Our identity is a specific marker of how we define ourselves at any particular moment in life. Discovering and claiming our unique identity is a process of growth, change, and renewal throughout our lifetime. As a specific marker, identity may seem tangible and fixed at any given point. Over the life span, however, identity is more fluid. For example, an able-bodied woman who suddenly finds herself confined to a wheelchair after an automobile accident, an assimilated Jewish woman who begins the journey of recovering her Jewish heritage, an immigrant woman from a traditional Guatemalan family “coming out” as a lesbian in the United States, or a young, middle-class college student, away from her sheltered home environment for the first time and becoming politicized by an environmental justice organization on campus, will probably find herself redefining who she is, what she values, and what “home” and “community” are. […] 

Identity formation is the result of a complex interplay among a range of factors: individual decisions and choices, particular life events, community recognition and expectations, societal categorization, classification and socialization, and key national or international events. It is an ongoing process that involves several key questions:
Who am I? Who do I want to be?  
Who do others think I am and want me to be?  
Who and what do societal and community institutions, such as schools, religious institutions, the media, and the law, say I am?  
Where/what/who are my "home" and "community"?  
Which social group(s) do I want to affiliate with?  
Who decides the answers to these questions, and on what basis?

Answers to these questions form the core of our existence. In this chapter, we examine the complex issue of identity and its importance in women's lives.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1993) defines identity as

- the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitely known or recognizable;
- a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group;
- the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity; individuality.

The same dictionary defines to identify as "to associate or affiliate (oneself) closely with a person or group; to establish an identification with another or others."

These definitions point to the connections between us as individuals and how we are perceived by other people and classified by societal institutions. They also involve a sense of individual agency and choice regarding affiliations with others. Gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and language are all significant social categories by which people are recognized by others. Indeed, on the basis of these categories alone, others often think they know who we are and how we should behave. Personal decisions about our affiliations and loyalties to specific groups are also shaped by these categories. For example, in many communities of color, women struggle over the question of race versus gender. Is race a more important factor than gender in shaping their lives? If a Latina speaks out publicly about sexism within the Latino community, is she betraying her people? This separation of categories, mirrored by our segregated social lives, tends to set up false dichotomies in which people often feel that they have to choose one aspect of their identity over another. It also presents difficulties for mixed-race or bisexual people, who do not fit neatly into such narrow categories.

In order to understand the complexity and richness of women's experiences, we must examine them from the micro, meso, macro, and global levels of social relations. […]

Critically analyzing the issue of identity at all of these levels of analysis will allow us to see that identity is much more than an individual decision or choice about who we are in the world. Rather, it is a set of complex and often contradictory and conflicting psychological, physical, geographical, political, cultural, historical, and spiritual factors, as shown in the readings that follow.
At the micro level, individuals usually feel the most comfortable as themselves. Here one can say, for example, “I am a woman, heterosexual, middle class, with a movement disability; but I am also much more than those categories.” At this level we define ourselves and structure our daily activities according to our own preferences. At the micro level we can best feel and experience the process of identity formation, which includes naming specific forces and events that shape our identities. At this level we also seem to have more control of the process, although there are always interconnections between events and experiences at this level and the other levels.

Critical life events, such as entering kindergarten, losing a parent through death, separation, or divorce, or the onset of puberty, may all serve as catalysts for a shift in how we think about ourselves. A five-year-old Vietnamese American child from a traditional home and community may experience the first challenge to her sense of identity when her kindergarten teacher admonishes her to speak only in English. A White, middle-class professional woman who thinks of herself as “a person” and a “competent attorney” may begin to see the significance of gender and “the glass ceiling” for women when she witnesses younger, less experienced male colleagues in her law office passing her by for promotions. A woman who has been raped who attends her first meeting of a campus group organizing against date rape feels the power of connection with other rape survivors and their allies. An eighty-year-old woman, whose partner of fifty years has just died, must face the reality of having lost her life-time companion, friend, and lover. Such experiences shape each person’s ongoing formulation of self, whether or not the process is conscious, deliberate, reflective, or even voluntary.

Identity formation is a lifelong endeavor that includes discovery of the new; recovery of the old, forgotten, or appropriated; and synthesis of the new and old [. . .]. At especially important junctures during the process, individuals mark an identity change in tangible ways. An African American woman may change her name from the anglicized Susan to Aisha, with roots in African culture. A Chinese Vietnamese immigrant woman, on the other hand, may adopt an anglicized name, exchanging Nu Lu for Yvonne Lu as part of becoming a US citizen. Another way of marking and effecting a shift in identity is by altering your physical appearance: changing your wardrobe or makeup; cutting your hair very short, wearing it natural rather than permed or pressed, dyeing it purple, or letting the gray show after years of using hair coloring. More permanent changes might include having a tattoo, having your body pierced, having a face lift or tummy tuck, or, for Asian American women, having eye surgery to “Europeanize” their eyes. Transsexuals – female to male and male to female – have surgery to make their physical appearance congruent with their internal sense of self. Other markers of a change in identity include redecorating your home, setting up home for the first time, or physically relocating.
to another neighborhood, another city, or another part of the country in search of a new home.

For many people, home is where we grow up until we become independent, by going to college, for example, or getting married; where our parents, siblings, and maybe grandparents are; where our needs for safety, security, and material comfort are met. In reality, what we think of as home is often a complicated and contradictory place where some things we need are present and others are not. Some people’s homes are comfortable and secure in a material sense but are also places of emotional or physical violence and cruelty. Some children grow up in homes that provide emotional comfort and a sense of belonging, but as they grow older and their values diverge from those of their parents, home becomes a source of discomfort and alienation.

Regardless of such experiences – perhaps because of them – most people continue to seek places of comfort and solace and others with whom they feel they belong and with whom they share common values and interests. Home may be a geographic, social, emotional, and spiritual space where we hope to find safety, security, familiarity, continuity, acceptance, and understanding, and where we can feel and be our best, whole selves. Home may be in several places at once or in different places at different times of our lives. Some women may have a difficult time finding a home, a place that feels comfortable and familiar, even if they know what it is. Finally, this search may involve not only searching outside ourselves but also piecing together in some coherent way the scattered parts of our identities – an inward as well as an outward journey.

Community Recognition, Expectations, and Interactions: The Meso Level

It is at the meso level – at school, in the workplace, or on the street – that people most frequently ask “Who are you?” or “Where are you from?” in an attempt to categorize us and determine their relationship to us. Moreover, it is here that people experience the complexities, conflicts, and contradictions of multiple identities, which we consider later.

The single most visible signifier of identity is physical appearance. How we look to others affects their perceptions, judgments, and treatment of us. Questions such as “Where do you come from?” and questioning behaviors, such as feeling the texture of your hair or asking if you speak a particular language, are commonly used to interrogate people whose physical appearances especially, but also behaviors, do not match the characteristics designated as belonging to established categories. At root, we are being asked, “Are you one of us or not?” These questioners usually expect singular and simplistic answers, assuming that everyone will fit existing social categories, which are conceived of as undifferentiated and unambiguous. Among people with disabilities, for example, people wanting to identify each other may
expect to hear details of another’s disability rather than the fact that the person being questioned also identifies equally strongly as, say, a woman who is White, working class, and bisexual.

Community, like home, may be geographic and emotional, or both, and provides a way for people to express group affiliations. “Where are you from?” is a commonplace question in the United States among strangers, a way to break the ice and start a conversation, expecting answers like “I’m from Tallahassee, Florida,” or “I’m from the Bronx.” Community might also be an organized group like Alcoholics Anonymous, a religious group, or a political organization like the African American civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Community may be something much more abstract, as in “the women’s community” or “the queer community,” where there is presumed to be an identifiable group. In these examples there is an assumption of shared values, interests, culture, or language sometimes thought of as essential qualities that define group membership and belonging. This can lead to essentialism, where complex identities get reduced to specific qualities deemed to be essential for membership of a particular group: being Jewish or gay, for example.

At the community level, individual identities and needs meet group standards, expectations, obligations, responsibilities, and demands. You compare yourself with others and are subtly compared. Others size up your clothing, accent, personal style, and knowledge of the group’s history and culture. You may be challenged directly, “You say you’re Latina. How come you don’t speak Spanish?” “You say you’re working class. What are you doing in a professional job?” These experiences may both affirm our identities and create or highlight inconsistencies, incongruities, and contradictions in who we believe we are, how we are viewed by others, our role and status in the community, and our sense of belonging.

Some individuals experience marginality if they can move in two or more worlds and, in part, be accepted as insiders (Stonequist 1961). Examples include bisexuals, mixed-race people, and immigrants, who all live in at least two cultures. Margaret, a White, working-class woman, for instance, leaves her friends behind after high school graduation as she goes off to an elite university. Though excited and eager to be in a new setting, she often feels alienated at college because her culture, upbringing, and level of economic security differ from those of the many upper-middle-class and upper-class students. During the winter break she returns to her hometown, where she discovers a gulf between herself and her old friends who remained at home and took full-time jobs. She notices that she is now speaking a slightly different language from them and that her interests and preoccupations are different from theirs. Margaret has a foot in both worlds. She has become sufficiently acculturated at college to begin to know that community as an insider, and she has retained her old community of friends, but she is not entirely at ease or wholly accepted by either community. Her identity is complex, composed of several parts. […]
Social Categories, Classifications, and Structural Inequality: Macro and Global Levels

Classifying and labeling human beings, often according to real or assumed physical, biological, or genetic differences, is a way to distinguish who is included and who is excluded from a group, to ascribe particular characteristics, to prescribe social roles, and to assign status, power, and privilege. People are to know their places. Thus social categories such as gender, race, and class are used to establish and maintain a particular kind of social order. The classifications and their specific features, meanings, and significance are socially constructed through history, politics, and culture. The specific meanings and significance were often imputed to justify the conquest, colonization, domination, and exploitation of entire groups of people, and although the specifics may have changed over time, this system of categorizing and classifying remains intact. For example, Native American people were described as brutal, uncivilized, and ungovernable savages in the writings of early colonizers on this continent. This justified the near-genocide of Native Americans by White settlers and the US military and public officials, as well as the breaking of treaties between the US government and Native American tribes (Zinn 1995). Today, Native Americans are no longer called savages but are often thought of as a vanishing species, or a nonexistent people, already wiped out, thereby rationalizing their neglect by the dominant culture and erasing their long-standing and continuing resistance. […]

Colonization, Immigration, and the US Landscape
of Race and Class

Global-level factors affecting people's identities include colonization and immigration. Popular folklore would have us believe that the United States has welcomed "the tired, huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (Young et al. 1997). This ideology that the United States is "a land of immigrants" obscures several important issues excluded from much mainstream debate about immigration. Not all Americans came to this country voluntarily. Native American peoples and Mexicans were already here on this continent, but the former experienced near-genocide and the latter were made foreigners in their own land. African peoples were captured, enslaved, and forcibly imported to this country to be laborers. All were brutally exploited and violated – physically, psychologically, culturally, and spiritually – to serve the interests of those in power. The relationships between these groups and this nation and their experiences in the United States are fundamentally different from the experiences of those who chose to immigrate here, though this is not to negate the hardships the latter may have faced. These differences profoundly shaped the social, cultural, political, and economic realities faced by these groups throughout history and continue to do so today.

Robert Blauner (1972) makes a useful analytical distinction between colonized minorities, whose original presence in this nation was involuntary, and all of whom are people of color, and immigrant minorities, whose presence was voluntary.
According to Blauner, colonized minorities faced insurmountable structural inequalities, based primarily on race, that have prevented their full participation in social, economic, political, and cultural arenas of US life. Early in the history of this country, for example, the Naturalization Law of 1790 (which was repealed as recently as 1952) prohibited peoples of color from becoming US citizens, and the Slave Codes restricted every aspect of life for enslaved African peoples. These laws made race into an indelible line that separated “insiders” from “outsiders.” White people were designated insiders and granted many privileges while all others were confined to systematic disadvantage. [. . .]

Studies of US immigration “reveal discrimination and unequal positioning of different ethnic groups” (Yans-McLaughlin 1990, p. 6), challenging the myth of equal opportunity for all. According to political scientist Lawrence Fuchs (1990), “Freedom and opportunity for poor immigrant Whites in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were connected fundamentally with the spread of slavery” (p. 294). It was then that European immigrants, such as Irish, Polish, and Italian people began to learn to be White (Roediger 1991). Thus the common belief among descendants of European immigrants that the successful assimilation of their foremothers and forefathers against great odds is evidence that everyone can pull themselves up by the bootstraps if they work hard enough does not take into account the racialization of immigration that favored White people.

On coming to the United States, immigrants are drawn into the racial landscape of this country. In media debates and official statistics, this is still dominated by a Black/White polarization in which everyone is assumed to fit into one of these two groups. Demographically, the situation is much more complex and diverse, but people of color, who comprise the more inclusive group, are still set off against White people, the dominant group. Immigrants identify themselves according to nationality – for example, as Cambodian or Guatemalan. Once in the United States they learn the significance of racial divisions in this country and may adopt the term people of color as an aspect of their identity here. [. . .]

This emphasis on race tends to mask differences based on class, another important distinction among immigrant groups. For example, the Chinese and Japanese people who came in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to work on plantations in Hawai‘i, as loggers in Oregon, or building roads and railroads in several western states were poor and from rural areas of China and Japan. The 1965 immigration law made way for “the second wave” of Asian immigration (Takaki 1987). It set preferences for professionals, highly skilled workers, and members of the middle and upper-middle classes, making this group “the most highly skilled of any immigrant group our country has ever had” (quoted in Takaki 1987, p. 420). The first wave of Vietnamese refugees who immigrated between the mid-1970s and 1980 were from the middle and upper classes, and many were professionals; by contrast, the second wave of immigrants from Vietnam was composed of poor and rural people. The class backgrounds of immigrants affect not only their sense of themselves and their expectations but also how they can succeed as strangers in a foreign land. For example, a poor woman who arrives with no literacy skills in her own language will have a more
difficult time learning to become literate in English than one who has formal schooling in her country of origin that may have included basic English.

