

THIS ISN'T BUSINESS, IT'S PERSONAL: PERSONAL NARRATIVES
IN THE FIELD OF COMPOSITION STUDIES

by

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ABSTRACT

I focus on three critical autobiographies in the field of composition studies: Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*, Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, and Victor Villanueva, Jr.'s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. When I analyze the three critical autobiographies, I break down the culture, language, and ethos integrated into the personal narratives. Culture is the behavior, attitude, traditions, and expectations of a group of people or of a particular institution (i.e., education, home, religion, workplace, and so on). Much of my analysis of culture derives from cultural psychology and relies on the theory of Jerome Bruner as well as Clifford Geertz: scholars outside of composition studies who talk about personal narratives mainly reference Bruner's works. Language is the vernacular, the discourse, the dialect, and the ideology of a people or institution. I realize that culture and language are intertwined, which explains my recognizing a person's culture by way of the language she uses. Much of my analysis of language comes from sociolinguistics. Also, ethos (or character or personal ethos) is the virtue, good value, and high merit an institution or culture sees in its members; ethos also is one's commitment to an institution's or culture's traditions and customs. Much of my analysis of ethos comes from classical and modern rhetoric. I have come to realize a necessity for the personal in order to understand various features of culture, language, and character—aspects Gilyard, Rose, and Villanueva, Jr. express in their autobiographies and aspects students may better articulate in their writing tasks.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; my wife, Regina; and my late paternal grandmother, Emma Lou.

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I am pleased to have this opportunity to thank my wife and fellow scholar, Regina L. Golar, for believing in me and trusting my work ethic. My gratitude toward you is long overdue: thank you and I love you. I am truly blessed to have had the Lord by my side, providing the strength and attentiveness I needed to carry me through the last thirteen months.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Approach

My research focuses on three “critical autobiographies” in the field of composition studies (Hindman “Special Focus” 37): Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America’s Educationally Underprepared*, Keith Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, and Victor Villanueva, Jr.’s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*.¹ In his autobiography, Mike Rose describes his admittance into higher education as a student, writing tutor, and writing instructor. Keith Gilyard talks about the dual roles he maintained in the school system as a student and as a friend of the streets. Also, Victor Villanueva, Jr. explains the hardships of his childhood community and depicts his experiences as a young scholar in the academy.

I examine the autobiographies for several reasons. The authors’ respective experiences resemble experiences I had as an adolescent and as a young adult—my personal connection to Rose’s, Gilyard’s, and Villanueva, Jr.’s works inspired me to learn more about personal narratives. Also, when I was an undergraduate freshman, I integrated my own voice and my personal experiences in academic paper assignments. Last, I want to reveal to writing instructors and freshman composition students the characteristics of scholarly personal narratives in order to help them develop effective personal narrative essays. The latter two points are most relevant:

¹ Victor Villanueva defines critical autobiographies as “autobiography mixed with the theoretical [/ theory]” (see Jane Hindman’s introduction to the “SPECIAL FOCUS” section of *College English* in the first issue of volume sixty-four, page 37).

when I think about Marilyn Cooper and Cynthia Selfe's work, "Computer Conferences and Learning: Authority, Resistance, and Internally Persuasive Discourse," I recall their desire to shift educational practices from traditional pedagogy to student-centered pedagogy and to have students "become comfortable with the ideas presented in the course" (Cooper and Selfe 848).² I envision the use of personal narratives as contributing to students' comfort levels as they share particular experiences of their past. I understand that some students are uncomfortable writing about themselves, that some writing instructors are not open to the idea of using students' lives as subjects of writing assignments, or that issues exist for both parties. Perhaps I romanticize the role personal narratives play for students and that my romanticizing perhaps overshadows the general concerns a few scholars have about teaching the personal narrative in undergraduate courses; however, the goal I seek to accomplish with this research may aid those writing instructors and scholars that view personal narratives differently than me.

For instance, various scholars who negatively perceive the use of personal narratives, find personal narratives harmful and risky, and they doubt that the personal narrative as a discourse benefits students. Dan Morgan, Marilyn Valentino, Susan Swartzlander, Diane Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler discuss the potential dangers of reading students' personal narratives. In his work "Ethical Issues Raised by Students' Personal Writing," Dan Morgan questions the use of personal narratives and struggles to understand the role of the teacher when in a personal narrative essay a student commits a murder, thinks about suicide, experiences sexual and drug abuse, or recuperates from a date rape (318-321). Morgan knows that "to address writing issues seems cold, and frankly, irrelevant" when students write about substance and physical abuses (320). I believe a writing instructor distances herself from the student's experience when the

² Cooper, Marilyn, and Cynthia Selfe. "Computer Conferences and Learning: Authority, Resistance, and Internally Persuasive Discourse." *College English* 52.8 (1990): 847-69.

writing instructor only pays attention to the structure, style, and grammar of the student's narrative. Moreover, Marilyn Valentino, in her article "Responding When a Life Depends on It: What to Write in the Margins When Students Self-Disclose," shares her insecurities about responding to students' personal narratives, especially when narratives are not required for assignments. She recalls when one of her students wrote a personal response to Langston Hughes' poem, "Harlem." The student starts by analyzing the persona's emotion but ends her response by loosely confessing a traumatic experience of her own:

When Hughes asks[,] "Does it explode?" He wants to know if you finally just burst violently....Are you filled with rage? Personally, my dreams were shattered [sic], and it wasn't by my own hands. My family took my dream and consumed it like a bunch of vultures. I'll never be able to be the pure, trusting person I once was. I was pushed into society, [sic] and corrupted. My body belonged to the highest bidder. (Valentino 274)

Valentino states that she "instructed [her students] to stick to the poem" when completing their journal responses, but the one student perhaps associated Valentino's instructions with a "personal response" (274). Because the student's response provided an unexpected account of her past, Valentino "wrote nothing" in the margins (274). Her student metaphorically expresses obligations forced on her by her family. She emphasizes that her body is a prized chattel of which others seek to take possession—"My body belonged to the highest bidder." Although the student does not detail her experience, the student's writing disturbs Valentino. Valentino's solution is to "avoid assigning autobiographical essays and even personal responses to readings" (277).

Additionally, in their article “The Ethics of Requiring Students to Write about Their Personal Lives,” Susan Swartzlander, Diane Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler focus on the harm that certain subjects may have on the students: “course requirements that demand self-disclosure can intensify a student’s feelings of abuse and powerlessness” (B1).³ Admittedly, teachers’ discomforts and students’ potential psychological dangers may develop. However, I believe that the discomfort some writing instructors have about personal narratives has less to do with their concern for students’ psychological health. Instead, their discomforts have more to do with their insecurities about reading the narratives and perhaps even their inability to teach the narratives effectively. I also believe that writing instructors have to differentiate *confession* from *disclosure* (a distinction I elaborate on in the concluding chapter). Marilyn Valentino, for instance, uses “self-disclose” in the title of her work. However, the kinds of personal responses her students write fit the category of confession.

For the most part, I know that psychological danger to students may be avoided when writing instructors “insist on tightly assigned topics, which always require prior approval in individual conferences,” and those dangers are avoided more so when writing instructors emphasize, at the beginning of the semester, the writing expectations (Morgan 322).⁴ The issues that have been discussed by these authors vary from teacher to teacher, which is why I work toward talking about the characteristics of scholarly personal narratives to enable writing

³ At the time *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published Swartzlander, Pace, and Lee Stamler’s article, the authors worked at Grand Valley State University. Susan Swartzlander was an assistant professor of English. Diane Pace was a psychologist and director of the counseling center. Virginia Lee Stamler was a psychologist and director of training at the counseling center.

⁴ Also, read bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*. In her work, hooks states that she informs her students about everything that will take place during the semester—she lets her students know that they will not only write personal narratives but also share their personal narratives with their peers. She gives the students the opportunity to either stay in the course or leave the course. She understands that every student is not comfortable sharing her personal experiences.

teachers to recognize the personal narrative's effectiveness, which carries over into the writing classroom.

I specifically examine the critical autobiographies of Mike Rose, Keith Gilyard, and Victor Villanueva, Jr. because the field of composition studies has overlooked the influence and impact such texts may have on other scholars, young and old pedagogues, and students of color. Each author invites his audience into the depths of his experience, not to gloat or seek pity but to explain and validate the influence of education, academia, and community and what it means for a minority to encounter these types of institutions. The face of the classroom has changed and will continue to change—composition classes no longer consist only of Caucasian students from the middle class; students of minority status enter the academy and struggle with retention partly because their voices go unnoticed. Moreover, each author's theory about the "world" boldly depicts realities of inner city communities, languages, and values that receive little attention from members of composition studies. Such realities, unfortunately, hold great value to scholars outside of the field—scholars to which pedagogues and scholars of composition studies refer. Why not focus on the critical autobiographies that may relate to the students who face the challenge of freshman composition and its writing traditions and textual subjects that students do not readily find engaging? In other words, Rose's, Gilyard's, and Villanueva, Jr.'s works are texts with which the field may start in order to develop discussions within the field about culture, language, and character.

Personal Investment

When I examine Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, Gilyard's *Voices of the Self*, and Villanueva, Jr.'s *Bootstraps*, I see bits of myself in each autobiography. I was the student who,

like Keith Gilyard, managed both the book smarts and the street smarts. I proved to my neighborhood peers that I was down for whatever, even if it meant fighting against another gang, smoking enough marijuana until my lips turned black, or joy riding in stolen cars. At the same time, I worked consistently on maintaining a good scholastic reputation. If running the streets during the day entailed breaking locks on idle-freight trains to snag boxes filled with glass cookie jars, by nightfall I had buried my nose in math problems of Advanced Trigonometry. If studying during the week for major tests or academic competitions overshadowed my social life, getting frisked by Chicago's finest haunted my weekend.⁵

I also was the student who, like Victor Villanueva, Jr., refrained from accepting the calls of my environment. I would hear the loud cries of my "high" uncles and their "high" friends—cries that shook the walls of my bedroom. Too many times, my money disappeared from new hiding places. My home lacked emotional and psychological security. My home had become the dwelling place where relatives robbed me, cheated me, and fixated on their next fix.

I needed an escape from the two-times-a-week police raids. I needed to escape running into salivating elders and their shaky hands. I needed an emergency exit from the in-house drug supply my father provided. I needed a different window from which to view the world: the dangers of the outside grew roots on the inside of the home.

When the opportunity arrived for me to enroll in college, I did not let it pass me by. However, after my admission to college, like Mike Rose and some of the students he worked with, I felt underprepared to engage in discourses rooted in the middle-class curricula. I did not understand the first-generation college student's requirement, "work harder than most of your peers." I had no idea that the high school education in which I triumphed did little to prepare me for the small liberal arts college education predominantly populated by whites. The high school

⁵ "Chicago's finest" is another way of saying Chicago's Police Department or police officers or detectives.

education could not compare to my white male and female counterparts' high school education from which they came. Their third generation ties to the college probably meant that their academic achievement resulted from their presence, which was already determined and in place.

Interests for the Academy

When I analyze the three critical autobiographies, I break down the culture, language, and ethos integrated into the personal narratives. Culture is the behavior, attitude, traditions, and expectations of a group of people or of a particular institution (i.e., education, home, religion, workplace, and so on). Much of my analysis of culture derives from cultural psychology and relies on the theory of Jerome Bruner as well as Clifford Geertz: scholars outside of composition studies who talk about personal narratives mainly reference Bruner's works.⁶ Language is the vernacular, the discourse, the dialect, and the ideology of a people or institution. I realize that culture and language may intertwine, which explains the rationale behind "vernacular cultures" or simply my recognizing the culture from which one comes due to one's style of language. Much of my analysis of language comes from sociolinguistics. Also, ethos (or character or personal ethos) is the virtue, good value, and high merit an institution or culture sees in its members; ethos also is one's commitment to an institution's or culture's traditions and customs. Much of my analysis of ethos comes from classical and modern rhetoric.⁷

Moreover, I use Rose's, Gilyard's, and Villanueva, Jr.'s texts for this research because scholars of English and pedagogues of freshmen composition continue to debate about the kinds

⁶ When I started the project and delve into scholarship that focused on the narrative, I stumbled on the reputation of Jerome Bruner. No matter the author and her field, she referenced Jerome Bruner's works. Throughout my research, I make numerous references to Bruner. To better understand "culture" and its relationship with personal narratives, I read Bruner's *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life; Acts of Meaning; The Culture of Education*; and "Life as Narrative"—all of which contribute to my development of a definition and an analysis of culture.

⁷ Although I mainly refer to Bruner for culture, I refer to other works that help develop the cultural analysis of the three autobiographies. The same happens with my analysis of language and ethos: I refer to different scholars and texts rather than one main scholar.

of texts freshmen should read, analyze, and emulate as they learn how to transition into other prose writing styles.

Present debates trickled down from the debate that took place mid 20th century. In the 1950s, *College English* published the debate between Wayne Booth and Gerald Thorson. Booth, in his article “Imaginative Literature Is Indispensable,” supported using literature in the composition course. Booth believed that some English literature (and not all literature) could “produce results in thinking, speaking, and writing” (Booth 35). Booth argued that “properly chosen imaginative literature” benefits the students more than any randomly taught literature (35). Imaginative literature, according to Booth, provides a “stimulus for thinking and writing,” it is a “source of subject matter,” and serves “as a model for style and grammar” (35). According to Gerald Thorson, there was a need to make sure the freshman student received the kind of education that was vital to her college experience in the fifties. He did not think literature should disappear from the writing course. He would rather use literature for the writing course and no other material. In his article “Literature: The Freshman’s Key,” Thorson asserts, “Literature should not only have a definite and prominent place in the freshman course: it should be the core of the course” (40). Booth’s argument supports literature, but not all literature, while Thorson supports literature and nothing else.⁸ Today, discussions continue, but rather than solely focus on the texts, some scholars talk about getting rid of freshman composition in general or transforming freshman composition into a service course that benefits the other colleges and

⁸ The other major debate featured Erika Lindemann and Gary Tate; it took place in the 1990s. Lindemann argues in “Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature,” that integrating literature in the freshman writing classroom does not prepare students to write for courses outside of the English discipline (Lindemann 311). Gary Tate, on the other hand, supports the use of literature in the writing course. He wonders if transforming freshman composition courses into a “place to teach students to write academic discourse” is the appropriate move, “so that they [the students] might ‘succeed as writers in the academy’ or in order that they might ‘join the conversations that education enables,’ to use Erika Lindemann’s elegant characterization” (Tate 319). He mocks Lindemann’s idea. He has a problem with her statement because he doesn’t want the writing course to be labeled as the course that caters to other disciplines.

disciplines on major universities (See Sharon Crowley's *Composition in the University* and the third issue of *College English's* fifty-fifth volume).

I analyze the three critical autobiographies because as personal narratives, they fall between the category of literary and non-literary texts. With Rose, Villanueva, Jr., and Gilyard viewed as representatives of composition studies (or composition and rhetoric), their works neither reflect traditional conventions of literature nor reflect traditional conventions of academic prose. The autobiographies offer critical experiences that detail theories about culture, language, and ethos.

The cultural, linguistic, and ethical characteristics the scholars use represent the same characteristics some students may use for personal narrative assignments. The connection I have with Gilyard's, Rose's, and Villanueva, Jr.'s narratives can happen for today's composition students / first-year writing students who comprise *minority* status (i.e., racially, culturally, linguistically, economically, etc.).⁹ Students should reach a point in their academic successes when their voices are as powerful as the voices of writing instructors and scholars. In his book *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, Robert Nash explores how personal narratives provide meaning for the experiences we remember. More important, he mentions students' limited opportunities to use first-person in academic essays:

[T]hey [students] were given so few opportunities to write in the first-person voice; therefore, this type of project [scholarly personal narrative] stands out even now. I have heard this particularly from people of color who have had to suppress their strong, distinct voices, along with their anger, for years in the academy. (2)

⁹ By minority status, I also include students who are not only underprepared and underrepresented but also multilingual and multicultural.

Unfortunately, students matriculate through an educational system that teaches them to write objectively, so students' voices are underdeveloped and their potentials are unfulfilled. Students do not bring with them their narrative voices because of the expectations of the educational school system. Because narrating is a communicative skill students have long acquired from their respective cultures and communities, such a skill should find rejuvenation in personal narrative assignments.

The kinds of students I envision are of minority descent. They are students from communities different from the academic community. In their work "Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen: A Multifield Approach for Today's Composition Students," Stephen Accardi and Bethany Davila contend that in higher education, mainstream students (prepared, privileged, and mainly non-ethnic, and whose primary dialect is Standard American English) are becoming the minority in numbers.¹⁰ So, instead of writing instructors developing separate pedagogies for basic writing, English composition, and ESL students, writing instructors should consider unified pedagogies and lesson plans that are beneficial for the new face of students enrolled in many colleges. As a minority having gone through an undergraduate experience that placed me at odds with the writing expectations of my professors and members of my cohort, I think about the influence my work may have on the underprepared, underrepresented students.

A Literature Review

Gilyard's, Rose's, and Villanueva, Jr.'s works (stylistically, rhetorically, and/or structurally) present the narrators' cultures, languages, and characters. In Gilyard's

¹⁰ In their work "Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen: A Multifield Approach for Today's Composition Students," Accardi and Davila mainly focus on the two-year colleges / community colleges of higher education where minority students typically outnumber "mainstream" students. More important, Accardi and Davila discuss potential pedagogical strategies for composition students, who today are not comprised of mainstream learners. Students in the composition classroom are ESL, basic writing, and mainstream learners.

autobiography *Voices of the Self*, the author discusses his urban community life, bidialectal speaking patterns (Standard English and African American Vernacular English), and working-class ideologies. In Villanueva, Jr.'s autobiography *Bootstraps*, the author discusses immigrant versus minority concepts as well as bidialectal speaking patterns (Spanglish) and urban community life. In Rose's autobiography *Lives on the Boundary*, the author discusses working-class ideologies as well as immigrant versus minority concepts. All three authors share their experiences as underrepresented individuals in an educational school system and as participants of varying communicative practices. Although I mention only a few qualities inherent in the narrators' experiences, the cultural, linguistic, and ethical attributes of their experiences provide perspectives to which today's underrepresented students can relate.

Because my research focuses specifically on three aspects of personal narratives (e.g., culture, language, and character), my agenda differs from the works about narrative that many narrative and literary theorists have discussed in the past. Three movements developed from scholars' examination of the narrative. The study of narrative first featured a grammar of narrative that earlier scholars, such as Gérard Genette, Arthur Coleman Danto, and Paul Ricoeur discussed in their respective works. They analyzed narrative events as well as tense, mood, and time. Second, scholars like William Labov and Robert Scholes focused on narrative use. They examined the influence language has on narrative construction. Later, scholars like Gerald Prince and Frank Kermode focused on narrative meaning; they believed narrative meaning developed by comparing / contrasting different narratives or recognizing narratives' implicit ideas.

John Rodden, author of "How Do Stories Convince Us? Notes towards a Rhetoric of Narrative," talks about scholars moving away from prescriptive notions about personal narratives

and focusing on rhetorical notions about personal narratives. He asserts, “The pioneering scholarly work in literary theory and narrative aesthetics . . . has focused chiefly on the *how* of narrative, posing questions about storytelling and story construction within the grammatical orbit” (149). Grammatical orbit or narrative grammar, in other words, refers to a set of rules for understanding and developing narratives that narrative theorists have found prevalent throughout various narratives. The pioneers of narrative analysis Rodden refers to are not only Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes but also scholars like Gérard Genette, Arthur Coleman Danto, Paul Ricoeur, and several others who focused on the construction of the narrative within the *grammatical orbit*, as Rodden puts it.

French literary theorist Gérard Genette, in both of his works *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* and *Narrative Discourse: Revisited*, focuses on oral and written narratives via grammars or characteristics, such as tense (the duration, speed, and frequency in narratives), mood (the discourse narrators use: perspective, “focalization,” and mood itself), and voice (differences in levels and persons).¹¹ Genette focuses on a “grammar” of narrative that emphasizes the verb, tense, mood, and voice as “defining unit[s]” in narrative sentences (Rodden 149).

Furthermore, American philosopher Arthur Coleman Danto advances the discussion about narrative in his work *Narration and Knowledge*. He examines narrative syntax and recognizes a distinction among events while changing the focus from prose to poetry. He states that narrative sentences “refer to at least two time-separated events though they only *describe*

¹¹ Pages 33-262 of Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* and pages 21-113 of Genette’s *Narrative Discourse: Revisited*. When Genette talks about “levels,” he refers to the “heterodiegetic narrator” versus the “homodiegetic narrator.” The former is simply a narrator who is not a character in the story and the latter is a narrator who is a character in the story.

(are only *about*) the earliest event to which they refer” (Danto 143).¹² In other words, the earliest event (E_{-1}) receives top priority over the latter event (E_{-2}), as in Danto’s analysis of William Butler Yeats’ poem “Leda and the Swan”: “[E_{-1}] A shudder in the loins engenders there / The broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And [E_{-2}] Agamemnon dead” (qtd. in Danto 151). According to Danto’s analysis, “Yeats’s sentence refers to the rape of Leda and to the death of Agamemnon, but it describes only the raping of Leda” (152). The analysis illustrates the function of narrative syntax: the importance of an event receives recognition when it appears first in two time-separated events of a sentence. Danto focuses on the content of the event in relation to the syntactical structure, but he does not address the effect of the content.

The works of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur also focus on narrative; however, Ricoeur targets a different grammar of narrative—time. In his trilogy of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur talks about the “fictive experience,” which is “the temporal aspect of this virtual experience of being-in-the-world proposed by the text” (100).¹³ In other words, when we read literature, it captivates us and makes us feel that fictive worlds (the settings, the situations, and the actions) happen concurrently with real time. Although the relevance of Ricoeur’s entire trilogy lies outside the scope of my project, for the most part, Ricoeur argues that the passing of time described in a text differs from the reading time of the text. I gather from the *grammaticality* of narrative concerning time (or duration) the notion that the real world disconnects from the fictive experience because time-in-the-text does not parallel time-in-the-real, regardless if we as readers try to think otherwise. Like Ricoeur, Genette emphasizes that the time mentioned in a narrated event differs from the time it takes the reader to read the narrated event. Genette calls these two elements “pseudo-time” as the duration of the narrative and “pseudo-iterative” as the duration of

¹² Danto, Arthur Coleman. *Narration and Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University, 1985.

¹³ *Time and Narrative* is a three volume series. The quotation I use comes from Ricoeur’s second volume.

the reading act (22-23). Ricoeur's and Genette's theories complicate the way a reader approaches an experienced event and a narrated event, for the narrated event can never mirror the experienced event as long as grammatical concepts of time apply.

Fortunately, when theorists and philosophers explored narrative syntax, "such a grammar of narrative," according to John Rodden, "[had] been invaluable for building a taxonomy of storytelling features and distinctions that can be separated and categorized" (149). So, whenever a scholar discussed narrative, she relied on the scholarship that focused on varying explanations about narrative grammar. As sociologist Catherine Reissman points out in her work *Narrative Analysis*, the narrative became a subject many fields studied, which demonstrated that "narrative [did] not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field" (Reissman 1).

Interestingly, the subject of narrative studies shifted from narrative grammar to something more practical. Scholars who discussed narrative grammar influenced others to focus on narrative pragmatics—a concentration on the use of personal narratives rather than a predominant concentration on personal narrative structure. The understanding of narrative transformed from recognizing the surface to acknowledging the content. Among the contemporary scholars who have examined narrative pragmatics, sociolinguist William Labov is most referenced. Labov's 1972 collection, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, examines the narrative to show its pragmatic, semantic, and structural significance. In his work, Labov analyzes African American preadolescents', adolescents', and adults' "black English vernacular" (BEV) (Reissman 1; Labov *Language* 3). When using the narrative of personal experience, Labov states, "the speaker becomes deeply involved in rehearsing or even reliving events of the past" (*Language* 354). His data—the recorded speech of "leaders of vernacular speech groups in south-central Harlem"—presents each speaker's

verbal skills which “illustrate the structural features of narrative” (355). Labov contends that every narrative has an abstract (“what was this [story] about?”), orientation (“who, when, what, where?”), complicating action (“then what happened?”), evaluation (“so what?”), resolution (“what finally happened?”), and coda, which signals that “the narrative is finished” (370).

