
With my having read Bootstraps twice now, the word that most immediately comes to mind is courage. This is an incredibly honest work, painfully frank about issues that are often suppressed in our profession: the price non-traditional students pay in order to enter the discipline. If Villanueva did nothing more in this book than articulate for the rest of us what it is like, on a day-to-day basis, to be poor and of color and seeking a place among America’s educated elite, this work would be an important addition to the discipline. Yet Villanueva’s project goes beyond this one goal; he uses rhetorical theory, coupled with his own experiences, to begin to articulate how academic discourse operates within the university. In a section relating the unwitting racism displayed by a few of his “heroes” in composition and rhetoric, Villanueva argues that the cherished belief that all students have the same educational opportunity in this country, provided they work hard enough, is a myth:

I offer these scenes to demonstrate how deeply embedded racism is, systematically. I offer these scenes to suggest the limitations of liberalism, the ideology that has at its base the belief that change is an individual concern, a matter of pulling one’s self up by the bootstraps, that all that is needed is to provide the conditions that will facilitate the pull, enough elbow room. It is America’s dominant ideology. (120-21)

Villanueva’s assertion is provocative; I myself can say, with some degree of certainty, that I have never had a professor who actively tried to keep me from succeeding in my studies. Yet as a working-class, poor, female student, I, too, can identify with many of the painful experiences Villanueva relates. But if no concerted effort on the part of individuals can be found to account for bigotry, for making success so difficult for those who do not fit the description of a traditional student (i.e., white, male, and middle-class), then where does the problem lie? For Villanueva, the answer is found in a sustained rhetorical inquiry into the discursive practices of the university as an institution: “Rhetoric, after all, is how ideologies are carried, how hegemonies are maintained. Rhetoric, then, would be the means by which hegemonies could be countered” (121).

Villanueva attempts to do just this with a research project designed to examine the oral linguistic features found in the writing of students in a basic writing course, as well as those in a more “traditional” freshman composition course. On the basis of his findings, Villanueva concludes that it is the “inordinate denial of the oral” which accounts for the
problems these basic writers experience when composing (113). His research leads him to assert that an effective pedagogy acknowledges the difference culture and class makes for both students and faculty in academe. The implications of this assertion reach beyond the issue of teaching non-traditional students, challenging the university itself.

*Bootstraps* is a remarkable achievement. Not everyone who reads it, however, will be as impressed. Many scholars, across all disciplines, who still find the inclusion of the personal inappropriate for academic discourse. Villanueva’s prose style pulls no punches for the reader, and his switching from first person to third, often referring to himself as “Papi,” does take some getting used to. The long discourses on Marxist and post-structuralist theories strike me, at times, as intellectual overkill. Still, the work is groundbreaking and Villanueva’s writing is powerful.

Don’t worry, Papi; after this, there can be no doubts about your ability.

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**ESSAY COMPETITION**

Graduate students in rhetoric and composition are invited to submit papers on the topic of entering the discipline for the Fifth Annual Symposium on the Teaching of Composition at Texas Christian University. This year’s symposium, “What Comes After Composition and Rhetoric?: Issues Facing the Discipline,” features keynote speaker Janice Lauer. The winner will be a featured speaker at the symposium and will receive a registration waiver, a commemorative plaque, and a $50 cash award. Students should submit two copies of the manuscript, not to exceed 10 pages double-spaced, and an abstract, not to exceed 125 words. The contestant’s name, address, affiliation, and phone number should appear on the cover sheet only; the manuscript should include no internal reference to the author. Papers should not have been submitted to other conferences or have been previously published. Submit papers by December 1, 1994, to Rachelle M. Smith, Symposium Coordinator, Department of English, Box 32872, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX 76129.