**Multiple Identities, Social Location, and Contradictions**

The social features of one’s identity incorporate individual, community, societal, and global factors [. . .]. Social location is a way of expressing the core of a person’s existence in the social and political world. It places us in particular relationships to others, to the dominant culture of the United States, and to the rest of the world. It determines the kinds of power and privilege we have access to and can exercise, as well as situations in which we have less power and privilege.

Because social location is where all the aspects of one’s identity meet, our experience of our own complex identities is sometimes contradictory, conflictual, and paradoxical. We live with multiple identities that can be both enriching and contradictory and that push us to confront questions of loyalty to individuals and groups. [. . .]

It is also through the complexity of social location that we are forced to differentiate our inclinations, behaviors, self-definition, and politics from how we are classified by larger societal institutions. An inclination toward bisexuality, for example, does not mean that one will necessarily act on that inclination. Defining oneself as working class does not necessarily lead to activity in progressive politics based on a class consciousness.

Social location is also where we meet others socially and politically. Who are we in relation to people who are both like us and different from us? How do we negotiate the inequalities in power and privilege? How do we both accept and appreciate who we and others are, and grow and change to meet the challenges of a multicultural world? [. . .]

**Study Questions**

1. What do Kirk and Okazawa-Rey claim are the most important factors that shape our identities?
2. Explain the macro, meso, and micro levels of social relations. Which of Kirk’s and Okazawa-Rey’s examples are most helpful to you in understanding these concepts? Which of these levels have had the most impact on the formation of your identity? Why?
3. Do you agree with Kirk and Okazawa-Rey that we all live with multiple identities? Using yourself as an example, explain your agreement/disagreement.
4. Explain “social location” in your own words. Is “social location” a useful concept for analysis in thinking about your own identity formation? Why or why not?
References


CHAPTER 3
Generational Memory in an American Town

John Bodnar

John Bodnar (1944–) is a professor of history who writes on labor, immigration, public and community memory, and the treatment of history in popular culture. He is the author of The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America (1985), Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century (1992), and Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film (2003). The following essay is based upon a series of interviews that Bodnar and his students conducted with individuals who grew up in the same Midwestern town, and whose sense of identity, values, and community were deeply influenced by the generational history of their times.

The idea of generational memory is widely invoked by scholars of modern American history. Drawing on the insights of Mannheim, who argued that social and political events encountered in early adulthood can permanently shape outlook, numerous historians have explained conflict and debate in modern America in terms of the disparate memories of respective generations. In the most familiar case, scholars have noted the divergent recollections of people who lived through the cataclysmic decades of the 1930s and 1960s, suggesting that the imprint of those times determined subsequent moral and political viewpoints.1

In the scholarly formulation, the “depression generation” apparently concluded that the central institutions and authorities that patterned their lives were responsible for pulling them through hard times and the war experience that followed, and that they would never need to be changed. Thus, they resolutely defended the traditional family, communal ties, religion, corporate capitalism, and the American nation. Terkel’s renowned study of remembering the Great Depression argued that the event left “an invisible scar” on those who lived it; and his oral history of World War II revealed how much those who experienced hard times appreciated the jobs that the war produced. Conflict with institutions and authorities existed in the
various accounts, but ultimately, people recalled solidarity in families, communities, workplaces, and the nation as a whole. Rieder argued that residents in a section of Brooklyn, New York, in the 1970s resisted racial integration of their neighborhood, modern ideas of sexual liberation, and the critics of their country because, “as children of the Great Depression” and as participants in World War II, they exalted such values as homeownership, traditional families and mores, and patriotism.²

The members of the “sixties generation” are generally regarded as mirror images of their parents. They tend to recall traditional authorities as repressive and untrustworthy. A survey of the “baby boomers,” born between 1946 and 1964, conducted by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1988, claimed that they “challenged virtually all the social mores and political values that had come before.” The study stressed their commitment to new sexual norms, their flight from marriage, and their experimentation with drugs and new musical forms. “Boomers,” themselves, although often idealizing the model of a traditional family, told the magazine’s investigators that they placed less emphasis on a “close-knit family” and “respect for authority” than did the generation that preceded them. Indeed, nearly all scholars who have looked at this group have stressed its tendency to rebel against traditional institutions as a hallmark of its collective identity. In one of the most complete investigations of the age group, Roof found that, despite their differences, those in the “sixties generation” were unified by their shared rebellion against traditional institutions, which further explained their involvement in numerous kinds of searches for meaning at midlife; they had already rejected many of the traditional prescriptions for living. A Gallup Poll from 1985 made a similar point: This generation was even less likely to trust social and political institutions and their leaders than people who were born after them.³

The manner by which people recall the past and use it to fashion outlooks in the present can be determined from life histories. This study of generational memory is based on a collection of accounts from individuals in Whiting, Indiana, an industrial town near Chicago, in 1991. The limitations are obvious. One town, one class, and one scholar’s predispositions do not make for a representative national sample. Whiting is not America. Nonetheless, what was remembered in Whiting was clearly linked to many of the issues that pervaded the nation’s political discourse in the past and in the present.

The town manifests a pattern representative of the midwest industrial belt: economic and population expansion early in this century, an interlude of economic contraction in the 1930s, economic stability in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, and a rapid decline of 30 percent in population from 1970 to 1990 and of 70 percent in employment at the town’s major source of jobs – the refinery of Standard Oil of Indiana – from 1960 to 1990. Economic turmoil was accompanied by broad transformations in the politics and culture of postwar America. Traditional religious, corporate, and governmental institutions lost some of their authority and ability to command loyalty, and individual goals came to supersede collective ones. The institutional pillars of Whiting – the Catholic Church, Standard Oil, and the Democratic Party – all suffered losses during this period. Fathers could no longer assure their sons of jobs at the refinery, as their own fathers had been able to do. Young
people were more likely to divorce and avoid church attendance than their parents were. Republicans won the majority of the votes for president in 1972 and 1980 in a town that had otherwise voted Democratic since the 1920s. In American culture as a whole, authority became more decentralized, and the idea of personal fulfillment contested the constraints on individualism that flourished under the regime of church, party, family, and corporation.4

Psychologists have demonstrated that narratives, along with abstract propositions, are the two fundamental forms of human cognition. Narratives in the form of life histories render complex experience understandable. Like all narratives they are subjective, despite their objective components, "reconstructing" rather than simply "resurrecting" the past in order to justify life choices. They are not only selective and subjective but also defensive and didactic. Their engagement with both the past and the present mitigates explanations of generational memories grounded solely in history but not those that are based in culture.5

The attempts of the people from Whiting to display their personal identities in life histories did not produce great variety. In their construction, these life histories resembled autobiographies, verifying Eakin’s contention that self-portrayals usually involve "culturally sanctioned models of identity." Three such "models" were found in Whiting. Individuals of an older generation presented themselves as morally upright, selfless, thrifty, hard working, and devoted to the welfare of others in the community and in the nation. They were not imprinted so much by past decades or events as by their long relationship with institutions and ideologies that venerated their preferred ideals: Standard Oil embodied a paternalism that promised jobs for hard toil; the Catholic Church guaranteed salvation for sacrifice and adherence to marital roles; and the nation offered fair treatment in return for patriotism.6

A second model of identity was exhibited by residents born in the town after 1940. This group evinced a relationship with authorities and ideologies that sanctioned a greater variety of lifestyles. Their narratives celebrated, rather than censured, self-fulfillment and mounted a stronger attack upon the power of parents and, especially, the corporations that influenced their lives. In a remarkable turn of events, the third model emerged from members of the older generation who had left Whiting and retired to Arizona. That these citizens, who had lived through the Great Depression and World War II, told of making lifestyle changes in the southwest desert implied that the imprint of the years prior to 1950 was not beyond reformulation. […]

**Generational Narratives**

The older generation in Whiting, born between 1902 and 1924, revered the ideal of obligation in an era when Americans argued about the pervasiveness of selfishness and the need for cohesion. They recalled lives of mutualism, duty, and care and criticized contemporaries who saw life as a process of self-realization. Their memories valorized their ability to serve their families, their employers, their working-class
community, and their nation. Authority was to be accommodated rather than resisted. But their loyalty was not blind. They granted it, as they told it, because they expected and received justice in return. At home, they benefited from familiar support; at church, they participated in a mutual effort at salvation; and at the refinery, they received steady jobs and pensions. Ultimately, their narratives represented a collective belief that they once upheld a common enterprise with other citizens and powerful institutions – the very basis of their loyalty – and that this communal foundation for just treatment was now disintegrating. Their accounts of the past were not only ventures into history and longing, but also demands for the reinstatement of justice in a society dominated by the state, the marketplace, and the media. And yet there was disaffection in their ranks. Although their peers who had retired to Arizona shared many of their memories of a moral community, they had decided in the present to embark upon a more determined quest for personal happiness.

The next generation – born between 1943 and 1962 in this sample, and coming of age after World War II – revealed a different collective memory and identity. This group blended experiences that were unique to the times in which their identities were formed with some of the personal knowledge and values of their elders. They rendered accounts of mutualism in families and neighborhoods, but they affirmed, in much stronger terms, that economic security and occupational stability were best obtained through individual resourcefulness rather than through loyalty to an institution. Their sense of self-reliance was cultivated when relationships with authority throughout American society had become problematic. Conservatives had mounted a widespread attack against individual claims upon the state, and advertisers against constraints on self-fulfillment. Moreover, cultural critics have suggested that the electronic media – especially television – tended to demystify power, fostering a “decline in prestige” of all who held it.

In Whiting, this deterioration was rooted in the more immediate issue of Standard Oil’s reduction in the workforce. Sons and daughters could no longer anticipate the lifetime jobs and benefits that accrued to their parents. Released from their parents’ attachment to the refinery, they were free to characterize themselves as more self-sufficient than their elders and overtly question their authority. However, their rebellion contained something of a longing for the advantages of an earlier era that were denied them.

The Older Generation

Whiting’s older generation were the children of immigrants who came to the town in the first two decades of this century to work at Standard Oil and mills in the area. Their parents were East European Catholics who relied on friends and kin to find them homes and jobs. Their life stories contained extensive accounts of family life that stressed the themes of justice/injustice and concern/indifference. Their narratives resolved these oppositions with the idealization of duty over rebellion and
selflessness over egoism. Their values did not emanate simply from events like the Great Depression but from ongoing encounters with familial, religious, corporate, and national authorities whom they considered fair and deserving of allegiance. When they gave loyalty to the community, they gave it to all of the institutions that pervaded that community. However, when they perceived that the institutions that once commanded their allegiance and supported their community were in decline – and no longer able to grant justice and benevolence – they became indignant. The nation no longer appeared to consist of caring and responsible individuals and institutions. Their patriotism had gone unrewarded; their identities were no longer validated.

The life histories of the older generation in Whiting always began with descriptions of their immigrant families. They recalled learning about the need to limit independence and to respect authority, even before the Great Depression. Family members were expected to take care of each other. According to one man born in 1919,

> Every kid had their chores to do. Every fall we’d chop wood and make kindling for storage and pile it in the woodsheds. That was the fall duty. After school, [we] had to bring it on the porch. And we used to help my grandmother out. She lived downstairs. But cleaning the kitchen, doing the dishes, well, that my sister Mary did. Housecleaning was mostly a girl’s job. But the guys used to scrub floors. Our home life was like a family deal. Everybody helped each other out. I tried to bring that tradition to my kids. My dad always told us, “you guys stick together, no matter through thick or thin. In the case of an emergency, you guys come out and help.” That’s how we were brought up.8

[...]

Consideration and esteem were the rewards for loyalty and submission. The older generation shared the memory of a moral community in which individualism was constrained and redefined, but not obliterated. Egoism and domination were tempered by the ideals of reciprocity and benevolence. The collective memory of this generation expressed what the past was like for them, as well as the timeless value of a moral society in the present. Their story emphasized the continued importance of recognizing individual needs and rewarding people for meeting collective exigencies, and it embodied a call for solidarity – “a realization that each person must take responsibility for the other because as consociates all must have an interest in the other.”9

Persistent anecdotes about justice and solidarity revealed the older generation’s fundamental adherence to authority. Workers at the refinery described men who were so loyal to the company that they would alert a foreman when a light bulb burned out so as not to retard the pace of production. Countless reiterations confirmed how much the local population prized rewards for their devotion, such as the pension system at Standard Oil, in which employees could contribute a portion of their income to a stock purchase plan that the company would partially match. In the view of some workers, men who earned such benefits had an easier time attracting marriage partners than those who did not.10 [...]

Voices Along the Way- Unit 4
During World War II, this generation described its participation in the national mobilization as voluntary. The people served the nation as they had their families and employers by joining the armed services, donating blood, buying war bonds, and producing gasoline products at the refinery. One man claimed that he decided to enlist as soon as he heard the news about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. A woman born in 1916 who admitted that everyone feared the war also recalled that “people were working so hard buying bonds and everything to help our country.” At St. John’s Catholic Church in Whiting, a shrine was built to “Our Lady of Victory” in 1942 “for our boys in the service, for victory, and for peace.” Prelates at the church maintained that “God and His Blessed Mother” deserved such reverence and that the shrine was the best possible aid that the congregation could render “to our country and our boys in the armed forces.” The pursuit of common interests was reinforced at the refinery, where the company newspaper took pride in the workers’ production of vital oil supplies, purchase of bonds, and exhibition of the “discipline and teamwork” that would serve many of them well in the military.11 [...]