Labov’s work differs from earlier narrative studies: the artifacts of Labov’s study are not literature; they consist of oral narratives from one-on-one interviews. Labov researches both the structure and the language of oral narratives.

From Labov’s study, I recognize the pragmatic, semantic, and structural benefits and functions of the narrative. As far as structure is concerned, Labov confirms that six parts comprise the narrative: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. He concludes that a narrator may include the orientation in any part of the narrative and exclude the abstract from the narrative. As for pragmatics, Labov’s study reports that members of particular cultures (i.e., African American culture) rely on a narrative discourse to tell about their experiences. It is within the narrative where mimicry of another person’s speech helps the narrator to make his audience members feel as though they were present in the experience. As for semantics, Labov’s analysis of BEV reveals that meaning in language develops due to relationships between words and phrases. For example, Labov explains that when a person says, “I put something on it” (or “[I] *put something on someone*”), the speaker really means that he hit something hard or hit the other person hard (359). The analysis of the narrative, thus, focuses on the content—as understood from Labov’s study; a narrator’s vernacular becomes the instrument for whatever sound analysis develops about the narrative.

Because something as keen and witty as the vernacular a particular group uses is a variation of language, the focus of narrative study requires knowledge about the content—

language. In his article “Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative,” literary critic Robert Scholes argues that the mystery of the narrative derives from the complexity of language. His theory follows that of Charles S. Peirce in that “A word in any language carries with it a semantic field of potential meanings which is partly governed by a social code and partly individualized by the unique features of whoever utters or interprets the word” (Scholes 207). In other words, certain vocabulary holds greater significance to a community than do others (i.e., “opium” versus “heroin”; “hoagie” versus “submarine sandwich”). Scholes states that people or critics (in general) must understand language before they can understand narrative. He states, “We *must* consider the nature of language because many of the problems and confusions in our thought about narrative stem from what seem to me to be a set of misconceptions about language itself” (Scholes 204). So, what does it profit a man reading narratives if the language of the narrative confuses him? Fortunately, Labov, for example, provides several footnotes to explicate the vernacular most familiar to the Harlem natives. More to the point, Scholes’ argument connects with Labov’s research on language use in narratives.

Furthermore, language manipulates the information that is recounted, according to Roland Barthes. In the work *Narrative and the Self*, Anthony Paul Kerby explores the structural meaning of narratives as they relate to personal experiences. He piggybacks a comment Barthes makes about language’s influence on personal experience: “Barthes views narratives as an integrative way in which the past is given a meaning it otherwise lacks, a meaning that is actually a play of language that is far from ideologically innocent in its ‘recounting’” (qtd. in Kerby 94).¹⁴ I find interesting Barthes’ notion about language: on the one hand, language cannot help but to be manipulative, i.e. controllable, maneuvering, or instructional. On the other hand, language or narrative discourse omits certain details of history. With the amount of space a

¹⁴ Kerby, Anthony Paul. *Narrative and the Self*. Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1991.

narrative occupies, a narrator would find impossible the notion to include everything about a particular experience.¹⁵ From such an understanding, Barthes' and Scholes' impressions of language and narrative demonstrate not only scholars' struggles to handle narratives but also scholars' complexities of both building and understanding a narrative.

I realize that the study of narrative has shifted from focusing solely on grammar. Because of the change in the study of narrative, grammar and meaning have become the foci. A few scholars who have demonstrated such narrative analysis are Gerald Prince, Frank Kermode, and Hayden White. According to literary critic Gerald Prince, narrative meaning develops from narratology, which "studies the form and functioning of narrative and tries to account for narrative competence. . . . [I]t examines what all narratives have in common—narratively speaking—and what enables them to be narratively different" ("Narrative Analysis" 181-82; *Narratology* 4-5).¹⁶ In other words, for one to understand a narrative, one has to compare and contrast it to another narrative. I would imagine that each narrative would belong to the same genre, field, or discipline.

Although literary critic Frank Kermode does not refer to narratology, I relate his argument to it. In his work "Secrets and Narrative Sequence," Kermode argues that readership is important to narratives because depending on the audience and the audience's knowledge with the narrative, the narrative either receives thorough attention or receives elementary attention. He asserts that narratives have "secrets"—which sometimes are the distorted information integrated in the work—that go unacknowledged by readers who "underread" but keep busy the

¹⁵ "Space" could range from the amount of time a person has to convey the experience relevant to a situation and/or the number of pages a narrator has to convey the experience to an audience.

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov coined the term "narratology" in 1969 (Riessman 1).

“overreaders” who are “members of a special academic class” (88).¹⁷ The common trait or technique involved with constructing narratives is the amount of secrets embedded within them. I wonder if the excitement about the personal narrative has much to do with the mystery scholars try to discover—the very act of discovery perhaps keeps the scholar entertained.

To use Kermode’s concept of narrative secrets as a point of departure, I consider some of the secrets to be elements of narratives that others may view as suspicious acts on the part of the author / narrator. Take for example early historians’ issues with narrative meaning wherein they see narrative as “exclusive” (White 7). In his work “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” historiographer Hayden White references the tradition of earlier historiographers: they preferred to rely on the “annals form” of historical events. They viewed the narrative as manipulative, for language used in narratives excluded important information and / or was bound to embed cultural biases; or, rather that narratives exclude universal, credible notions of the past. White contends that early historians “refused narrative . . . on the assumption that the meaning of the events in which they wished to deal did not lend itself to representation in the narrative mode” (White 6).¹⁸ Therefore, historians valued evidence, such as timelines or what White calls the “annals form,” which included bulleted historical events (9). White, however, emphasizes a need to change old concepts about recounting the past. He suggests that historiographers build on the annals form to develop the “history proper” (or the historical narrative) which reveals the complete narrative that exemplifies the “discourse of the real” rather

¹⁷ According to Kermode, the person who under-reads is the one authors bank most of their success on because they know the one who does not try to scrutinize the work is the one who finds pleasure in the content that resides at the surface. However, the over-reader, who typically takes the role as critic, reads the text so “minute[ly], intense[ly], and slow[ly]” (88).

¹⁸ White references Alexis de Tocqueville, Jacob Christoph Burckhardt, Johan Huizinga, and Fernand Braudel as the early historians.

than the “discourse of the imaginary” (20 and 23).¹⁹ White specifies the kind of history proper he wants the field to pursue: a discourse of the real, which differs from a discourse of the imaginary, such as the discourse writers use for fictional works. Because I consider the former (discourse of the real) for personal narratives, I do not support the notion that narratives will maintain suspicious acts on the part of the author / narrator. What early historians worried about and what Frank Kermode addresses (i.e., narrative secrets), would not be labeled exclusive; rather, the elements of the narrative would include the cultural, linguistic, and ethical perspectives of the author / narrator.

Although scholars viewed narratives as culturally biased, linguistically manipulative, or morally exclusive, I value the shift that took place in narrative studies. For the most part, I fuse and invert the biases about the narrative’s exclusiveness and manipulation to help guide our use of personal narratives. My work addresses the use of language, culture, and even character in personal narratives to demonstrate how the elements that scholars once disregarded or ridiculed now critically develop the narrative. Moreover, my ending with Hayden White’s argument to construct the historical narrative and use a discourse of the real develops the kind of personal narrative we are to ask our composition students to construct. By analyzing the scholarly critical autobiographies *Voices of the Self*, *Bootstraps*, and *Lives on the Boundary*, I highlight the stylistic and rhetorical moves the writers make. The autobiographies provide narrative meanings students may implement into their personal narratives. Although my initial perception of the personal narrative includes the conventions of fiction, the personal narrative in composition studies is not to be confused with the narrative in creative writing because the former includes a retelling of events not necessarily through characters and plots but through people and situations.

¹⁹ The general understanding of “discourse of the real,” is that reality is or real events are made desirable. It suggests that the historical narrative “reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished’” (White 24).

Bringing Focus back Home

To recap, scholars, like early historians, believed that the narrative fictionalized experiences, so they did not trust a written story; yet, when the personal narrative adheres to the role of historical narrative or what Hayden White calls the discourse of the real, the personal narrative evokes a distinguished role for advocates of the nonfictional personal narrative. Fictionalizing historical events did not interest the early historians. According to Hayden White and Robert Scholes, scholars grew suspicious of the narrative because when a scholar places historical events in narrative form, she excludes pivotal events; earlier historians realized that language in the narrative is more manipulative and exclusionary than they liked (White 1980). Also, a writer may provide literary allusions or simply include words or concepts that conceal certain information others may overlook or realize (Scholes 1980). In order to understand the full effect of the personal narrative, a reader would have to know how to read into language *per se*. Anthony Kerby also mentions others' apprehensions about the narrative: no one wants to invest in the narrative because the play of language is far from "innocent" (Kerby 94). In other words, the language in personal narratives is rhetorical: depending on the occasion for constructing the narrative or the audience envisioned while writing the narrative, the writer discloses certain details of the past or conceals certain details. Kerby goes on to state that no one wants to accept the notion that "language impose[s] its own cultural forms of expression" within the act of narrating (41). He admits that some readers may not readily accept various narrative forms because some readers may not understand enough about a writer's cultural origins, which influence the way she constructs her narrative. Times have changed: cultural forms may serve as foundations for narratives because as Catherine Reissman points out, "[n]arrators speak in terms

that *seem* natural” (emphasis added, Reissman 5). In other words, we recognize our cultural identities in narratives.

American psychologist Jerome Bruner advocates that nothing is culture-free (*Culture* 14). Because culture exists in everything, he mentions that we can learn about one’s culture by paying attention to one’s narrative. In one of his works, “Life as Narrative,” he states that “one important way of characterizing a culture is by the narrative models it makes available for describing the course of life” (“Life” 15). Bruner’s conception of culture and narrative demonstrates the interdependence between the two, which is why we, according to Reissman, “can analyze how culturally and historically contingent these terms are” (5). For the most part, my understanding of language and culture—as Kerby, Bruner, Scholes, and White discuss both terms in their works—blends the perceptions of each to show a connection that has yet to receive recognition in the scholarship of composition studies.

Just as culture and language interrelate to help produce real past experiences, character (ethos) of the speaker holds a similar value. For instance, for us to recognize character, we must examine language and culture because language becomes the medium that highlights human character, a character that exemplifies the community or culture from which one departs. According to rhetorician James Baumlín, “the technique of conveying human character through language” is called “*ethopoia*” (xii). Furthermore, James Britton, in his work *Language and Learning*, advocates, “we use language as a means of organizing a representation of the world [or ourselves] . . . and that the representation so created constitutes the world we operate in” (7). The world we operate in, as in the culture in which we were raised and the language-patterns (or communicative practices) used, enters our narratives whether we intend it to do so or not. Our world becomes the background that reveals aspects of our respective cultural, ethical, and

linguistic identities. It is no wonder that our “human character,” according to Bauman, “with its particular habits, strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and vices, can be rendered and represented in language” (xii). Because our character consists of various cultural values, ideologies, morals, and behaviors, language helps us to create the types of character we want to share publicly. The personal narrative becomes the frame that captures a particular experience we deem appropriate for a particular time.

In the end, if I am to question the rhetorical value of personal narratives in the writing classroom and argue that 1) narratives are sufficiently problematic and sufficiently critical for the kinds of thinking we want our students to develop and 2) that students encounter more problems than we realize when they transform events into personal narrative discourse, I pose the following questions: As a field, what are we doing with personal narratives? In the composition classroom, why do we—the writing instructors—teach personal narrative assignments? Do we assume students construct personal narratives so naturally that they transform events into narrative discourse unproblematically?²⁰ These questions imply that the narrative as a mode of discourse is hard to grasp, yet I try to reify “personal narrative” to understand the potential benefits we may gather from constructing it.

Scholars within the field of composition studies have talked about the function and benefit of using the personal narrative. According to Jane Hindman, the personal narrative “can promote the material as well as the subversive authority of our own professional discourse” (“Special Focus” 35).²¹ In other words, narrative as a discourse empowers the scholar.

²⁰ These questions also are based on Judith Summerfield’s inquiries in her work “Is There a Life in this Text?”

²¹ This statement comes from Jane Hindman’s introduction to the “SPECIAL FOCUS” section of *College English* in the first issue of volume sixty-four in September of 2001. Scholars who have focused on the problematic and the usefulness of narrative / personal writing are Jane Hindman, Victor Villanueva, Ellen Cushman, Min-Zhan Lu, Anne Ruggles Gere, Deborah Brandt, Ann Herrington, Candace Spigelman, Gesa Kirsch, Patricia Sullivan, and John Schilb.

Sometimes, a writer simply has to “draw on *everything* [she] knows” according to compositionist Patricia Bizzell (vii). The authority of a professional discourse derives from the experience about which the writer willingly talks. Also, Hindman states that “personal writing must be shaped by ‘the conditions of language and its users’” (“Thoughts” 10). Part of Hindman’s point simply emphasizes that the narrative as a discourse must also abide by certain communal conventions. Personal writing is not an individualistic agenda: writers must consider communal approval: like any discourse, as rhetorician Tita French Baumlin in her article “‘A good (wo)man skilled in speaking’: *Ethos*, Self-Fashioning, and Gender in Renaissance England” informs us, narrative “is a circulating, public commodity, since ‘words are public property’” (T. Baumlin 232). More important, the narrative becomes a lens, which helps us to focus on the cultures, languages, and characters of writers / narrators and all other persons involved or mentioned in the narrative. In her article “Composing Culture: A Place for the Personal,” Patricia Sullivan contends, “personal narratives are told within certain cultural frames of intelligibility,” and “if we make these frames visible, we can gain an understanding of how social and cultural relations work to then construct what we take to be our ‘selves’—individuals with particular desires and identities” (46).²² Narrative construction, as exemplified by Hindman’s and Sullivan’s arguments, helps us to locate the identities that scholars bring and now students may bring with them to the page.

To demonstrate the influence of personal narratives, I analyze three key autobiographies in composition studies: *Lives on the Boundary*, *Voices of the Self*, and *Bootstraps*. Throughout my analysis, I discuss three elements of the personal narrative—culture, language, and character—that may serve as guiding principles for freshman composition students when

²² From Sullivan’s “Composing Culture: A Place for the Personal” (2003), which was published in the special issue of *College English*. The issue focuses on personal writing in the discipline.

constructing personal narratives. These academic works can serve as examples of creative, critical works that aid young writers to combine the *personal* and undiscovered ideologies entrenched within the students' respective histories.

In the following chapters of the research, I expand on the information I have shared in this introductory chapter. In **CHAPTER TWO**, I assert a workable definition of “personal narrative,” one that utilizes the nonfictional characteristic of narrative writing. Next, I introduce the theories of culture, language, and character to establish the narrative analysis of the three autobiographies. Also, I reason that language, culture, and ethos are interdependent in narrative construction.

I emphasize the principle of narratology by highlighting similarities and differences between Mike Rose's, Victor Villanueva, Jr.'s, and Keith Gilyard's critical autobiographies. Because no one has thoroughly examined these critical autobiographies as the types of work that can promote the advancement of studying culture, language, and ethos in the field of composition studies as well as the advancement of composition and rhetoric as a field, I feel compelled to explore and analyze the narratives of each text. Bruce Horner argues in his work “Traditions and Professionalization: Reconceiving Work in Composition” that members of the field need to “construct a sense of tradition in Composition as an active and activating force central to its work” (367).²³ The field has many sources from which to form its own canon—works that we immediately refer to when many of us think about language, culture, and character individually. However, the three elements of the personal narrative collectively produce a canon that already has three texts through which we can explore. My statement is not to say that the field already does not have a group of texts to which scholars can refer; I simply argue that we

²³ Horner, Bruce. “Traditions and Professionalization: Reconceiving Work in Composition.” *College Composition and Communication* 51.3 (Feb. 2000): 366-398.

must visit texts that promote multiple identities for the varying identities of young scholars and their students.

I analyze the narratives and divide the analysis into three parts: cultural, linguistic, and ethical (i.e., ethos) implications. In **CHAPTER THREE**, I examine the different and similar cultural and linguistic characteristics of the autobiographies. Similarly, I use **CHAPTER FOUR** to evaluate the character (ethos) of the speakers and demonstrate character's relation with culture and language.

In **CHAPTER FIVE**, I shift from analyzing narratives in scholarship to offering ideas to promote the narrative's complexity and its potential to engage students with familiar subjects of the classroom—themselves. I argue that with proper tutelage, students' personal narratives may provoke the same kind of positive responses scholars have about other scholars' narratives, only that students will understand how their cultures and characters can be embedded in the narratives they share in a particular writing unit. I also attempt to answer the original questions that influenced my research (See page 22). After analyzing the three autobiographies, I revisit my analysis in order to draw attention to the role the narrative plays in each work and the direction, inspiration, and instruction such narratives can provide for young student writers in the composition classroom.

I must also point out that throughout the work, I give voice to my experiences as they resemble ideologies and theories the authors present in their autobiographies. The writing style of this work will include both informal and formal means of communicating my own personal narratives and the separate agendas relevant to different sections of the work. I mention these ideas because my work includes an "I" narrator that both scrutinizes and retells stories relevant to the direction and overall goal of this work.

CHAPTER 2

Defining the Personal Narrative

I define the personal narrative by identifying the kind of narrative composition studies should consider for its own use: The personal narrative is a discourse that writers use to introduce and share experiences that refer to their identities. Cultural, linguistic, and ethical values encompass the identities writers willingly express in the narrative. When compositionists use the personal narrative, the mode of discourse differs from the personal narrative concept to which literati and creative writers refer. However, compositionists integrate the latter groups' aesthetics to develop a real discourse rather than a fictional discourse. The real discourse is synonymous to a discourse of the real—a phrase Hayden White explains as a complete narrative (like the history proper) that does not fictionalize any past events of a narrative (See pages 18-19 of Chapter One). If composition and rhetoric operates as an autonomous field that integrates the personal narrative into its classroom practices and scholarly works, then the personal narrative must become distinguishable from fictional narratives. Otherwise, the field shadows the core of creative writing.²⁴

Historically, the notion of the written narrative arose out of earlier personal oral narratives; yet the written narrative has literary connotations. The conventions of fiction

²⁴ I remember various conversations about the kinds of personal narratives published. Having received my bachelor's and master's degrees in creative writing, and now having pursued my doctorate degree in composition and rhetoric, I have entered conversations with literati, fiction writers, poets, and scholars and pedagogues of composition and rhetoric. Our discussions about the kinds of personal narratives varied from recognizing "personal narrative" as memoir, personal experience, and personal essay, to recognizing "personal narrative" as autobiography, personal narrative, and nonfiction. Interestingly, personal narrative is similar to nonfiction; however, nonfiction is not similar to personal narrative because a nonfictional work does not necessarily have to come from a personal experience. I advocate that composition studies utilizes the kind of narrative that derives from the *personal* / person.

influence the expectations about the narrative. When authors create stories, they include characters, settings, plots, conflicts, rising actions, climaxes, falling actions, and resolutions. The narrative also appears in poetic forms. For example, in both fiction and poetry, writers create settings as characters—such a writing style may fictionalize the connection between the character and the setting.

Yet, the conventions of fiction also exist in the nonfictional story: several composition and rhetoric scholars create, embrace, support, and use the personal narrative, demonstrating the field's adoption of the non-fictional standards of narratives. Although each member of the field does not readily accept the personal narrative as sophisticated prose, the particular mode of discourse has a strong presence in the field via scholarship and pedagogical practices. Personal narratives written by compositionists, composition theorists, practitioners, and student-writers should not include the conventions of fiction as those of us with creative writing backgrounds know those conventions to be; instead, personal narratives should utilize the skeleton or structure of the conventions. Personal narratives should not support the *imaginary* the way fiction tends to do most of the time.

Personal narratives should be, as Anthony Kerby has described in *Narration and the Self*, the link between "A and B" (45). In other words, the narrative should present a logical connection between two events. Personal narratives should be "unavoidably selective" because a narrative about a boy who overcomes the passing of his parents does not have to include the death of his pet or does not have to include Allen Iverson's retirement from professional basketball (Kerby 47). In addition, no one wants to know about the time parents conceived the narrator, the time the narrator began teething, or the time the narrator took two steps before learning to walk. None of those details is important in a story that may focus on events related to

the events of “September 11.” Audience members want to know about a crucial moment worth telling...a life-altering event...a moment in general. William Labov states that “the very concept of narrative demands that we recognize as an essential first step the decision to report an event, and the entailment that it is judged to be reportable” (“Narrative” 38). When such a decision takes place, it is important to recognize how the speaker “occup[ies] more social space than in other conversational exchanges” (Labov, “Some Further Steps” 406). Therefore, when we select events, we choose the right details relevant to a particular moment in order to “carry enough interest for the audience” (406). Also, personal narratives should convey more than one dominant truth, as Judith Summerfield proclaims in “Is there a Life in this Text? Reimagining Narrative” (180). A perspective from which my narrative derives is simply a perspective and not the only perspective on which others may solely depend. Because the personal narrative, according to historiographer Hayden White, serves as a “metacode, a human universal,” the truth of my experiences allows me to communicate to another person who may have experienced a similar encounter (6). Yet, throughout scholarship about the narrative, no matter how I synthesize the information, the personal narrative has not been wholly made concrete, which means scholars have created questionable assumptions about this mode of discourse.

On Breaking the Personal Narrative’s Attachment to Old-Expressivism and Romanticism

When practitioners and scholars began using the personal narrative in most classes, the idea of the narrative was “widely assigned” by the mid-1900s according to rhetorician Robert J. Connors (173-77); however, like most new modes used in the academic community, members felt compelled to place the narrative in a particular category, such as expressivism and later

romanticism. Now, with about sixty years behind us, I do not see our field's need to continue to box the narrative in the earlier ideologies or theories of expressivism and romanticism.

When scholars place the personal narrative in expressivists' and romantics' ideologies, the personal narrative has negative connotations, such as self-promotion and self-glorification. Several scholars like Jeff Park (2005), Peter Elbow (1968; 1973; and 1981), David Bartholomae (1995), Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald (1998), Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy (1992), and many others discussed personal narratives in relation to expressivism; such an affiliation also developed narrative's use in process pedagogy. Expressivism, for the most part, is a movement and an ideology that neither adheres to conventions of academic prose nor encourages traditional teachings of writing. More important, expressivism is a form of writing that does not consider the contexts of the writer; it aims to promote the self and no one or anything else. Unfortunately, scholars of the past have categorized the personal narrative as a form of expressivism. Thus, personal narratives placed writers, according to Christopher Burnham, "in the center" (19). In his work "Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice," Burnham contends that expressivism placed the writer in the center "by assigning highest value to the writer and her imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development" (19). Such a notion makes expressive writing—or personal narrative in this case—a *selfish* act. Therefore, when viewed as a selfish act, the personal narrative and expressivism become elements of *romanticism*. In their work *Reason to Believe: Romanticism, Pragmatism, and the Teaching of Writing*, Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald define romanticism as "the search for and glorification of self" (Roskelly and Ronald 31). To glorify the self is to toot one's own horn, so to speak. The idea of the personal narrative as scholars connect it to romanticism suggests that the personal narrative is one-dimensional and lacks

interconnectedness between the authors and the authors' audiences. Such a disconnection between author and audience is what influences other scholars to label expressivism as "antirhetorical" / "arhetorical" (Roskelly and Ronald, 1998; Tobin, 2001). The overall evaluation of the personal narrative may be summed up in Paul de Man's critique of autobiographies. Cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner, in "Life as Narrative," reports that de Man "speaks of the 'defacement' imposed by turning around on oneself to create, as he puts it, 'a monument'" (13). In other words, de Man says that we construct ourselves through autobiography to be like shrines or iconic figures.

