



Excerpt from *Bootstraps: From an Academic of Color*

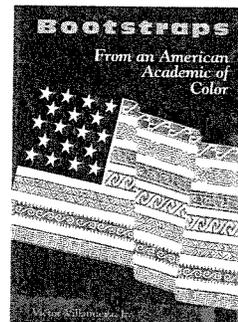
VICTOR VILLANUEVA

■ Villanueva, Victor. Excerpt from *Bootstraps: From an Academic of Color*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993. 66–77. Print.

Framing the Reading

No matter what races or ethnicities or nationalities you as a reader of this book identify with, it's probably not news that in any given setting, some languages or styles of a language seem dominant and others seem marginalized. Whether you have thought about this or not, you have the ability to change your language and tone for different audiences and purposes—that is, to “code-switch.” The ability to move among different versions of your language, or different languages altogether, in order to match different social circumstances is an important one for successfully engaging with others. For some of you, this code-switching might mean using a different language and sound in a place of worship than you do in a place of work or school. For some of you, it might mean using the languages characteristic of ethnicities other than your own. Some of you are international students who are multilingual, while others might be second-generation students who speak one language with your families and another at school. One way or another, to be human is to be aware of the interplay among languages and how they mark identity, status, and potential. And to be human is to be aware that in circumstances where you use a form of language that is not the one most commonly used in broader society, one of your struggles is learning the language used by the majority and deciding what of it to use—when, where, how much. Making decisions about what language practices to use is not just a matter of learning something new, but of deciding who to be.

Victor Villanueva's book *Bootstraps: From an Academic of Color* is a narrative and an analysis of his own experience with this struggle. Villanueva grew up as a Puerto Rican in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York City, with parents who had emigrated from Puerto Rico with Spanish as their first language. He grew up to be a very successful professor of rhetoric, focusing on questions of race, language, and power. *Bootstraps* tells the story of his evolution, and the excerpt that you'll read here focuses specifically on his movement from the U.S. Army into an English degree and graduate school. It's a literacy narrative that captures the feelings of confusion and frustration, as well as elation and satisfaction, experienced by one member of a group whose language and



ethnicity are not in the majority as he learns to participate in an academic community that required using very different language practices. We include it because we think that, like the other literacy narratives included in this chapter, it speaks to students who have experienced trying out new language practices in a new place; it also describes the frustrations of learning to write in school settings like the one you are in now.

Villanueva is Regents Professor at Washington State University. In his work, he describes and theorizes the ways cultural systems, including universities, use language and rhetoric to reinforce or to resist ethnic and racial oppression. He made another major contribution to the study of rhetoric and writing with his anthology *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, a reader which gathered a wide range of composition research and theory and made it accessible to students. He's headed the Conference on College Composition and Communication and won a wide range of honors both from the field of writing studies and the universities in which he's taught, researched, and administered.

Getting Ready to Read

Before you read, do at least one of the following activities:

- Find out more about this writer. You can begin at his school Web page, <http://www.libarts.wsu.edu/english/Villanueva.htm>, and also Google-search more broadly.
- Think back to when you first considered going to college, whatever age that was. Did you think, back then, you could do it? If you didn't feel confident, what prevented that confidence?

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What school-writing experiences have you encountered that resemble any described by Villanueva?
- What do you know about affirmative action in higher education, and how is this reading matching up with that knowledge?

I wanted to try my hand at college, go beyond the GED. But college scared me. 1
I had been told long ago that college wasn't my lot.

He drives by the University District of Seattle during his last days in the 2
military and sees the college kids, long hair and sandals, baggy short pants on
the men, long, flowing dresses on the women, some men in suits, some women
in high heels, all carrying backpacks over one shoulder. There is both pur-
pose and contentment in the air. Storefronts carry names like Dr. Feelgood
and Magus Bookstore, reflecting the good feelings and magic he senses. A block
away is the University, red tiles and green grass, rolling hills and tall pines, apple
and cherry blossoms, the trees shading modern monoliths of gray concrete and
gothic, church-like buildings of red brick. And he says to himself, "Maybe in the
next life."

