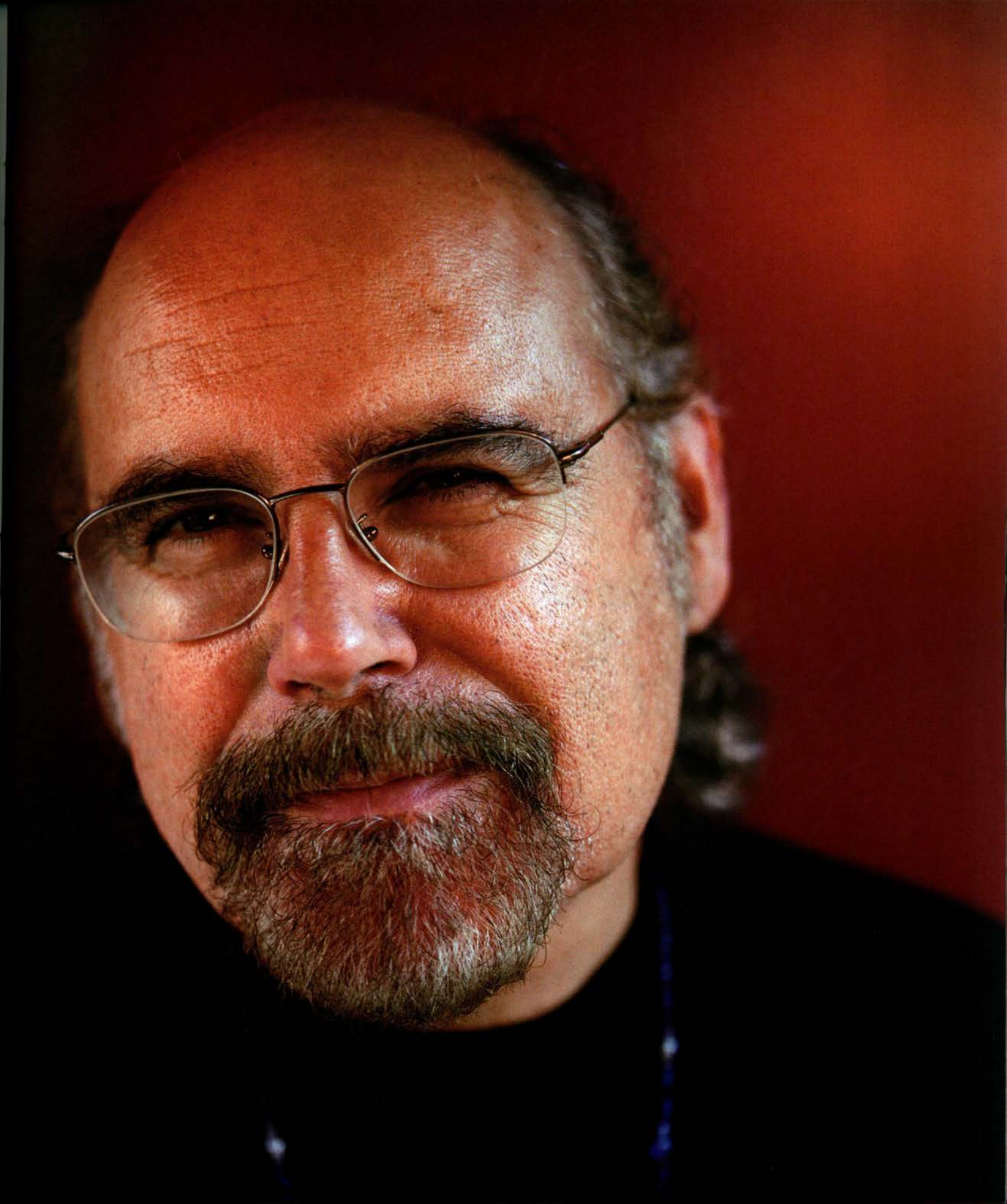
But he will never be part of The Establishment.

By Rachel Morton

Photographs by Kathleen Dooher

Among its faculty are more than 40 Nobel Laureates and dozens of great minds and renowned scholars. Davíd Carrasco '67 is one of this elite group, known worldwide as a foremost expert on Mesoamerican culture. Not only a teacher and researcher, Carrasco is also a passionate and persuasive spokesman for the great achievements of Mexico and the early civilizations of South and Central America.

It has become a calling for Davíd Carrasco to make people aware of the contributions and achievements of ancient Mesoamerican cultures. His success has been driven by more than intellectual zeal and ambition; there's a personal side to it. Carrasco



is himself Mexican-American and in the course of his coming of age and discovering himself as a man, he learned to embrace his identity as a Mexican. In doing so, he gave up any aspirations to the mainstream and took on a new role as a man on the border, part insider and part outsider.

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Since his boyhood, Davíd Carrasco has understood what it means to live in the ambiguous region between two worlds, two cultures. "*La dualidad*" — he laughs, "it's a very Mexican way to understand the world." *La dualidad* symbolizes Carrasco's very identity and sense of place in the world. Mexican and American. He is both; he is neither.