However, the personal narrative is more about one person identifying with another and less about one person admiring herself. Interestingly, the scope of the narrative's use in general is not about self-promotion, self-centeredness of the author, or antirhetorical agendas. For instance, one of the advocates of personal writing, Peter Elbow, did not and does not share similar conceptions of the personal narrative as his contemporaries. Elbow considers not iconic figures but an interaction between writers and audiences via characteristics writers offer about themselves to others. Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy, in their work "Is Expressivism Dead? Reconsidering Its Romantic Roots and its Relation to Social Constructionism," contend that Elbow looked to "insert personal experience into human interaction . . . in hopes to increase our chances for identifying with one another" (649). The very fact that Elbow sought interaction between two or more individuals helps to diminish the earlier connotations of expressivism / romanticism. Because few scholars opposed expressivists' ideas and pedagogies, the style and ideology of writing they presumed at the time related to individual prowess.

Today, the personal narrative introduces elements that comprise the writer's identity and her existence rather than the writer's identity without contextual understanding. For example, Robert Nash argues in *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* that contextual aspects help influence our understanding of ourselves:

Our ways (our truths) to live depend on our hows, whens, and wheres. These, in turn, depend on the ways in which we were raised. Our whys are a product of our peculiar tastes, temperaments, talents, timing, tribes, and training. . . . [W]e will always be bounded by the impact on us of our particular genetics, psychologies, histories, sociologies, and tribes of influence. (39)

Nash talks about writers' inevitable act to write about themselves in light of contextual influences—a writer is unable to write autonomously from her roots (i.e., heritage, political times, personal histories, sociological happenings, and the list goes on). A writer is her own contextual experience and even other individuals' contextual experiences. Of course, in order for a person to develop the personal narrative, the act itself must be a solo effort. The effort alone perhaps led scholars to connect the personal narrative to expressivist and romantic concepts I mentioned above. For instance, Peter Elbow's approach to teach writing requires students to write themselves through the “garbage” by completing freewriting exercises:

Freewriting is the easiest way to get words on paper and the best all-around practice in writing that I know. To do a freewriting exercise, simply force yourself to write without stopping for ten minutes. Sometimes you will produce good writing, but that's not the goal. Sometimes you will produce garbage, but that's not the goal either. You may stay on topic, you may flip repeatedly from one to another: it doesn't matter. (*Writing With Power* 13)

I find freewriting offends some people. They accuse it of being an invitation to write garbage. Yes and No. Yes, it produces garbage, but that's all right. What is feared seems to be some kind of infection . . . Bad writing doesn't infect . . . It might if you did nothing but freewriting . . . But no one asks you to give up careful writing. It turns out, in fact, that these brief exercises in not caring help you care better afterward. (*Writing Without Teachers* 7)

Elbow's concept of freewriting demands that the act of writing continues (no matter what) until something rich, workable, feasible, or drivable emerges. Writers, if they are the subjects of the texts, will have to push their way through their crowded thoughts to find a self they deem appropriate for the texts. For the most part, I can clearly see why scholars have envisioned a writer's search for self or the idea that the writer is in the center: the process of weeding through her own writing causes the writer to take full command of her subject—which for the personal narrative involves the *self*. However, such a perspective about looking at the act of writing does not excuse scholars' decisions to labor on the past. The work of Aileen Hale, Jennifer Snow-Gerono, and Fernanda Morales, "Transformative Education for Culturally Diverse Learners through Narrative and Ethnography," introduces the concept of creating a collective narrative, which "through narrative writing, sharing, and the critiquing process . . . an act of collective responsibility was formed in which each individual [student] was responsible for creating a shared and connecting learning environment" (1418). Each student was required to reflect on a "curricular" experience she had in education and produce a narrative that not only developed the class's collective narrative but also "helped them [the students] to re-conceptualize themselves, their school, and/or the world, either positively or negatively" (1417).

More to the point, the personal narrative, as I view it, surpasses writers writing to discover themselves. In other words, no discovery is needed. I encourage writers (including students) to see that they express characteristics, ideologies, and traditions about themselves. Thus, students write to share something that already resides within. Jeff Park in his book *Writing at the Edge: Narrative and Writing Process Theory*, references expressive writing (i.e., personal narrative): "I suggest that expressive writing is the place where self and culture meet—a place that is . . . a zone of construction of the self" (8). Writing is the meeting place between self and culture. Although an event includes a *self*, the behavior or the attitude of the self reflects a culture's influence on the self. The audience not only learns the ways of the person but also acknowledges the influence a culture has on the person. The concept of expressive writing—one that differs from the earlier notions about expressivism and romanticism—mirrors Robert Nash's idea that writers inevitably include their contextual identities. Context includes culture. Furthermore, "individual writers exist in a paradoxical space of being both autonomous selves containing multiplicities [. . .] and social and cultural constructions" (Parks 7). In other words, each writer's experience is an experience not necessarily her own: each person brings with her certain cultural aspects. Writers carry these aspects into new and different spheres. Although writers' experiences appear autonomous from other writers' experiences, the social interactions and cultural traditions (via speaking, via values and morals, via rituals and/or traditions, via anything relevant to one's culture) create or shape that autonomous writer. Park becomes my stepping-stone for demonstrating the need to focus on contemporary notions rather than earlier notions of the personal narrative. According to Park, "we will always be bounded" by our contexts (39). The personal narrative, then, provides more than just a story or a recount or a retelling of a sequence of events. The experience writers share in personal narratives, according

to folklorist Sandra Stahl "is something more than a sequence of actions; it is even something more than the inclusive event" (qtd. in Smith 2). In other words, we must also recognize what is not explicitly and/or clearly stated in the narrative: writers' words implicitly create the contextual aspects that thwart our attention to not only subjects derived from culture but also subjects derived from language and character.

Although writers may convey a cultural, ethical, and/or linguistic understanding in the personal narrative without having to explicitly state, "This is part of my culture, character, and language and what I was accustomed to when growing up," the technique alone does not overshadow or trump how several scholars view the narrative as inferior to expository academic writing. In their review of the discussion between compositionists David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow in *College Composition and Communication* about academic writing versus personal narratives, Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald state, "The ongoing debate [. . .] assumes a hierarchy with academic writing as the pinnacle and personal story as the unfortunate precondition to the development of mature, sophisticated public prose" (103). Of course, recent scholarship paints such an opposition between academic writing and personal narrative.

Interestingly, another idea about personal narrative is that the personal narrative holds several scholars' interests—scholars in the field of composition. In his work "Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow," Bartholomae references a few scholars who use personal narrative: "I am thinking of Jane Tompkins' recent article, 'Me and My Shadow.' [. . .] I am thinking of Mike Rose's book, *Lives on the Boundary*. [. . .] I am thinking of Don McQuade's chair's address at the 1989 CCCC. I am thinking of some of [Peter Elbow's] prose" (67). Likewise, I add that Ellen Cushman's "The Rhetorician as an Agent for Social Change," Marti Singer's "Moving the Margins," and Susan Brown Carlton's "Constructing Narratives,

Seeking Change” also make some use of the personal narrative. In the previous chapter, I hint at the idea that writers embed their cultures, characters, and languages into personal narratives. Each characteristic holds a crucial role in personal narratives. The culture, language, and character are the three points that give the personal narrative its weight and even its foundation no matter how history has devalued the use of the personal narrative.

Culture / Language / Ethos

I connect cultural aesthetics to linguistic and ethical aesthetics in personal narratives. Culture, language, and character are interdependent and provide depth for personal narrative development. As I develop the theory about the personal narrative, I first will discuss the location of culture in the personal narrative; then, I will talk about language and character respectively in relation to culture because certain notions about the former two elements overlap with those about culture.

When I recognize culture in a personal narrative, I admit that “something is quite different here”; “something is familiar here”; “the kinds of interaction that take place among the people involved reminds me of...”; and/or “that is quite different from the way we did things.” Everyone participates in culture, and most things cultural surround us daily. In another one of his works *The Culture of Education*, cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner examines the existing ideologies of education and education’s influence on society. Just like other institutions, such as the family, religion, and work, education is a culture in and of itself. According to Bruner, “nothing is ‘culture-free’” (*Culture* 14). However, what is culture? In order to understand what makes human beings “tick” or causes me to notice similar or different qualities highlighted in the personal narrative, I must understand that culture is a “system of values, rights, exchanges,

obligations, opportunities, power” (*Culture* 11; *Acts of Meaning* 35). Because I have encountered culturally different aesthetics, I intuitively gravitate to a speaker’s values, opportunities, and even power no matter if the speaker herself is unaware of the cultural perspectives. Moments in the personal narrative are culturally concrete via metaphors, scenes, literal references, and/or actions. For instance, in her article “Constructing Narratives, Seeking Change,” Susan Carlton reflects on an incident in high school. I interpret the incident to refer to the theory of culture although Carlton considers it a racial matter:

Once, when I was in high school, the city bus that I and twelve other students took each day was delayed by traffic. Arriving after the beginning of the first class of the day, we went to the attendance office to receive passes to go to class. As we stood side by side behind a long counter waiting for our passes, one of the school clerks smiled at me and said, “That’s all right, honey, you go right ahead to class.” Although as a high school freshman I had virtually no political consciousness regarding race, it was immediately and embarrassingly obvious that I had received this dispensation because I was the only white student in the group. As I slunk off to class, I reflected on how the clerk had, after all, read the situation correctly. I was the only one whose legal presence in the halls required no certification. It would be automatically extended to me by virtue of my whiteness. I would be spared the delay of questioning and, far more important, my sense of my own right to be where I was would remain intact. (338-39)

Carlton’s “legal presence” and “virtue of [her] whiteness” are White cultural privileges, which illustrate a system of power. Both concepts represent society’s perceptions about Caucasians and their cultural privileges that emerge in various situations. Even here, when I refer to “society,”

culturally whose society am I referring to? Because I am a minority (specifically, an African American), the cultural understandings or cultural assumptions I have about my White counterpart influence how I approach a scenario such as Carlton's. From the example, would my claim that Carlton's story involves culture hold stronger if the identity of the school clerk is mentioned? Is there a cultural understanding between two Caucasians—via the belief that the school clerk is of the same culture as the narrator—even when Carlton does not understand what implicitly takes place? Is there a cultural understanding between two individuals of different cultures—via the belief that the school clerk does not come from a White culture—in that Carlton is revered by the non-White clerk? I do not devalue Carlton's experience; instead, I explore the experience as an outsider looking in. However, as an outsider, I still maintain images, situations, attitudes, and mannerisms familiar to me, which resemble Carlton's encounter.

Moreover, certain powers exist within a culture, like Carlton's virtue of whiteness. Exchanges, whether monetary or charitable and verbal or gestural and explicit or implicit and seen or unseen, advance the workings of a particular culture, as we see with Carlton's remittance from receiving a late attendance slip. Also, the cultural power I recognize in Carlton's narrative represents part of the criteria Bruner outlines about culture which I mentioned earlier.

Interestingly, when we look at culture we must also, as Bruner states, "examine how the demands of a cultural system affect those who must operate within it" (*Culture* 11-12). In other words, limits, obligations, regulations, traditions, and conventions of a culture take hold of individuals' actions, speech, thoughts, morals, values, and attitudes.

For instance, during my adolescence, relatives on my father's side would tell me, "You're a Ceaser, there ain't nothing you cain't do"; "You got Emma Lou running through your blood,

you know what hard work means”; “We are Ceasers, we know how to make the most of nothing.” Although I believed my elders and witnessed relatives enacting everything my elders proclaimed, I did not quite understand what any of this meant other than the idea that my family did things a certain way that no other family was or is able to do. Now, I see that a family-name elicits certain cultural behaviors; a family-name signifies a cultural habit, tradition, performance, or even a certain level of competence. Either evaluation I have of my family’s history stems from cultural barriers or freedoms. My family’s culture has constructed a version of reality that I recognize in narratives. That is, one culture (i.e., my African American culture) endures certain circumstances more than another does.

In any case, no matter the writer, some cultural understandings do not come to life without the shape of a narrative. Bruner amplifies the relationship between culture and personal narratives: “narrative [is viewed] as [. . .] an expression of a culture’s world view” (*Culture* xiv) and that “[it] is only in the narrative mode that one can construct an identity and find a place in one’s culture” (42). I recognize through Susan Carlton’s experience Bruner’s concept of culture’s relationship with the personal narrative because her experience is what constructs her identity in a culture that favors the privileged rather than the underprivileged (i.e., the non-White students who had to remain in the attendance office to receive tardy slips).

I gravitate to cultural elements within narratives because, as Bruner emphasizes in another work *Acts of Meaning*, “the very shape of our lives . . . is understandable to ourselves and to others only by virtue of those cultural systems of interpretation” (33). In other words, every individual maintains, controls, and/or believes in cultural systems that mold her every step, speech, attitude, lifestyle, and mannerism. Collectively, we recognize and interpret one another’s culture. We innately equip ourselves to read culture the moment we participate or

interact with our own cultures. Due to culture's presence, every individual recognizes an event according to the customs she is accustomed to or an event quite different than she anticipates.

Although personal narratives thrive on culture as Anne Dyson and Celia Genishi indicate in their work *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community*—"stories [personal narratives] are an important tool for proclaiming ourselves as cultural beings"—personal narratives develop real experiences because of culture's relationship with language (4). For instance, Jerome Bruner explains that writers' constructions of meaning come from systems already present in culture and language:

systems that individuals used in constructing meaning were systems that were already in place, already "there," deeply entrenched in culture and language.

They constituted a very special kind of communal tool kit whose tools, once used, made the user a reflection of the community. (*Acts* 11)

Bruner equally positions culture and language. I interpret "systems" as cultural and linguistic characteristics, qualities, aspects, and ideologies writers use in narrative construction. At some point, the language learned comes from the cultural experience in which we dwell. In his work *Language and Learning*, James Britton discusses the relationship between language and experience and how our experiences inadvertently emphasize differences: "Your representation of the world differs from mine, and that is not only in so far as the world had used us differently—that is to say we have had different experiences of it" (14). The key word, "difference," represents the various perspectives a group of individuals may have in relation to the same event. Therefore, when I accept someone's representation of an event, I acknowledge that my representation of the same event is not the only, dominant representation. My cultural and linguistic practices allow me to interpret differently a shared moment with another individual

who practices an alternate set of cultural and linguistic traditions. At the same time, my interaction with a different culture helps me to understand more than my own perspective of an event; my interaction helps me to know about the cultural and even linguistic thoughts that are different from my own.

Picture this scenario: Home. Chicago. Westside. Early 90's. My stepbrother and I are in our bedroom having a conversation about some girl he wants to get with (in a very passionate way). Every now and then, the *n*— word leaves his mouth: “N—, you crazy! Of course she gonna let me hit it. Don't you know who I am? I'm the col'est n— I know.”²⁵ I am about eleven years old; he is about fourteen. Now picture this: Robert Burns Elementary. Chicago. Pilsen / Little Village community.²⁶ Early 90's. My stepbrother and I arrive at school for breakfast. We sit at one of the tables in the cafeteria where our Latino friends make space for us. One friend talks about a sexual experience he had the night before. My stepbrother interjects with “For reals? You cheesed her bro? Ahh, c'mon bro, youse lyin' bro!” The difference between the two scenarios deals with what are known as style registers. In their work *American English*, sociolinguists Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes define style “registers” as “[language] varieties associated with particular situations of use” (266-67).²⁷ In other words, what my stepbrother says to me in the style of his natural dialect / speech differs from what he says to our friends in their natural style of dialect / speech.

²⁵ When my stepbrother emphasizes that he is the “col'est,” he brags about how well he succeeds in courting the girls. “Col'est” is really “coldest,” another way for my stepbrother to boast that he is the best at what he does. The word is equivalent to admitting one is “bad” which is “good.” For instance, “Michael Jackson wore a bad leather two piece pants suit; I've got to get me one of those!”

²⁶ “Little Village,” what used to be called South Lawndale, is a predominantly Mexican American neighborhood in which my elementary school was located. The experience of attending an elementary in such a “barrio” of Chicago was dangerous: gang activity was extreme, which meant trouble for the handful of us African Americans attending Burns Elementary.

²⁷ Wolfram, Walt, and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English*. 2nd ed. 1998. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

Culturally, African Americans in the inner city of Chicago generally drop the *-s* and state, “For real.” We would use the phrase when we wanted our audience to understand the seriousness or the truth of the matter at hand. Never would we use the *-s* the way our Latino friends used the term and like my stepbrother uses it when in their presence. Linguistically, my stepbrother’s register changes when he is around a different culture: instead of using “hit it” to emphasize sexual activity like when he and I spoke, my stepbrother uses “cheesed,” a word many of our Latino friends substituted for the act of sexual activity or more graphically the act of ejaculating. Also, my stepbrother repeatedly uses “bro” in the conversation he has with our friends. Naturally, he uses the *n-* word in our conversations. Because he talks with individuals outside of our culture, he adopts the style they would use. Their *bros* are equivalent to my stepbrother’s *n-s*. He even makes the “you” plural by using “youse.” He had used “y’all” on numerous occasions when around other African Americans.

My stepbrother’s actions demonstrate how his speech adheres to one of the “major approaches to the [. . .] study of stylistic variation”: audience design (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 270). He “[adjusts] [his] speech toward [his] audiences” (279). His actions exemplify a notion sociolinguist Catherine E. Davies talks about in her work “Language and Identity in Discourse in the American South: Sociolinguistic Repertoire as Expressive Resource in the Presentation of Self.” She states that “speakers can become conscious of the language ideologies within which they operate and can modify their speech in relation to context for purposes of the projection of identity” (Davies 72).²⁸ What identity does my stepbrother create or seek? If forming a particular identity is not my stepbrother’s focus, why does he trouble himself with

²⁸ Catherine Evans Davies’ “Language and Identity in Discourse in the American South: Sociolinguistic Repertoire as Expressive Resource in the Presentation of Self” is published in Michael Bamberg, Anna De Fina, and Deborah Schiffrin’s *Selves and Identities in Narrative and Discourse* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007. 71-88).

stylistic variation? What my stepbrother would say to me and other African Americans differs from what he would say to our Latino friends at school. My reflection of the two scenarios also demonstrates cultural and linguistic ties. At times, I find the act to separate language from culture difficult. Although my stepbrother's racial identity differs from our friends', my stepbrother's daily interaction with the culture of Latinos allows him to enact their cultural and linguistic ideologies, mannerisms, and attitudes. As a result, culture trumps race. I like to think that by the end of the day however, no matter how convincing my stepbrother appears to our Latino counterparts, that his race will not allow him the kind of access into the Latino culture he pursued.

In retrospect, dialects, registers, slang, and speech can be essential to culture so that a reader identifies a writer's identity via the cultural and linguistic elements in the personal narrative. According to sociolinguist William Labov, the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) linguistically forms a "separate development" from Standard English (SE) and "is a healthy, living form of language" that "shows the signs of people developing their own grammar[,] . . . which is very rich and complicated" (qtd. in Gates xix).²⁹ Labov's study also illustrates how, on the page, a reader can distinguish the writer's culture via the language the writer uses. Of course, not all personal narratives necessarily provide what sociolinguist Barbara Johnstone refers to in her work *Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics* as "phonetic spellings," "nonstandard spellings," or "eye-dialect" in order for readers to know about or simply recognize the writer's linguistic / cultural background or origin (119).³⁰ However, narrators

²⁹ Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University, 1988.

³⁰ Barbara Johnstone's *Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Truly a writer can incorporate dialogue to indicate the different nonstandard spellings or phonetic spellings, like when a

integrate the kinds of dialogue inherent in a culture and language, describe environments typical of a culture and mood of the environment's language use, and share cultural perceptions through language.

Although culture and language arguably develop narrative independently, I view them to be interdependent. Language is a sort of culture and culture is a sort of language. Johnstone refers to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which I know is a perfect example of a narrative (a fictional narrative but a narrative nonetheless) that emphasizes a kind of language—African American folk language—representative of a particular culture of African Americans. The language as culture and culture as language theory is also present in one of the three critical autobiographies used for this project: Victor Villanueva, Jr.'s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. When Villanueva, Jr. imitates the language of a Filipino drill sergeant, he authenticates the scene so the audience may evaluate “the words, accent and all”:
“Ip you're worried about Bietnam, don't be. Because you're all gonna go anyway and do your job por Uncle Sam. And. Ip you're worried about being killed, don't be. Because you're all such sorry sacks ob sh[*]t, you're all going to die anyway” (43). Alphabets “v” and “f” are replaced with “b's” to indicate the accent or the enunciation the drill sergeant performs involuntarily. The author captures the cultural and linguistic aesthetic of the Filipino sergeant to indicate the difference between his own aesthetics and those of the Filipino. Such a passage introduces culture via language and vice versa.

Although I highlight the interdependence between culture and language in the personal narrative, I recognize a third element, character (i.e., *ethos*), that works with culture and

“Southern American might be transcribed saying ‘neked’ for ‘naked’ or ‘purty’ for ‘pretty’” (119); however, even when dialogue is not incorporated, the style the narrator provides may indicate a cultural and/or linguistic identity, like in Adam Banks' *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground* or like in the three critical autobiographies I examine in this work: *Voices of the Self*, *Bootstraps*, and *Lives on the Boundary*.

language. The character of the writer or the individuals the writer talks about constitutes the rhetorical effectiveness of personal narratives in light of the culture and language from which *character* derives. According to Catherine Davies, identity in discourse partly has to do with the “different levels of linguistic organization (i.e., . . . morphology, lexicon, syntax, pragmatics) that the speaker [or in this case, the writer] may deploy as strategic expressive and rhetorical resources in the situated presentation of self” (71). In other words, we find out about the character of the writer by way of analyzing how she expresses her thoughts or characteristics typical of her cultural and linguistic upbringings. We find out information about the character of the writer by way of analyzing which particular aspects of her identity are relevant to the kind of narrative she shares with her audience.

In the story about my stepbrother, I simply could argue what Bruner proclaims: we maintain expressions that portray our cultural worldviews. In other words, I revere my stepbrother as the cultural archetype because he “construct[s] an identity and find[s] a place in one’s culture,” and he maintains a sense of authenticity within a given culture due to the linguistic styles, patterns, and dialects that govern his language (Bruner, *Culture* 42). Similarly, a writer must understand another culture if she integrates the cultural and linguistic traditions that differ from her own. My stepbrother fits the mold as someone who understood the culture of the supposedly archetypal, macho, Latino teenager. Rather than change the subject or believe our friend, my stepbrother plays the doubt game, which provokes the friend and fills the friend with pride. Although my stepbrother doubts the events, his doubts show that he is interested in the discussion. His dual identity, which underlies both scenarios shared above, is due to his character and the experience from which he (and him alone) has developed that character.

However, this is not about my stepbrother: he is just a distraction or an example, depending on the perspective.

My point is that character contributes to the rhetorical effectiveness of the personal narrative; character of the writer / narrator completes a triangular force (i.e., culture → language → ethos = personal narrative) to share rather than discover aspects that make up the writer's identity. Interestingly, ethos, language, and culture already are intact. The introductory chapter of James Baumlín and Tita French Baumlín's *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory* entails a definition of ethos and ethos' linguistic ties. James Baumlín acknowledges what historians have called "*ethopoia*, the technique of conveying human character through language" (xii). Language becomes the medium which paints for an audience the *human character*—the "habits, strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and vices" of the writer of personal narratives (xii).³¹ *Ethopoia* and character traits detail the rhetorical skill of the writer—placing power back into the speaker / narrator / writer of the work rather than leaving power with and discovering power in the work alone.