He must be content with escaping a life at menial labor, at being able to 3
bank on the skills in personnel management he had acquired in the Army. But
there are only two takers. The large department-store chain would hire him as

a management trainee—a shoe salesman on commission, no set income, but a trainee could qualify for GI Bill benefits as well as the commissions. Not good enough, not getting paid beyond the GI Bill; and a sales career wasn't good enough either, the thought of his mother's years as a saleslady, years lost, still in memory. A finance corporation offers him a job: management trainee. The title: Assistant Manager. The job: bill collector, with low wage, but as a trainee, qualified to supplement with the GI Bill. The combined pay would be good, but he would surely lose his job in time, would be unable to be righteously indignant like the bill collectors he has too often had to face too often are, unable to bother people like Mom and Dad, knowing that being unable to meet bills isn't usually a moral shortcoming but most often an economic condition.

The GI Bill had come up again, however, setting the "gettinover" wheels in motion. The nearby community college charges ninety dollars a quarter tuition, would accept him on the strength of his GED scores. That would mean nearly four hundred dollars a month from the GI Bill, with only thirty dollars a month for schooling ("forgetting" to account for books and supplies). What a get-over! There would be immediate profit in simply going to school. And if he failed, there would be nothing lost. And if he succeeded, an Associate degree in something. He'd be better equipped to brave the job market again.

So he walks onto the community college campus in the summer of 1976. It's not the campus of the University of Washington. It's more like Dominguez High School in California. But it is a college. Chemistry: a clumsiness at the lab, but relative grace at mathematical equations and memorization. French is listening to audiotapes and filling out workbooks. History is enjoyable stories, local lore from a retired newsman, easy memorization for the grade.

Then there is English. There are the stories, the taste he had always had for reading, now peppered with talk of philosophy and psychology and tensions and textures. Writing is 200 words on anything, preceded by a sentence outline. He'd write about Korea and why *The Rolling Stone* could write about conspiracies of silence, or he'd write about the problems in trying to get a son to understand that he is Puerto Rican when the only Puerto Ricans he knows are his grandparents; he'd write about whatever seemed to be on his mind at the time. The night before a paper would be due, he'd gather pen and pad, and stare. Clean the dishes. Stare. Watch an "I Love Lucy" rerun. Stare. Then sometime in the night the words would come. He'd write; scratch something out; draw arrows shifting paragraphs around; add a phrase or two. Then he'd pull out; the erasable bond, making changes even as he typed, frantic to be done before school. Then he'd use the completed essay to type out an outline, feeling a little guilty about having cheated in not having produced the outline first.

The guilt showed one day when Mrs. Ray, the Indian woman in traditional dress with a Ph.D. in English from Oxford, part-time instructor at the community college, said there was a problem with his writing. She must have been able to tell somehow that he was discovering what to write while writing, no prior thesis statement, no outline, just a vague notion that would materialize, magically, while writing. In her stark, small office she hands him a sheet with three familiar sayings mimeoed on it; instructs him to write on one, right there, right then. He writes on "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." No memory of what he had

written, probably forgotten during the writing. Thirty minutes or so later, she takes the four or five pages he had written; she reads; she smiles; then she explains that she had suspected plagiarism in his previous writings. She apologizes, saying she found his writing “too serious,” too abstract, not typical of her students. He is not insulted; he is flattered. He knew he could read; now he knew he could write well enough for college.

English 102, Mr. Lukens devotes a portion of the quarter to Afro-American literature. Victor reads Ishmael Reed, “I’m a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra.” It begins,

*I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra,
sidewinders in the saloons of fools
bit my forehead like O
the untrustworthiness of Egyptologists
Who do not know their trips. Who was that
dog faced man? they asked, the day I rode
from town.*

*School marms with halitosis cannot see
the Nefertitti fake chipped on the run by slick
germans, the hawk behind Sonny Rollins’ head or
the ritual beard of his axe; a longhorn winding
its bells thru the Field of Reeds.*

There was more, but by this point he was already entranced and excited. Poetry has meaning, more than the drama of Mark Antony’s speech years back.