The Younger Generation

The life histories and identities of Whiting’s younger residents also affirmed the value of a tightly knit community and expressed concern about modern disintegration, although the image of communal decline in their narratives was contested by examples of resourceful individuals free from the constraints of traditional authority and hopeful of economic rejuvenation. Pride of individual achievement and hope for progress stood in place of calls for justice and moral outrage. From the perspective of middle age, these people focused more on the prospects of the future rather than a veneration of the past. Their encounter with economic decline gave them no reason to lionize authorities and institutions that held no promise of fairness or benevolence.

This working-class sample was not so likely to attend college or achieve affluence as many of their peers who are normally associated with the sixties generation. Their encounter with the 1960s and 1970s was not liberating but disappointing. Traditional authorities and paths to economic security had little to offer them. Because it was difficult to find permanent jobs at Standard Oil and other plants in the area after 1970, they resigned themselves to making a living through their own ingenuity.

This generation was no stranger to families of modest means and traditional values; family relationships accounted for most of their memories of mutualism. Unlike the older group’s experience with authority, theirs seldom involved benevolence or justice, and, as a result, their memory of authority – even that of their parents – was more critical. One woman recalled with disdain how her father had forced her and her sister to return the pants that a neighbor had made for them because he would not let them wear anything but dresses. A man born in 1952 remembered his Southern Baptist upbringing with bitterness: “We went to
church three times a week; that was very important. We prayed before every meal. We read the Bible daily....It was either [obey] or be thrown out.” Still another confessed that the death of his autocratic father did not have too traumatic effect on him.12

The younger generation stressed discontinuity more than continuity. In an era of sharp economic and cultural change, this group described their lives mainly as the result of individual decisions, not as the result of following occupational footsteps of their parents. Their emphasis on self-reliance explicitly contested their parents’ commemoration of mutualism and justice. Lasch held that a preoccupation with self-sufficiency can emerge, ironically, from feelings of powerlessness in modern life. The economic decline of Whiting and northwest Indiana after 1945 forced members of the postwar cohort into a more difficult job search than that faced by those who routinely entered the refinery during an earlier era, perhaps explaining why baby boomers produced stronger narratives of personal initiative than the preceding generation.13 [...]

Although both generations recalled the recent past as a time of decline – a deterioration in the formative community in their lives – the older generation saw the problem in moral terms. For those who matured after World War II, however, the demise of Whiting did not end with moral outrage but with a dream of economic revitalization. In the early 1990s, the younger people talk of the return of progress as a way of muting fears of economic decline. They are receptive to messages of individualism and self-fulfillment from contemporary culture, not only because they challenge the moral authoritarianism of their elders, but also because they sense that individualism may be the only viable resource in an economy so much more unpredictable and unjust than the one their parents knew. In their grievance with declining solidarity, they share memories and values with their elders, but in their celebration of individualism, depart from them. [...]

Generational memory is formed in the passage of time, not simply born in pivotal decades and events. Revising the deterministic paradigm of much scholarly thinking, this study – with its subjective, limited perspective openly acknowledged – suggests that generational memory is best understood as the result of long-term encounters with economic forces and powerful authorities. Regardless of the impact of the past, however, generational views are also under constant review and discussion in the present. Whiting’s oldest generation revealed, late in life, that their basic narrative was molded from memories of their formative years – the 1920s through the 1950s – and from their reaction to the ideas that emerged later. Undoubtedly, they asserted their critique of social change in American history as elderly people who longed for the past; but they were not just looking backward. [...]

Finally, the concept of generation itself is not without its problems. This study implies not only that the imprint of the past is indeterminate but also that boundaries between generations are imprecise. Generations can agree as well as disagree. For instance, both generations lamented economic decline and tended to be critical of corporate layoffs; and differences in generation did not always eliminate bonds fostered by class, although further investigation is necessary to reveal whether this
connection was more pronounced for the working class or the middle class. Moreover, despite the obvious influence of life stage in remembering, both the young and the old in Whiting were concerned about the future. The former were more hopeful and the latter more pessimistic, but their respective memories and attitudes were driven, in part, by speculation about what was to come. Both groups tended to manipulate the past. Assumptions to the effect that generational outlooks are defined by pivotal events like the Great Depression or the “sixties” are wrong. Both young and old in Whiting demonstrated an ongoing connection to the process of creating meaning and exchanging information within their community and the larger society. They affirmed their commitment to participate in the continuous project of restating the reality of the past, present, and future in the contested culture of contemporary America.

### Study Questions

1. What does Bodnar mean by “generational memory”? How does it affect our understanding of both the past and the present? Give an example of how it affects the historical understanding of each of the generations he interviewed.

2. Why does Bodnar argue that Whiting, Indiana can serve as a model for understanding important generational differences in attitudes toward government, authority, religion, and work between the 1930s and the 1990s? What differences did you find most interesting?

3. Give an example of differences in generational memory within your own family.

### Notes


CHAPTER 41

From *Jasmine*

*Bharati Mukherjee*

Once described as “the foremost chronicler of the multicultural new America,” Bharati Mukherjee (1940–) is a novelist, short-story writer, and teacher. Born to upper-class Brahmin parents in Calcutta, India, she was raised in a large household of relatives. Her mother, who was married at age 16, encouraged her to attend college and seek a professional career. Mukherjee moved to the US in 1959, received her MFA in Creative Writing in 1963, and her PhD in English at the University of Iowa in 1969. She lived for 12 years in Canada, and has taught at numerous universities. The most persistent themes in Mukherjee’s fiction center on the conflicts of adapting to a new culture and the ways that immigrants influence contemporary American life. The excerpt that follows is from her best-known novel, *Jasmine* (1989), whose heroine takes on numerous identities and families in order to meet the challenges of an increasingly globalized US society.

Chapter 1

ifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears – his satellite dish to the stars – and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns.

“‘No!’ I shouted. ‘You’re a crazy old man. You don’t know what my future holds!’”

“Suit yourself,” the astrologer cackled. “What is to happen will happen.” Then he chucked me hard on the head.

I fell. My teeth cut into my tongue. A twig sticking out of the bundle of firewood I’d scavenged punched a star-shaped wound into my forehead. I lay still. The astrologer re-entered his trance. I was nothing, a speck in the solar system. Bad times were on their way. I was helpless, doomed. The star bled.

“I don’t believe you,” I whispered.
The astrologer folded up his tattered mat and pushed his feet into rubber sandals. "Fate is Fate. When Behula's bridegroom was fated to die of snakebite on their wedding night, did building a steel fortress prevent his death? A magic snake will penetrate solid walls when necessary."

I smelled the sweetness of winter wildflowers. Quails hopped, hiding and seeking me in the long grass. Squirrels as tiny as mice swished over my arms, dropping nuts. The trees were stooped and gnarled, as though the ghosts of old women had taken root. I always felt the she-ghosts were guarding me. I didn't feel I was nothing.

"Go join your sisters," the man with the capacious ears commanded. "A girl shouldn't be wandering here by herself." He pulled me to my feet and pointed to the trail that led out of the woods to the river bend.

I dragged my bundle to the river bend. I hated that river bend. The water pooled there, sludgy brown, and was choked with hyacinths and feces from the buffaloes that village boys washed upstream. Women were scouring brass pots with ashes. Dhobis were whomping clothes clean on stone slabs. Housewives squabbled while lowering their pails into a drying well. My older sisters, slow, happy girls with butter-smooth arms, were still bathing on the steps that led down to the river.

"What happened?" my sisters shrieked as they sponged the bleeding star on my forehead with the wetted ends of their veils. "Now your face is scarred for life! How will the family ever find you a husband?"

I broke away from their solicitous grip. "It's not a scar," I shouted, "it's my third eye." In the stories that our mother recited, the holiest sages developed an extra eye right in the middle of their foreheads. Through that eye they peered out into invisible worlds. "Now I'm a sage."

My sisters scampered up the slippery steps, grabbed their pitchers and my bundle of firewood, and ran to get help from the women at the well.

I swam to where the river was a sun-gold haze. I kicked and paddled in a rage. Suddenly my fingers scraped the soft waterlogged carcass of a small dog. The body was rotten, the eyes had been eaten. The moment I touched it, the body broke in two, as though the water had been its glue. A stench leaked out of the broken body, and then both pieces quickly sank.

That stench stays with me. I'm twenty-four now, I live in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa, but every time I lift a glass of water to my lips, fleetingly I smell it. I know what I don't want to become.

Chapter 2

Taylor didn't want me to run away to Iowa. How can anyone leave New York, he said, how can you leave New York, you belong here. Iowa's dull and it's flat, he said. So is Punjab, I said. You deserve better.
There are many things I deserve, not all of them better. Taylor thought dull was the absence of action, but dull is its own kind of action. Dullness is a kind of luxury.

Taylor was wrong. Iowa isn’t flat, not Elsa County.

It’s a late May afternoon in a dry season and sunlight crests the hillocks like sea foam, then angles across the rolling sea of Lutzes’ ground before snagging on the maples and box elders at the far end of ours. The Lutzes and Ripplemeyers’ fifteen hundred acres cut across a dozen ponds and glacial moraines, back to back in a six-mile swath. The Ripplemeyer land: Bud’s and mine and Du’s. Jane Ripplemeyer has a bank account. So does Jyoti Vijh, in a different city. Bud’s father started the First Bank of Baden above the barber’s; now Bud runs it out of a smart low building between Kwik Copy and the new Drug Town.

Bud wants me to marry him, “officially,” he says, before the baby comes. People assume we’re married. He’s a small-town banker, he’s not allowed to do impulsive things. I’m less than half his age, and very foreign. We’re the kind who marry. Going for me is this: he wasn’t in a wheelchair when we met. I didn’t leave him after it happened.

From the kitchen I can see the only Lutz boy, Darrel, work the ground. Darrel looks lost these days, like a little boy, inside the double-wide, air-conditioned cab of a monster tractor. Gene Lutz weighed nearly three hundred pounds and needed every square inch.

This is Darrel’s first planting alone. The wheels of his tractor are plumed with dust as fine as talcum. The contour-plowed fields are quilts in shades of pale green and dry brown. Closer in, where our ground slopes into the Lutzes’, Shadow, Darrel’s huge black dog, picks his way through ankle-high tufts of corn. A farm dog knows not to damage leaves, even when it races ahead after a weasel or a field mouse. The topsoil rising from Shadow’s paws looks like pockets of smoke.

Last winter Gene and Carol Lutz went to California as they usually did in January, after the money was in and before the taxes were due, and Gene, who was fifty-four years old, choked to death on a piece of Mexican food. He was so heavy Carol couldn’t lift him to do the Heimlich maneuver. The waiters were all illegals who went into hiding as soon as the police were called.

Gene looked after everything for me when Bud was in the hospital. Now Bud wants to do the same for Darrel and the Lutz farm, but he’s not the man he once was. I can look out Mother Ripplemeyer’s back window and not see to the end of our small empire of ownership. Gene used to say to Bud, “Put our farms smack in the middle of the Loop and we’d about reach from Wrigley to Comiskey.”

In our three and a half years together, I have given Bud a new trilogy to contemplate: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. And he has lent me his: Musial, Brock, and Gibson. Bud’s father grew up in southern Iowa, and Gene’s father came from Davenport. Ottumwa got Cardinal broadcasts, and Davenport got the Cubs. Baseball loyalties are passed from fathers to sons. Bud says he’s a Cardinals banker in Cubbie land. He favors speed and execution: he’ll lend to risk takers who’ll plant new crops.
and try new methods. Gene Lutz went with proven power: corn, beans, and hogs. After a good year, he’d buy himself the latest gadget from the implement dealer: immense tractors with air-conditioned cabs, equipped with stereo tape deck. A typical Cubbie tractor, Bud would joke, all power and no mobility – but he approved the purchase anyhow. Gene even painted an official Cubs logo on its side. I thought it said Ubs. Darrel painted the Hawkeye logo over it.

Darrel has a sister out in San Diego, married to a naval officer. Carol moved to be near her. With all the old Iowans in Southern California, she does not think she’ll be a widow for long. Darrel had a girl living with him last fall, but she left for Texas after the first Alberta Clipper.

Darrel talks of selling, and I don’t blame him. A thousand acres is too much for someone who graduated from Northern Iowa just last summer. He’d like to go to New Mexico, he says, and open up a franchise, away from the hogs and cold and farmer’s hours. Radio Shack, say. He’s only a year younger than I, but I cannot guess his idea of reality. I treat him as an innocent.

Yesterday he came over for dinner. People are getting used to some of my concoctions, even if they make a show of fanning their mouths. They get disappointed if there’s not something Indian on the table. Last summer Darrel sent away to California for “Oriental herb garden” cuttings and planted some things for me – coriander, mainly, and dill weed, fenugreek and about five kinds of chili peppers. I always make sure to use his herbs.

Last night he said that two fellows had come up from Dalton in Johnson County with plans for putting in a golf course on his father’s farm. Bud told me later that the fellows from Dalton are big developers. With ground so cheap and farmers so desperate, they’re snapping up huge packages for future non-ag use. Airfields and golf courses and water slides and softball parks. It breaks Bud’s heart even to mention it.

Darrel’s pretty worked up about it. They’d have night golf with illuminated fairways. Wednesday nights would be Ladies’ Nights, Thursday nights Stags Only, Friday nights for Couples. They’re copying some kind of golf-course franchise that works out West. The plan is to convert the barn into a clubhouse, with a restaurant and what he calls sports facilities. I’m not sure what they’ll do with the pig house and its built-in reservoir of nightsoil.

“If you’re so set on sticking with a golf course,” Bud said, “why don’t you buy the franchise yourself?”

“I couldn’t stand watching folks tramping down my fields,” he said.

“So, what’ll you call the club?” I asked Darrel. It didn’t seem such a bad idea. A water slide, a nighttime golf course, tennis courts inside the weathered, slanting barn.