Carrasco was born to a Mexican father and American mother. He grew up in Silver Spring, Md., in a working-class family, and developed a love of reading from his mother and a love of sports from his father, a basketball coach. He himself was an All-Star basketball player at his public high school.

His father had worked hard to move up from his own childhood in the barrio in El Paso and he became the basketball coach and athletic director for American University.

"My father was trying to move ahead and blend, but he couldn't. He was trying to figure out how to culturally make it. The message was, 'You're welcome to be like us. But you'll never be like us.'"

In addition, this was a period where there was a lot of racial conflict in the air, he says. And his family identified with the struggle for civil rights and freedom for blacks.

The senior Carrasco did move far from his roots, becoming a sports goodwill ambassador to Mexico as part of the 1968 Olympic games. He moved the family to Mexico City and that's when the teenaged Davíd began to understand, in his bones, what the other half of his heritage meant to him.

For Carrasco, the turning point came in adolescence when he visited the archaeological museum in Mexico City and seemed to see, for the first time, the artifacts for what they were — remnants of a great civilization.

"I was moved visually, emotionally, by these material objects — their shape, size. It was like walking into a dream. A huge stone serpent, eagle heads, jades, an incredible calendar stone, decorated knives, things that were out of tombs! It was nearly a religious experience.

"These strange objects suggested a sophisticated culture to me. One that was very open about its own strangeness. Clearly a monumental civilization."

And to a 12-year-old boy, this monumental civilization was the same civilization that he had known as the butt of jokes — Montezuma's Revenge, Mexican stand-off, jumping beans, lazy Mexicans — he had the full American repertoire of stereotypes and misinformation. "I had been ashamed of my culture. Here I saw civilization. Big stuff. I thought, 'I'm going to recover those things we were.' "

The young Carrasco had an epiphany that day at the museum in Mexico City. He mentions a meaningful passage from Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that speaks to his experience:

All of us, at some moment, have had a vision of our existence as something unique, untransferable and very precious. This revelation almost always takes place during adolescence. Self-discovery is above all the realization that we are alone: it is the opening of an impalpable, transparent wall — that of our consciousness — between the world and ourselves. . . .

"This passage tells a lot about me," says Carrasco. That day at the museum set a direction for his education and his life. He has never looked back.

Carrasco is that much-coveted commodity in academe: an intellectual whose research and scholarship is substantial and adds to the body of knowledge, yet also a scholar who applies his knowledge and insight to relevant issues of the day. With these dual talents, his star rose quickly through academia. After earning a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and teaching for 15 years at the University of Colorado, he was courted by Princeton University and taught there from 1991 to 2001. Then Harvard came calling and he's been in Cambridge ever since.

His work is broad and varied. Carrasco's hands-on research at archaeological sites, such as Tenochtitlan, led to his book, *City of Sacrifice*, about the subject of human sacrifice and its role in the religion of the Aztecs. He co-produced a film, *Alambrista: The Director's Cut*, about the struggles of undocumented Mexican farm workers in the U.S. In recent years, he has coordinated a group of international scholars in deciphering a 16th-century Mexican codex, the *Mapa de Cuahtinchan*.

The archive of materials that he began collecting during his years at the University of Colorado has grown in size and scope. Known as the Moses Mesoamerican Archive and Research Project, that material now serves as a resource for students and colleagues worldwide.

To top this impressive list of accomplishments, in 2004 the Mexican government honored Carrasco for his work in unearthing and promulgating the heritage and legacy of Mexican culture. For this they bestowed upon him the highest decoration they can give a foreign national, the *Orden Mexicana del Aguila Aztec* (Order of the Aztec Eagle).

And now, Carrasco finds himself, at age 62, at the top of his profession, comfortably ensconced at Harvard University, in an attractive office on an upper floor of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which is tucked into a charming and shady corner of the Harvard campus.

As his career has soared, he has climbed into the very bosom of The Establishment . . . "I'm not The Man but I *know* The Man."

He has a named Harvard professorship — he is officially the Neil. L. Rudenstine Professor of the Study of Latin America — and has a joint appointment with the Divinity School and the Department of Anthropology. He has an international reputation, and successful ventures into film and books as well as teaching and research. You'd think there'd be no man more firmly planted in The Establishment than Davíd Carrasco.

But in spite of his dazzling credentials, Carrasco sees himself as an outsider in this bastion of North American culture. As his career has soared he has climbed into the very bosom of The Establishment, and yet he clearly feels a little out of his element.

"I'm not The Man. But I *know* The Man," he says with a grin.

Anyone who knew Davíd Carrasco back then, back in his Western Maryland days, would understand the slight unease Carrasco might feel at this moment. For Carrasco has always had an identification with the "other," an empathy for the underdog.

His first years on the Hill were profoundly influenced by Ira Zepp, who helped him focus his acute social consciousness into work with SOS (Student Opportunity Service). He spent several summers, starting in 1964, working in Puerto Rico with SOS volunteers and has written about those experiences in an essay in *The Journey Outward*, edited by Zepp.