Mr. Lukens says that here is an instance of poetry more for effect (or maybe *affect*) than for meaning, citing a line from Archibald MacLeish: “A poem should not mean / But be.” But there *was* meaning in this poem. Victor writes about it. In the second stanza, the chipped Nefertitti, a reference to a false black history, with images from “The Maltese Falcon” and war movies. The “School marms” Reed mentions are like the schoolmasters at Hamilton, unknowing and seeming not to know of being unknowing. Sonny Rollins’ axe and the Field of Reeds: a saxophone, a reed instrument, the African American’s links to Egypt, a history whitewashed by “Egyptologists / Who do not know their trips.” He understood the allusions, appreciated the wordplay. The poem had the politics of Bracy, the language of the block, TV of the fifties, together in the medium Mr. D had introduced to Victor, Papi, but now more powerful. This was fun; this was politics. This was Victor’s history, his life with language play.

Years later, Victor is on a special two-man panel at a conference of the Modern Language Association. He shares the podium with Ishmael Reed. Victor gives a talk on “Teaching as Social Action,” receives applause, turns to see Ishmael Reed looking him in the eye, applauding loudly. He tries to convey how instrumental this “colleague” had been in his life.

He’ll be an English major. Mr. Lukens is his advisor, sets up the community college curriculum in such a way as to have all but the major’s requirements for a BA from the University of Washington out of the way. The University of Washington is the only choice: it’s relatively nearby, tuition for Vietnam veterans is \$176 a quarter. “Maybe in this life.”

His AA degree in his back pocket, his heart beating audibly with exhilaration and fear, he walks up the campus of the University of Washington, more excited than at Disneyland when he was sixteen. He's proud: a regular transfer student, no special minority waivers. The summer of 1977. 12

But the community is not college in the same way the University is. The community college is torn between vocational training and preparing the unprepared for traditional university work. And it seems unable to resolve the conflict (see Cohen and Brawer). His high community-college GPA is no measure of what he is prepared to undertake at the University. He fails at French 103, unable to carry the French conversations, unable to do the reading, unable to do the writing, dropping the course before the failure becomes a matter of record. He starts again. French 101, only to find he is still not really competitive with the white kids who had had high school French. But he cannot fail, and he does not fail, thanks to hour after hour with French tapes after his son's in bed. 13

English 301, the literature survey, is fun. Chaucer is a ghetto boy, poking fun at folks, the rhyming reminding him of when he did the dozens on the block; Chaucer telling bawdy jokes: "And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole . . . 'A berd, a berd!; quod hende Nicholas." So this is literature. Chaucer surely ain't white. At least he doesn't sound white, "the first to write poetry in the vernacular," he's told. Spenser is exciting: images of knights and damsels distressing, magic and dragons, the *Lord of the Rings* that he had read in Korea paling in the comparison. Donne is a kick: trying to get laid when he's Jack Donne, with a rap the boys from the block could never imagine; building church floors with words on a page when he's Dr. John Donne. Every reading is an adventure, never a nod, no matter how late into the night the reading. For his first paper, Victor, the 3.8 at Tacoma Community College, gets 36 out of a possible 100—"for your imagination," written alongside the grade. 14

I was both devastated and determined, my not belonging was verified but I was not ready to be shut down, not so quickly. So to the library to look up what the Professor himself had published: *Proceedings of the Spenser Society*. I had no idea what the Professor was going on about in his paper, but I could see the pattern: an introduction that said something about what others had said, what he was going to be writing about, in what order, and what all this would prove; details about what he said he was going to be writing about, complete with quotes, mainly from the poetry, not much from other writers on Spenser; and a "therefore." It wasn't the five-paragraph paper Mr. Lukens had insisted on, not just three points, not just repetition of the opening in the close, but the pattern was essentially the same. The next paper: 62 out of 100 and a "Much better." Course grade: B. Charity. 15

I never vindicated myself with that professor. I did try, tried to show that I didn't need academic charity. Economic charity was hard enough. I took my first graduate course from him. This time I got an "All well and good, but what's the point?" alongside a "B" for a paper. I had worked on that paper all summer long. 16

I have had to face that same professor, now a Director of Freshman Writing, at conferences. And with every contact, feelings of insecurity well up from 17

within, the feeling that I'm seen as the minority (a literal term in academics for those of us of color), the feeling of being perceived as having gotten through *because* I am a minority, an insecurity I face often. But though I never got over the stigma with that professor (whether real or imagined), I did get some idea on how to write for the University.