“The Barn,” Darrel said. “I was hoping you’d come up with a prettier name. Something in Indian.” He started blushing. I want to say to Darrel, “You mean in Hindi, not Indian, there’s no such thing as Indian,” but he’ll be crushed and won’t say anything for the rest of the night. He comes from a place where the language you speak is what you are.
The farmers around here are like the farmers I grew up with. Modest people, never boastful, tactful and courtly in their way. A farmer is dependent on too many things outside his control; it makes for modesty. They’re hemmed in by etiquette. When they break out of it, like Harlan Kroener did, you know how terrible things have gotten.

Baden is what they call a basic German community. Even the Danes and Swedes are thought to be genetically unpredictable at times. I’ve heard the word “inscrutable.” The inscrutable Swedes. The sneaky Dutch. They aren’t Amish, but they’re very fond of old ways of doing things. They’re conservative people with a worldly outlook.

At dinner, Bud snapped Darrel’s head off. “What farmer is nuts enough to golf three or four nights a week around here?” he asked.

Darrel tried to joke about it. “Times change. Farmers change. Even Wrigley’s getting lights, Bud.”

Bud’s probably right. Most times he’s right. But being right, having to point out the cons when the borrower wants to hear only the pros, is eating him up. He pops his stomach pills, on top of everything else. Blood pressure, diuretics, all sorts of skin creams. Immobility has made him more excitable. Later that night I tried to calm him down. I said, “Darrel won’t have to sell. You’ll see, it’ll rain.” Then I took his big pink hand, speckled with golden age spots and silky with reddish blond hairs, and placed it on my stomach. His hair is bushy and mostly white, but once upon a time he was a strawberry blond with bright blue eyes. The eyes are less bright, but still a kind of blue I’ve never seen anywhere else. Purple flecks in a turquoise pond.

I am carrying Bud Ripplemeyer’s baby. He wants me to marry him before the baby is born. He wants to be able to say, Bud and Jane Ripplemeyer proudly announce . . .

He hooks his free hand around my neck and kisses me on the mouth, hard. “Marry me?” he says. I always hear a question mark these days, after everything he says.

Bud’s not like Taylor – he’s never asked me about India; it scares him. He wouldn’t be interested in the forecast of an old fakir under a banyan tree. Bud was wounded in the war between my fate and my will. I think sometimes I saved his life by not marrying him.

I feel so potent, a goddess.

In the kitchen, today as on all Sundays, Mother Ripplemeyer is in charge. We have gone over to Mother’s for our Sunday roast. Bud and his eight brothers and sisters were born in this house. From Baden, it’s the first livable house on the second dirt road after you pass Madame Cleo’s. Madame Cleo cuts and styles hair in a fuchsia pink geodesic dome.

When Bud and Karin’s divorce became final, Karin got their fancy three-story brick house with the columns in front, their home for twenty-eight years. The house he bought after the divorce is low and squat, a series of add-ons. It had been a hired man’s house. Eventually we’ll take over Mother Ripplemeyer’s house. Until then, we wait out here on three hundred acres, which isn’t bad. My father raised nine of us on thirty acres.

This was a three-room frame house. He rents out the three hundred acres for hay. We added a new living room with an atrium when we moved in, and a small
bedroom when we got word from the adoption agency in Des Moines that Du had made it out to Hong Kong. The house looks small and ugly from the dirt road, but every time I crunch into the driveway and park my old Rabbit between the rusting, abandoned machinery and the empty silo, the add-ons cozy me into thinking that all of us Ripplemeyers, even us new ones, belong.

Du is a Ripplemeyer. He was Du Thien. He was fourteen when we got him; now he’s seventeen, a junior in high school. He does well, though he’s sometimes contemptuous. He barely spoke English when he arrived; now he’s fluent, but with a permanent accent. ”Like Kissinger,” he says. They tell me I have no accent, but I don’t sound Iowan, either. I’m like those voices on the telephone, very clear and soothing. Maybe Northern California, they say. Du says they’re computer generated.

It was January when Du arrived at Des Moines from Honolulu with his agency escort. He was wearing an Aloha, Y’All T-shirt and a blue-jean jacket. We’d brought a new duffel coat with us, as instructed. Next to Bud, he seemed so tiny, so unmarked, for all he’d been through. The agency hadn’t minded Bud’s divorce. Karin could have made trouble but didn’t. The agency was charmed by the notion of Bud’s “Asian” wife, without inquiring too deeply. Du was one of the hard-to-place orphans.

He had never seen snow, never felt cold air, never worn a coat. We stopped at a McDonald’s on the way back to Baden. When we parked, Du jumped down from the back, leaving the new coat on the seat. The wind chill was —35, and he waited for us in the middle of the parking lot in his Aloha, Y’All T-shirt while we bundled up and locked the doors. He wasn’t slapping his arms or blowing on his hands.

The day I came to Baden and walked into his bank with Mother Ripplemeyer, looking for a job, Bud was a tall, fit, fifty-year-old banker, husband of Karin, father of Buddy and Vern, both married farmers in nearby counties. Asia he’d thought of only as a soy-bean market. He’d gone to Beijing on a bankers’ delegation and walked the Great Wall.

Six months later, Bud Ripplemeyer was a divorced man living with an Indian woman in a hired man’s house five miles out of town. Asia had transformed him, made him reckless and emotional. He wanted to make up for fifty years of “selfishness,” as he calls it. One night he saw a television special on boat people in Thai prisons, and he called the agency the next day. Fates are so intertwined in the modern world, how can a god keep them straight? A year after that, we had added Du to our life, and Bud was confined to a wheelchair.

Mother likes to cook, but she’s crotchety this afternoon. It’s one of her medium-bad days, which means she’ll wink out on us entirely by the end. She is seventy-six, and sprightly in a Younkers pantsuit, white hair squeezed into curls by Madame Cleo, who trained in Ottumwa.

In Hasnapur a woman may be old at twenty-two.

I think of Vimla, a girl I envied because she lived in a two-story brick house with real windows. Our hut was mud. Her marriage was the fanciest the village had ever seen. Her father gave away a zippy red Maruti and a refrigerator in the dowry. When
he was twenty-one her husband died of typhoid, and at twenty-two she doused herself with kerosene and flung herself on a stove, shouting to the god of death, “Yama, bring me to you.”

The villagers say when a clay pitcher breaks, you see that the air inside it is the same as outside. Vimla set herself on fire because she had broken her pitcher; she saw there were no insides and outsides. We are just shells of the same Absolute. In Hasnapur, Vimla’s isn’t a sad story. The sad story would be a woman Mother Ripplemeyer’s age still working on her shell, bothering to get her hair and nails done at Madame Cleo’s.

Mother Ripplemeyer tells me her Depression stories. In the beginning, I thought we could trade some world-class poverty stories, but mine make her uncomfortable. Not that she’s hostile. It’s like looking at the name in my passport and seeing “Jyo – ” at the beginning and deciding that her mouth was not destined to make those sounds. She can’t begin to picture a village in Punjab. She doesn’t mind my stories about New York and Florida because she’s been to Florida many times and seen enough pictures of New York. I have to be careful about those stories. I have to be careful about nearly everything I say. If I talk about India, I talk about my parents.

I could tell her about water famines in Hasnapur, how at the dried-out well docile women turned savage for the last muddy bucketful. Even here, I store water in orange-juice jars, plastic milk bottles, tumblers, mixing bowls, any container I can find. I’ve been through thirsty times, and not that long ago. Mother doesn’t think that’s crazy. The Depression turned her into a hoarder, too. She’s shown me her stock of tinfoil. She stashes the foil, neatly wrapped in a flannel sheet, in a drawer built into the bed for blankets and extra pillows.

She wonders, I know, why I left. I tell her, Education, which is true enough. She knows there is something else. I say, I had a mission. I want to protect her from too much reality.

She says she likes me better than she did Karin, though Karin grew up right here in Baden and Karin’s mother, who is eighty-two, still picks her up for their Lutheran Mission Relief Fund’s quilting group. Last year the Relief Fund raised $18,000 for Ethiopia. Mother’s group’s quilt went for eleven hundred dollars to a bald, smiling man from Chicago who said it was for his granddaughter, but I read the commercial lettering on his panel truck.

Just before the divorce, according to Bud, Karin was agitating to stick Mother in the Lutheran Home. Mother senses I have different feelings about family.

The table is set and ready. Du’s made a centerpiece out of some early flowers and I’ve polished the display rack of silver spoons. Bud has five brothers and three sisters, and they were all born or at least christened with silver spoons in their mouths. I, too, come from a family of nine. Figure the odds on that, Bud says. He has a brother in Minneapolis and a sister in Omaha and a brother named Vern Ripplemeyer, Jr., who died in Korea, the family’s only other encounter with Asia. All the others are in Texas or California. After the divorce, Mother asked Karin to give the spoons back. “Call me an Indian giver,” Mother likes to joke. “I mean our kind.”
Du and Scott, whose father works down in the corn sweetener plant, are sprawled on the rug watching Monster Truck Madness. It’s trucks versus tanks, and the tanks are creaming them. We bought ourselves a satellite dish the day after we first talked long distance to Du. There’s no telling where this telecast is coming from.

Du’s first question to Bud, in painful English over trans-Pacific cable, was “You have television? You get?” He talked of having watched television in his home in Saigon. We got the point. He’d had two lives, one in Saigon and another in the refugee camp. In Saigon he’d lived in a house with a large family, and he’d been happy. He doesn’t talk much about the refugee camp, other than that his mother cut hair, his older brother raised fighting fish, his married sister brought back live crabs and worms for him to eat whenever she could sneak a visit from her own camp. From a chatty agency worker we know that Du’s mother and brother were hacked to death in the fields by a jealous madman, after they’d gotten their visas.

“Look at that sucker fly!” Scott shouts, crawling closer to the screen. “All right!” Mud scuds behind the Scarlet Slugger.

“Whoa, Nellie!” Du can match Scott shout for shout now. “Hold on, mama!” The Slugger is the body of a Chevy Blazer welded onto a World War II tank.

Mother wanders over to the television but doesn’t sit down. In an instant replay we watch the Scarlet Slugger tear up the center of a bog. I can’t help thinking, It looks like a bomb crater. Does Du even think such things? I don’t know what he thinks. He’s called Yogi in school, mainly because his name in English sounds more like “Yo.” But he is a real yogi, always in control. I’ve told him my stories of India, the years between India and Iowa, hoping he’d share something with me. When they’re over he usually says, “That’s wild. Can I go now?”

“Holy Toledo!” Mother is into it.

“Mom, it’s okay, isn’t it, if Scott stays for dinner?”

“If it’s okay with his parents.”

Scott grins at me with his perfect teeth. I envy him his teeth. We had no dentist in Hasnapur. For a long time we had no doctor either, except for Vaccinations-sahib, who rode in and out of the village in a WHO jeep. My teeth look as though they’ve been through slugfests. Du’s seventeen and wears braces. Orthodontics was the Christmas present he asked for.

“And if the two of you wash the beans,” I add.

“You aren’t making the yellow stuff, Mrs. R.? I detect disappointment.

“I will if you name it.”

I see him whispering to Du, and Du’s bony shoulder shrug. “Globey?” he says.

It’s close enough. I took gobi aloo to the Lutheran Relief Fund craft fair last week. I am subverting the taste buds of Elsa County. I put some of last night’s matar panir in the microwave. It goes well with pork, believe me.

Bud wheels himself in from his study. “I can’t let the kid do it!” The kid is Darrel, whose financial forms he’s been studying. “It’s plain stupid. Gene would never forgive me.”

I’ve sent away for the latest in wheelchairs, automated and really maneuverable. The doctor said, “I had a patient once who had his slugs pierced and hung on a chain.
around his neck.” Bud said to throw them out. He didn’t want to see how flattened they’d got, bouncing off his bones. The doctor is from Montana. I haven’t been west of Lincoln, Nebraska. Every night the frontier creeps a little closer.

Think of banking as your business, I want to tell Bud. Don’t make moral decisions for Darrel. It’s his farm now. He can make half a million by selling, buy his franchise and a house, and I can look out on a golf course, which won’t kill me. Bud gets too involved. It almost killed him two years ago.

“Watch him, Dad!” Du whoops. “Watch him take off!”

Bud puts away the Financial Statement and Supporting Schedules form he’s been penciling. He skids and wheels closer to Du to watch the Python.

“Can you do a wheelie yet, Mr. R.?” Scott jokes.

“Boy!” He smiles. “That thing gives the guy great air!”

The Python’s built himself a fancy floating suspension. Father and son watch the Snakeman win his class.

On the screen Cut Tire Class vehicles, frail as gnats, skim over churned-up mud. Helmeted men give me victory signs. They all plan on winning tonight. Nitro Express, Brawling Babe, Insane Expectations. Move over, I whisper.

Over the bleached grounds of Baden, Iowa, loose, lumpy rainclouds are massing. Good times, best times, are coming. Move over.

Mother paces between the windows. “Poor Vern.” Her hands pick at lint balls I can’t see. “It’s blowing so hard he’ll never find his way back from the barn. A man can die in a storm like this.”

Bud flashes anxiety at me. His father was Vern. I calm him with a touch. He rests his head on my hip. “Kiss an old fool for love?” He grins. I bring my face down close to his big face. He kisses my chin, my cheeks, my eyelids, my temples. His lips scuttle across my forehead; they warm the cold pale star of my scar. My third eye glows, a spotlight trained on lives to come. This isn’t a vision to share with Bud. He is happy. And I am happy enough.

The lemon-pale afternoon swirls indoors through torn window screens. The first lightning bugs of summer sparkle. I feel the tug of opposing forces. Hope and pain. Pain and hope.

Mother moves around the room, turning on lamps. “Seen the quilt?” she says. “How much do you think it’ll bring? Thirty-five? Forty?”

In the white lamplight, ghosts float toward me. Jane, Jasmine, Jyoti.

“It’ll depend on the Christian conscience of strangers,” Bud jokes. “You might get more than thirty-five.”

“Think how many people thirty-five dollars will feed out there.”