Furthermore, character works toward exposing a particular truth about the personal narrative's role as a mode of discourse.³² Walter Fisher, in his article "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm," contends that "narrative as a *mode of discourse* is more universal and probably more efficacious than argument for nontechnical forms of communication" (254).

³¹ The authors' concept of *ethopoia* comes from the context of recognizing the Greek professional rhetorician, Lysias—a ghostwriter for many speeches recited by others in the courts (xii).

³² I am compelled to interject for a moment with the notion that the kind of truth I call attention to is the lower case *truth* instead of the capitalized *Truth*, a comparison that I gather from Thomas Kuhn's discussion about natural science and how its research methodologies attempts to find a universal Truth and not a kind of truth (See Kuhn's *The Structure of Science Revolutions*). I distinguish the former truth from the latter truth because like with the personal narrative viewed as a mode of discourse, one's character can only expose one kind of truth rather than one grand, universal truth, and one's character can simply use the personal narrative to communicate with another individual. For instance, Robert Nash (2004) points out, "Our stories are symbols for [. . .] truth . . . and . . . what constitutes personal . . . meaning for all of us" (2). Quite similar to Nash, Anthony Kerby (1991)—several years prior—makes clear, "No one account can be regarded as *the* final truth" (90). No more than three years after Kerby, Judith Summerfield (1994) states, there should be more than one dominant truth (180).

In other words, because narrative, as William Labov expresses in “Ordinary Events,” is the first-learned style of speech we revert to when communicating with one another as a discourse, we universally understand and use it (37). Also, narrative’s effectiveness has to do with the notion that “*Ethos* [. . .] functions throughout all aspects of discourse” according to James Kinneavy and Susan Warshauer (173). In their work “From Aristotle to Madison Avenue: *Ethos* and the Ethics of Argument,” Kinneavy and Warshauer argue that “When a speaker encourages a view of himself or herself as someone with good sense, good judgment, and good will, *ethos* is a direct result” (173). The writer tends to write in a language and culture to which she belongs. So, *ethos* exposes the truth about the personal narrative as a discourse. In the personal narrative, a narrator should not falsify her experience. In other words, the writer should tap into the experience she knows firsthand: the writer exemplifies the culture and the language from which she originates.

The relationship between *ethos*, culture, and language helps me to understand the personal narrative’s rhetorical effectiveness because a writer interweaves aspects of all three components to disclose a specific past experience. When I refer to *ethos* and culture, I think about Michael Halloran’s work, “Aristotle’s Concept of *Ethos*, if not His Somebody Else’s.”³³ Halloran states, “To have *ethos* is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks” (60). Because they have been groomed or trained to walk, talk, and think as other members of their cultures, most writers already maintain virtues of their culture. However, what if a writer is not as virtuous as the details she provides of herself as narrator? Does such a writer receive as much credibility as does a writer who is virtuous? Would the writer’s expression of her culture seem as truthful, honest, or real? The character of the writer also has to

³³ Halloran, S. Michael. “Aristotle’s Concept of *Ethos*, if not His Somebody Else’s.” *Rhetoric Review* 1.1 (1982): 58-63.

align with the aesthetics of the culture and language from which the writer learns because “the speaker must understand *ethos* in order to create in his audience a strong and favorable impression of his own character” (Halloran 60). I mentioned earlier that ethos, culture, and language work together in personal narrative development. In order to build “character,” a writer must also expose her cultural and linguistic roots. According to Aristotle, we form character through our interaction with activities pertinent to our identity:

“For the things which we have to learn before we can do them we learn by doing: men become builders by building houses, and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage.” (qtd. in Halloran 60-61)

In other words, the member of the culture adopts certain cultural mannerisms and traditions that contribute to the character she projects publicly (i.e., in personal narratives). Not all experiences deserve space in personal narratives. If a writer from a lower-class family background is asked to write about her life to serve as motivation to a group of individuals from well-to-do families, she may talk about the importance of networking (i.e. making connections with resourceful individuals and groups). If the same writer is asked to target individuals from socioeconomic lower-class families, she may talk about her experiences of surviving the rigors and dangers she encountered as a person from the same socioeconomic background as her audience. No matter the audience, aspects of the writer’s culture, language, and character derive from whichever moment of her experiences she desires to share.

In addition, no matter how many times we deny ourselves the opportunity to construct personal narratives, many cultures rely on the narrative when presenting examples for an

argument. To take the words of Aristotle, *we become narrators by the practice of narrative actions*, which may be the reason scholars integrate the personal narrative in their works or primarily have used the personal narrative as the central focus of their works.

Reflection: Culture, Language, and Ethos Make the Personal Narrative Work

Another way to look at the relationship between ethos, language, and culture is to recognize that culture is the core, the gel, and the yolk: language is an aspect of culture and ethos exemplifies culture. For instance, when Kinneavy and Warshauer talk about one of the elements of ethos—“*arête*, or ‘good moral character’”—they emphasize the influence of culture:

[. . .] *arête* is related to the word *Ariston*, meaning “nobility” or “aristocracy,” suggesting that the ethical appeal is a type of *cultural* appeal. To be convincing, a speaker must exhibit that quality of character that culture, and not the individual, defines as virtue. In fact *ethos* itself, derived from Greek words meaning “custom,” “habit,” “usage,” and “character,” is similarly connected to social values. The effectiveness of an ethical appeal thus depends on one’s ability to gauge a society’s values and to display them—indeed, to affirm them—in one’s speech. (175)

The state of the ethical appeal depends on the cultural values to which the writer adheres. The rhetorical effect of a personal narrative partly has to do with the narrator’s character that portrays cultural virtues from which she understands. When I view the concept of language in personal narratives, I am unable to see language as a characteristic that is separate from culture. As I mentioned earlier about Catherine Davies’ work, the different levels of linguistic organization (such as prosody, lexicon, syntax, and pragmatics) may indicate the cultural background of a

speaker. Of course, prosody would be difficult to recognize in written text unless the writer does what Zora Neale Hurston did for “Janie” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—provide what Johnstone (2000) considers to be eye-dialect.

Overall, Bruner says it best when talking about the influence of culture: “nothing is ‘culture-free,’” and “much of what is involved in being a member of a culture is doing what the ‘thing’ around you requires—tending the garden, paying the bills, repairing the downspout” (*Culture* 14 and 151). He also states quite plainly that “culture shapes mind, that it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of our selves and our powers” (x). As I note from Susan Carlton’s narrative, her experience exposes the power of her culture. I understand the truth of “her” and her only by way of her ignorance of her culture’s power. The narrative, for her, not only constructed (as Bruner mentions) the world as she saw it but also the implications of her culture as others perceived it. Moreover, my own narrative demonstrated the importance of linguistic understanding. My stepbrother, in order to fit in with members of the Latino community, adopted Latinos’ linguistic, communicative registers. I mentioned that my stepbrother’s racial identity would never grant him full access into the Latino community; however, the cultural and linguistic identity he adopts convinces our friends to include him in their daily conversations. More to the point, a narrative that introduces the kind of register shifts or eye-dialect or any sort of language variation that we recognize to be similar to or different from our own is a narrative that seeks to authenticate the experience so that details are not falsified. Such notions about culture welcome language and ethos, introducing to readers like myself the idea that we are products of the experiences known to us from the moments we are babes to the moments we are adults. Such notions about culture also suggest that one’s culture resides within the language used and character portrayed in personal narratives.

CHAPTER 3

My Experience with the Personal Narrative

Fall term. Knox College. 1998. *College Writing I*. Professor B wants us to write a personal narrative that explores who we are. The catch: she wants us to use a literary piece covered in the class. We have two weeks to complete the narrative. I use Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "We Real Cool." I make a connection: I am the *we* voiced in the poem. Extremely excited, I type four drafts. I work myself thin before I reach a final draft. At this point in the term, I have gotten used to visiting the Educational Development Program where Mr. M works with me, my personality, and my writing. He questions me: "Norman, what are you trying to say here?" "Doesn't this sound more like your thesis than what you state in the intro?" "Are these your words or the author's?" Among the four drafts, Mr. M critiques two. It is two weeks later. I turn in my personal narrative. I receive a "B." I am not disappointed. I am not angry. It is quite possible the sun shines brighter this day. It is quite possible. I remember feeling like I officially belonged—as if I can take on the challenges of a new place academically. With my college bound academic paper combined with my personal experiences, I remember thinking that my experience counts for something.

College Writing I did something to me that I am unable to shake. The professor allowed me to voice my experience, an experience I thought would not fly in the academy. High school English teachers used to say, "You are to write as objectively as possible"; "Your opinion does not matter, so do not try to rely on it in college papers." Fortunately, the personal narrative essay for Professor B's course developed within me a subtle confidence. I believed not in the academy

but in myself. Although I typed four drafts before the final draft, I did not let the process bother me. I easily could have fallen victim to focusing solely on the product and could have gotten discouraged from the process—putting together my introductory paragraph and immediately running over to see Mr. M for an evaluation and critique, my nail-biting anticipation for assurance to continue with the draft. However, I was the adopted son in the family of writing center-type learning sessions that featured my words on Mr. M’s computer-monitor. I had experienced what writing center pedagogues Lil Brannon and Stephen North refer to as “new ways of teaching composition, intervening in it, changing it” (qtd. in Boquet and Lerner 173).³⁴ What the personal narrative did for me catapults into developing narrative’s potentials for other students like me.

What follows in this chapter is my process of applying what chapter two brings to light: a cultural and linguistic theory of the personal narrative. If at some point my argument sounds biased, then readers must understand that my argument is biased—in favor of the personal narrative and the release it provides to a writer’s experience. When I digress to reflect on my own experiences, such as the one above, that deal with my entrance into the academy and my need to slice through any insecurities about college (that foreign and mysterious ivory tower where most freshmen think professors are aliens), I find it difficult to push to the back burner a defining moment such as knowing my experience contributes to my position in academia. Entering the academy—the opportunity alone—can be quite jarring for many of us who remember what it meant to be academically ill-prepared, to be the minority, or to be of a lower socioeconomic class. When the opportunity arises for us to share an experience, it is important to paint our experiences with proper brushes, canvases, and oils. Three scholars of the field of

³⁴ Statement comes from Lil Brannon and Stephen North which is quoted in Elizabeth Boquet and Neal Lerner’s “After ‘The Idea of a Writing Center’” (*College English* 71.2 (2008): 170-89).

composition studies, who are the focus of this work, paint defining moments and more: Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, Victor Villanueva, Jr.'s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. Because each author provides numerous experiences in his respective work, I only will look via theories of culture and language at the cultural and linguistic ties marked in all three critical autobiographies for this particular chapter. In the next chapter, I apply both theories along with a theory of rhetoric (i.e., ethos), which elaborates on the effectiveness and aspects of "character" when synthesized from Aristotle's and Quintilian's notions of ethos.

Cultural/Linguistic Zone Next Five Miles

Our culture along with language builds the narrative involuntarily. No matter what style of written speech we use, the various ideologies we follow, and the morals or principles we share, these attributes derive from our interaction with our family, community, education, occupation, and religion. When we construct personal narratives, we depict the various cultures and languages from which we originate. According to cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner, "the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life" ("Life" 15). In other words, narratives do not present past experiences as they actually occurred. Through our use of language and the presence of culture, we rearrange or (as Bruner states) *organize, structure, and segment and purpose-build* the past events so that we may develop our own perception of our experiences. No matter what the arrangement of events, a narrative stays true to the experiences of the speaker because the

speaker not only refers to aspects of her culture but also constructs those cultural characteristics according to the linguistic practices of her identity. Interestingly, the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes reflect the ideologies of a culture. I trace the ideologies of a culture back to sociolinguist William Labov's 1972 collection. In light of his examination of the style and grammar of a "black English vernacular" (BEV) or what is now referred to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Labov also pays attention to BEV in narrative form (*Language in the Inner City* 3). He describes narrative as a kind of system that "show[s] a shift towards [a] vernacular—that is, towards the first-learned style of speech that is used in every-day communication with friends and family" (Labov "Ordinary Events" 37). In other words, Labov acknowledges narrative as a discourse to which many cultures refer. For many oral cultures (like African American cultures), members revert to their first-learned style of speech to convey a depiction of the past. For some, the narrative is the style of speech they feel comfortable using.

The autobiography of Keith Gilyard, *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, demonstrates Gilyard's comfort in reverting to the personal narrative. His work helps to reveal the influences culture and language have on his identity. The author discusses the challenges of surviving urban community life, following working-class ideologies, and acquiring bidialectal speaking patterns, "in which two separate languages are maintained" (i.e., Standard English and AAVE) (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 316). His work expands the literature that focuses on the African American experience within the educational school system. Moreover, Gilyard's experience exemplifies my argument about the personal narrative—that cultural and linguistic principles help to structure perceptual experiences. As narrator, Gilyard reveals a dual personality by distinguishing "Keith" (the name known to his friends in the neighborhood) from "Raymond" (the name to which teachers, fellow students, and principals refer):

[The principal, Mr. Price, addresses Gilyard's new class,] "Hello class, this is Raymond Keith Gilyard." The name suddenly sounded important to me. "He's a fine enough young man, isn't he?" They answered in synchronized yesses. The principal continued. "What shall we call you, young Master Gilyard? Shall we call you Raymond or Keith?"

Nobody had ever called me Raymond before. Uptown it was always Keith or Keithy or Little Gil. Raymond was like a fifth wheel. A spare. And that's what I decided to make these people call me. *They cannot meet Keith now. I will put someone else together for them and he will be their classmate until further notice. That will be the first step in this particular survival plan.* Of course it wasn't thought out in those specific terms, but the instinct and action were there. And from that day on, through all my years in public school, all White folks had to call me Raymond. (Gilyard 43)

Interestingly, Gilyard expresses the power of names. Why not use one name for both communities? Why differentiate the identity he maintains in the neighborhood from the identity he maintains in the classroom? Although Gilyard creates a plan to use a specific name and personality for the school system, he hints that the attitude of the streets has more to do with the language and culture of Keith (i.e., the tough attitude and the use of AAVE) and less to do with the language and culture of Raymond: the one performing "handwriting drills, simple addition, simple subtraction, and readings from the primer" (43); the one showing he could do it all, "[s]pelling tests. Book reports. Multiplication. Division. History. Astronomy" (51). He refers to members of the school setting as "these people," which culturally and linguistically implies that he sees a difference between them (the "White folks") and himself. "Raymond," who is

surrounded primarily by Caucasians, perhaps considers everyone else to be the other—the estranged. Also, he considers his role play as Raymond a survival strategy. What is it about the school setting or the educational school system that threatens Gilyard’s place? What is it about Gilyard’s background that leads him to feel he has to strategize? Perhaps Gilyard’s alternate personality “Keith” provides enough reason for Gilyard to stand guard against an environment that maintains and molds its own cultural identity—an environment such as the new school he is expected to attend. Perhaps the school’s cultural identity is too different for Keith and a personality like Keith would find it difficult to survive.

Interestingly, the information Gilyard provides to his audience depends on the kind of audience with whom he communicates. Also, the cultural and linguistic characteristics tied to Keith and Raymond are valuable to the group of people or persons whom Gilyard befriends. As Raymond, Gilyard “wanted to be laughed with, not laughed at, so [he] scored highly on all [his] tests and raised [his] [hand] as vigorously as anyone else” among his classroom peers (Gilyard 45). However, as Keith, Gilyard “waited to see where the next fun would come from[;] . . . [he] preferred to spar with words. Debate, you know, try to rank somebody out [and] fight if [his] target tried to ignore [him]” whenever he roamed the streets with Lonnie Blair, his best friend from the neighborhood (53). Although Gilyard’s competitive edge stuck with him no matter the environment, his attitude and demeanor changed according to the institution’s or community’s expectations.

Gilyard’s actions as Keith and as Raymond exemplify what Clifford Geertz highlights in his work *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*; he theorizes that a person’s actions consist of “whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable

to . . . members” of each group (qtd. in Geertz 11).³⁵ Evidently, “our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are . . . cultural products” according to Geertz (50). Gilyard’s actions as Keith develop due to his interaction with the street culture. Because Lonnie Blair devalues a good education, Gilyard also devalues the potential that a good education may provide to him: He says to Lonnie, “Even *I* don’t like school that much” (Gilyard 81). Similarly, Gilyard’s actions as Raymond develop due to his parents’ teachings and working-class ideologies: Gilyard understood that if he worked hard, he would get his parents’ approval and admiration. For instance, on a day when the teacher invites the students’ parents to observe the children, Raymond assures his father that he knows what he is doing in the classroom. After Raymond provides the correct answer to a question Mrs. Lehrman poses to the class, he seeks approval from his father: “‘Thank you Raymond’ said Mrs. Lehrman in relief. She smiled and I poked out my chest and headed for my seat. Cast a glance at Pops. He wasn’t one for the big grin, but his faint nod of approval let me know he was pleased” (46). Raymond, like Keith, is a chameleon because others mold his identity by imposing their cultural expectations. Lonnie expects Keith to hold similar values as himself while “Pops” expects Raymond to succeed academically like Raymond’s White counterparts.

Gilyard’s narrative helps to show the cultural / linguistic differences between the school and the neighborhood. Gilyard feels greater pressure to “belong” when around fellow African American Lonnie than he does when around the Caucasian students in school. As Keith, positive cultural and linguistic characteristics are reinforced: the first time Gilyard introduces Lonnie in the narrative, Lonnie is called “my first best friend” and later “my blood brother” (51 and 69). As Raymond, the culture of the school setting creates negative connotations: Gilyard looks to maintain the image of Raymond—a persona he is not so comfortable portraying. Furthermore,

³⁵ Quotation comes from Ward Goodenough.

as Keith, Gilyard feels included rather than excluded whenever he would “catch up to the Black group heading toward Corona . . . [falling] in stride” because his friends could “understand all the Black things about [him] and share with [him] a special camaraderie” (53 and 69). As evident in Gilyard’s autobiography, culture and language help to produce real past experiences: our personal narratives draw others closer to the details that comprise our respective identities. According to Jerome Bruner, in his work *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, “we are virtually from the start expressions of the culture that nurtures us” (87 and 90). In other words, Bruner insists that we represent our cultural influences. As expressions, we represent our cultural / linguistic identities.

In narratives, we integrate traditions and characteristics of our cultures and languages subconsciously. For instance, the autobiography of Victor Villanueva, Jr., *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, demonstrates Villanueva, Jr.’s comfort with his Puerto Rican, cultural, and linguistic identity. While referring to himself in third person as “Papi,” Villanueva, Jr. describes the social pressures of his new environment, Alexander Hamilton Vocational-Technical High School:

This was Papi’s world: . . . gang wars in the streets and in the halls of Hamilton, teachers talking in tired monotones, foundry and carpentry and drafting. He’d rather read. But this was the world. . . . He was scared to be round bellied and thin armed in this new block, in Hamilton. . . . Papi got fit enough not to look like those who permanently carry invisible but easily discernible kick-me signs. He could look the bad-[*]sses in the eye, his shoulders back, left hand swinging slightly behind the body, right hand pulling up his pants pocket, an exaggerated hobble. He be bippin’. Less brave than bravado. He could talk sh[*]t on the

block when a confrontation seemed eminent: glasses off, fists loosely clenched, one poised near the hip, the other higher, over the solar plexus, eye-to-eye: “Lessee how bad you are.” Only came to blows once in all the time in Bed-Stuy [a housing project] and Hamilton and later in Compton, near Watts. [His friends] Papo, [and] Manny, would wonder aloud how Papi could “talk-the-talk and walk-the-walk” and still be “so white” in private and do so well in school. (4-5)

Villanueva, Jr., without explicitly detailing his beliefs (as in, what he values most: education / studying) allows the reader to acknowledge an aspect which he and his culture consider important. In his environment, Latino boys were supposedly *hard* (tough). The street culture taught the author to transform his demeanor. Because Villanueva, Jr. found himself positioned in the center of his culture, he had to show he could defend himself. Interestingly, Latino boys who were supposedly tough were not respected if they were smart—Manny and Papo were slightly puzzled about Villanueva, Jr.’s street credit and his ability to do well in the classroom. As I notice with Gilyard’s experience in the school system, both of Villanueva, Jr.’s identities conflict if he presents them simultaneously in a single, social (or academic) setting. In “Papi’s” world, he has to explicitly prove he belongs in the culture outside of the classroom and implicitly show he is worthy of the benefits awarded to him in a meritocratic, educational society. Unfortunately, his friends connect educational success with a culture outside of themselves—whiteness. They “wonder aloud” how Villanueva, Jr. can be cool *per se* and “still be ‘so white’” while he excels academically (5).

Moreover, the author interweaves into the narrative the cultural language that is inherent in his character, his identity, and his New York city community. An African American culture influences his Puerto Rican culture: *he be bippin* is a variant of African American Vernacular

English. According to sociolinguists John Russell Rickford and Russell John Rickford, in their work *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*, the “invariant habitual *be* is probably the best-known but least understood of AAVE’s grammatical signposts”; it “describes only an event that is performed regularly or habitually, as in ‘He *be* talkin’ with his lady every day’” (113).

Villanueva, Jr. expresses the blend of African American culture with that of Latinos’—he *be bippin’*, which is his demeanor of looking and walking cool. Moreover, the description of the events in the narrative features a vernacular of the streets, especially when Villanueva, Jr. starts a thought with “Only came to blows,” which means he had to fight. He even calls himself “Papi”—a sort of macho nickname. The name also signifies that Villanueva, Jr. is a young man, one who can take on the assumptive roles of a man during one’s pre-adult years. The author documents experiences, mannerisms, expectations, and conversations to which many members of the inner city may relate.

The relation between experiences shared among various groups of individuals illustrates that “culture is . . . constitutive of mind” (Bruner *Acts* 33). In other words, the influence of culture has a stronger hold on our lives than we would admit. Culture engrains within us a sort of system, “symbol systems that individuals used in constructing meaning . . . that were already in place, already ‘there,’ deeply entrenched in culture and language” (11). The systems help me to recognize similar as well as different characteristics of a culture that are already in place—a culture that mirrors or differs from my own, especially when narratives present kinds of cultural languages that are present in *Bootstraps* and even Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self*. Also, I position Bruner’s theory of culture next to Labov’s theory that the narrative can be viewed as a discourse. For example, Bruner states, “we frame the accounts of our cultural origins and our most cherished beliefs in story form . . . we represent our lives (to ourselves as well as to others) in the

form of narrative” (*Culture* 40). Because William Labov theorizes that the narrative as a discourse is our first-learned style of speech, information about our respective cultures subconsciously take shape. The way we organize our narratives and the way we retell narrative events represent a type of discourse or language.

I also note in Bruner’s statement the notion that the very form of narrative is culturally influenced. The idea is validated in William Labov’s evaluation. For instance, Labov acknowledges the “impact of narratives in black vernacular style,” which not only adheres to his theory about narrative construction but also “match[es] in verbal skill [the speaker’s] outstanding performance in argument, ritual insults, and other speech events of the black vernacular culture” (*Language* 355 and 356). Labov offers a skeleton of narrative construction that showcases the discourse of narrative to be effective: “a fully-formed narrative may show the following: 1. Abstract [what was this about?]. 2. Orientation [who, when, what, where?]. 3. Complicating action [then what happened?]. 4. Evaluation [so what?]. 5. Result or resolution [what finally happened?]. 6. Coda [signals that the narrative is finished]” (362-63). Speakers mainly produce narratives in the order above; however, the “orientation” is not always located at the beginning of the narrative structure (364-65). According to Labov, “we find much of this material [the constituents of orientation—time, place, persons, and their activity or the situation] is placed at strategic points later on” in the narrative (365). A narrative told in black vernacular style exudes the characteristics of the African American culture. I recall many days when my friends and I would try to belittle one another telling “yo mama” jokes. Of course, we had to be as creative and original as possible. With a crowd of spectators, we had to slant the crowd to favor our respective jokes. These series of jokes, also known as ranking, reading, insulting, sounding, signifying and playing the dozens are snippets of entertainment in many narratives (Morgan 263;

Peters 4; Gates, Jr. 52). Although my project does not focus on black vernacular style, Labov's theory introduces ways we may learn about different cultures by way of the language its members write / speak. When I juxtapose language theory and cultural theory, I realize the significance of narrative use and narrative form: both develop an authentic quality representative of writers' narratives or better yet writers' cultural languages that portray either the writers' concepts about their own identities or the writers' conceptions of others' identities.