Professorial Discourse Analysis became a standard practice: go to the library; see what the course's professor had published; try to discern a pattern to her writing; try to mimic the pattern. Some would begin with anecdotes. Some would have no personal pronouns. Some would cite others' research. Some would cite different literary works to make assertions about one literary work. Whatever they did, I would do too. And it worked, for the most part, so that I could continue the joy of time travel and mind travel with those, and within those, who wrote about things I had discovered I liked to think about: Shakespeare and work versus pleasure, religion and the day-to-day world, racism, black Othello and the Jewish Merchant of Venice; Dickens and the impossibility of really getting into the middle class (which I read as "race," getting into the white world, at the time), pokes at white folks (though the Podsnaps were more likely jabs at the middle class); Milton and social responsibility versus religious mandates; Yeats and being assimilated and yet other (critically conscious with a cultural literacy, I'd say now); others and other themes. And soon I was writing like I had written in the community college: some secondary reading beforehand, but composing the night before a paper was due, a combination of fear that nothing will come and faith that something would eventually develop, then revising to fit the pattern discovered in the Professorial Discourse Analysis, getting "A's" and "B's," and getting comments like "I never saw that before."

There were failures, of course. One professor said my writing was too formulaic. One professor said it was too novel. Another wrote only one word for the one paper required of the course: "nonsense." But while I was on the campus I could escape and not. I could think about the things that troubled me or intrigued me, but through others' eyes in other times and other places. I couldn't get enough, despite the pain and the insecurity.

School becomes his obsession. There is the education. But the obsession is as much, if not more, in getting a degree, not with a job in mind, just the degree, just because he thinks he can, despite all that has said he could not. His marriage withers away, not with rancor, just melting into a dew. The daily routine has him taking the kid to a daycare/school at 6:00 a.m., then himself to school, from school to work as a groundskeeper for a large apartment complex; later, a maintenance man, then a garbage man, then a plumber, sometimes coupled

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with other jobs: shipping clerk for the library, test proctor. From work to pick up the kid from school, prepare dinner, maybe watch a TV show with the kid, tuck him into bed, read. There are some girlfriends along the way, and he studies them too: the English major who won constant approval from the same professor who had given him the 36 for being imaginative; the art major who had traveled to France (French practice); the fisheries major whose father was an executive vice president for IBM (practice at being middle class). Victor was going to learn—quite consciously—what it means to be white, middle class. He didn't see the exploitation; not then; he was obsessed. There were things going on in his classes that he did not understand and that the others did. He didn't know what the things were that he didn't understand, but he knew that even those who didn't do as well as he did, somehow did not act as foreign as he felt. He was the only colored kid in every one of those classes. And he hadn't the time nor the racial affiliation to join the Black Student Union or Mecha. He was on his own, an individual pulling on his bootstraps, looking out for number one. He's not proud of the sensibility, but isolation—and, likely, exploitation of others—are the stuff of racelessness.

There were two male friends, Mickey, a friend to this day, and Luis el Loco. 21 Luis was a *puertoricenseño*, from Puerto Rico, who had found his way to Washington by having been imprisoned in the federal penitentiary at MacNeal Island, attending school on a prison-release program. Together, they would enjoy talking in Spanglish, listening to *salsa*. But Luis was a Modern Languages major, Spanish literature. Nothing there to exploit. It's a short-lived friendship. Mickey was the other older student in Victor's French 101 course, white, middle class, yet somehow other, one who had left the country during Vietnam, a disc jockey in Amsterdam. The friendship begins with simply being the two older men in the class, longer away from adolescence than the rest; the friendship grows with conversations about politics, perceptions about America from abroad, literature. But Victor would not be honest with his friend about feeling foreign until years later, a literary bravado. Mickey was well read in the literary figures Victor was coming to know. Mickey would be a testing ground for how Victor was reading, another contact to be exploited. Eventually, Mickey and his wife would introduce Victor to their friend, a co-worker at the post office. This is Carol. She comes from a life of affluence, and from a life of poverty, a traveler within the class system, not a journey anyone would volunteer for, but one which provides a unique education, a path not unlike Paulo Freire's. From her, there is the physical and the things he would know of the middle class, discussed explicitly, and there is their mutual isolation. There is love and friendship, still his closest friend, still his lover.