Out there. I am not sure what Mother imagines. On the edge of the world, in flaming deserts, mangled jungles, squelchy swamps, missionaries save the needy. Out There, the darkness. But for me, for Du, In Here, safety. At least for now.

Oh, the wonder! the wonder!
Study Questions

1. What do you learn about Jasmine’s identity in Chs. 1 and 2 of Mukherjee’s novel? How has her family’s situation in India during the 1960s shaped her ideas of religion, education, and marriage?

2. How do you know that Jasmine is telling her story during the 1980s? Find supporting evidence from Bluestone, Springsteen, or Stacey.

3. According to Jasmine, how is India reshaping American identities?

4. What does being American mean if Jasmine is a representative of the new American pioneers?
CHAPTER 42

Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural

Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn

Claudia Chiawei O’Hearn (1971–) was born in Hong Kong to a working-class Irish-American father and a Chinese mother. Raised as an American in Singapore, Belgium, and Taiwan, she moved to the United States to attend Oberlin College. After graduating in 1993, she moved to New York and worked as an editor at Pantheon books. The following excerpt comes from the “Introduction” to Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural (1998), an anthology of essays by 18 writers who reflect on the complex social locations that have shaped their experiences and their identities.

I was walking down the street the other day, on my way home from the gym, when a large woman with wiry hair run amok approached me, mumbling to herself and looking somewhat deranged, as only New Yorkers can look. As she neared me, she looked me in the eye and barked, “Half-breed bitch.” I had already passed her by the time I figured out what she had said. Shocked, my first reaction was a mix of surprise and even pleasure: “How’d she know? What gave it away?” It wasn’t until a block later that I became enraged and thought of a witty retort.

I stopped being American when I first came to the States to live eight years ago. Growing up in Asia, I knew being mixed set me apart, but I didn’t have to name it until people began to ask, Where are you from? My father was raised in a working-class Irish American family in Fall River, Massachusetts. My mother was born near Shanghai, China, but when she was seven, on the eve of the communist revolution, she and her family fled to Taiwan. They met, romantically, and I think aptly, on an airplane (my mother was a flight attendant) and soon married – though not without first encountering resistance. My father’s family were familiar with only stereotypes of Asian women, and so were not eager to invite China into the O’Hearn fold. My mother’s family felt the same and took it a step further by hiring a private detective, who fortunately was unable to dig up anything incriminating about my father. Both
sides eventually got over it, so we can laugh about it now, and frequently do. Following my mother’s example, both of her sisters married Caucasians, creating a whole generation of hapas (Hawaiian for half) in our family.

My parents settled in Hong Kong, where I was born, and moved to Singapore, Belgium, and Ohio and finally settled in Taiwan. I consider these all to be home, with the exception of Akron, Ohio, where I experienced my first sting of racism when preschool classmates pushed me off playground slides, pulled tight their eyes, and idiotically chanted, “Ching, Chang, Chong, Chinese.” Early learners. As coached by my mother, I retorted, “Chinese are better.” But since these places are all home, they forfeit their definition as a single place I can come from. Suspended, I can go anywhere but home.

I don’t look especially Chinese – my eyes are wide and lidded, and my hair has a Caucasian texture and color. When my mother and I walked together, people would stare, often rudely. I could see questions in their curious looks: “Is this your daughter?” We looked incongruous. It never occurred to me that my mother and I looked any more different than any other mother and daughter; and even if we did, that it would affect how we related to each other. I don’t think I minded so much because I assumed that I would find a home in the States when I went there for college. To me, America was summer vacations; getting up at six in the morning to watch Scooby Doo and the rest of the Saturday morning cartoons; eating Pop Rocks and macaroni and cheese (which I would inhale in large amounts); and best of all, shopping at the mall. Coupled with what I saw in the movies, this was my small window into American life.

Because most people didn’t know where to place me, I made up stories about myself. In bars, cabs, and restaurants I would try on identities with strangers I knew I would never meet again. I faked accents as I pretended to be a Hawaiian dancer, an Italian tourist, and even once a Russian student. It always amazed me what I could get away with. Being mixed inspired and gave me license to test new characters, but it also cast me as a foreigner in every setting I found myself in.

My brother looks Chinese – 70 percent to my 30 percent. And though he might dispute this, I have always felt that he was more readily accepted as being Chinese. I resented him for the ease with which he could slip into the culture, whereas I had to constantly prove and explain myself. I remember how during Chinese New Year, as tradition, we would go from house to house, eating large meals, playing mah jong, and collecting red envelopes containing untold amounts of cash that would later be gambled away. I dreaded these occasions because I felt excluded, whereas my brother, it seemed, was welcomed. Questions about what he planned to do with his life, when was he going to find a girlfriend, etc., were asked of him, while I was mostly treated with polite comments about the style of my dress and carted off to watch TV. I’d sit in the corner, grumbling as I snacked on M&Ms and watermelon seeds and watched badly dubbed American movies. My parents were exasperated by my long face and didn’t understand why I was bothered even as they had me pegged as the American one. My mother accused me of not dating Chinese guys as proof of my being Americanized. Of course when I did eventually date one, she didn’t approve of him because he wore an earring, dressed all in black, and was known to smoke cigarettes.
My decision to study in Ireland on a semester abroad rather than in China, a country I have yet to visit, seemed to further confirm my predilection. I defended my choice because it conveniently fit my English major and why wouldn’t I want to explore my Irish heritage. Truthfully, I was afraid to go to China because it was foreign to me. This may seem absurd considering that I had been living in Taiwan for over ten years, but I knew it would require something of me that I was not prepared to give. I wasn’t ready to take that journey yet. During the time I lived in Taiwan, China had seemed forbidding – I remember hearing stories about people we knew going and being detained for long periods of time. It wasn’t until after I left for college that government restrictions preventing travel between the two countries were relaxed.

But then I would also benefit from the privileges of being an American. I remember how I would bypass long lines and the price of admission at nightclubs that welcomed foreigners, while my brother had to present a passport as proof of his citizenship. Even though I attended an international school, my friends fell into two groups – the Asians and the foreigners. The biracials blended in both directions, moving between the groups, though always somewhat outside each. Looking back, I think the distinctions came more into focus as we grew older. I remember once one of my American friends let slip a racial slur, something about irreputable, gold-digging Chinese women trying to trap Western men. Appalled, I pointed to my face – the product of such “unholy” joinings. She responded, “Oh, you’re not really Chinese” – as though this were a plus.

When I came to the States for college, I became another sort of expatriate. Since I lacked the cultural tools necessary to roam undetected (knowledge of key television shows, important cultural references, even the subtle nuances of American English that you miss out on when you grow up abroad), I had to fake it and laugh at jokes I didn’t get. Luckily I was familiar with The Simpsons, had seen almost every episode of The Love Boat on videotape, and vaguely knew who Howard Stern was. I got tired of hearing, “Oh, you wouldn’t understand, you’re not from here.”

Toward the end of my first year, I went to hear Angela Davis speak. In making a point about the racism and inequality of the American educational system, she asked the white students to raise their hands if they had taken a course in black/Asian/etc. studies. A few proud students lifted their arms, and I was one of them. Then she asked the students of color to raise their hands if they had taken a course that focused on white/Western studies. Every one of them raised their hands, and the point was made. One was made for me as well, for I had hesitated, unsure whether to join them, although I wasn’t sure why I assumed I belonged to the first group any more than the second. I ended up raising my hand for both, looking around to see if anyone noticed. I realized that although I had been making a point all year of letting people know that I was Chinese and enjoyed surprising them, I had learned to believe that I was American/white – I didn’t differentiate. Could I be both, or did one trump the other?

It’s easier to be white. To be Chinese, to be half Chinese, is work. I often find myself cataloguing my emotions, manners, and philosophies into Chinese and American, wary if the latter starts to outweigh the former. Three points Asia. How can I be Chinese if I prefer David Bowie to Chinese pop, if I can more easily pass as an
American, if I choose to live in New York and not return to Asia where my family still lives, if English is my first language and Chinese remains a distant second? How can I be Chinese when I struggle to communicate with my grandparents? I am unable to tell them about friends, boyfriends, life-altering experiences, beliefs, new jobs – to tell them about my life and who I have become – and the result is they don’t really know me. I’m ashamed to admit that there have been times I dreaded visiting them because of the humiliation of having to resort to hand gestures and second-grade Chinese.

And yet I play the part of a foreigner here all the time. I insist on not being American and tell people about the various customs that are foreign to me – Thanksgiving Day turkey and football, milk shakes, It's a Wonderful Life at Christmas, and fireworks on the Fourth of July. I remember once I got carded when I was an underage summer school student at Tufts University trying to get a drink at a T.G.I. Fridays in Boston. Undaunted, I decided to try a different tactic and responded, in exchange-student-accented English, “Ah, we do not have IDs in China. I do not understand your strange customs.” The waitress looked baffled, but I still didn’t get any rum in my Coke. When I visit my American cousins, though they are welcoming, I can’t help but notice that familial ties don’t wash over cultural differences. Sometimes, when I would visit for more than a couple days, I would start speaking with a grossly exaggerated Boston accent, in an attempt to get whitified and bridge the gap. By sharing an accent, perhaps I could be more a part of the family and share their history. Very rarely do the two families come together, and when they do, it is a jarring family portrait.

I think back to what my mother replied when I asked her if it bothered her that I looked so Western, so not-Chinese. What did she think when she looked at me? With seemingly uncomplicated conviction, she told me that she didn’t care because she didn’t break me down into Chinese and American. “I see my daughter, finish your dinner.” Ultimately, I think she is right, for racial and cultural identity becomes an inherent sum of who you are and what your experiences have been. But I question how much she really believes what she says. My parents’ difficulty with my recent choices of partners has exposed their belief that I will marry a Caucasian and that my brother will marry a Chinese, an assumption based on some vague and undefinable notion of what we look like and how they see us. My brother, it happens, is dating a Chinese woman, whose parents, ironically, don’t approve of him because he isn’t Chinese enough. “Why make life harder for yourself than it has to be? Different cultures will make marriage difficult,” is what my father says when he sees me getting angry. Exasperated, I point to his own marriage as a sign of his illogic. “Have you forgotten that you’re married to a Chinese woman?” But more important, I wonder whose racial and cultural background will match my own. I get silence for an answer.

For those of us who fall between the cracks, being “black,” being “white,” being “Chinese,” being “Latino,” is complicated. [...] Skin color and place of birth aren’t accurate signifiers of identity. One and one don’t necessarily add up to two. Cultural and racial amalgams create a third, wholly indistinguishable category where origin and home are indeterminate. And yet, I am also reminded of a comment made by a notable mixed-race fiction writer in response to Tiger Woods’s declaration of his
Asian and black heritage (and I paraphrase): "When the black truck comes around, they’re gonna haul his ass on it."

What name do you give to someone who is a quarter, an eighth, a half? What kind of measuring stick might give an accurate estimation? If our understanding of race and culture can ripen and evolve, then new and immeasurable measurements about the uniqueness of our identities become possible.

**Study Questions**

1. How was O’Hearn viewed "from the outside" as a mixed race person growing up in Asia (Singapore and Taiwan)? How did she view herself "from the inside"?

2. How did the outside/inside views of O’Hearn shift when she came to live in the US?

3. Compare O’Hearn’s ethnic American identity formation with Kesaya Noda’s or with Jack Agüeros's. What additional factors come into play for a mixed race person living in the US at the turn of the twenty-first century?
CHAPTER 43

From The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Poems

Sherman Alexie

Born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, Native American poet and fiction writer Sherman Alexie is a vibrant contemporary literary voice. Alexie’s father was a truck driver and logger who spent little time with his family; his mother, a quilter, sold her work to make ends meet. An American Studies graduate of Washington State University in 1991, Alexie’s interest in writing was sparked during a college creative writing workshop, which led to his first major book, The Business of Fancydancing (1992). He has published several highly praised works of fiction and poetry, and two screenplays, one of which, Smoke Signals (1998), became the first Hollywood film produced, directed, and acted entirely by Indians. Alexie writes with unflinching candor about the realities and conflicts of Indian life and identity on and off the Reservation. The following three poems give a hint of his poetic breadth, the first two written with biting irony; the third, with warm tenderness.

1. I cut myself into sixteen equal pieces
keep thirteen and feed the other three
to the dogs, who have also grown
tired of U.S. Commodities, white cans
black letters translated into Spanish.
“Does this mean I have to learn
the language to eat?” Lester FallsApart asks
but directions for preparation are simple:
a. WASH CAN; b. OPEN CAN; c. EXAMINE CONTENTS
2.

It is done by blood, reservation mathematics, fractions:
father (full-blood) + mother (5/8) = son (13/16).
It is done by enrollment number, last name first, first name last:
Spokane Tribal Enrollment Number 1569; Victor, Chief.
It is done by identification card, photograph, lamination:
IF FOUND, PLEASE RETURN TO SPOKANE TRIBE OF INDIANS, WELLPINIT, WA.

3.

The compromise is always made in increments. On this reservation we play football on real grass dream of deserts, three inches of rain in a year. What we have lost: uranium mine, Little Falls Dam salmon. Our excuses are trapped within museums, roadside attractions totem poles in Riverfront Park.
I was there, watching the Spokane River changing. A ten-year-old white boy asked if I was a real Indian. He did not wait for an answer, instead carving his initials into the totem with a pocketknife: J.N.
We are what we take, carving my name my enrollment number, thirteen hash marks into the wood. A story is remembered as evidence, the Indian man they found dead shot in the alley behind the Mayfair. Authorities reported a rumor he had relatives in Minnesota. A member of some tribe or another his photograph on the 11 o’clock news. Eyes, hair all dark, his shovel-shaped incisor, each the same ordinary identification of the anonymous.

4.

When my father disappeared, we found him years later, in a strange kitchen searching for footprints in the dust: still
untouched on the shelves all the commodity
cans without labels – my father opened them
one by one, finding a story in each.