As evident from the title of his work *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*, Mike Rose summarizes issues involved with the kinds of students who have been labeled remedial, underprepared, or "slow" (xi). The lives of nontraditional students (adults and Vietnam veterans) and lives of students of the working-class are on the margins / the boundary. The boundary connotes the difference between administrators' evaluation of underprepared or underrepresented students and Rose's evaluation and work with the supposedly underprepared students. Each evaluation is a boundary where the former group (i.e., administrators' ideas) focuses on grades, teacher evaluations, retention (or the lack thereof), graduation rates, etc.; and the latter values its participation in students' academic processes and progresses by way of one-on-one conversations, pedagogies, lesson plans, etc. Rose's work overall juxtaposes case study and personal narratives. More important, the autobiography demonstrates how cultural and linguistic characteristics comprise our everyday talk or the discourse of our respective communities.

I do not separate a culture from its commonly used language because I view culture and language as inseparable and find them interdependent in the construction of personal narratives. For instance, among the various narratives he develops in his autobiography, Mike Rose evaluates the way some teachers and administrators judge a basic writing course at UCLA.

While he details his observation of Dr. Gunner's basic writing course, he emphasizes the language used by some teachers, students, and administrators:

It is the first week of fall quarter, and I am observing a section of English A, UCLA's most basic writing course, the course that students and many professors have come to call "bonehead." English A students vex universities like UCLA. By the various criteria the institutions use, the students deserve admission—have earned their way—but they are considered marginal, "high risk" or "at risk" in current administrative parlance. "The truly illiterate among us," was how one dean described them.

Dr. Gunner is a particularly gifted teacher of English A. She refuses to see her students as marginal and has, with a colleague, developed a writing course on topics in Western intellectual history. As I watch her, she is introducing her class to the first item on her syllabus, classical mythology. She has situated the Golden Age of Athens on a time line on the blackboard, and she is encouraging her students to tell her what they already know about Greek culture. Someone mentions Aristotle; someone else says "Oedipus Rex...and the Oedipus complex." "Who wrote about the Oedipus complex?" asks Dr. Gunner. "Freud," offers a soft voice from the end of the table. (2)

Interestingly, the language Rose uses to describe how others have labeled basic writers negates the performance and knowledge the students show in the classroom. For instance, the academy features a "discourse of academics" that "is marked by terms and expressions that represent an elaborate set of shared concepts and orientation" (Rose 192). In other words, labels such as "marginal," "high risk," and "at risk"—terms with which only academicians are familiar—are

shared concepts that place cultural / linguistic barriers or distances between those “in the know” and those who are not. When such language “weaves through so many lectures” or conversations among teachers who have taught basic writing, “it’s easy to forget what a foreign language it can be” (192). More important, UCLA’s professors, students, and administrative staff follow a cultural assumption about the basic writing course: students who enroll in the courses are not so bright. The assumptions about the course are problems Rose notices.

The evaluations (i.e., bonehead, illiterate, and at risk) that specific groups at UCLA have about the institution’s basic writing students derive from whatever cultural characteristics, assumptions, beliefs, and generalizations that position basic writers as marginalized or inferior. According to Bruner, culture is a system of power (*Culture* 11). So, in order for one group of people to maintain power, another group must have limited power or in the case provided in the excerpt from Rose’s work a lack of access to gain power. Students according to Rose had been labeled “high risk” and “at risk”; students had been called the “truly illiterate” among everyone else. Basic writers immediately are placed in a category where they exercise very little power. Their culture, as others view it, is academically inadequate compared to UCLA’s mainstream students.

Culture influences the identities we assume. According to Bruner, “self-making is from the outside in—based on the apparent esteem of others and the myriad expectations that we early, even mindlessly, pick up from the culture in which we are immersed” (Bruner *Making Stories* 65). In other words, because basic writing curricula and basic writers are surrounded by their counterparts (the mainstream students) as well as teachers / advocates of non-basic writing courses, basic writers perhaps conform to the expectations others have about them. The “outside” defines basic writers’ self-perceptions. Basic writers become basic writers because

everyone else labels them so. Culture or rather the influence of culture molds our character as well as the language or discourse we find most comfortable using—individuals with whom we communicate create a standard we uncontrollably follow. So although Rose’s narrative is, as Bruner states, an “expression of a culture’s world view” about students who tend to be remedial or high risk or intellectually challenged (Bruner, *Culture* xiv), Rose counters by sharing with his audience, what Genevieve Patthey-Chavez and Constance Gergen contend in their article “Culture as an Instructional Resource in the Multiethnic Composition Classroom,” the instructor’s positively effective “information *exchange* between [her and] her students” (112). He mocks those who doubt the intellectual capacity of basic writers: one student understands narcissism; another student knows *renaissance*’s French origin (Rose 2-3). The narrative itself introduces assumptions about students’ cultures as well as linguistic capabilities.

Although the excerpt from Rose’s work introduces a subject different from the excerpts from Villanueva, Jr.’s and Gilyard’s autobiographies, all three autobiographies integrate similar concepts because of the influence of culture and language. When James Britton, in *Language and Learning*, states that we “each build our own representation of the world, but we greatly affect each other’s representation, so that much of what we build is built in common,” he perhaps hints that no matter how different we think our stories are, those stories actually have similar qualities (19). For instance, the basic writers in Rose’s work are defined according to individuals and groups who are not enrolled in the basic writing course. The students are expected to think or perform a certain way according to the labels forced on them by others. In Gilyard’s work, in light of the author’s act to help readers understand his approach to enter a new class with new students who are different from him, Gilyard decides to conduct himself in a manner appropriate to the school system according to the name Raymond. Also, Villanueva, Jr. is accused of acting

White, which implies that he performs well in the classroom possibly orally and through written text. A certain language, which differs from the language he acquires from the neighborhood, must be maintained and performed in the culture and language of education. Only through his friends' evaluations do I acknowledge Villanueva, Jr. as being labeled White. No matter the individual or group of individuals, each person finds himself following the cultural expectations or denying the cultural expectations set forth by those with whom he interacts. From all three autobiographies, the subjects of each anecdote are marginalized in a sense that others define or determine the cultural / linguistic characteristics each subject enacts and accepts.

In addition to the cultural and linguistic characteristics I highlight above, other moments in Gilyard's, Villanueva, Jr.'s, and Rose's prose signify the culture and language by which each author is surrounded. For starters, Rose details the social setting on a college campus where great student activity takes place:

It hits you most forcefully at lunchtime: the affluence of the place, the attention to dress and carriage, but the size, too—vast and impersonal, a labyrinth of corridors and classrooms and libraries; you're also struck by the wild intersection of cultures, spectacular diversity, compressed by a thousand social forces. [. . .]
Students are rushing to food lines or dormitories or sororities, running for elevators or taking stairs two at a time. Others “blow it off” and relax, mingling in twos and threes. Fifties fashion everywhere: baggy pants, thin ties, crew cuts, retro ponytails—but so are incipient Yuppiedom and cautious punk, and this month's incarnation of the nuevo wavo. (3)

Rose's portrayal of the culture of higher education captures the active student environment. Most important, I recognize the intersection of “diversity” and the rush to “food lines or

dormitories or sororities.” Also, the culture of dress says much about the influence culture has on its members. What we label as fashion trends (i.e., “Fifties fashion”) becomes what I consider as cultural attributes. The realm of the academy differs from the realm of the surrounding community. The youth at the university express their hybrid personalities and cultures with crew cuts and baggy pants. According to Bruner, “Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation” (*Acts* 13). The action in the narrative parallels experiences familiar to me because of shared concepts—dormitories, sororities, food lines, labyrinth of corridors, and libraries. But, what about the person who has no college experience or no interaction with the fastidiousness of demanding students? Perhaps the other reader transforms the college scene into a scene she has experienced...a scene that depicts the bustle of a demanding nine-to-five. Interestingly, the details Rose shares inform both those who are familiar with and those who are not familiar with the student environment near the food court on a college campus. Because culture is constitutive of mind, most readers and scholars recognize when concepts differ from their own cultural concepts (*Acts* 33). On an elementary level of thinking, a person may say, “what is a dormitory or a sorority or a nuevo wavo?” A person may think, *these aren’t things I have encountered*. Yet, when we distinguish the differences, we still acknowledge culture’s existence. Bruner contends that culturalism affects the way we receive cultural differences because “it [culturalism] takes its inspiration from the evolutionary fact that mind could not exist save for culture” (*Culture* 3). Where does our way of thinking derive from? We are not able to ignore culture. We encounter what Clyde Kluckhohn emphasizes, a “total way of life of a people” and “a way of thinking, feeling, and believing” through culture (qtd. in Geertz 4). On the other hand, we grow curious to know about

the cultural influence Rose points out: the archetypal fifties fashion. We may even notice the influence the fifties has on current fashions. We may understand that the way of thinking in the fifties is not so different from the way of thinking in present-day.

Like Rose, Villanueva, Jr. captures the essence of his environment. Yet, Villanueva, Jr. carries the character of his environment with him during a time after his parents decide to escape the dangers of Bedford-Stuyvesant (a borough in New York City) and move the family to Los Angeles, California. Although this Puerto Rican author from the east coast speaks Spanish, the language holds different cultural values for Spanish speakers along the west coast:

Both the Mexican's Spanish and the Puerto Rican's really are dialects, neither true to the prestige dialect of four hundred years back. Not only would the Spaniard not pronounce Castiliano as he [Dad] had [i.e., cath-til-yano], but the historical Spanish of the Puerto Rican was Andalusian. Still, his [Dad's] assertion (which he voiced often) shows the degree to which I was taught that the Mexican was not to be regarded as somehow kin to the Puerto Rican, an assertion that the Chicanos and the Vatos made clear at my failed attempts to join the community [in Los Angeles]. "*Mira*," I'd say, just the way to open a conversation, a phatic device in linguistic jargon. "*¿Mira a que?*" would come the retort, usually accompanied with the flip of eyebrows to a vato brother. "*Oyes*," they'd say, a phatic device. "*¿Oyes a que?*" I'd say to myself. "Slow down," I'd say when they spoke Spanish. "Slow down," they'd say when I did. And if I spoke of *salsa*, speaking of music, they'd wonder why I was talking about hot sauce. We were different. (41)

Villanueva, Jr. presents a dilemma that sometimes is unacknowledged: although some individuals are descendants of the same group, their cultural languages differ. The kind of day-to-day communication young Villanueva held with his friends back in New York conflicts with the speaking patterns or communicative patterns of the young group in California. Aspects of Villanueva, Jr.'s inner city Latino community of Bed-Stuy influences the way he starts a conversation with "Mira" (or look). Although he is not asking his audience to marvel at an object, he asks for their attention before he speaks. Unfortunately, the new community he seeks to join does not follow such a cultural tradition. The phatic device, "mira," according to the youth in California, suggests that Villanueva, Jr. wants to show them something. Instead, they prefer to use "Oyes" (or listen), which for them is the appropriate / correct conversation starter when someone speaks.

Also, as indicated in the excerpt, the author mentions that the Spanish he speaks and the Spanish some Mexicans, Chicanos, and/or Cubans speak simply are dialects. Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes define dialect as "any variety of a language that is shared by a group of speakers," which in Villanueva's passage indicates that his dialect is more associated with a cultural language present in his old neighborhood Bed-Stuy and less associated with a cultural language present in his new neighborhood Compton (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2). In addition, the conflict between Villanueva, Jr. and members of the new community revolves around semantics, "the meanings of words" and pragmatics, "the use of language forms to perform different functions" (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 64). A term or phrase he generally uses comes from the interaction he has with his culture. A term someone else uses—someone who is outside of Villanueva, Jr.'s culture—derives from her interaction with her culture. So, a word or phrase holds different values for different individuals of differing cultures. For instance,

Villanueva, Jr. details the day he and his father attends a baseball game and another boy who also is with his own father “blurts out, ‘¡Mira ese bicho!’” (Villanueva, Jr. 41). Young Villanueva is surprised that the father did not spank or reprimand the son. However, Villanueva, Jr.’s father “sees the shock on Papi’s [Villanueva’s] face, smiles, and explains that for Cubans *un bicho* is a bug, an insect. For the Puerto Rican, the word is a vulgar reference to male genitalia” (41). Although the term “un bicho” exists in Villanueva, Jr.’s cultural language and in the other boy’s cultural language, young Villanueva would not dare to use it in the presence of his family or his Puerto Rican friends.

Interestingly, Villanueva, Jr. expresses his culture’s morals and values. His family would not use a term that they view negatively. Semantically, “un bicho” has derogatory connotations that are known to Puerto Ricans: Villanueva, Jr.’s narrative exposes the insight. Because his narrative exposes a particular perspective, angle, judgment, and evaluation of a term that has both cultural insignificance and cultural significance, I am reminded of James Britton’s statement about voicing our experiences. He states that we use language to organize “a representation of the world—each for himself—and that the representation so created constitutes the world we operate in” (Britton 7). For Villanueva, Jr. the world in which he operates consists of cultural differences within a spoken language / dialect, Spanish. I recognize some values relevant to Villanueva, Jr.’s culture because the narrative introduces a subject that places him as the other, the estranged, or the odd ball among his contemporaries. More important, I, the non-native Spanish speaker, acknowledge that Spanish, just like any other cultural language (i.e., AAVE), has its own variations. I am not to assume that Spanish speakers from California understand Spanish speakers from New York.

Additionally, narratives not only expose or reveal characteristics archetypal of one's culture and language (as indicated through Villanueva, Jr.'s and Rose's narratives) but also introduce cultural and linguistic risks to which the author adheres. For example, Gilyard talks about the summer months between graduating from the eighth grade and entering high school. The culture of the streets influenced his actions more than he would have imagined. He details his experience of trying to fit in:

The only thing Melvin [one of the friends with whom Gilyard worked] had on me streetwise was that he was using heroin. Snorting. That shouldn't have bothered me so much, but it did. . . . Melvin talked about getting high, never suggesting I try it, but hooking me all the while.

I vomited at first. Used a fingernail file to shovel a bag of the sh[*]t up my nose over at Gary's. Gary was weird, a bright guy who was somewhat new in the neighborhood. I couldn't understand why someone with only a year left at a highly regarded school like Brooklyn Tech would want to be fooling around with this stuff. He didn't understand me either. . . . I was snorting again that same night. And by the weekend, I was ready to hit the main line. . . . "I want two bags" I replied. "What they got down here, fours?"

"All depends on who we catch. They mostly got fours down here, but we might catch treys." [Gary said]

. . . Wallace [a boy Gilyard befriends while in junior high] broke in, "You sniffin these Keith? Or you gonna skin pop?"

"I don't know. I'm thinkin about poppin one and holding one. Supposed to feel it more, right?" (Gilyard 142-43)

Gilyard dives into the grotesque, dark experience of drug abuse. Of course, such an excerpt may worry certain readers. Patricia Bizzell, in her foreword of Diana George's *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers & Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*, mentions her initial distaste for the personal narrative:

“Oh no, not stories!” I moaned faintly, when Diana George told me about the collection on which she wanted me to comment. In theory, I admire writing that does serious intellectual work by combining the personal, the professional, and the political. Such writing might be called “loaded” stories. But in practice, I often find it hard to read, and even harder to write . . . Why I shy away from this work would, no doubt, be a “loaded” story in itself, involving my strict Presbyterian upbringing, current political concerns, and more. (vii)

From Bizzell's initial evaluation, I understand that the story has a tendency to introduce ideologies, political agendas, and traumatizing experiences an audience may find offensive or uncomfortable to follow. Yet, Gilyard invites us into a culture and language quite different from the identity that has shaped some of our own morals, values, and traditions. After his first time experience with heroin, he vomits: he is what some of us may call a virgin to the drug. However, the social pressures involved with his interaction with his culture leads him to attempt once more: “I was snorting again that same night” (142). The role as Keith has as much of an influence on Gilyard as does the role of Raymond. He proclaims that getting along with his community peers held a great value to him no matter how successful he proved himself to be in the educational school system: “The one belief I held above all others, including the one of ‘destiny,’ was that I should fit in with my community peers, which meant adopting their value

system and, in fact, helping to develop it” (110). Interestingly, Gilyard upholds his respective creed.

For instance, he scours dead end drug spots with his peers until they are all satisfied. This is noticeable in the dialogue he has with Gary and Wallace as they hope they can find a dealer who carries “treys” (or packs of heroin that cost three dollars) instead of “fours.” Also, Gilyard adopts the mindset or thought of his peers around the neighborhood which displaces him from the role he plays as Raymond. In other words, Gilyard evaluates and analyzes Gary’s situation and wonders, “why someone with only a year left at a highly regarded school like Brooklyn Tech would want to be fooling around with [heroin?]” (142). Ironically, during earlier moments in primary education, Gilyard pursued top academic rankings. He was the student who sought his parents’ approval. Yet, during the transition to secondary education, the language of Gilyard’s prose indicates the distance he places between the educational school system and himself. “Keith” begins to rampage in the streets to take on the ways of the streets—chaos, disorder, spontaneity, and liberty reign for Gilyard. As evidence of Gilyard’s actions, his story “provide[s] clues to [his] subjectivity” (Foss 339). He sort of flowed with the wind so to speak. In her text *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, contemporary rhetorician Sonja Foss provides—among many methods of rhetorical criticism—a brief overview of the study of narratives; she elaborates on a particular “narrative method of criticism” (335). More important, Foss connects culture with personal narratives. She states, “stories commonly told in a culture provide glimpses into that culture—the meanings attributed to particular events, the aspects of the culture that are privileged and repressed, and the values of the culture” (339). When Keith becomes attracted to the liberating attitude that is shared among his friends, the culture, the language, and/or the cultural language of the neighborhood gain strength within him. Keith

becomes the rambunctious teenager looking to make out with random girls (126), find his next fix (144), and develop new criminal acts, like snatching purses and stealing cars (146).

End Work Zone

Of course, the narrative becomes the discourse that helps the authors to share what Sonja Foss calls glimpses of their cultures and languages. Much of what takes place in the authors' lives originates from the cultural and linguistic practices that contribute to their respective identities. At the start of this chapter, I introduced readers to the revelation that my personal experience served as a stepping stone to enter the academy. The insecurities I carried with me from my secondary education-experience challenged my admission to college. Mike Rose calls the university "a strange place"—a place I had not the slightest idea about (5). My first-generation admittance into higher education ill-prepared me and the expectations I was supposed to maintain about the institution. More important, my academic culture—one that derives from Chicago's inner city public school system—consumed me: I thought the education I received was strong enough for the small liberal arts education I encountered at a predominantly White institution. My world that I brought with me from the city included some of the traits Villanueva, Jr. and Gilyard elaborate on in their works: I had to develop a survival plan; I had to maintain a demeanor that did not invite anyone to pick fights with me; and, I had to show that I could perform as successfully as other students of my cohort. These were the cultural stamps related to my high school educational experience, which I placed in my back pocket to prepare for the first moment I walked the social and academic width of the college campus. Because entering college had been the most important feat at that time in my life, I started this chapter

discussing part of what made sense to me as a student who *made it*—a phrase that indicates that few individuals actually leave the neighborhood to *make* something of themselves.

The general concept of the narrative, as indicated through the excerpts I analyze in this chapter, is that writers invite readers into a world that either solidifies universal experiences or teaches distinct transactions that become pivotal lessons toward grasping diversity. From the use of minute terms or phrases (i.e., *he be bippin*) to enacting mannerisms / behaviors (i.e., the attitude of Keith versus Raymond) to showing and following particular values (i.e., understanding the intellect of basic writers), the narrative has proven to serve as the plateau where culture and language interweave interdependently. So, the moment we, as readers, open the book to someone's narrative, we should keep in mind a kind of realization Patricia Bizzell expresses: "an author . . . might draw on knowledge gained as a parent, feminist theorist, poet, post-structuralist, or in one case, commercial litigator. But such combinations are necessary because . . . [a person] must draw on *everything* [she] know[s]" (vii). The identity to which an author refers possibly indicates snippets of the culture and language from which she has learned. The main priority for scholars is to gather the bits writers create on the page so that scholars become a step closer to examining the full view of writers' cultural and linguistic origins.

CHAPTER 4

In chapter two, I explicitly stated that cultural (culture), linguistic (language), and ethical (ethos / character) values, morals, mannerisms, behaviors, attitudes, and ideologies comprise the identities writers subconsciously express in the narrative. I realize that character, like culture and language, develops the personal narrative. In chapter three, I focused on the connection between a writer's culture and language; however, I argue overall that the rhetorical effectiveness of a personal narrative starts with the interrelation of culture, language, and character. I include "character" in this project because (1) the "I" specifically discerns the kind of narrator presented in Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self*, Victor Villanueva, Jr.'s *Bootstraps*, and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*; and, (2) when I encounter the "I," I rummage through the baggage the "I" totes. Everything about the structure of the narrative, the direction of the narrative, and the style of the narrative relate to those qualities that comprise the identity of the narrator: culture, language, and character.

In this chapter, I continue to examine the three autobiographies mentioned above by analyzing personal ethos in conjunction with culture and language. I believe experience is effective because of the relationship between character, culture, and language. I define ethos by referring to Aristotle and Quintilian; both rhetoricians define personal ethos differently, yet I value the ideas of both rhetoricians. I use their notions about ethos to serve as a foundation for the contemporary works I consult when developing the idea of narrators' characters in personal narratives. Next, I explore different passages of the autobiographies that illustrate the workings of culture, language, and character that, together, help to develop the personal narrative. The last

section of the chapter involves my overall evaluation of Gilyard's, Villanueva, Jr.'s, and Rose's autobiographies in order to talk about my role as "audience" and talk about my interests in their autobiographies.

On Understanding Character

In order to build the personal narrative, first, we fill the narrative with content. Second, we reduce the content, the "perceptual" experiences cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner mentions in his article "Life as Narrative," so that the content fits into the frame of the personal narrative (15). To reduce means we have to sift through the layers of our pasts. Unfortunately, sifting is difficult because we have so many experiences. When we manage the kind of information we want to share with the public, we have to be "selective" as Anthony Kerby emphasizes in *Narrative and the Self* (47). The act alone induces us to choose certain experiences that are most relevant to whatever current situation. Certain experiences produce a certain ethos, such as determined-Norman or responsible-Norman or insightful-Norman; no matter what information I share about myself (information that eventually depicts a particular character about me), I am still using moments from my experiences. Because audience plays an integral role in the construction of my character, I include particular experiences to emphasize a particular perspective about me. Of course, my personal ethos may include the way I use language and may include culture's influence on my personality, mannerism, attitude, and so on. However, a few early rhetoricians thought differently concerning the overall perspective about ethos.

