REVIEWS

Making It: A Myth in Academic Life

by
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Rev. of Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color, by Victor Villanueva, Jr. Urbana IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993. 151 pages. Paper. $16.95; $12.95, members.

A life of genteel poverty. An idealist removed from life, living in an ivory tower. A parasite of the state, making a living by—of all things—reading and writing: what other images can we conjure up about the life of an academic? Recent reports and full length books critiquing academic life are abundant, and many project these very images. These images of the academy, however, rarely coincide with the actual life of the academic professional, and if for that reason alone, Victor Villanueva's Bootstraps is a welcome dose of reality.

One week after I'd finished the book, the image that kept swirling in my head was of the assistant professor "stalking about at Safeway at six in the morning so as not to be seen with the food stamps legally tendered, ashamed despite full knowledge of the economics of color, the workings of hegemony" (139). There is nothing tweedy, nerdy, or elitist about this academic's situation. To use the term Villanueva coins earlier in the book, he has become "the destitute-employed-professional" (117), and in that one expression, Villanueva's brilliant critique of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is made concrete and accessible.

The academic autobiography invariably is not pure autobiography, but a mixed-genre of autobiography, analytical essay, and fiction, switching occasionally between first- and third-person points of view. Increasingly, the form is finding its way unto bookshelves necessarily restricted to university campuses. Within English studies, Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundaries seems to be the first such work of the current generation, and it has reached the status of the genre's straw man, the starting point from which other writers depart because of its shortcomings or omissions. But also within this group one can include Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands / La Frontera, James Phelan's Beyond the Tenure Track, Richard Rodriguez's Hunger of Desire, Keith Gilyard's Voices of the Self, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s Colored People, as well as Toni McNaron's I Dwell In Possibilities.

What Villanueva's work brings to this genre is his own unrelenting critique of class in America. A respected professor at UCLA, Rose describes his working class upbringing and offers a from-here-to-there American tale. Anzaldua's critique of class, though always implicit, is not her first and foremost concern. As his title suggests, however, socio-economic class is Villanueva's primary concern. The title alludes to the American myth of rugged individualism, the consuming "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. . . . It is America's dominant ideology" (121). For many, however, the bootstrap mentality, even when one has made it according to its terms, remains an unrealized, unachievable role in the unfolding economic drama of late capitalism. This is especially true in academic life, since in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century those seeking positions in institutions of higher learning, particularly American universities and colleges, invariably came from wealthy backgrounds. One of the enduring ironies of Villanueva's book is that, in many respects, he has "made it." And yet, from his position as an associate professor at Northern Arizona University, Villanueva writes, "My boots are on. But they pinch" (121). For some, the fit is better than for others.

Villanueva is a New York Puerto Rican; he is also a rhetorician, trained in Greek and Latin classics. His critique of his education draws on the works of Cicero, Quintilian, and Plato, among others, but he also draws from the works

of more contemporary theorists, primarily Paulo Friere and Antonio Gramsci. Villanueva takes the reader from his neighborhood through his elementary and secondary years through his time in the military during the Vietnam era to his years as an assistant professor at a Midwestern university, where he was socially and racially isolated. The inter-weaving of classical rhetorical theory and contemporary pedagogical and cultural theory with Villanueva's own story makes for fascinating and difficult reading—fascinating in that the synthesis he offers is ingenious; difficult in that his story is a backlash through the equation that literacy and education equal economic stability. And of course this is precisely Villanueva's point. To be literate and well educated is no guarantee of economic success; the educational degree is just a degree, not a vocational key to the door of the American dream. That last sentence reads pedantic and self-righteous, something Villanueva manages to avoid while still making his message ring true, truer than anything I can bring to this review.

Bootstraps is a timely antidote to the polemics machinated by people like Roger Kimball in Tenured Radicals, Dinesh D'Souza in Illiberal Education, or William Bennett, who seems bent on making a career out of education-crisis rhetoric. Villanueva's plan for English studies will surprise many, combining in a thoughtful manner the notions of E. D. Hirsch in Cultural Literacy with the antithetical ideas of Paulo Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Those in the humanities will be drawn to this literacy narrative, written from the perspective of an organic intellectual, one who is still analyzing his and his culture's notion of "making it."