Evolution

Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation
right across the border from the liquor store
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
and the Indians come running in with jewelry
television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit
it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill
takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it
all catalogued and filed in a storage room. The Indians
pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn
their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin
and when the last Indian has pawned everything
but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks
closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old
calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES
charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter.

At Navajo Monument Valley Tribal School

from the photograph
by Skeet McAuley

the football field rises
to meet the mesa. Indian boys
gallop across the grass, against
the beginning of their body.
On those Saturday afternoons,
unbroken horses gather to watch
their sons growing larger
in the small parts of the world.
Everyone is the quarterback.
There is no thin man in a big hat
writing down all the names
in two columns: winners and losers.
This is the eternal football game,
Indians versus Indians. All the Skins
in the wooden bleachers fancydancing,
stomping red dust straight down
into nothing. Before the game is over,
the eighth-grade girls’ track team
comes running, circling the field,
their thin and brown legs echoing
wild horses, wild horses, wild horses.

Study Questions

1 How does Alexie use humor to tell painful truths about contemporary Indians’ lives? Does the humor strengthen or weaken the points he is making? Explain, using an example from one of the three poems.

"13/16"
1 What issues about Indian identity is Alexie raising in this poem? Why does he have to cut himself up into pieces?
2 How do the issues Alexie raises compare with those raised by Vine Deloria, Jr.?

"Evolution"
1 Who is Buffalo Bill? Why are the Indians pawning everything to him, including their skeletons?
2 What do the pawn shop and "The Museum of Native American Cultures" tell us about Alexie’s view of what has happened to Indians’ cultural heritage?

"At Navajo Monument Valley Tribal School"
1 Explain how Skeet McAuley’s photograph affects your reading of the poem, and how the poem affects your reading of the photograph.
2 What makes the football games practiced by these high school students different from professional football?
3 Why does Alexie compare the boys and girls to wild horses?
Throughout a Glass Darkly:
Toward the Twenty-first Century

Ronald Takaki

Ronald Takaki (1939–) was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii, but he recalls that when he arrived in Ohio for college, “most people did not see me as an American.” His mother, who was born on a sugar plantation, ran a restaurant with her husband during Takaki’s high school years. Takaki received his PhD in history at the University of California Berkeley in 1967, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. A professor of Ethnic Studies, he has published numerous books, including Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans (1989) and A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America (1993). In this excerpt from the concluding chapter of A Different Mirror, Takaki examines the implications of the US’s increasingly diverse immigrant and ethnic populations for the future of American society and culture.

The myth of the Asian-American “model minority” has been challenged, yet it continues to be widely believed. One reason for this is its instructional value. For whom are Asian Americans supposed to be a “model”? Shortly after the Civil War, southern planters recruited Chinese immigrants in order to pit them against the newly freed blacks as “examples” of laborers willing to work hard for low wages. Today, Asian Americans are again being used to discipline blacks. If the failure of blacks on welfare warns Americans in general how they should not behave, the triumph of Asian Americans affirms the deeply rooted values of the Protestant ethic and self-reliance. Our society needs an Asian-American “model minority” in an era anxious about a growing black underclass. Asian-American “success” has been used to explain the phenomenon of “losing ground” – why the situation of the poor has deteriorated during the last two decades while government social services have expanded. If Asian Americans can make it on their own, conservative pundits like Charles Murray are asking, why can’t other groups? Many liberals have joined this chorus. In 1987, CBS’s 60 Minutes presented a glowing report on the stunning achievements of Asian Americans in the academy.
“Why are Asian Americans doing so exceptionally well in school?” Mike Wallace asked and quickly added, “They must be doing something right. Let’s bottle it.” Wallace then suggested that failing black students should try to pursue the Asian-American formula for academic success.¹

Betraying a nervousness over the seeming end of the American Dream’s boundlessness, praise for this “super minority” has become society’s most recent jeremiad—a call for a renewed commitment to the traditional virtues of hard work, thrift, and industry. After all, it has been argued, the war on poverty and affirmative action were not really necessary. Look at the Asian Americans! They did it by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. For blacks shut out of the labor market, the Asian-American model provides the standards of acceptable behavior: blacks should not depend on welfare or affirmative action. While congratulating Asian Americans for their family values, hard work, and high incomes, President Ronald Reagan chastised blacks for their dependency on the "spider's web of welfare" and their failure to recognize that the "only barrier" to success was "within" them.²

But comparisons of Asian-American “success” and black “dependency” have shrouded the impact of the Cold War economy on the problems of unemployment and poverty. The strategic nuclear weapons program under the Reagan presidency was financed by enormous deficits. Defense expenditures under the Reagan administration more than doubled from $134 billion in 1980 to $282 billion in 1987. In that year, defense spending amounted to 60 cents out of every dollar received by the federal government in income tax. Meanwhile, resources were diverted from our social needs: defense spending was $35 billion greater in 1985 than in 1981, while funds for entitlement programs such as food stamps and welfare were cut by $30 billion. Moreover, the focus of our research and development on strategic nuclear weapons has greatly harmed our general economy. Since 1955, the federal government has spent more than $1 trillion on nuclear arms and other weaponry for the Cold War—a sum representing 62 percent of all federal research expenditures. This concentration on the military needs of the US-Soviet rivalry drained our national resources and at the same time undermined our ability to produce competitive consumer goods, which in turn, generated trade imbalances and contributed to a decline in commercial manufacturing, especially for those sectors of the industrial economy where many blacks had been employed.³

These macrocosmic political and economic realities have even reached remote Indian reservations. During the nineteenth century, as white settlement expanded westward toward the “Stony mountains,” policy-makers like Francis Amasa Walker had moved Indian tribes onto reservations. Many of these reservations later became valuable sites for resources vital to the Cold War’s nuclear weapons program as well as our energy-consuming economy. Fifty-five percent of our uranium deposits are located on Indian-owned lands, and nearly 100 percent of current mining occurs in Indian territory. In the Southwest, this industry employs 20 percent of working Laguna Pueblo Indians. The United Mine Workers Union estimated that approximately 80 percent of the workers in the uranium shaft mines will die of lung cancer.

Native Americans living near the shafts are also in danger, for they have been exposed to air and drinking water contaminated by radiation from the tailings generated by the mining and milling of uranium. In Edgemount, South Dakota,
three million pounds of tailings were dumped near the Cheyenne River, and cancer rates for people drinking that water have been 50 percent higher than in any other county in the state. In 1978, the Department of Energy released a report stating that the risk of lung cancer for persons living near the tailings piles was twice that of the general population. Involved in the extract of uranium have been powerful corporations – Kerr-McGee, Exxon, Atlantic Richfield, Mobil Oil, and United Nuclear.  

By 1980, 740,000 Indians – more than half of the total Native American population – no longer lived on reservations. Instead, they resided in cities such as New York, San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, Tulsa, Minneapolis–St. Paul, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In 1940, only 24,000 Native Americans, or 13 percent of the group’s national population, lived in urban areas. World War II had attracted thousands of them to work in urban war-related industries. The major migration, however, occurred between 1953 and 1972: under the Bureau of Indian Affairs relocation program, 100,000 Indians left the reservations for the cities. One of the movers and shakers behind this new policy was Dillon S. Meyer. Appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1950s, he had been the director of the War Relocation Authority, responsible for administering the Japanese-American internment camps during World War II. Meyer’s goal had been to assimilate Japanese Americans by resettling them across the country. This idea of incorporation through dispersal became the basis of the Voluntary Relocation Program, which provided job training and transportation to cities where Indians would be given assistance in finding employment and housing. Like Commissioner Francis Amasa Walker, Meyer hoped to integrate Native Americans into modern urban society. 

Recently, 40,000 Soviet Jews have been entering the United States annually, and altogether they total over 200,000. Like the Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth century, they have been selling their houses and furniture, giving away almost everything, and leaving with only what they can carry wrapped in bedspreads or packed in suitcases. After their arrival, they have had to start all over again. Describing the plight of a Jewish refugee family, Barbara Budnitz of Berkeley, California, explained: “These people have nothing. I offered them an old desk. They said they wanted it, but what they really needed was a bed.” Many of these refugees had been engineers in the old country, but here they have been suffering from unemployment. Lacking English language skills and possessing technical knowledge that has limited transferability, many have been forced to find jobs as apartment managers, janitors, or even as helpers at McDonald’s. According to Barbara Nelson of the Jewish Family Services in Oakland, California, about 80 percent of the Jewish refugee families have been compelled to seek welfare support. 

Still the Jews are glad to be in America where there is religious freedom. “My five-year-old daughter is attending school at the synagogue – something she could not do in the Ukraine,” explained Sofiya Shapiro, who came with her family in 1991. “I am glad she can get to know Jewish tradition.” Indeed, many of the refugees are learning about Judaism for the first time in their lives. But like the Jewish immigrants of earlier times, the recent refugees are hopeful this country will offer them an opportunity to begin again. “That’s what America is,” commented Budnitz. “We need to keep it that way.”
America’s continuing allure has also been as a place for a fresh economic start. This has been particularly true for the recent arrivals from Ireland. Like the nineteenth-century Irish immigrants fleeing hunger and the ravages of the potato famine, these recent newcomers have been pushed by grim economic conditions at home: in 1990, unemployment in Ireland was a staggering 18 percent. Seeking work in America, many have entered illegally in the past decade. Undocumented Irish workers have been estimated to total as many as 120,000. “It’s an anonymous floating population,” stated Lena Deevy, director of the Irish Immigration Reform Movement office in Boston. “It’s like counting the homeless.” These illegal aliens constitute what one of them described as “an underclass,” forced to take “the crummiest jobs at the lowest wages.” The 1987 Immigration Reform Act, which made it unlawful for employers to hire undocumented workers, has created economic and social borders for many Irish. “You can’t apply for a job,” explained an Irish waitress who came to Boston in 1986. “You can’t answer a want ad [because of the 1987 law]. It’s all word of mouth.” Undocumented Irish workers have to keep a low profile, she added: “My social life is limited to the Irish sector. I can’t talk to Americans – you just have to tell too many lies.” Director Deevy described their nervousness: “It’s like living on the edge. There’s a lot of fear” that someone “will squeal to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service].” In 1990, a new immigration law provided for the distribution of 40,000 green cards to be awarded by lottery, with 16,000 of them reserved for Irish. “I plan to fill out at least a thousand applications,” said Joanne O’Connell of Queens, New York, as she looked forward to this “Irish Sweepstakes.”

Most of today’s immigrants, however, come from Asia and Latin America. Over 80 percent of all immigrants have been arriving from these two regions, adding to America’s racial diversity – a reality charged with consequences for our nation’s workforce. By the year 2000, there will be more than 21 million new workers. They will be 44 percent white, 16 percent black, 11 percent Asian and other groups, and 29 percent Hispanic. A preview of the significance of this racial diversity in the twenty-first century can be seen in California. There, Hispanics, composed mostly of Mexican Americans, number 4.5 million, or approximately 20 percent of the state’s population. Many of them are recent newcomers, pulled here again by dreams of El Norte. Compared to the Anglos, the Hispanics are young. In 1985, they represented 32 percent of the youth (aged birth to fifteen years) and only 8 percent of the elderly (sixty-five years and over), compared to 52 percent and 83 percent for Anglos. The number of Hispanics entering the workforce will increase, while Anglos will continue to constitute a large majority of the elderly.9 

Together, we have created what Gloria Anzaldúa celebrated as a “borderland” – a place where “two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory.” How can all of us meet on communal ground? “The struggle,” Anzaldúa responded, “is inner: Chicano, indio, American Indian, mojado, mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people…. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.”10
Such awareness, in turn, must come from a “re-visioned” history. What Gloria Steinem termed “revolution from within” must ultimately be grounded in “unlearning” much of what we have been told about America’s past and substituting a more inclusive and accurate history of all the peoples of America. “To finally recognize our own invisibility,” declared Mitsuye Yamada, “is to finally be on the path toward visibility.” To become visible is to see ourselves and each other in a different mirror of history. As Audre Lorde pointed out,

\[
\text{It is a waste of time hating a mirror}
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\[
\text{or its reflection}
\]
\[
\text{instead of stopping the hand}
\]
\[
\text{that makes glass with distortions.}^{11}
\]

By viewing ourselves in a mirror which reflects reality, we can see our past as undistorted and no longer have to peer into our future as through a glass darkly. The face of our cultural future can be found on the western edge of the continent. “California, and especially Los Angeles, a gateway to both Asia and Latin America,” Carlos Fuentes observed, “poses the universal question of the coming century: how do we deal with the Other?” Asked whether California, especially with its multiethnic society, represented the America of the twenty-first century, Alice Walker replied: “If that’s not the future reality of the United States, there won’t be any United States, because that’s who we are.” Walker’s own ancestry is a combination of Native American, African American, and European American. Paula Gunn Allen also has diverse ethnic roots – American Indian, Scotch, Jewish, and Lebanese. “Just people from everywhere are related to me by blood,” she explained, “and so that’s why I say I’m a multicultural event… It’s beautiful, it’s a rainbow… It reflects light, and I think that’s what a person like me can do.” Imagine what “light” a “multicultural event” called America can reflect. America has been settled by “the people of all nations,” Herman Melville observed over a century ago, “all nations may claim her for their own. You can not spill a drop of American blood, without spilling the blood of the whole world.” Americans are not “a narrow tribe”; they are not a nation, “so much as a world.” In this new society, Melville optimistically declared, the “prejudices of national dislikes” could be “forever extinguished.”^{12} […] 

America’s dilemma has been our resistance to ourselves – our denial of our immensely varied selves. But we have nothing to fear but our fear of our own diversity. “We can get along,” Rodney King reassured us during an agonizing moment of racial hate and violence. To get along with each other, however, requires self-recognition as well as self-acceptance. Asked whether she had a specific proposal for improving the current racial climate in America, Toni Morrison answered: “Everybody remembers the first time they were taught that part of the human race was Other. That’s a trauma. It’s as though I told you that your left hand is not part of your body.” In his vision of the “whole hoop of the world,” Black Elk of the Sioux saw “in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being.” And he saw that the “sacred
hoop’’ of his people was ‘‘one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight
and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the
children of one mother and one father.’’ Today, what we need to do is to stop denying
our wholeness as members of humanity as well as one nation.13

As Americans, we originally came from many different shores, and our diversity
has been at the center of the making of America. While our stories contain the
memories of different communities, together they inscribe a larger narrative. Filled
with what Walt Whitman celebrated as the ‘‘varied carols’’ of America, our history
generously gives all of us our ‘‘mystic chords of memory.’’ Throughout our past of
oppressions and struggles for equality, Americans of different races and ethnicities
have been ‘‘singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs’’ in the textile
mills of Lowell, the cotton fields of Mississippi, on the Indian reservations of South
Dakota, the railroad tracks high in the Sierras of California, in the garment factories
of the Lower East Side, the canefields of Hawaii, and a thousand other places across
the country. Our denied history ‘‘bursts with telling.’’ As we hear America singing,
we find ourselves invited to bring our rich cultural diversity on deck, to accept
ourselves. ‘‘Of every hue and caste am I,’’ sang Whitman. ‘‘I resist any thing better
than my own diversity.’’14

Study Questions

1. What is the myth of the Asian-American ‘‘model minority’’? Why, according
to Takaki, does American society need this myth? How is it used against
other minorities?