In his work *Rhetoric*, Aristotle describes a personal ethos that involves good speaking skills as well as good personal character. He elaborates on three appeals of argument otherwise

known as pathos, ethos, and logos. The pathetic appeal deals with the emotion of the audience; the speaker tries to persuade her audience by retelling an experience or by relying on images that evoke emotional reactions from the audience. The ethical appeal deals with the credibility and trustworthiness of the speaker; ethos refers to the character of the speaker. The audience has to believe in what the speaker says. The logical appeal deals with rationality or logic; the speaker uses logic to persuade her audience. Among Aristotle's three appeals of argument, "ethical appeals raise emotions favorable to the rhetorician's moral character" (Bizzell and Herzberg 171). In other words, a rhetor has the talent to persuade her audience to favor her argument as well as her personality. Aristotle knows that one's character depends on one's ability to speak well (Short 369). For instance, he states that "Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible" (Aristotle 1356a; Kinneavy and Warshauer 173). In other words, no matter the personality of the speaker, if she has the necessary speaking skills, then she convinces her audience to believe in her and her argument. The audience's evaluation of a speaker develops after they hear how well the speaker constructs an argument. A similar understanding may apply to a writer rather than a rhetor, for Aristotle's theory helps an audience to grant credibility to any contemporary writer for as long as the writer writes well enough for her audience to believe her. Furthermore, Aristotle contends, "this kind of persuasion . . . should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak" (1356a). I definitely admire the notion that no critic should prejudge, profile, or stereotype a speaker before she delivers an argument. In retrospect, how else is a rising scholar to receive the credibility and accolades from her audience if her audience evaluates what it thinks it knows about her personal character first and evaluates what it notices about her work second? When I apply this concept to contemporary processes of

peer-review, many editors and scholars recognize good writers by the way in which those writers write. Over time when a once-young writer becomes an established writer, her personal character (or reputation) may transcend what others notice about her writing capabilities.

At the same time, Aristotle admits that a person's good reputation would not hurt her chance to persuade her peers. He states, "it is not true . . . that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to [her] power of persuasion; on the contrary, [her] character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion [she] possesses" (1356a). In other words, the greater the moral character of the speaker, the greater her ability to persuade others—an audience readily accepts someone whose reputation it already knows and approves.

However, Quintilian feels that personal character alone should be the essence of personal ethos. To him, the *person* outweighs skill. In an excerpt from his work *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintilian understands that a person does not innately occupy "good habits of composition and delivery" (Bizzell and Herzberg 361). Such skills come naturally over time—over time when older, respectable men instill in youth eloquence or good speech, which comprises young men's good characters. The overall goal is to develop good character. For instance, Quintilian believes that young men should shadow respectable men of eloquence. The idea is clear to me that during the time youth spend with elders, youth grow accustomed to the ways of the adults. Quintilian describes the influence elders may have on young apprentices:

Let him every day say something, and even much, which, when the pupils hear, they may carry away with them, for though he may point out to them, in their course of reading, plenty of examples for their imitation, yet *the living voice*, as it is called, feeds the mind more nutritiously and especially the voice of the teacher,

whom his pupils, if they are but rightly instructed, both love and reverence. (367; bk. 2, ch. 2)

Quintilian suggests that young men learn from elders who can teach them, by way of example, how to make discourse effective *per se*. Quite similar is the phenomenon that young children during their informative years repeat and emulate words and thoughts of adults with whom the children spend most of their time. If we help young writers study narrative structures of a few autobiographers, we help to elevate a natural ability in novice writers to develop their own style of the narrative. In his work “Aristotle’s Concept of *Ethos*, if not His Somebody Else’s,” Michael Halloran points out, “‘men become builders by building houses’” (Halloran 60-61). The idea Quintilian poses deals not necessarily with skill but with tradition or ritual—those practices like writing that begin before a young writer takes on the role as a writer. In her discussion about ethos in the Renaissance, modern rhetorician Tita French Baumlin in “‘A good (wo)man skilled in speaking’: *Ethos*, Self-Fashioning, and Gender in Renaissance England,” mentions the argument Thomas Wilson makes about ethos. According to earlier rhetorician Wilson, “by companyng with the wise, a man shall learne wisdom” (qtd. in T. Baumlin 234). Wilson’s theory mirrors Quintilian’s, for Quintilian basically emphasizes the “importance of instilling good habits of composition and delivery, so that eventually the orator may express [her]self with seemingly natural facility” (Bizzell and Herzberg 361). In other words, all the training one undergoes throughout her education becomes part of her identity. She performs naturally. She, in this case, writes effectively because that is all she knows how to do. Quintilian contends, “Natural ability and learning contribute equally to rhetorical skill” or as I would argue contribute equally to personal ethos (Bizzell and Herzberg 362).

Although Quintilian mainly values the product—good moral character—the development of ethos should also involve what Aristotle mentions, skill. A young writer would have had to practice a particular skill consistently for majority of her life in order for her to display what comes naturally to her. Yet, Quintilian’s notion about character not only has *skill in speaking well* to thank but also has the implicit presence of culture and language to thank for the commonality between his theory of ethos and Aristotle’s. Culture and language influence the development of the kind of personal ethos a person must adopt, develop, or even embrace and later use in personal narratives. More important, a writer does not become a writer overnight. She would have had instilled in her the ability to place words together in a certain way; she would have had to maintain the cultural and linguistic styles relevant to the character that has taken shape over time.

The primary difference between Quintilian’s theory and Aristotle’s is that Aristotle considers both the *speech* and the *person* to make up personal ethos. For *person*, Aristotle focuses on “good will,” “virtue” / “good moral character,” and “good sense” (Sipiora 268; Aristotle 1378a; Kinneavy and Warshauer 173). Yet, both theories function for me as one combined notion of character that complements culture and language in personal narratives.

I admit that “character” immediately comes to my mind when I talk about ethos. Others have considered different terms and ideas related to ethos: “voice,” “personality,” “self,” and “ethics” (Swearingen 1994; Alcorn 1994; Aristotle 1954; and Sipiora 1994). I prefer “character” because as Robert Con Davis and David S. Gross mention in their work “Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the *Ethos* of the Subaltern,” “The Greek concept of *ethos* is traditionally represented in modern English as ‘character’” (65). Slightly different from voice and self, character, as Amelie Rorty describes in *The Identities of Persons*, “suggests . . . that there is a reciprocal

relation between what people really are and what other people imagine them to be. Cultures that imagine people as characters . . . create different kinds of people” (qtd. in Alcorn 8).³⁶ I think the word “imagine” is pivotal because it may connote terms associated with fiction, such as “falsity,” “fantasy,” or “hyperbole.” However, what I imagine someone else to be comes from my understanding of her overall experiences. What I imagine is my interpretation of the events that unfolded. For the most part, character represents a particular aspect of someone’s experiences. No matter the perspective from which one’s character develops, the descriptions remain credible. What I recall about my childhood may differ from what my parents recall about my childhood. Moreover, I define character (or ethos) as the quality that makes a writer / narrator believable, trustworthy, credible, and virtuous by way of her writing style as well as her interaction and commitment to institutional or cultural traditions and customs.

The absolute quality that sits well with me about a writer concerns my attraction to the way the writer constructs the personal narrative and the experiences documented in the narrative to which I may relate. I find myself enacting the actions that classical rhetorician Cicero, in his work *Orator*, talks about concerning the good qualities of an eloquent speaker. He states, “For it is not an eloquent *person* whom I seek . . . but that absolute quality, the possession of which makes a man eloquent” (343). Cicero’s “quality” to me means multiple qualities. I think along the lines of contemporary rhetorician Phillip Sipiora. I keep in mind how “honest” the narrator appears, how “credible” I find the narrator to be, how “involved” the narrator allows me to be in the development of her story, how well I “identify” with the narrator and her experiences, and/or how the narrator’s “practical wisdom” / “good sense” sits well with me in different situations she encounters (Sipiora 271-72, 274, 276, 278, and 282). No matter which aspect of ethos I find

³⁶ Marshall Alcorn, Jr. quotes Rorty in his article, “Self-Structure as a Rhetorical Device: Modern Ethos and the Divisiveness of the Self.” (Baumlin, James S., and Tita French Baumlin, eds. *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1994.)

present in the personal narrative, I understand that much of the information the narrator shares with her audience derives from her cultural and linguistic upbringings. Overall, I find that since character consists of culture and language, writers of personal narratives, especially the three autobiographers of this research, subconsciously retain their culture, language, and character.

School Is in Session: Discussing Three Principles Present in Personal Narratives

We create the types of character and the kinds of insight about our cultures through our language; consequently, we connect our character to the culture and language with which we identify. By “create,” I simply mean that our discourse as narratives allows us to shape our experiences into written form. I do not consider the idea of fictionalizing experiences in the manner that others may consider when it comes to “create.” Modern rhetorician James Baumlin states in the introduction of his co-edited anthology, *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*, that “human character, with its particular habits, strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and vices, can be rendered and represented in language” (xii). Baumlin asserts that language *re-*presents our character. To me, character involves those intricacies we picked up from our parents, our teachers, our relatives, our coworkers, and our acquaintances. Accordingly, certain aspects of our character derive from our culture. In his autobiography *Voices of the Self*, Keith Gilyard talks about the influence his mother’s bidialectalism had on him, the verbal skills he acquired from his mother—a skill that becomes part of Gilyard’s personal ethos:

. . . [She] initiates . . . dialogue with a question that is clearly Standard English[:]
[“Haven’t I told you about not coming straight home from school?”] . . . But . . .
whatever coolness has been maintained gives way and . . . [her] dialect changes[:]
[“Ain’t no teacher can keep no class late like that.”] . . . My mother is a bidialectal

speaker, capable of producing Black English and Standard English as well. And it should be obvious . . . that even in the preschool years my own move toward bidialectalism was well underway, made possible no doubt by my awareness of my mother's verbal maneuvering. I had seen how she could speak to a grocer, a salesman, a doctor, or a stranger in one manner (Standard English), and then turn around, watch me carelessly knock a bowl of cereal on the floor, and exclaim, "Now look what you done did!" (Gilyard 30-31)

Part of Gilyard's personal ethos deals with what modern rhetorician Phillip Sipiora mentions in his work "Ethical Argumentation in Darwin's *Origin of Species*," "honest reporting" (Sipiora 275). Gilyard invites the audience to relive his experience. The dialogue between his mother and him represents the level of integrity present in his character. The other part of his ethos involves his use and conception of bidialectalism. We understand that he learns through his mother's speech patterns the cultural value of maintaining two dialects spoken in his home. Gilyard's mother deems it important to speak in a certain manner that is acceptable to others outside of her household. Gilyard establishes this same concept the moment the principal introduces him to his new teacher and classmates (See Chapter 3; Gilyard 43). The narrative features the character's respect for bidialectalism and reveals a cultural language (African American Vernacular English) that is intimate and informal: intimate in a sense that the mother does not have to pretend to be someone else when speaking to her son, and informal in a sense that the mother freely uses it in the presence of young Gilyard because the language comes naturally to her. For instance, she exclaims, "Now look what you done did!" Immediately, she points out his messiness. She uses *done* as the tense-aspect marker. According to John Rickford and Russell Rickford, "*Done* . . . feels and sounds more intense, more forceful [than *has/have*];

it “emphasizes the completed nature of an action, and / or its relevance to the present” (120). Gilyard’s mother, in other words, yells, *Now look at what you have done*. Of course, when I substitute “done did” with “at... have done,” the urgency and displeasure in Gilyard’s accident loses the intensity that I notice when his mother speaks in AAVE. For the most part, the rhetorical expressions noted in Gilyard’s work exemplify his interaction with his home culture and home language. Because he is able to discern the difference in his mother’s verbal skills, I am not surprised that he develops a character to interact with non-African American friends and a character to interact with family and other African American friends from the neighborhood.

For Gilyard, the role as “Raymond” grows because of the approval others have of him. He feels like a king in the school setting when his answers seem “to really excite the teacher” or when his “classmates [stare] in amazement . . . wondering where [he] picked up [his] information” (Gilyard 46-47). Gilyard not only builds integrity with the teacher and his classmates but also builds integrity with me, the audience; I notice that the evaluations others have of him determine his success. He establishes both his ability to speak well (Aristotle) and his natural person that seeks to excel in the classroom (Aristotle and Quintilian). Moreover, Gilyard’s willingness to participate in the classroom demonstrates his ethical growth in the culture of education: some pedagogues evaluate the level at which students comprehend the classroom materials, and Raymond shows that he understands the materials well. The manner in which Gilyard speaks also demonstrates that the language familiar to some of his peers, teachers, and administrators in the educational school system grants him the opportunity to be heard; without hesitating, Gilyard uses the appropriate language to win over his teacher: “she asked if anyone knew the difference between a house and a home. No one else in the class even attempted an answer. The perfect stage for me. . . . ‘A house can be anywhere you live . . . But

it's not a home until there is love'" (46). The culture accepts Raymond because his personal ethos exhibits traits the culture deems as reputable, important, and necessary: he participates in classroom activities, and he speaks clearly in Standard English. By "culture," I refer to administrators and teachers, members of the educational culture.

The role of "Keith," on the other hand, is a non-factor to the school system because the cultural and linguistic traits of Keith do not complement the role "Raymond" maintains when around his classmates and teachers. Throughout the autobiography, Gilyard does a good job expressing the authenticity of both the academic setting and the surrounding community via the contrasting cultures and languages that "Raymond" and "Keith" value. According to Michael Halloran in his work "Aristotle's Concept of Ethos, or if not His Somebody Else's," "To have *ethos* is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks" (60). To no one's surprise, Keith emulates, even exemplifies, the African American culture to which he belongs because the attitude, mannerism, speech etc. mold his character. For example, after Gilyard beats up a Jewish boy named Jerry who calls Gilyard a "filthy cheatin nigger," he tells the incident to his best friend from the neighborhood (Gilyard 89):

Lonnie Blair was amused by the incident. He couldn't stop laughing and rolling all over his bedroom floor.

"You sure showed that Jewboy somethin, didn't you?" [asks Lonnie Blair]

"Yeah man. I rocked his chops pretty good. Shook his mind up too."

[replies Keith.]

"You did the right thing. Just because you nice enough to play football with them don't give them Jewboys no right to think they can jig over you.

That's just like a Jew too, you know, tryin ta take advantage of somebody. You

know I'd like to crack me a few of them Jewboys myself. I'm surprised they didn't all jump you. They're good for somethin like that."

"Well I know they probably wanted to, but I was ready for em. I woulda grabbed somebody and choked him until they all backed off. That's the way you do that you know."

"I know." [Lonnie Blair replies]

I didn't tell Lonnie about the loyalty of Marty Rosenberger, or even about how much a friend Marty always was. Lonnie would never have understood. (90)

In order for Gilyard to manifest the virtues most valued by the *street* culture, which Lonnie Blair represents, Gilyard not only has to retell a crucial moment when he triumphs in a fight but also has to omit details of his friendship with Marty, one of them "Jewboys" as Lonnie calls them. Culturally, Lonnie's reaction shows that Keith would be wrong to befriend such a group of individuals, such as Jerry and anyone else who associates with Jerry. The reaction Lonnie has exemplifies a sort of cultural code: if one person acts inappropriately, then we are to assume everyone else who accompanies that one person is bound to act inappropriately. Culturally, people generally have a habit of believing that if one person of a particular culture acts *ugly*, then others of the same culture will do the same. Moreover, Gilyard upholds the values of his culture by neglecting to mention to Lonnie the bond Gilyard has with Marty. Such a confession would lead Lonnie to think Keith is a sell out who betrays his own culture.

Also, I recognize that the virtue of street culture does not adhere to conventional understandings of virtue such as righteousness, uprightness, and morality. In reference to Lonnie's celebratory reaction to Keith's story, virtue resembles what cultural literary theorist Addison Gayle, Jr. highlights in his work "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the

White Aesthetic.” Gayle, Jr. talks about the Marquis DeSade’s inversion of symbols, something that traditionally has been considered one thing becomes its opposite (Gayle 93). So, a fight or better yet Keith detailing that he “bloodied” Jerry’s nose with his right hand “followed . . . with a jump-kick to his [Jerry’s] stomach,” is something “virtuous,” and honorable and of good value to the culture (Gilyard 89). Keith’s violent behavior is not the sole virtuous characteristic; Keith’s reaction to avenge the humiliation he feels from Jerry’s derogatory words is honorable in the sight of Keith’s culture. Gilyard’s character in the end commits to the expectations set forth by his culture. Furthermore, Gilyard’s character and language are that of the culture with which he identifies. He does more than tell the story; he allows the dialogue to help capture the essence of the cultural language so that the narrative is not “dry and jejune . . . nor . . . erratic, and wantonly adorned with far-fetched descriptions” (Quintilian 369). As William Labov emphasizes in his collection *Language in the Inner City*, an “evaluation” of a narrative may consist of the narrator “quot[ing] himself as addressing someone else” to express “what the point is” of the narrative story (371-72). Gilyard reports the events and includes the language characteristic of the different persons involved as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative by providing an evaluation or a disclaimer.

Like Gilyard, Victor Villanueva, Jr., in his autobiography *Bootstraps*, renders his character through his use of language and his will to retain aspects of his culture. Villanueva, Jr. finds a way to befriend other persons of Latin descent for cultural, linguistic, and ethical comfort the same way Keith seeks comfort from his friends in the neighborhood. Villanueva, Jr. talks about the bond he forms with two students who are also nontraditional students like Villanueva, Jr. at a four-year university; however, I am interested more in his connection to the Puerto Rican male than I am with his friendship with the other male student:

There were two male friends, Mickey, a friend to this day, and Luis el Loco. 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*. (72)

The minute history about Luis is mysterious yet interesting. Luis's background is mysterious because I do not know why he spends time in the penitentiary or why he participates in a prison-release program. I am not sure if the narrator knows. I realize that throughout the autobiography, Villanueva, Jr. stays truthful in clarifying that not all Hispanics come from the same culture and speak the same Spanish dialect/vernacular. Interestingly, above he clarifies a difference among Puerto Ricans. He introduces Luis "the crazy one" as a *puertoricenseño* from the island Puerto Rico. The narrator, on the other hand, is a Puerto Rican from New York. Villanueva, Jr. without having explicitly stated the variance between him and Luis demonstrates that he and Luis are different kinds of Puerto Ricans because of their respective places of origin. The personal ethos established in the text presents a character of credibility or trustworthiness, for I recognize the authenticity of Villanueva, Jr.'s character through an implicit understanding. We know Villanueva, Jr. as "Papi" from "*el bloque*" ("the block") in New York where "Nuyorcinios . . . Puerto Ricans . . . are in many ways culturally closer to African Americans than to Mexicans" (Villanueva 49 and 57). Villanueva, Jr. comes from a neighborhood where it was normal to speak in "portorican Black English: '*Mira*, ain't no way nobody tellin' me nothin' about nothin', men" (8).³⁷ The more negatives the speaker uses (i.e., ain't nobody tellin' me nothin'), the greater the emphasis of the message. Interestingly, the Latino speaker uses the

³⁷ The author purposefully uses "portorican" to demonstrate how others in the community pronounced "Puerto Rican." In addition, he states that a pattern or structure of Puerto Rican Black English involves adding "a *mira* on one end [of a statement] and a *men* on the other" (8).

Spanish word, “Mira” (look), to get the attention of his audience rather than to request that the audience literally look at something. Overall, I trust the narrator’s implied argument—an argument that is silent and that distinguishes his Puerto Rican history from crazy Luis’s. At the same time, Luis accepts the authenticity of Villanueva, Jr.’s personal ethos because each man understands the other linguistically. No matter the regional and historical differences between Luis and Villanueva, Jr., both share traits that are prevalent in their cultures: “they . . . enjoy talking in Spanglish [and] listening to *salsa*” (Villanueva 72).³⁸

The friendship Villanueva, Jr. develops with Luis implies a couple of ideas. First, language influences the way the two individuals accept each other. Historical contexts connect two individuals who are as they say *worlds apart* yet are able to maintain the same cultural values. Villanueva, Jr. contends, “Whether biologically transmitted beyond the basic ability to learn language or not . . . it is clear that language is passed on by people” (86). In other words, the “particular perspective gained here is that the Latino’s ways with words could not help but be influenced by the 400 years in which Spain dominated so much of the New World . . .” (84). One group of people came in contact (physically and linguistically) with another group of people. The effect resembles a sort of chain reaction that takes place throughout the years. Even possible, in the words of earlier Spanish scholar Juan Luis Vives, is the notion that language “does not proceed from a private self whose wisdom teaches or influences other private selves; rather it is a circulating, public commodity, since ‘words are public property’” (qtd. in T. Baumlín 232). In the passage about Villanueva, Jr. and Luis, language develops an echo among

³⁸ Although Victor Villanueva, Jr. does not describe or detail the Spanglish conversations that take place between him and Luis, he references Spanglish in an earlier section of his autobiography. For example, he states, “Spanglish was simply Spanish: ‘Papi, *dame la* hammer’” (8). Rather than use complete English for the command, *give me the hammer*, the other person who talks to Villanueva, Jr. blends Spanish with English—*hammer* is the only word that remains in English. While attending a predominantly Mexican American elementary school, I understood that certain individuals when forced to speak English in their respective homes lost portions of their native language, Spanish. When someone does not recall the Spanish term for a concept, she reverts to the English term of the concept. The act itself is sometimes an act of desperation and other times the act is a subconscious act.

Villanueva, Jr.'s culture and Luis's culture. The two enjoy talking in Spanglish not because each person picked up the dialect on his own but because Spanish speakers' encounters with other Spanish / English speakers help to maintain such linguistic patterns throughout the years. Therefore, the distance between Luis's Puerto Rico and Villanueva, Jr.'s New York diminishes because of the notion that language is not only "social . . . ideological . . . [and] historical" but also cultural, transferable, and powerful (Villanueva 85-86).

Perhaps their cultural influences linked the two individuals the moment they learned of one another's past. Villanueva, Jr. and Luis may have relished the idea that each person was once a tough guy, another possible commonality. The inner macho-Latino attitude may have had much to do with their friendship: Villanueva, Jr. at one point knowing he "could talk sh[*]t on the block when confrontation seemed eminent" (4); and Luis at one point knowing he could stir up trouble after "having been imprisoned in the federal penitentiary" (72).

At the same time, the culture of the university could have been the reason for their close-knit relationship on top of many other factors. When arriving at the university—a "vast and impersonal" place filled with "a labyrinth of corridors and classrooms," students of color try to find someone or some *thing* that soothes them, reminds them of the familiar, or reassures the validity of their positions in such a place (Rose 3). Villanueva, Jr. admits, "There were things going on in his classes that he did not understand and that the others did. . . . He was the only colored kid in every one of those classes" (Villanueva 72). He experiences a sense of isolation others may not have known anything about. The primary indicator of his sudden isolation is his recognition of being the only minority student in classes dominated by non-ethnic, middle-class, and mainstream students. I come to know so much about his culture, his language, and his character in his recollection of attending classes and not understanding perhaps the academic

language with which his professors spoke or the perspective many students used when contributing to discussions or the texts required for the courses. In his work *The Culture of Education*, Jerome Bruner states, “culture at large expresses its way of life through institutions” (29). The way of life at the university entails middle-class thought, speech, learning, communication, and the list goes on. The academy hosts a way of life that isolates any minority student from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, ill-prepared educational school systems, or cultures outside of the States.

So, the experience Villanueva, Jr. encounters helps to validate most minority students’ frustrations of alienation in the academy where professors’ and mainstream students’ perspectives seem so remote from minorities’ cultural, linguistic, and ethical perspectives. Villanueva, Jr. creates for me the emotions of his character that finds no immediate role or purpose in a community that seeks to advance its own ideologies of culture and language; yet, I am pleased that the narrator discerns the differences between the university and his identity. Through the boldness he possesses from his culture, Villanueva, Jr. “demonstrates” what Richard Leo Enos and Karen Rossi Schnakenberg point out in their work “Cicero Latinizes Hellenic *Ethos*”: they state that Cicero calls “a prudent character . . . one that recognizes the nature of a situation . . . and ways of manifesting such views to the audience” (Enos and Schnakenberg 199). When Villanueva, Jr.’s interacts with different communities, I am able to evaluate his position, role, and demeanor. He is not oblivious to his surroundings. In the classroom, he identifies differences; he does not pretend that he knows what is going on in the classroom. Earlier in the chapter, I stated that I try to keep in mind how the narrator involves me in the development of his story—an aspect that contributes to his personal ethos, an ethos that retains cultural values to which I may relate. Villanueva, Jr.’s story has engrossed me because of his “passion of

commitment” (Enos and Schnakenberg 200), for he proclaims, “my not belonging was verified but I was not ready to be shut down” (Villanueva 70).