But before Carol there is simply the outsider obsessed. He manages the BA. He 22 cannot stop, even as the GI Bill reaches its end. He will continue to gather credentials until he is kicked out. Takes the GRE, does not do well, but gets into the graduate program with the help of references from within the faculty—and with the help of minority status in a program decidedly low in numbers of minorities. "Minority," or something like that, is typed on the GRE test results in his file, to be seen while scanning the file for the references. His pride is hurt, but he remembers All Saints, begins to believe in the biases of standardized tests: back in the eighth grade, a failure top student; now a near-failure, despite a 3.67 at the competitive Big

University of State. Not all his grades, he knew, were matters of charity. He had earned his GPA, for the most part. Nevertheless, he is shaken.

More insecure than ever, there are no more overnight papers. Papers are written over days, weeks, paragraphs literally cut and laid out on the floor to be pasted. One comment appears in paper after paper: “Logic?” He thinks, “Yes.” He does not understand. Carol cannot explain the problem. Neither can Mickey. He does not even consider asking the professors. To ask would be an admission of ignorance, “stupid spic” still resounding within. This is his problem.

Then by chance (exactly how is now forgotten), he hears a tape of a conference paper delivered by the applied linguist Robert Kaplan. Kaplan describes contrastive rhetoric. Kaplan describes a research study conducted in New York City among Puerto Ricans who are bilingual and Puerto Ricans who are monolingual in English, and he says that the discourse patterns, the rhetorical patterns which include the logic, of monolingual Puerto Ricans are like those of Puerto Rican bilinguals and different from Whites, more Greek than the Latin-like prose of American written English. Discourse analysis takes on a new intensity. At this point, what this means is that he will have to go beyond patterns in his writing, become more analytical of the connections between ideas. The implications of Kaplan’s talk, for him at least, will take on historical and political significance as he learns more of rhetoric.

About the same time as that now lost tape on Kaplan’s New York research (a study that was never published, evidently), Victor stumbles into his first rhetoric course.

The preview of course offerings announces a course titled “Theories of Invention,” to be taught by Anne Ruggles Gere. His GRE had made it clear that he was deficient in Early American Literature. Somewhere in his mind he recalls reading that Benjamin Franklin had identified himself as an inventor; so somehow, Victor interprets “Theories of Invention” as “Theories of Inventors,” an American lit course. What he discovers is Rhetoric.

Not all at once, not just in that first class on rhetoric, I discover some things about writing, my own, and about the teaching of writing. I find some of modern composition’s insights are modern hindsights. I don’t mind the repetition. Some things bear repeating. The repetitions take on new significance and are elaborated upon in a new context, a new time. Besides, not everyone who teaches writing knows of rhetoric, though I believe everyone should.

I read Cicero’s *de Inventione*. It’s a major influence in rhetoric for centuries. The strategies he describes on how to argue a court case bears a remarkable resemblance to current academic discourse, the pattern I first discovered when I first tried to figure out what I had not done in that first English course at the University.

Janet Emig looks to depth psychology and studies on creativity and even neurophysiology, the workings of the brain’s two hemispheres, to pose the case that writing is a mode of learning. She explains what I had been doing with my first attempts at college writing, neither magic nor a perversion. Cicero had said much the same in his *de Oratore* in the first century BCE (Before the Common Era, the modern way of saying BC):

Writing is said to be *the best and most excellent modeler and teacher of oratory*; and not without reason; for if what is meditated and considered easily surpasses sudden and extemporary speech, a constant and diligent habit of writing will surely be of more effect than meditation and consideration itself; since all the arguments relating to the subject on which we write, whether they are suggested by art, or by a certain power of genius and understanding, will present themselves, and occur to us, while we examine and contemplate it in the full light of our intellect and all the thoughts and words, which are the most expressive of their kind, must of necessity come under and submit to the keenness of our judgment while writing; and a fair arrangement and collocation of the words is effected by writing, in a certain rhythm and measure, not poetical, but oratorical. (*de Oratore* I.cxxxiv)

Writing is a way of discovering, of learning, of thinking. Cicero is arguing the case for literacy in ways we still argue or are arguing anew.