2. How did immigration patterns in the late twentieth century compare with
earlier immigration patterns? What were the most important differences?

3. How helpful do you find Takaki’s concept of the US as a ‘‘borderland’’?
How does it compare with the older notion of the US as a ‘‘melting pot’’?

4. Takaki says that Americans will not be able to find ‘‘communal ground’’
until we have an accurate understanding of US history that includes ‘‘all the
peoples of America.’’ Discuss two examples of individuals or groups that
you have learned about in this book which have increased your understand-
ing of American history and culture.

Notes

Ronald Takaki, ‘‘Asian Americans in the University,’’ San Francisco Examiner April 16, 1984;
William Raspberry, ‘‘Beyond Racism (Cont’d),’’ Washington Post, November 19, 1984; Barry
Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Commu-
nity Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry (New York: 1982); Barbara Ehren-


7. Interview with Sofiya Shapiro (pseudonym), August 30, 1992; interview with Barbara Budnitz, August 22, 1992.


CHAPTER 45

“To live in the Borderlands means you”

Gloria Anzaldúa

Feminist poet, fiction writer, activist, and cultural theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) was one of the first openly lesbian Chicana writers to publish in the US. Born to Mexican-American farm owners in Jesus María of the Valley, Texas, she moved with her family to Arkansas where they worked as migrant field hands after the death of her father. The first person from her community to attend college, Anzaldúa earned her BA in English from Pan American University in 1969, and her MA in English from the University of Texas at Austin, in 1972. Her prize-winning first book, This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (edited with Cherrie Moraga, 1981), brought third-world women’s writing to national prominence. Anzaldúa’s most influential book, Borderlands/La Frontera (1987), from which the following poem comes, explores the challenges and possibilities that face multiracial women who live on the “borderlands” between cultures.

To live in the Borderlands means you
are neither hispana india negra española
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing
that the india in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
that_mexicanas_call_you_rajetas,
that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you’re a burra, buey, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half – both woman and man, neither –
a new gender;
To live in the Borderlands means to
put chile in the borscht,
eat whole wheat tortillas,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by la migra at the border checkpoints;
Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to
resist the gold elixer beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;
In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;
To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;
To survive the Borderlands
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads.

Study Questions

1 What are the costs and benefits of living in the “Borderlands,” according to Anzalduá?
2 How many identities does Anzalduá “contain” and where do they come from? Which of these are identities are imposed from without and which determined from within?
3 How does Takaki’s discussion of the US as a borderland provide a context for Anzalduá’s idea of borderlands? How does her idea of the US as a “mestiza” (mixed) culture compare with O’Hearn’s?
4 Can Americans live “sin fronteras”? What would this mean for you personally? For the nation at large?

gabacha – a Chicano term for a white woman
rajetas – literally, “split,” that is, having betrayed your word
burra – donkey
buey – oxen
sin fronteras – without borders
CHAPTER 47

Brave New World:
Gray Boys, Funky Aztecs, and Honorary Homegirls

Lynell George

Born and raised in Los Angeles, award-winning journalist Lynell George (1962–) loves her city. “As a native,” she writes, “I constantly box with the city and its issues and I’m proud of how it belligerently redefines itself... [There is] no better place/moment to be a journalist where race and culture and language and crisis constantly converge before they converse.” Specializing in culture, art, and race, she has published articles in numerous magazines, such as Vibe, Newsday, Essence, and African American Review. George has been a staff writer for the Los Angeles Times and cohost of StoryLines California, a talk-radio program that features discussions of literature. In the following article, published in 1993, she shows the astonishing ways that high school students in Los Angeles cross racial, immigrant, and ethnic borders as they create hybrid forms of American popular culture.

Let’s call him “Perry.”

If you grew up in Los Angeles (back when it was still hip to dub the mix “melting pot”) and sat through a homeroom roll call sandwiching you somewhere between a Martinez, Masjedi, Matsuda and Meizel, you knew one – but more than likely two. This Culver City “Perry,” a classmate of mine, had Farrah Fawcett-feathered blond hair, moist blue-gray eyes and a Tiger Beat dimple in his chin. Tall and gregarious, at first glimpse he seemed destined for the surfers’ corner in the cafeteria – that tight tangle of dreamy adolescents who, in wet suits under their hooded Bajas, made their way down to Zuma Beach on slate-gray February mornings. Blaring Led Zeppelin, Boston or Aerosmith, they trailed westward, away from the sun.

In broad-lapel Qianna shirts and denim flares, Perry, who looked less like Peter Frampton than Barry Gibb, embraced the electronic trickery of Parliament-Funkadelic, the East Coast soul of the Isley Brothers, or some Ohio Players midnight jam swelling from the boombox. He certainly never surfed. He shadowed the
intricate steps of the Soul Train dancers, sat with the black basketball players in the back of the bus and attempted to chat up their little sisters in a sonorous baritone carefully fashioned after (who else but) Barry White.

“Oh, man, he’s like KC, you know, in the Sunshine Band,” those who knew him would tease. But new faces would take a second look, then bristle and inevitably inquire: “Hasn’t anybody told him he ain’t black?”

“Chill out,” Perry’s best partner, the tallest, most imposing BMOC would always defend. “He’s OK. He’s gray.”

After a while, most everyone forgot what Perry wasn’t – even forgot that he was “gray”: the hard-won badge worn by those white kids who seemed much more comfortable hovering in the space between.

It often worked other ways, too. White kids, honorary homeboys and homegirls who dressed like cholos and talked the grand talk about mi vida loca. Blue-blood black kids who surfed and played mean, tireless sets of country club tennis. Japanese kids who saved their lunch money to buy Forum floor seats for Earth, Wind and Fire spectacles and were slipping everyone hallway high-fives during passing period long before it became pro-ball decorum.

Over the years, LA’s mix has only evolved into a much more complex jumble as immigration patterns shift and swell, as blurred neighborhood boundaries subdivide or change hands. However, Los Angeles [...] is still a segregated city, despite such “border towns” as Culver City, Echo Park, or Carson and the disparate bodies that inhabit them, blending and sharing their cultural trappings and identifiers. These contiguous neighborhoods inspire intercultural dialogue. And those living at the fringes have (not without incident) found it necessary to learn something about adaptation. Dealing not in dualities but in pluralities, survival in this city requires a cultural dexterity heretofore unimagined.

LA has metamorphosed into a crazy incubator, and the children who live on these streets and submit to their rhythm rise up as exquisite hothouse flowers. They beget their own language, style, codes – a shorthand mode of communication and identification. It’s more than learning a handy salutation in Tagalog, being conversant in street slang or sporting hip-hop-inspired styles. This sort of cultural exchange requires active participation and demands that one press past the superficial toward a more meaningful discourse and understanding.

By no means a full-blown movement, these young people, a small coterie, exhibit large-scale possibilities. Unaware and without fanfare, they are compelling examples of how effortless and yet edifying reaching out can be.

Their free-form amalgamation billows up in street style (like the “Gangsta”/cholo-style baggy chinos and Pendletons that hit the mainstream fashion pages a few months back) as well as in street music. Latino rapper Kid Frost shook it up with his icy, tough-as-nails Public Enemy delivery, then sharpened the edges with staccato snatches in Spanish. For raw power, post-punk badboys the Red Hot Chili Peppers don’t have a thing on their counterparts, the Badbrains.

Recently, the Funky Aztecs have taken the baton. Their new recording, “Chicano Blues,” offers samples from soul crooner Bill Withers while vamping on traditional 12-bar delta blues. When not dipping into reggae dub-style or funk, Merciless, Indio
and Loco pay homage to the rich California melange with the raucous single, "Salsa con Soul Food."

For Merciless, who’s 19, the mixing was almost inevitable. His family moved to an all-black neighborhood in Vallejo when he was 9, and before he shaved his head a year ago, "I had real curly hair," he says. "Just, I guess, by the way I dress, a lot of people mix me up with either being black or mixed with black." And the rhythms of hip-hop were a break from the street. "My Chicano partners they were all into their little gangs, you know, their little Notre XIV. Everyone was talking about gangster stuff: 'I'ma kill you,' 'I gotta gun,' 'this bitch is my 'ho.'" But I wasn't into that, I was more like expressing myself politically. It was mainly my black friends who were into rapping and deejaying and stuff like that.

"It’s a trip because my own race trips off me. I even got chased out of my own barrio. But the brothers are real cool with me. It’s not that I side on them or whatever because my race always puts me down. It’s not like that, but if you’re cool to me, I don’t care what color you are – I’m going to give you that love right back."

Lives and attitudes like that wreak havoc with stubborn stereotypes and archaic notions about what it is to be African-American, Latino, Asian-American or Anglo in a quickly transfiguring metropolitan center. In a recent Village Voice Literary Supplement, LA expatriate Paul Beatty eloquently shared a vision of home: "Growing up in Los Angeles," writes Beatty, "I couldn’t help noticing that language was closely tied to skin color" but not exclusively. "Black folks was either ‘fittin’ or ‘fixin’ to go to Taco Bell. . . . The four Asian kids I knew talked black. . . . When I started writing, I realized that me and my friends had difficulty processing the language. We felt like foreigners because no one understood us. We were a gang of verbal mulattoes. Black kids with black brains but white mouths – inbred with some cognitively dissonant Mexicans who didn’t speak Spanish and looked crazy at anyone who thought they did."

Some argue that this sort of mixing dilutes culture and creates innumerable lost souls; but many of those who live it see this sharing as realistically inclusive and ultimately enriching – so long as one holds on to integral bits and pieces of one’s own. Those more optimistic hear rumblings in and of this New Age patois as harbingers; these young people are well-equipped bellwethers of the new cultural hybrids of Los Angeles.

The mixing starts earlier and earlier, as Jai Lee Wong of the LA County Human Relations Commission points out: "My child is 4 1/2 and is fluent in Spanish because his baby-sitter teaches it to him." He tends, she explains, to identify people by the language they speak, not by their racial or ethnic designations. "If they speak English they are English or American. If they speak Korean, they’re Korean," Wong says. "And even though his father is Chinese and speaks only English, my son thinks he’s American. For him it’s not based on race or ethnicity. He hears me and his father sitting around identifying people by race and it confuses him. Then one day he started talking about that ‘green kid over there.' Turns out that he was talking about a white kid wearing a green shirt." Race is a concept not beyond, but perhaps already behind him, Wong realizes; a clumsy piece of baggage that already weighs him down.

The new world view? "It’s a people thing," Merciless says. "It’s not a black or brown or white or red or orange thing. It’s a people thing. We all just need to grow up."
The mere fact of LA's diversity makes the contentious concept of assimilation far less cut-and-dried than it was in the past, when widespread use of the term *melting pot* suggested that a soul branded with “minority” status in the United States had to “melt down” his or her cultural trappings – language, dress, religious ritual or even body type – to aspire to the American ideal.

Here, where Central and South America meet the Pacific Rim and West Indies, the definitions of what it means to be black, white, brown or yellow blur, and fitting in requires an entirely different set of tools and techniques. Paule Cruz Takash, a UC San Diego anthropologist and ethnic studies professor, notes that “assimilation is not a one-way street,” with everyone striving to adopt Anglo culture. As the phrase “Ellis Island West” spices news reports about the growing lines winding around the city’s Immigration and Naturalization Service office, the question of assimilation becomes broader, takes on new definitions.

Ironically enough, in the past two decades, the media and other information arteries, traditional tools for stratifying cultures with the uncomplicated, and erroneous, shorthand of stereotypes, have been invaluable tools for breaking down stereotypes and reworking prevailing theories about cultural identity. New mixes take shape at monster movie-plexes, super-bookstores and the alternative glitz of underground clubs (and the easy access to them). The ears and eyes take it all in – and the brain then reassembles it, gives it new form.

And an increasing number of LA newcomers embody and advance the recombinant culture. Nahom Tassew, a 17-year-old Ethiopian who’s a junior at Belmont High, came to the United States knowing “just what I saw on movies and TV” about African-Americans. “I thought if I came here, I’d have to become a thief,” he says, “or that was what people would think I was.” After 2½ years, he has a new attitude (“I saw that [African-Americans at Belmont] were people . . . that there were good people and bad people, that every race has good people”) as well as friends from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Japan and China. And he’s studying Spanish. “I need some Spanish words,” he says. Just what will emerge from these admixtures is difficult to say. Tassew, at least, will acquire an early-age sophistication, learning classroom English along with the street Spanish of his neighborhood, finding astonishing cultural parallels (from salutation rituals to food) with his Chinese friends. In that environment, he and others have found, there is no room for xenophobia.