The challenges both Gilyard and Villanueva, Jr. encounter are challenges developed while trying to resolve conflicts that exist between their respective characters and the expectations of the culture and language that help to create their characters. Of course, I refer to the personal ethos they develop while taking on the characteristics of a culture and a culture’s language. As evident in Lonnie’s celebratory reaction to Gilyard’s fight with Jerry, Lonnie (a representative of the culture to which Gilyard relates) expects Gilyard to avoid people “jig[ing]” over him (Gilyard 90). The same goes for Villanueva, Jr.’s experience. Because he finds himself quite isolated from the university’s middle-class language and culture, his friendship with another Puerto Rican, such as Luis “el Loco,” is expected (Villanueva 72). I recall when I first arrived on Knox College’s campus, I searched for something that reminded me of home—no matter if that meant linguistically (i.e. checking to see that I was not the only one who spoke and understood Chicago slang) or culturally (i.e. checking to see that I would have someone else with whom I could relate intuitively). When I interacted with fellow African American students, they let me know that I also should get to know more about the African American administrators and faculty. Such a task entailed building friendships, attending and supporting all social events put together by another person of our culture, and joining student organizations that focused on African Americans’ topics and heritage because most of our support came from faculty and administrators of color.

I even remember my stepbrother’s excitement when I returned home for the holidays. He wanted to know how many “Black people” attended the college, how many of them had I met, and, of course, how many “sistas” were there and how many of them were “tight looking” and

were available for him to “holla at” or how many had I talked to. These queries were hidden expectations. I now realize that my personal ethos underwent my stepbrother’s evaluation. He expected me to carry to college the cultural, linguistic, and ethical principles that molded me—those same principles to which he adhered while still in our hometown and living among other African Americans on the Westside of Chicago. When I had to present to my stepbrother my loyalty to the principles that originated from my home, I think about rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s insight about persuasion located in his *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke states, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his” (Burke 55). In other words, I had to show that I could “rap” to an African American female; I had to provide details of my encounters with other African Americans in general. I internally understood that my status as a college student entailed possible differences between who I was and who I used to be. If I had no information to report to my stepbrother, I would not have maintained his respect. If I had not interacted with other African Americans on campus, I would not have held my end of the bargain *per se*. At the same time, I did not need to persuade my stepbrother because I naturally carried with me the traits he expected me to enact. I simply interacted and connected with other students of color on the campus as a natural instinct. My character consisted of both my inner person and my skill in speaking well or in this case authentically.

Much of what I experienced, along with the experiences Gilyard and Villanueva, Jr. report, Mike Rose also talks about in his autobiography *Lives on the Boundary*. Rose admits, “School [for many of us unfamiliar with it] can be a tremendously disorienting place. No matter how bad the school, you’re going to encounter notions that don’t fit with the assumptions and beliefs that you grew up with” (28). As a child of immigrant parents who “didn’t read or write

very much and had no more than a few books around the house,” Rose did not have a strong background with reading and writing, two characteristics pivotal for an education that produces authors Rose could have read and written language he could have emulated (19). Rose’s educational experience proved to be difficult considering the differences in cultural, linguistic, and ethical ideologies that resided at home and in the classroom.

From Rose’s experience, I realize that his cultural, linguistic, or ethical values or practices conflict with the environment outside of his home—my interpretation is due to the narrator’s description and sentiment about the school setting. His description and sentiments make it necessary to examine the characteristics of an educational experience by way of perceiving that experience from the perspective from which Rose enters the school system. For starters, although his father—who was from Naples—“went through a year or two of Italian elementary school and could write a few words,” his father “had been a salesman, a tailor, and a gambler” when he arrived to the States. Rose’s father exemplified a diligent character. Rose’s mother who was from Calabria “grew up very poor” and “slept with her parents and brothers and sisters in one room”; she “quit school in the seventh grade to care to her sickly younger brothers.” Soon afterward, she worked in a “garment factory” due to her father’s “railroad accident” when he lost his leg (Rose 12). Rose’s mother emulated a responsible character with good sense. Whatever circumstances developed, Rose could learn from his parents’ actions the drive to do anything he sets his mind to do. When it came to education...well, education and its requirements are challenges that Rose faces first.

As evident from his parents’ minimal educational experience, Rose is unable to consult his parents on what to expect from an education that not only differs from their Italian education but also involves “kids from all kinds of backgrounds,” an “unsettling” situation for someone

like Rose (28). According to Jerome Bruner, in *The Culture of Education*, “many indigenous cultures do not practice as deliberate . . . a form of teaching as we do” (20). Because minorities, like Villanueva, Jr. and me are not familiar with the rigorous teaching practices of education, someone else, like young Rose who has parents born and raised on foreign soil, is sure to have a difficult time adapting to the culture of an American education—a culture that also entails linguistic expectations (both written and aural) and a particular ethos (e.g., one of virtue, diligence, morality, and so on).

Moreover, once an individual interacts with his culture and its language, issues that were once issues dissipate. When I think about Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg’s interpretation of Quintilian’s work in their collection *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to Present*, I recall the authors note that Quintilian emphasizes that one of the “early signs of a young student’s aptitude” is the student’s “talent for mimicry” (361). Quintilian’s theory makes possible the notion that all students, according to Rose, “learn things about people” because they start “picking up on the cues from . . . school and [the] curriculum” (Rose 27).³⁹ The language that first seems to “[pile] up like cars in a serial wreck,” later becomes a “modeling of grace” when “it all slowly, slowly [begins] to work itself into the way [the student] [shapes] language” (Rose 54 and 56). So, the once doubtful student later becomes the one prepared and diligent thus developing “an ability to read difficult texts,” “learning how to reread critically” and “[teasing] out definitions and basic arguments” the way Rose describes himself (51). The improvement in his reading proves he becomes a member of a culture that no longer feels mysterious to him.

Jerome Bruner contends, “It is principally through interacting with others that [people] find out

³⁹ The quotation from Rose is really about the way other students outside of vocational education notice the difference in their good educational prowess and the vocational education students’ poor educational prowess. Rose was among the students enrolled in vocational education; the “school” defined voc. ed. students as “‘slow’” (28). I use the quotation to emphasize that a student who is unfamiliar with a new place eventually understands the new setting’s ways of life (via cultural, linguistic, and ethical interactions that occur).

what the culture is about and how it conceives of the world” (*Culture* 20). The moment Rose consults teachers and professors, each group willingly provides the assistance needed. When Rose agrees to meet with teachers and professors, he grows into the educational ethos he never imagined would develop. His interests in improving his analytical thinking, writing, and reading skills prompt representatives of the culture to teach him particular techniques. Rose recounts a scenario when “Dr. Erlandson” scans Rose’s prose one sentence at a time:

He always began by reading the sentence out loud . . . Then he would fiddle with the sentence, talking and looking up at me intermittently to comment or ask questions: “‘Ascent.’ That sounds like ‘assent,’ I know, but look it up, Mike.” He’d wait while I fluttered the dictionary. “Now, ‘the entirety of his work’ . . . try this instead: ‘his entire work.’ Let’s read it. ‘Camus assented to a richer vision of life that would characterize his entire work.’ Sounds better doesn’t it?” . . . And so it would go. He rarely used grammatical terms, and he never got technical. He dealt with specific bits of language: “Try this here” or “Here’s another way to say it.” He worked as a craftsman works, with particulars, and he shuttled back and forth continually between print and voice, making me breathe my prose, making me hear the language I’d generated in silence. (Rose 55)

Before Rose realizes the culture of education and its language, he humbles his character and moves pride to the side. He receives help. Rose undergoes a transformation from once proclaiming, “I was out of my league” to later receiving critiquing-instructions about his written language (43). The professor does not focus on technical writing terms but relies on a common aural technique that Rose can take with him to practice in private. By way of example, Rose learns how to attack his prose by rearranging, scrutinizing, and omitting unnecessary phrases.

The influence of Dr. Erlandson's teaching exemplifies Quintilian's theory that "the *living voice* . . . feeds the mind more nutritiously" (Quintilian 364; bk. 2 ch. 1 and 367; bk. 2 ch. 2). So, when Dr. Erlandson repeats Rose's prose back to Rose, Rose captures the distinction between what he "generate[s] in silence" and what he has to revise while in the presence of Dr. Erlandson (Rose 55). He then approaches language under a new light, enlightened by a different process of writing that is familiar to the culture in which he seeks admittance.

The type of character Rose develops is one that represents not only the culture of education but also the intricacies of his parents' cultural values. Education shows its approval of Rose's character the moment he exhibits traits that "education" deems as reputable, important, and necessary—he is receptive to *instruction* thus willing to improve the way he studies, reads, speaks, and writes. His interaction with teachers and professors or better yet the way he learns from his teachers and professors portrays his diligent (hardworking) character. Rose's parents, loyal individuals to their families, made sacrifices. His father once juggled multiple money earning opportunities and his mother became head of households on numerous occasions. Their diligent characteristics resided deep within Rose, for the moment he recognizes his circumstances, he finds ways to overcome the challenges. I learn from Phillip Sipiora's "Ethical Argumentation in Darwin's *Origin of Species*" that a rhetor (or narrator) "must establish the appearance of practical judgment" (268). Sipiora references Aristotle's theory about ethos and practical judgment as parts of one's character. So, part of the trust I have in Rose derives from the Aristotelian notion about practical judgment (also known as "good sense" or "*phronesis*") (qtd. in Sipiora 268). Rose evaluates and reflects on the help sessions received in and out of class and realizes the potentials of learning abilities, which strengthened the personal ethos others valued about him.

School's Out: A Reflection

As evident from the three autobiographies, an audience readily accepts someone whose reputation it already knows and approves especially if the character adopts certain cultural and linguistic traits valuable to such a group. The audience I speak about represent the Lonnie Blairs, the Luis el Locos, and the Dr. Erlandsons; and there are many others who have assisted the narrators in their educational as well as social endeavors. At the same time, I think of my role in this project as a representative of “audience” and my perception of the narrators’ histories, backgrounds, values, and morals. Why did I find their stories worth reading about?

I like to explore why I have considered examining *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, and *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. In the midst of the authors retelling their experiences, part of me feels as though I had been “charmed” as in what rhetoricians Richard Enos and Karen Schnakenberg highlight from George Kennedy’s understanding of Ciceronian ethos (194). The other part of me feels that I was not charmed or lured in so to speak; rather, I had realized the writers’ abilities to exemplify aspects of my own culture—an effect that James Kinneavy and Susan Warshauer express in their article “From Aristotle to Madison Avenue: *Ethos* and the Ethics of Argument.” I experience the autobiographers’ experiences because I realized their abilities to not only “gauge society’s [or my] values and . . . display them” but also “exhibit that quality of character that culture [my culture]. . . defines as virtue [or as good quality]” (Kinneavy and Warshauer 175). Perhaps both my being charmed and my noticing similar cultural values are the same. No matter the perspective, I know that because I revisit the crucial moments of each writer’s life, I have the opportunity to capture his frustrations, insecurities, trials, achievements, rewards, and plights.

According to Sonja Foss, “What emerges as significant from [the] narrative also might reveal something important about an individual’s identity” (339). I would even add that the narrative reveals something important about an institution’s identity or a group’s identity. The experiences the narrators shared provided insight about the cultures, languages, and characters of the narrators as well as the culture, language, and character certain environments expected the narrators to understand and adopt for their own purposes. The narratives may have openly described aspects of the narrators’ lives on a few accounts, and on other accounts may have indirectly described their lives. More important, I recall saying to myself, *I know exactly what you’re talking about...That’s it right there... Without a doubt*. I had become the “Amen” corner attesting to narratives about undergraduate professors’ satisfaction to see their students “playing with language” and graduate professors’ dissatisfaction to that same style of play (Villanueva 87); narratives about “[trying] to be a hip schoolboy, but it was impossible to achieve that persona” (Gilyard 160); and narratives about escaping from “depressed communities” to earn rewards of financial stability and social opportunities (Rose 47).

At the same time, I like to think that minority students in our first-year composition courses not only try to find similarities between the authors’ lifestyles and their own lifestyles—which they are more than welcomed to do—but also *journey*, just as I have journeyed, to realize personal narratives offer perspectives about any given subject: the nation, global affairs, graduate studies, family units, drugs, education, and the list goes on. As Phillip Sipiora emphasizes, I hope students “move beyond the internal ethics of a text [and move] into the arena of cultural values” (Sipiora 288). We must have students read texts that express the meaning of tough economic times when “rats [crawl] within the walls” and a family awaits “food stamps,” and have students follow the narrative to notice the shift in the narrator’s experience (Villanueva 65).

From such a narrative, we come to know a little something about culture—aspects common to certain groups of people entailing certain attitudes and behaviors. We come to know a little something about language—the ability alone to talk freely about financial expectations without actually saying *times are hard*. We come to know a little something about character—the idea that one is honest enough to share her thoughts in relation to the cultural circumstances. In the event that such a narrative burdens the reader, we focus on sections of the narrative that uplift and motivate. The overall goal is to show that learning combined with application (the understanding to apply) give the student a clear example of how she may express ideas about her cultural, linguistic, and ethical values.

In the end, I recall the question Quintilian answers in relation to teaching young apprentices to become knowledgeable men of speech: “what authors ought to be read by beginners?” He argues, “I would have the best authors commenced at once, and read always; but I would choose the clearest in style, and most intelligible” (375; bk. 2, ch. 5). I share the same sentiments today. The autobiographies examined, discussed, and analyzed in this work represent my notion of the “best.” Of course, such an evaluation is subjective and biased; however, that is a concept I readily accept.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

What follows in this chapter is my conclusion to the entire research project. This chapter does not read (or should not read) entirely like a chapter that adds another argument to what I have already argued. The chapter elaborates on a few ideas I presented in previous chapters. Also, the chapter indirectly relies on the previous chapters to answer questions I posed in chapter one: what are we doing with personal narratives? Why do we teach personal narratives / narrative assignments? Do we assume students construct personal narratives so naturally that they transform events into narrative discourse unproblematically? So that readers do not feel cheated or deceived by the journey this project has taken, I will not beat around the bush. I first revisit the value of personal narratives. Second, I re-examine the critical autobiographies to reiterate that personal narratives are about the institutions that comprise the identity of the writers / narrators. Third, I suggest ways to help students understand the act of shaping their experiences into written language. Last, I address ways students may better understand culture, language, and ethos in personal narrative writing.

The Personal Narrative

The personal narrative is a communicative act, a discourse, a medium; it overflows with secrets, ideologies, strategies, uncertainties; it is structure; it liberates; it is a truth and not the Truth. No wonder we continue to find difficult the task to construct one and to understand our attraction to it. Like a hot-air balloon, the narrative glides over the past allowing us to look down

to position buildings as they were, people as they spoke, and actions as they occurred. Through all of this, we know that personal narratives must do more than exist as *accounts* of something.

In his work “Personal Writing Assignments,” Robert Connors talks about the influence and use of personal writing in composition classrooms. One of the “first elements of composition taught in most classes” by 1900 was the personal narrative (or narration) according to Connors. He states that by the mid 1900s, “personal writing [was] . . . widely accepted by students.” Because students positively reacted to personal writing, “most [writing courses] . . . start[ed] with it.” The point of the narrative was to encourage students to “enter the conversation at age eighteen” (Connors 173, 177, and 181). The conversation Connors refers to is the influential talk that floats around in “written discourse” or academic discourse (i.e., literary scholarship, canonical literature, or all facets of the academy) (Connors 181; Rose 192). He ends his article by emphasizing the need for teachers to move students “*beyond*” personal accounts, a notion into which I attempt to bring life. From 1987, the year in which Connors’ article receives publication, to 2010, the notion to exceed mere personal account in personal writing has not dissipated. . . . nor has the notion diluted a pursuit to capture the *more* of personal narratives. I among many others (Labov, Macrorie, Elbow, Summerfield, Connors, Singer, Brodkey, Hindman, Sullivan, etc.) have studied the personal narrative in order to understand the rationale for teaching it in the writing course, for shaping it for publication purposes, or for “reverting” to it (as Labov states) in many communicative acts. I have come to realize a necessity for the personal in order to understand various features of culture, language, and character—aspects Gilyard, Rose, and Villanueva, Jr. express in their autobiographies and aspects students may better articulate in their writing tasks.

Keith Gilyard's *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, Victor Villanueva, Jr.'s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared* are narratives that not only detail the narrators' experiences but also emphasize the power, influence, or effect various institutions have on each narrator's identity. The characteristics of each narrator derive "from outside in—based on the apparent esteem of others and on the myriad expectations that [are] pick[ed] up from the culture[s] in which [the narrators] are immersed" (Bruner, *Making Stories* 65). Closely related to the theory—that the *outside* influences the individual—is Louis Althusser's ISAs (ideological state apparatuses). I will never forget my novice attempt at literary theory about six years ago in a graduate seminar and the moment I grew agitated at the possibility that I had been operating under the pretenses of ideological state apparatuses. The graduate professor talked about Althusser and these "things" we find ourselves uncontrollably following, enacting, and/or repeating as a response to limitations or freedoms allotted to us by various institutions (i.e., culture, education, family, community, occupations, politics, etc.)—all of which make up the ISAs. When I think about the narrators' autobiographies and the claim Bruner makes in *Making Stories* that everyone is an *expression* of the culture that "nurtures" her, I realize that the personal narrative helps to reify and display all "things" pertinent to the narrator's culture, family, religion, political affiliation, education, and the list goes on—institutions that not only mold the narrator's character and language but also evaluate the narrator in light of the principles that comprise her identity (87). What does all of this mean? The personal narrative benefits not necessarily the writer who constructs it; rather, the reader uses the personal narrative to focus on the culture / language from which the writer originates. Thus, compositionists, composition theorists, composition

pedagogues, and general composition advocates shed light on cultural histories when they *personally narrate* their experiences.

For instance, the group “Keith” runs with creates trouble instead of avoiding it: Gilyard makes concrete the culture, language, and character of the group. Drug abuse is valued: “You sniffin these Keith? Or you gonna skin pop?” (142); fornication is pursued: “Be a good chance to git your thing wet” (123); fashion is imperative: “You could obtain respect simply by dressing well. In other words, you could get over better if you ‘vined’” (120-20); and fighting is honored: “While it was mandatory to hate the Whites, we couldn’t stand being called Black. That was an automatic fight” (91). In contrast, “Raymond’s” interaction with education creates opportunity and potential. For example, thoughts about a future are valued: “And I sifted through my catalogs at home, focusing in on the University of Connecticut and the University of Notre Dame” (153). Public recognition is offered: “This [poem] is good work Raymond . . . I’m going to use it for the bulletin board” (76); and assimilation is required: “I felt I was coming along nicely. Sang ‘America the Beautiful’ and ‘My Country, Tis of Thee’ as loudly as anyone [and] [...] Showed the proper concern for the Cold War” (47).

Gilyard consistently keeps the personality of Keith at odds with the personality of Raymond (See Chapters Three and Four). In the dichotomy between both characters, I acknowledge the development of both due to their performances or lack of performances in relation to the expectations that their respective communities demand. Remember when young Gilyard recognizes the difference in his mother’s interaction with strangers and family (See Chapter Four)? Gilyard, during adolescence, channels the linguistic differences his mother demonstrated when he was younger; thus, he forms dual characters that adhere to the expectations set forth by “Lonnie,” “Melvin,” or “Wallace” (individuals who represent the

neighborhood's culture / language / character) and expectations set forth by "Mr. Price," "Mrs. Lehrman," or "Mrs. Applebaum" (a different set of individuals who represent education's culture / language / character) (Gilyard 43, 45, 90, 122, 134, and 142). Gilyard's interaction with each group helps to display the traits that the groups deem significant.

Victor Villanueva, Jr. also provides insight about his surroundings. Just like Clifford Geertz, in his work *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, points out Clyde Kluckhohn's definition of culture as a "way of thinking, feeling, and believing," Villanueva, Jr. emphasizes so to speak the way of a place, a group, or an institution (qtd. in Geertz 4). Villanueva, Jr. plainly highlights the expectations of different places and groups with which he interacts. For instance, on *the block* or *el bloque*, from New York to East Compton, young Villanueva does not think about the future (i.e., college), because in the "ghetto . . . no one thought in terms of college . . . no one was taught a trade. Just do time" (Villanueva 5).⁴⁰ The future is difficult to envision when the present is chaotic and unapologetic. Also, he "got fit" because he did not want to be the wimp others bully—to keep a good reputation meant knowing how to hold his own or stand up for himself or show that no one would or could push him around (4). Later, he knows the importance of maintaining his identity no matter the success:

Like many a Latino, I was upset by Richard Rodriguez's autobiography, *Hunger of Memory* . . . Rodriguez is not just the writer; he [needs to understand that he] is the Mexican American writer, the writer of the Hispanic experience, whether he cares for the epithets or not, epithets imposed on him even as he denies them—
Mexican American, Hispanic. (39)

Villanueva, Jr.'s way of thinking parallels his Latino culture because his culture influences most of his actions—he joins others' disgust toward Rodriguez, one who openly states that he is proud

⁴⁰ The term "time" refers to jail time / imprisonment.

to have eradicated his native tongue and proud to have become a “success” *per se*. The cultural roots Villanueva, Jr. maintains become the fuel for his rebuttal to Rodriguez, a man who sees himself as “just the writer.” Furthermore, Villanueva, Jr. expresses education’s ideology when he finds out from Mrs. Ray, a part-time instructor at the community college, that “his writing [is] ‘too serious,’ too abstract, not typical of her students.” “He is flattered” because he then knows “he could write well enough for college” (68). Mrs. Ray’s evaluation of Villanueva, Jr.’s writing serves as confirmation as to what the academy expects from its students.

Mike Rose deals with a similar issue that involves administrators’ and teachers’ expectations of certain students: he visits a basic writing course filled with students who perhaps conform to the assumptions and beliefs others outside of the class create. Remember when Rose negates the assumptions administrators held about the basic writing students (See Chapter Three)? Each student has potential and intellect and shows that she knows vital information relevant to class discussions. In addition to the experience of Rose looking from the outside-in, his autobiography features an inside cultural perspective about the “learned behavior” and the “total way of life of a people,” specifically students enrolled in vocational education (qtd. in Geertz 4-5). Young Rose, whose “tests [scores] got confused with those of another student named Rose,” was placed in a vocational track education (Rose 24). Vocational education, at the time, enrolled “slow” students (28). Ironically, the experience was anything but vocational. According to Rose, vocational education is a “curriculum that isn’t designed to liberate you but to occupy you, or, if you’re lucky, train you, though the training is for work the society does not esteem” (28). So, after young Rose grows accustomed to vocational education, his attitude transforms from him marveling about the wonders of chemistry and astronomy to him feeling dull, bored, and detached from classroom activities. He admits, “Students will float to the mark

you set. I and the others in the vocational classes were bobbing in pretty shallow water” (26). His personal ethos parallels those of his peers: he learns to follow suit so to speak. I think about the hypochondriac—the moment you tell her about her sluggishness, which may not have any connection to feeling sick, she immediately believes a fever already has arrived. She feels sick; she believes the symptoms have run amok. She *plays the part* by feeding into the image of looking sick. The same effect takes hold of young Rose. School counselors place him in vocational education although he does not belong; yet, he becomes “vocational.” In the vocational track, a no hope for the future attitude develops: “none of us was groomed for the classroom” (26). Mediocre attempts to work at daily lessons emerge: “I got bored with history. My attention flitted here and there” (27). *Avoid the spotlight or evade public recognition* becomes the motto: “Reject the confusion and frustration [of education] by openly defining yourself as the Common Joe. Champion the average” (29). The culture, language, and ethos of this kind of education belittle the potential to succeed, a potential each student may very well possess.