David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky discuss literary theorists like 30 Jonathan Culler and the pedagogical theorist Paulo Freire to come up with a curriculum in which reading is used to introduce basic writers, those students who come into the colleges not quite prepared for college work, to the ways of academic discourse. Quintilian, like others of his time, the first century CE, and like others before his time, advocates reading as a way to come to discover the ways of language and the ways of writing and the ways to broaden the range of experience.

Kenneth Bruffee, Peter Elbow, and others, see the hope of democratizing the 31 classroom through peer-group learning. So did Quintilian:

But as emulation is of use to those who have made some advancement of learning, so, to those who are but beginning and still of tender age, to imitate their school-fellows is more pleasant than to imitate their master, for the very reason that it is more easy; for they who are learning the first rudiments will scarcely dare to exalt themselves to the hope of attaining that eloquence which they regard as the highest; they will rather fix on what is nearest to them, as vines attached to trees fain the top by taking hold of the lower branches first (23–24).

Quintilian describes commenting on student papers in ways we consider new:

[T]he powers of boys sometimes sink under too great severity in correction; for they despond, and grieve, and at last hate their work; and what is most prejudicial, while they fear everything; they cease to attempt anything. . . . A teacher ought, therefore, to be as agreeable as possible, that remedies, which are rough in their nature, may be rendered soothing by gentleness of hand; he ought to praise some parts of his pupils' performances, tolerate some, and to alter others, giving his reasons why the alterations are made. (100)

Richard Haswell recommends minimal scoring of student papers, sticking to one or two items in need of correction per paper. Nancy Summers warns against rubber-stamp comments on student papers, comments like “awk;” she says comments ought to explain. Both have more to say than Quintilian on such matters, but in essence both are Quintilian revisited.

Edward P. J. Corbett looks to Quintilian, Cicero, and others from among the ancients, especially Aristotle, to write *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. In some ways, the book says little that is different from other books on student writing. But the book is special in its explicit connections to ancient rhetorical traditions. 32

Without a knowledge of history and traditions, we risk running in circles while seeking new paths. Without knowing the traditions, there is no way of knowing which traditions to hold dear and which to discard. Self evident? Maybe. Yet the circles exist. 33

For all the wonders I had found in literature—and still find—literature seemed to me self-enveloping. What I would do is read and enjoy. And, when it was time to write, what I would write about would be an explanation of what I had enjoyed, using words like *Oedipal complex* or *polyvocal* or *anxiety* or *unpacking*, depending on what I had found in my discourse-analytical journeys, but essentially saying “this is what I saw” or “this is how what I read took on a special meaning for me” (sometimes being told that what I had seen or experienced was nonsense). I could imagine teaching literature—and often I do, within the context of composition—but I knew that at best I’d be imparting or imposing one view: the what I saw or the meaning for me. The reader-response theorists I would come to read, Rosenblatt, Fish, Culler, and others, would make sense to me, that what matters most is what the reader finds. Bakhtin’s cultural and political dimension would make even more sense: that all language is an approximation, generated and understood based on what one has experienced with language. In teaching literature, I thought, there would be those among students I would face who would come to take on reading, perhaps; likely some who would appreciate more fully what they had read. But it did not seem to me that I could somehow make someone enjoy. Enjoyment would be a personal matter: from the self, for the self. 34

And what if I did manage a Ph.D. and did get a job as a professor? I would have to publish. A guest lecturer in a medieval lit course spoke of one of the important findings in his new book: medieval scribes were conscious of the thickness of the lozenge, the medieval version of the comma. He found that thinner lozenges would indicate a slight pause in reading; thicker lozenges, longer pauses. Interesting, I reckon. Surely of interest to a select few. But so what, in some larger sense? What would I write about? 35

Then I stumbled onto rhetoric. Here was all that language had been to me. There were the practical matters of writing and teaching writing. There were the stylistic devices, the tricks of language use that most people think about when they hear the word *rhetoric*; “Let’s cut through the rhetoric.” It’s nice to have those devices at one’s disposal—nice, even important, to know when those devices are operating. But there is more. Rhetoric’s classic definition as the art of persuasion suggests a power. So much of what we do when we speak or write is suasive in intent. So much of what we receive from others—from family and friends to thirty-second blurbs on TV—is intended to persuade. Recognizing how this is done gives greater power to choose. But rhetoric is still more. 36

Rhetoric is the conscious use of language: “observing in any given case the 37
available means of persuasion,” to quote Aristotle (I.ii). As the conscious use of
language, rhetoric would include everything that is conveyed through language:
philosophy, history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, literature, politics—“the
use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by
nature respond to symbols,” according to modern rhetorician Kenneth Burke (46).
The definition says something about an essentially human characteristic: our pre-
dilection to use symbols. Language is our primary symbol system. The ability to
learn language is biologically transmitted. Burke’s definition points to language as
ontological, part of our being. And his definition suggests that it is epistemologi-
cal, part of our thinking, an idea others say more about (see Leff).