In fact, Carrasco arrived at college as "Dave," and after his SOS trip to Puerto Rico, changed the pronunciation of his name to how he was addressed there — *DaVEED* — which is how he is still known today. He also acquired his fluency in Spanish from his Puerto Rican trips.

"I've been lucky," says Carrasco. "I've had some great teachers, like Ira. People saw things in me I never saw in myself."

What Zepp saw in Carrasco, back in 1964 when he was a first-year at Western Maryland College, was a youth who was "deeply earnest and intellectually very curious. He sought then, and still seeks to anchor his learning in living. He always thought that truth and learning were not just antiseptic abstractions, but were there for something."

The other side of Carrasco that Zepp noticed was that "he had this innate sense of justice and compassion. He always has had a real sense of care for the underprivileged, the marginalized. It was a leaning toward the exploited — he listened to the cries of the suffering world."

That innate identification with the "other" is still a part of what drives Carrasco today. And it's part of what forged the strong friendship he has with novelist and Princeton professor Toni Morrison.

He likes to tell the story of their meeting: In 1991, Carrasco was in his first year teaching at Princeton and asked to sit in on one of Morrison's classes. Though she was initially reluctant to have a professor in the back of a small seminar, she agreed.

"She gave a great lecture on *Moby-Dick*," he remembers, "and I felt this connection between my life and the world she talked of in the class." She spoke about "the ways black people ignite critical moments of discovery in American literature. . . about how blackness evokes certain unconscious feelings and conflicts hidden from our daily life."

This really struck a chord with Carrasco. After class, he trailed Morrison and her entourage back across campus, trying to get in a word among the admirers who surrounded her. He tried to gain her attention and interest by mentioning three reactions he'd had to her lecture.

The movie *Paris Trout*, he said, had resonance with the themes she discussed in the lecture. She'd never seen it.

"Strike one," says Carrasco.

He tried his second idea, mentioning a novel, *The Old Gringo*, by Carlos Fuentes. She hadn't read it.

"Strike two," says Carrasco.

Finally he told her that during her lecture, "I couldn't stop thinking about a book called *The Words To Say It*, by Marie Cardinal.

Morrison stopped in her tracks.

"Now that is really amazing because the whole series of lectures is based on my reading of that book."

"Home run," grins Carrasco.

The book they both felt so strongly about is the 1975

French novel/memoir powerfully recounting Cardinal's descent into madness and her recovery through seven years of psychoanalysis. "The story of what it feels like," Carrasco has written, "to be inside the arduous process of psychoanalysis."

The book has been of interest to analysts, feminists and literary scholars over the years, but Carrasco was struck again by its power and scope as he realized that it "not only appealed to a historian of religions like me, but was capable of igniting critical thinking and creative writing about agonies of race in America in one of our greatest writers," he has written.

"I want you to come see me so we can talk and get to know each other," said Morrison to Carrasco. Which they did, and Carrasco soon helped her do some research for her next novel, *Paradise*, and he joined the circle of black artists and intellectuals like Cornel West who surrounded Morrison.

"We've become colleagues and friends," says Carrasco, who adds, "She has given me advice in navigating academe and in my career." But most significantly, he took her to Mexico for a week to meet Gabriel García Márquez.

"That's one of the big things for me," Carrasco says. "I introduced Toni Morrison and García Márquez." He grins. Not bad for a kid whose father came from the barrio.

While he has been celebrated and rewarded for his achievements, all has not been smooth sailing for Carrasco. There have been controversies and challenges along the way, some of which continue to rankle.

His first year at Harvard, after being recruited in part by Harvard scholar Cornel West, a dispute arose between West and former Harvard president Larry Summers, which eventually resulted in West's return to Princeton (and later, Summers' resignation).

"I felt I suffered a loss that would never be recovered," said Carrasco. He and West, friends and former colleagues from Princeton, had planned on continuing a discourse they'd begun earlier on the African-American-Latino relationship, one of the things he'd looked forward to exploring at Harvard. "Our chance to work together was lost."

And then last year Harvard government professor Samuel Huntington published a book, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, that criticized the influx of immigrants to the U.S., especially Mexicans, saying they threatened the very core of the American identity. A standing-room-only crowd witnessed Carrasco's challenge to the book at a panel that was also covered widely in the press.

But times have changed. And they've changed at Harvard as well. This fall Harvard inaugurated its 28th president, Drew Faust — the first president since the Larry Summers fiasco, and the start of a new regime that brings hope to Carrasco.

The day before the event Carrasco strides across campus, speaking loudly on his cell phone to be heard over the chapel bells ringing. It will be a busy weekend; his son is coming in from Barcelona, his friend Toni Morrison is coming to town to give a special reading at the Harvard inauguration, and he has also been invited to speak at the event on a panel entitled, "The Arts of Interpretation: Whose Meaning Is it Anyway?"

"Yes, there have been tremendous changes," Carrasco allows. "But at the same time, it's because women and people of color have pushed. They weren't invited in."

Zepp, for his part, has relished Carrasco's progress. "He has far surpassed this teacher. I love the guy, I am proud of him. This is the crazy thing. People write about 'the teacher who changes my life.' I had a student once who changed my life." ■