Gilyard’s, Villanueva, Jr.’s, and Rose’s autobiographies introduce varying identities of people and places by which the authors are surrounded (See Chapters Three and Four). Their interactions with their surroundings influence their behaviors as well as their morals and values. Interestingly, the narratives develop histories to which I and other scholars may refer. Therefore, when personal narratives continue to highlight the transactions and the exchanges that take place between the persons in the narratives and the “environment,” we connect to the intricacies of the environment in light of the experience of the narrator—this is what we are doing with personal narratives as scholars. Yet, why do we consider teaching the personal narrative as pedagogues? The answer is implied. Allow me to explain.

When I examine the experiences of each narrator, I perform multiple acts that may seem useful for fellow pedagogues of composition and composition studies as well as students in composition classrooms. First, I listen. I understand the frustrations and satisfactions each narrator presents in his autobiography. Although their words appear on the page, I listen to their narrative's development. Second, I jot down or keep a mental check on qualities from the narratives that represent the vibe of a place, a people, and an idea each narrator experiences that illustrate cultural, linguistic, and/or ethical similarities and differences. Last, I analyze the importance of the information each narrator has invited me to experience. My examination of the identity of education, for example, catalogs the various ideologies each narrator encounters. I have touched on a few above. The result of each narrator's encounter with education is pivotal: the minority student, more than likely, has to assimilate without eradicating characteristics of his roots (Gilyard; Rose); the minority student has to become two versions of himself—characters that both derive from his personal history (Gilyard); or, the minority student has to become a *hybrid*: one who could “speak like academics but in the language of the streets” (Villanueva 52; Gilyard). My approach to the narrative texts is not an approach that solidly determines the depth of the narrators' experiences; however, the approach provides potential for others working with or developing personal narratives. More important, I listen, retain, and analyze the narratives because they not only “teach . . . about human experience[s]” as Lester Faigley highlights in his work *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*, but also present notions relevant to cultural identities, linguistic practices, and ethical loyalties (qtd. in Faigley, 160). So, students, as apprentices of the personal narrative, may learn about the significance of culture, language, and character because we as pedagogues have to do what Phillip Sipiora advises in his work “Ethical Argumentation in Darwin's *Origin of Species*.” He asserts that we

have to “move beyond the internal ethics of a text” and into subjects that are of value to both the classroom and its students (Sipiora 288).

Beyond Retrospection and into Practicality

Personal narratives for the student should invoke the same elements I have evaluated and analyzed in the critical autobiographies. What I mean by *should* is that we can expect to see the cultural, linguistic, and ethical traits with which a student writer identifies; I do not advocate that students *must* include those traits because the personal narratives involuntarily embed the qualities that comprise students’ identities. To show students the varying cultures, languages, and characters inherent in their narratives, we mainly have to play roles similar to the role of “hearers” which Aristotle clarifies in *Rhetoric*: we have to determine the narrative’s “end and object.” We have to be particular hearers, specifically “judge[s], with [decisions] to make about things past or future” (1358b). Our goal whenever we teach the personal narrative should be to help students shape their experiences into written language that would grant us entrance into the institutions that mold the students’ personal ethos, determine their cultural boundaries and freedoms, and highlight their linguistic practices.

We no longer teach students typically from middle-class families, students who perhaps for quite some time do not think much about their speech and culture as dominant institutions we encounter in higher education as well as in the elementary and secondary educational school systems. Students who earn their way, their entrance, into the academy today and come from lower, working-class families whose members walk and talk with a certain swagger are increasing in numbers; some of these students consistently think in survival mode (like Gilyard when the principal introduces him to his new classmates and teacher) planning ways to keep cool

so to speak and gain knowledge about the tools the academy has to offer. These types of students, minority students, enter academic communities that build or break, teach or turn away, mold or melt. Moreover, a student from minority status (See Chapter One) has an identity we should learn about and not necessarily disregard. In order for us to understand and grow closer to cultures, languages, and characters of the students that we do not recognize immediately, we have to teach the personal narrative a certain way that allows space for critical communication between us and the students' narratives. Teaching students to shape their experiences is the challenge we face, however. *Shaping* may involve us teaching them that narratives are constructs and that constructing personal narratives is more about the act of disclosing and less about confessing information.

Narratives Are Constructs

I recall a particular semester I taught *English Composition I*. I asked my students to write about the nightlife of Tuscaloosa. They were to write their narratives in the form of letters—one to their closest friends or relatives and the other to their parents.⁴¹ They were to talk about the same incident to both audiences. In the letter to friends, some students talked about being “wasted” before leaving their rooms (dormitories) to go to a party on campus or a home football / basketball game or a performance on the Quad during homecoming. I do not remember the other occasions. Their encounters with alcoholic beverages became the foci of the narratives. Details about who brought what and how depicted students' knowledge of getting around the university's policies about drinking in dormitories. I acknowledged that they had established a sort of underground culture that enjoyed taking risks. As fresh ideas to their plots, they

⁴¹ I explained that “parents” may also represent any person(s) serving as legal guardian(s) because I am aware that not every student lives with her biological parent(s).

summoned the parents' college experiences, which their parents shared with them at some point. One student mentioned that if the residential advisor caught her with alcohol in her room, the student's father would be extremely disappointed, not at the act of her residential advisor catching her but at the idea that his daughter did not grasp his instructions on how to drink "responsibly" so to speak. In this context, "responsibly" is her knowing how to conceal any evidence of alcohol in her room. In the letter to parents, some students focused on the actual events. Details about drinking before attending an event received fewer words and expressions. The students who mentioned alcohol wrote that they had little or no participation in drinking. I like to consider those narratives as diluted versions of the chaotic drinking binges expressed in letters to the friends. I even remember two students talking about the racial prejudices they encountered at various venues along The Strip.⁴² In the letters to friends, these students documented word for word the verbal confrontation; however, in the letters to parents, students summarized or paraphrased the verbal exchanges.

As evident from the assignment, personal narratives are more than mere "constructs"—Amy Robillard makes this claim in her work "It's Time for Class: Toward a More Complex Pedagogy of Narrative" (83). In other words, a writer includes certain experiences and excludes others. The process alone does not mean the writer deceives her audience; instead, the process demonstrates that the writer values audience and understands the rhetorical strategy needed for whatever situation. My students constructed their narratives according to the exigency of the assignment. When I say "exigency," I refer to rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation." Three concepts make up what he calls "the rhetorical situation": "constraints," which are the people, events, and objects that have significant roles in *the* situation; "audience," which

⁴² The Strip is the historic, popular street near campus where many bars, independent stores, and restaurants settle. Most heavy activity takes place on The Strip.

influences the way a speaker states her claim / argument; and “exigence,” which is the motivational event, issue, or problem (Bitzer 62-63). So, my students composed their narratives the way Amy Robillard describes her own narrative development: “consciously sift[ing] through the good and the bad [experiences] depending on who [she is] talking to and what point [she is] trying to make” (Robillard 83). Shocked by the influence of audience, my students realized that they disclose specific information with certain individuals and conceal specific information from others. They discovered that narrating is a rhetorical act. Paul Ricoeur emphasizes, “to narrate experience is to *refigure* it, to tell it in a *certain way*, and often for a certain end” (emphasis added; qtd. in Kerby 47). Therefore, when a student discloses certain information to an audience yet conceals particular moments from an audience, she understands the meaning of audience and its effect on the personal narrative. She still relies on her experience to bring to light the effect of the narrative she develops. Of course, the process for many students is difficult. The main task for us pedagogues of composition is to allow students to find their comfort zones. What if a student does not want to disclose any information that informs a stranger about her history?⁴³ What if a student comes from a culture that objects to narratives and what narratives are about? I consider questions like these to be potential issues, possible setbacks one would have to understand before students begin the act of writing. However, I do not see them as disruptive and irresolvable. When students come to understand rhetorical acts, they will come to understand inclusion and exclusion—the theory behind narratives as constructs; they may include information that they feel most comfortable sharing or they may exclude information that they feel least comfortable sharing.

⁴³ I use “stranger” to refer to any person outside of the student’s family / kin.

Experience as Subjects in the Classroom

In the same semester, I constructed my syllabus according to the feedback I received from previous students. The semester began with “Paper One” focusing on NARRATIVE and ended with “Paper Five” focusing on COMPARING/CONTRASTING. The reason for starting the semester with “Paper One” as a narrative essay assignment, came not only from positive feedback from prior students but also from the “[assumption] that students can write easily, ‘naturally,’ without much thought, about what has happened to them. They have the data—the ‘reality’—at hand” according to Judith Summerfield (182). However, students who primarily attend a flagship institution rarely have interests in reading yet alone writing. Such students do not easily construct narratives. To some students, writing the narrative is far from *natural* because they are caught between a rock and a hard place. They have to unlearn prescriptive writing instructions from their respective high school curricula that involved teachers instructing students to avoid any first-person perspective. Then, they have to learn effective ways to integrate the first-person perspective. Many mainstream students have issues with the transition; or, am I clear to say “transformation?” Because many mainstream students struggle, more than likely non-mainstream students encounter double the frustration. By the time most students enter the academy, the “I” has been “sidelined” like an injured quarterback. Fortunately, the student understands that avoiding the first-person perspective was and is temporary the moment we use personal narrative assignments in freshman composition. According to Robert Nash, in his work *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*, students “were given . . . few opportunities to write in the first-person voice” (Nash 2). Thus, when students leave one discourse community (e.g., secondary education) and enter a different discourse community (e.g., higher education), we, as Amy Robillard emphasizes, “cannot simply expect students to

adopt our [the latter's / the academy's / the middle-class's] ways of thinking uncritically” (Robillard 76).⁴⁴ We have to ease students into the new environment. One way to accomplish the task is to welcome their experiences, especially the experiences of minority students. According to Maxine Hairston, in her work “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” “Every student brings to class a picture of the world in his or her mind that is constructed out of his or her cultural background and unique and complex experience” (Hairston 190). Because every student maintains an image of the world according to her cultural influences, we have to teach each student ways to make use of the “I” that seeks a role and position in its new environment. The objective perhaps is to “encourage our students to create their own meanings from their own histories” (Robillard 76). In other words, we have to hope, as Stephen Tchudi says in *What Makes Writing Good*, “to engage students in writing from their own experience” (qtd. in Faigley 121).

Unfortunately, students may understand personal narratives as vehicles to *confess* the iniquities of their histories. When confession becomes the bulk of the personal narrative, many writing instructors fight a battle that they cannot win immediately. Confessions evoke ethical issues involved with personal narratives. At what point do teachers intervene or step in to discuss counseling options for students who produce narratives that recount traumatic experiences? In her article “Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing,” Anne Ruggles Gere acknowledges that some students write distressful personal narratives, yet they receive praise from some writing instructors:

⁴⁴ Although I use a collective / inclusive “we” throughout this particular chapter to position myself among other composition pedagogues, I am compelled to dissociate myself as a member of the middle-class (i.e. “our way of thinking”) because I consider myself still learning the academy’s way of thinking. The ideology of the ivory tower is not something practiced and discussed in my parents’ home—nor has it been practiced and discussed. The only way I would consider myself a member included in the phrase “our way of thinking” is if “our way of thinking” continually developed during my informative years and during adolescence.

. . . student accounts of experiences with infertility, auto accidents, childhood trauma, or divorce receive instructor accolades such as “moving,” “powerful,” and “honest.” Here, as in much personal writing, the most highly prized narratives deal with traumatic experiences. (204)

When some writing instructors praise students’ traumatic experiences, the instructors disregard the issues of the students’ experiences. Accordingly, instructors distance themselves from the ethical issues students confess in narratives. Rather than writing instructors acknowledging the content (i.e. the issues), writing instructors draw themselves to the style students use to recount their history. Sensitive instructors may recognize that these narratives are significant to our students and to the confidence our students try to develop, so the notion to praise the students may not occur.

Although students may bring with them the misconception of what should or could go into the personal narrative, we have to do what I mention earlier: have students unlearn the information they carry with them to the academy. To unlearn also means to teach distinction. We have to teach students the difference between confession and disclosure, for confession may lead to discomfort between the writing instructor and the student. David Bleich talks about the distinction in his work, “Collaboration and the Pedagogy of Disclosure.” He states that confession is an “implied reference to a religious morality, as if one is confessing sins and revealing secrets” (Bleich 48). I realize that private language or private information consists of students’ confessions, which does not adhere to the goal of the personal narrative as I see it or as Bleich and many others see it. The personal narrative, nonetheless, is a public discourse, which parallels Bleich’s understanding of disclosure: “Disclosure refers more to telling things in more

intermediate contexts” like small groups and classrooms as well as venues outside of the classroom (48).

Perhaps the former (confession) influences certain pedagogues / scholars, like Dan Morgan and Marilyn Valentino to caution others to either limit or eliminate the use of personal narratives (See Chapter One)...perhaps. Limiting the personal narrative influences tighter narrative assignments while eliminating the personal narrative simply perpetuates the repression students encounter in primary and secondary education—the same discourse communities that detract students from relying on their first-learned style of speech, narrative discourse (Labov). So, eliminating the personal narrative to me means undervaluing the power of narrative as a discourse, in which the act alone leads to stripping away students’ cultures represented in language, and later ignoring the little identity students carry into the college classroom. If confession is the only drawback that causes some of our writing instructors to grow insecure about teaching personal narratives, then mentally we have to channel the act of disclosing in order to better guide students to provide real “perceptual” experiences from which even we may learn (Bruner, “Life” 15).

Suggestions

When we guide, instruct, teach, we shape, form, mold, so the general idea to make both our students and us comfortable with personal narratives is to lead by example. How else are we ever going to move beyond the pages of this research if we do not take into consideration possible suggestions to culture, language, and character development? As I close the chapter on this work (for now), I suggest ways we may develop students’ keen awareness of the personal narrative that will allow them to reify notions and ideas related to their individual histories which

in the end demonstrates how theoretically complex the act of constructing personal narratives tends to be.

Language

We can start by allowing students to show their authentic voices in the narrative essays. We come to understand that expressions like idioms connect us—the outsiders, the readers, the audience—to the cultural and ethical breeding the student appreciates about her history. For instance, “Raymond” reiterates what he learns from Sunday School when his primary school teachers asks the class about the difference between a house and home: “A house can be anywhere you live with walls and ceilings and floors. But it’s not a home until there is love,” answers Raymond (Gilyard 47). Also, another form of language, like eye-dialect, the concept sociolinguist Barbara Johnstone talks about in her work *Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics*, informs us about the culture of a people—a people to which the narrator belongs or a people by which the narrator is surrounded (119). Earlier in the research, I refer to the language of a drill sergeant that Villanueva, Jr. mimics in his autobiography. I would like to bring attention to that same passage. Victor Villanueva, Jr. imitates the language of a “short Filipino” drill sergeant:

Ip you’re worried about Bietnam, don’t be. Because you’re all gonna go anyway and do your job por Uncle Sam. And. Ip you’re worried about being killed, don’t be. Because you’re all such sorry sacks ob sh[*]t, you’re all going to die anyway.

(43)

As I also mention earlier, the substitution of “f’s” and “b’s” for “p’s” and “v’s” presents a mental sound that indicates a cultural difference between the drill sergeant’s acquisition of the English language and a native’s acquisition of the English language. The drill sergeant’s “speech” also

implies that English is not his primary language. He clearly expresses himself using expressions to which many of his recruits may relate: he calls them “sorry sacks ob sh[*]t.” The sergeant wants to establish his authority by belittling the esteem of his recruits—a sort of break down to build up approach. Authenticity. For just a split second, language lures us into the real time of a told event. We relive the event the narrator tells and we imagine the face that belongs to the words the narrator remembers. According to Susan Miller, “discourse, particularly writing in the vernacular, ‘convince[s] us that it is a ‘real presence’” (qtd. in T. Baumlín, 237). In other words, discourse relays to us the immediacy of an event or of the persons involved in the event. Honest reporting helps students recapture an event and helps us connect to such an event. At the same time, a student’s act to mimic language and to present such language on the page, allows us to understand the mannerisms of the student’s culture. We learn about the student and her attention to detail...to get it right, so to speak...to demonstrate language variation. Something about her culture liberates her just enough to boldly capture the sound of someone else’s speech / speaking patterns.

Culture

Although students may understand ways to use dialect, vernacular, slang, and/or expressions, they may find the inclusion of culture a bit difficult—which it is. On the other hand, the act of recognizing culture has to come from the outsider, the reader of the text. If we try to force students to think about culture while they write, the act of writing slows and they rely too much on critical thinking and less on writing. We may start by collaborating on ideas that are cultural before we begin the act of writing—surely, students immediately snap into the mindset of several experiences that imply cultural aesthetics or aspects. Let us give the “young black man” space to

“write about the conflicts he feels between what he is learning in astronomy, a subject that fascinates him, and the teachings of his church” (Hairston 191). Through his narrative, we, the audience, the teachers, and fellow peers, study the differences. We may recognize the church’s attitude about astronomy, and how believing in the evolution of space denies God’s hand in the creation of space. Let us note the manner in which student narrators interact with other persons in the narrative. As Clifford Geertz points out, we come to know culture from “a way of thinking, feeling, believing” (qtd. in Geertz, 4), like Keith and “Lonnie Blair” believing one is “tougher” than the other—a behavior prominent in street culture:

[Lonnie says,] “. . . What if I did something to you? What would you do?”

[Keith replies,] “Do something back to you.”

“Like what?”

“You’ll see. I’m use ta fightin. I been in gang fights.”

[Lonnie retorts,] “Aw man, get outa here. You ain been in no gang fights.”

[Keith doesn’t back down] “I have so. Where you think I got this scar from?” I

put a hand up to the left side of my face to really draw his attention to it. (Gilyard 52)

Both individuals admit to fighting. Both attempt to “out tough” one another expressing threats to one another. We understand that a street culture involves physical violence no matter if a person performs self-defense or initiates the physical conflict. For the most part, events will present to us various attitudes, behaviors, and/or traditions to which the narrator or others around the narrator adhere.

Ethos

Sometimes, we may not instruct students to discern independent qualities of language, culture, and even personal ethos because their narratives may include all three. When Gilyard freely *speaks* African American Vernacular English with friends outside of the school setting or when Gilyard *speaks* Standard American English in the presence of his teachers, he becomes *valuable* to both *cultures*. If such an advanced composition of an event takes place, we have to acknowledge the prose that indicates a person's virtue in light of his culture's beliefs and expectations. Just like our, the readers', recognition of culture in the text, personal ethos requires the same attention. We have to evaluate the credibility of the narrator, her words, her account in general, her interactions with those around her. Mike Rose's experience in vocational education exemplifies the *virtue* of his character, for he does not counter the attitudes of his peers. Instead, he retains the same attitude: "During my time in Voc. Ed., I developed further into a mediocre student . . . I fooled around in class" (Rose 27). The same with Gilyard; he does not tell Lonnie about his friendship with one of the Jewish boys. Gilyard wants to continue to be viewed as devoted to his cultural roots (See Chapter Four). When we instruct our students to recognize actions, behaviors, and traditions that narrators *follow*, we demonstrate that "character" or personal ethos derives from the narrators' commitment to follow those qualities of language and culture within the narrative and outside of the narrative.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ To be committed, to show loyalty, good value, high merit (all those characteristics that make a character virtuous...to its culture) outside of the narrative simply means that the student writer displays such a quality in the very act of writing—in using the language that portrays her devotion to her cultural and linguistic roots or her acquisition of education's cultural and linguistic roots.

Final Thoughts

The autobiographies of not only Keith Gilyard, Victor Villanueva, Jr. and Mike Rose but also anyone else include identities that exist outside of the presence of the narrator. When bell hooks, for instance, sought to provide personal accounts of her teaching philosophy in *Teaching to Transgress*, she did not narrate her experiences for the purpose of self-glorification or self-promotion. Neither did Linda Brodkey seek to make herself monumental in the publication of “Making a Federal Case Out of Difference: The Politics of Pedagogy, Publicity, and Postponement.” The greater concern for the autobiographer involves connecting her audience to ideologies of a people and a place. So, when we consult the experiences of those willing and able to discuss them, we tend to conform to generalizations that the narrative is supposed to entertain us; thus, those experiences are supposed to entertain us. However, entertainment is the least important attribute. When we compose the narrative, read the narrative, or theorize within the narrative, we seek answers, answers toward greater understandings about the world around us. For the most part, the personal narrative is not the only means of knowing and learning about the world; it is the *initial* means of knowing and learning about the world. And because narrative as a discourse, according to American philosopher Arthur Coleman Danto, is “a *form* of explanation,” we figure even our students—the Carloses, Miguels, Larrys, Danielles, and Geraldines—may use the personal narrative to explain the way of a place or institution (237).

From what I experienced and what the authors of this research experienced, I can say that many students of minority status encounter discomforts and failures as well as successes inside and outside of the ivory tower. If there is a universal experience to which someone or *somebody* may relate (and, there *is* a universal experience), we as writing instructors have to allow our students to “explain” what relieves them about their new environment, what troubles them, what

motivates them. Better yet, what may we acquire from the explanations created in narrative prose?

One of the tasks involved with this project that *problematizes*, to take Judith Summerfield's term, the personal narrative is having to understand the conflict that exists between my relying on the experiences of my character that no longer exists and my writing about the struggles although my current stance transcends the contextuality of the character I talk about. Why do I, better yet, Gilyard, Villanueva, Jr., or even Rose revert to experiences so distant from our current experiences when others may view us as individuals who represent "success?" For the most part, each autobiographer holds a voice others, like myself, refer to when seeking answers. Each participates in the field's national conference, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Each maintains a scholarly reputation that has already constructed a series of events slightly different from / than the experiences of each autobiographer's *coming of age* narratives. Part of me believes that students may encounter a similar critical evaluation of the characters they describe in their personal narratives.

Unfortunately, any student enrolled in higher education, excelling in college courses may no longer claim she is of a class lower than the middle-class that already exists in academia: family and community members of the lower-working class no longer see the college educated individual as someone who reflects their ideologies; they view the college educated individual as someone who obtains a higher socioeconomic status. Yet, the fuel or the source or the *thing* that drives the personal narrative is the *past*.

In this work, I have tried to show that personal accounts are less about the person and more about attributes that help to form the person as a writer outside of the narrative and a "character" within the narrative. I do not claim to know all there is to know about a narrative's

purpose and influence, yet I have tried to better construct, better reify, notions about culture, language, and ethos that we take for granted. Although we find the task to recognize some “thing” as part of cultural understanding easy, we find difficult the process of putting into words the attributes that make it cultural. To challenge a text that features elements we readily recognize as scholars and writers on the outside looking in is a practice that has taken place for many years. But, we can continue to build our own ethos by respecting those practices so that we come to discover other angles, perspectives, ideas, and theories that our respective cultures deem significant. My narrative analysis of Keith Gilyard’s *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, Victor Villanueva, Jr.’s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, and Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America’s Educationally Underprepared* serves as a point of departure for other scholars in the field to recognize the aspects of identity or even subjects dealing with identity that are crucial for not only members of composition studies but also young writing apprentices enrolled in the field’s courses. The three autobiographies are works I consider products of conversations relevant to the field and texts of the field that should receive greater attention.

In the end, I am thankful for the presence of “audience.” Who knows the kind of audience each author thought about while in the process of completing his autobiography? I do know that without an audience, the authors might have refigured or retold their narratives in a certain way to a certain end quite different from what they published.

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