So to study rhetoric becomes a way of studying humans. Rhetoric becomes for 38
me the complete study of language, the study of the ways in which peoples have
accomplished all that has been accomplished beyond the instinctual. There were
the ancient greats saying that there was political import to the use of language.
There were the modern greats saying that how one comes to know is at least me-
diated by language, maybe even constituted in language. There were the pragmatic
applications. There was the possibility that in teaching writing and in teaching
rhetoric as conscious considerations of language use I could help others like my-
self: players with language, victims of the language of failure.

Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. This account shifts back and forth between the first person (“I”) and the third person (“Victor,” “he”). What effects does that shifting create? Does it break any rules you’ve been taught?
2. How does Villanueva define *rhetoric*? What else does he say that studying rhetoric helps you study?
3. Have you ever tried observing and imitating the writing moves that other writers make, as Villanueva describes doing with his English teachers (“Professorial Discourse Analysis”)? If so, what was your experience doing so? If not, what would you need to look for in order to do the kind of imitation Villanueva describes?
4. In paragraph 6, Villanueva describes his college writing process as, “The night before a paper was due, he’d gather pen and pad, and stare. Clean the dishes. Stare. Watch an ‘I Love Lucy’ rerun. Stare. Then sometime in the night the words would come.” (A few more sentences finish his description.) What elements of this process resemble your own? How is yours different?
5. Villanueva is describing his own experience of encountering affirmative action—how he benefited from it, and how it also had some negative effects. Was this an account you might have expected to hear? If not, how did it differ from your perceptions of affirmative action?
6. In telling the story of his writing process and being called into Mrs. Ray’s office (para. 7), Villanueva suggests that he expected Mrs. Ray would take issue with his

writing style of “discovering what to write by writing, no prior thesis statement, no outline, just a vague notion of what would materialize, magically, while writing.” How does that story reflect your own experience of being taught how writing is supposed to happen?

7. Did you attend other colleges before attending the one at which you’re using this book? Villanueva describes the difference between his community college and the University of Washington (paras. 5–21). If you’ve attended both two-year and four-year schools, what differences do you see? If you’ve attended different schools of the same sort, what were the differences? Can you see your experiences at different schools as acquiring different “literacies”?
8. In a number of places in this excerpt, Villanueva talks not just about “literacy sponsors” but about authors whose ideas about writing and teaching writing shaped his own. Before coming to college, what authors had you read that shaped your thinking about writing?

Applying and Exploring Ideas

1. Villanueva writes that “school became my obsession,” and yet he describes struggling with writing for school. In other words, he ran the risk of being barred from doing the thing he loved because of his writing. Consider the activities you most love being part of: was there ever a moment where language or writing threatened to (or did) bar your access to them? Or where language or writing provided your gateway to them? Write a two- to three-page descriptive narrative (imitate Villanueva’s style, if you like) about that situation.
2. Analyze Villanueva’s piece here using Brandt’s notion of literacy sponsorship. What literacy sponsors appear in Villanueva’s literacy narrative? (Start by making as complete a list as you can.) What did these sponsors allow and limit?
3. Do some Professorial Discourse Analysis of two college or high school teachers you’ve had. What did they each expect from your writing? Did they agree or differ in their expectations? Describe their expectations in two to three pages, and give specific examples of what each expected.
4. Look up information about Robert Kaplan’s “contrastive rhetoric.” Write a two-to three-page explanation describing contrastive rhetoric and explaining why might it have helped a student like Villanueva make sense of his own experiences in college.

Meta Moment

Do you think differently about anything (ideas about writing, social issues) after reading Villanueva than you did coming into it? What, and how?