The students have unfurled a cloth banner and hung it high above the stage of Belmont High School’s cavernous auditorium. In electric, wild-style lettering it proclaims: La Raza Unida (The United Race). As the SRO crowd mills around her, principal Martha Bin stands on the sidelines, blond hair folded into an elegant updo, her walkie-talkie poised in a freshly manicured hand. This year, voting to pass on the usual Columbus Day assembly, the student body, Bin explains, chose instead to pay homage to the campus’s Latin cultural mix – spanning several countries and continents.

In what looks like an elaborate show-and-tell, students bring bits and pieces of their culture to Belmont’s stage. Since the auditorium won’t accommodate the 4,000-plus student body at one seating, there are two assemblies – one morning, another in the afternoon. The second performance begins with several girls in frothy turquoise
dresses, their partners in dark, pressed suits, displaying rancheras. Later come the cumbias, a mambo and an elaborate dance performed with lit candles that originated in Peru. Capping the show is a trio in below-the-knee, extra-large baggy shorts, who rap and joke in English, Spanish, and French.

"We are a school of immigrants," says Bin, sitting down for a moment in a quiet classroom next to the auditorium, her walkie-talkie close by. "Many of the black kids are Hispanic. We have Chinese-Cubans. We have Koreans who speak Portuguese." Belmont, one of the largest high schools in the nation, with 4,500 students on campus, bises out another 3,000 to accommodate the crush of the Temple/Beaudry/Echo Park district youth population from which it draws. Bin says 78% of the student body is Latino; the rest is a mix that includes citizens of Romania, Colombia, Armenia, Ethiopia and Biafra. "You sit them together," Bin says, "they just have to get along — conjunto — together."

William Han, an 18-year-old Belmont senior, thinks he knows why. "Students who attend Belmont," he says, "are first-generation American students, whereas at other schools they are second or third. We are immigrants. This is our first experience." Han knows the struggle to adjust. It was just four years ago that he and his Korean parents moved here from their home in Brazil. A bright and talkative "American" teen, he wears an oversized jersey with "William" embroidered in green, green/gray pressed slacks and black sneakers. His black hair is close-cropped and sticks up like the bristles of a stiff brush. Like many of the kids around him, he's something of a citizen of the world — he speaks Portuguese, Spanish, English and Korean. "Things at Belmont are honest," he says. In the common fight to cope with a new culture, "people accept you for who you are."

Because of the intricate cultural mix surrounding the school, there are concerns and needs that are unique to Belmont. "Our ESL students tend to be Spanish speaking, but a lot of Asians speak Spanish before English on our campus because they hear it in their neighborhood," says assistant principal Rosa Morley, herself an embodiment of ethnic and cultural blending. (She has Chinese parents but grew up in Cuba. Fluent in Spanish, she feels most connected to Cuban culture.)

"The kids feel that the whole world is like this," Bin says, and that can be a problem later on. "They have some difficulty when they move out of this environment and are no longer the majority."

"We don't tell them this isn't the real world," Morley says. "They will find out sooner or later. We are sheltering them in a sense but cannot control what life will bring for them."

By college, one doesn't see as many "Culver City Perrys." The university, for those who make it, is often the startling baptism, a reawakening or first-awakening of self. Students moving out of ethnically/racially diverse environments and into the austere university setting come face to face with cultural stratification. It is, for many, the first time that they are called upon to choose sides or feel a need to become politically active.

The Institute for the Study of Social Change, based at UC Berkeley, reported on diversity at the university level a year ago in a study called the Diversity Project. The study's goal was to address "a vital and constantly unfolding development emerging
in American social life,” focusing primarily on demographic changes in the country and how they affect interpersonal communication on college campuses. There would be no solution to the problems of diversity, the report stressed, as long as we think in polar terms. The extremes of “assimilation to a single dominant culture where differences merge and disappear vs. a situation where isolated and self-segregated groups (retreat) into . . . enclaves” don’t work, researchers concluded. The report was based on 69 focus-group interviews with 291 UC Berkeley students.

The report advises a “third and more viable” option: “the simultaneous possibility of strong ethnic and racial identities (including ethnically homogeneous affiliations and friendships) alongside a public participation of multiracial and multiethnic contacts that enriches the public and social sphere of life.”

In testimonials in the Diversity Project, students spoke frankly about the problems of bridging two worlds and the inexorable pressure to fit in. An Asian-American male was traumatized when presented with a completely alien environment: “I was totally unaccustomed to being in (a) social situation where only Asians were there. So I was completely lost. . . . I got so frustrated, I rejected. . . . my Asian-American identity and had a lot of Hispanic friends.”

In this period of self-searching, what will help these students realize this “third experience” – recognizing diversity while maintaining their own distinctive cultural identity – is to develop the cultural equivalent of achieving bilingual or multilingual proficiency, to be sensitive enough to adapt to one’s surroundings without losing sight of self.

This concept of cultural pluralism – where each group makes an influential and duly recognized contribution to American society – may seem naive or merely whimsical, but in light of the tremendous cultural shift, it is tenable.

“Racial and ethnic identities are always formed in dialogue with one another,” says George Lipsitz, professor of ethnic studies at UC San Diego and author of “Time Passages,” a collection of essays on diversity and contemporary pop culture. “So to be Chicano in LA means to have a long engagement with black culture. What kind of Anglo you are depends on what group of color you’re in dialogue with.”

Lipsitz has noted that this mixing once was a more class-based phenomenon, but that drift has altered dramatically in recent years. “When I see desegregated groups of graffiti writers, one of the things that strikes me is that they’re also mixed by class,” he says. “Style leaders are working-class kids who present themselves as poorer than they are but they have a suburban following. One writer told me: ‘Y’know, I go down to the Belmont Tunnel, I go out to the motor yard in Santa Monica, I meet a guy who lives in Beverly Hills, I meet someone who went to Europe last summer.’ It’s the way they expand what’s open to them.”

Lipsitz doesn’t see this mixing as a grievous threat or as diluting culture, as some nationalists do. People find allies wherever they find them, he believes. “For example, there is a group of graffiti writers who call themselves ALZA – which stands for African, Latino, Zulu and Anglo. ALZA, Lipsitz says, is Chicano slang for rise up. They found each other. Nobody set this up. Nobody put an ad in the paper. They look for spaces that are what we call ‘multicultural.’ I don’t think that they ever think
to look at it in those ways. But there’s a sense of interest and excitement and delight in difference that makes them look for more complexity.”

But painting this phenomena as some sort of “we are the world” harmonious culture fest would be erroneous. Like those in the Diversity Project, Lipsitz has witnessed some of the more painful outcomes of “fitting nowhere,” what isolation and alienation can do to a young person’s spirit and soul. “I’ve talked to many students who are either from racially mixed backgrounds or who have what they consider to be an odd history – maybe they were the only black student in a white high school or something like that,” he explains. “Then at the university it seems that there is an inside that they are not part of, and there is no obvious subgroup that they can join.

“They don’t feel comfortable maybe with African-American culture. Or there are Chicanos who come in but they don’t speak Spanish well enough for MEChA (a college-level Latino political organization); or there are Asian-Americans who are Korean or Vietnamese, and the campus is dominated by Japanese- or Chinese-Americans. It is their love of difference, danger and heterogeneity that brings them together. When a singer like George Clinton comes along – who’s too black for the whites, too white for the blacks – “in a way he’s talking to people whose lives are like that.” [...]

Those who might be viewed by some as having “odd histories” because they’ve spent their lives juggling codes or responding to the various influences within them are breaking down walls and erecting sturdy bridges through the mere act of living their lives. Granted, this vision appears mere chimera, almost utopian. But it is, for them, proving to be an integral component of psychic survival. In this period of uneasy transition, complicated by overwhelmingly rapid change, young people ride the periphery, and their lives do impressive battle with notions of a now-archaic “norm.” But their quiet revolution is fueled by much more than simply the adolescent ache to belong. It is a more honest, eyes-wide-open way to reach out and greet a world as confounding as they are.

**Study Questions**

1. What is the meaning of “Gray Boys, Funky Aztecs, and Honorary Home-girls’”? What has brought this “brave new world” into being, according to George?

2. What roles have the mass media, popular music, dance, and fashion played in constructing the hybrid identities of the LA high school students profiled in this article? How would she have to update these if she were publishing her article today?

3. How would Judith Stacey’s “brave new families,” Bharati Mukherjee’s heroine Jasmine, or Claudine O’Hearn fit into the picture George presents?

4. Why does George find all this cultural and social “mixing” exhilarating and hopeful? Do you think she provides an accurate description of contemporary US culture? Why or why not?
I, Too, Sing America

I would never have become a writer unless my family had emigrated to the United States when I was ten years old.

I grew up in the '50s in a dictatorship on the little Caribbean half-island of the Dominican Republic. Although it was a highly oral culture rich in storytelling, it was not a literary culture. I grew up among people who thought of reading as an antisocial activity that could ruin your health and definitely take the fun out of life.

Reading/studying was not an activity that was encouraged in my family, especially for us girls. My grandmother, who only went up to fourth grade, used to tell the story that she only picked up a book when she heard the teacher's donkey braying as it climbed up the hill to her house.

Boys had to make the sacrificio and get an education in order to earn a living – but in moderation. My cousin was considered strange because he not only loved to read but as a teenager began to write poetry. "Se va a enfermar," my aunt would say, shaking her head every time she found Juan sitting in a chair, reading a book. "He's going to get sick."

I was also growing up in a repressive and dangerous dictatorship. In a social studies class, a student wrote an essay in which he praised Trujillo, the dictator, as the true father of our country. The teacher commented that certainly Trujillo was one of the fathers of our country, but there were others. The boy, the son of a general, must have gone home and told his father. That night
the teacher, his wife, and his two young children disappeared. Intellectuals, people who read and questioned, were suspect. A book in your hands might as well have been contraband.

In 1960, my father's underground activities against Trujillo were discovered, and we were forced to escape the country in a hurry. The minute we landed on American soil we became "spics" who spoke our English with heavy accents, immigrants with no money or prospects. Overnight, we had lost everything, our country, our home, our extended family structure, our language, for Spanish was the language of home, of \textit{la familia}, of self understanding. We arrived in the United States at a time in history that was not very welcoming to people who were different, whose skins were a different color, whose language didn't sound like English. For the first time in my life I experienced prejudice and playground cruelty. I struggled with a language and a culture I didn't understand. I was homesick and heartbroken.

My sisters and I, being young, soon rallied to the challenge. We learned the new language, the new music, the new ways to dress and behave ourselves. But our success on these fronts soon created another kind of problem in our family. My parents wanted desperately to keep us to the old standards, and yet they also wanted us to succeed in this new culture. How could we study hard and earn all A's and get ahead but be sweet and submissive and let Papi make all the decisions? How could we remember our Spanish when we were forced to speak only English outside the home? How could we keep our mouths shut out of \textit{respeto} for our parents when in school we were being taught to speak up and debate, if need be, with our teachers? How could we get along with our friends and yet never go over to their houses for parties and sleepovers because they might have older brothers or parents who allowed things my parents did not allow?

My sisters and I were caught between worlds, value systems, languages, customs. And this was our challenge, which is the challenge for many of us who are immigrants into a new world that is different from the old one of childhood: how to maintain a connection to our traditions, our roots, \textit{and} also to grow and flourish in our new country? How to find creative ways to combine our different worlds, values, conflicting and sometimes warring parts of our selves so that we can become more expansive, not more diminished human beings?

But the problem was that no one was thinking like that back in those days. This was the United States of the early '60s, still locked in the civil rights struggles, pre-women's movement, pre-Equal Rights Amendment movement, pre-multicultural studies, pre-anything but the melting pot, that old assimilationist, mainstreaming model. Those were the days when the model for immigration was that you came to America, you assimilated, you cut off your ties to the past and the old ways, and that was the price you paid for the privilege of being an American citizen.

But sometimes it is these painful moments that can become opportunities for expansion and self-creation. I had become a hybrid – as all of us who travel beyond an original self or hometown or homeland are bound to become. I was not a mainstream American girl and I wasn't a totally Dominican girl anymore. And yet I wanted desperately to belong somewhere. It was this intense loneliness and desire to connect with others that led me to books. Homesick and lonely in the USA, I soon discovered that the world of the imagination was a portable homeland where everybody belonged. I began to dream that maybe I, too, could create worlds where no one would be barred.
And so, it was through the wide open doors of its literature that I truly entered this country. Reading Mr. Walt Whitman, I heard America's promise and I fell in love with my new country. "I hear America singing, its varied carols I hear." As for melting all our variety into one mainstream model, Mr. Whitman disagreed: "I am large, I contain multitudes." This country was a nation of nations, a congregation of races. "I resist anything better than my own diversity."

Was this allowed? I wondered, looking over my shoulder. Wasn't this subversive? But Mr. Whitman's poems were printed in my English textbook where he was described as "the poet of America." He was saying what this country was really all about. Although America seemed to have forgotten its promises, its writers remembered and reminded us.

Slowly and not without struggle, America began to listen. As the 1960s progressed into the '70s, the country around me began to change. Under pressure from its own marginalized populations and from its growing number of immigrants, the nation was being forced to acknowledge its own diversity and become more inclusive. Citizens were challenging America to be true to its promises. The first time I attended a march in support of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution and was not hauled off to be tortured in a dark prison chamber by the secret police, I understood that a free country was not one that was free of problems or inequalities or even hypocrisies. Such failures came with the territory of being a human being. Freedom was the opportunity to shape a country, to contribute to the ongoing experiment, never tried before, of making out of the many, one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. The words were not just rhetoric. It was our right and responsibility to make the words come true, for ourselves and for others.

As the nation changed, our literature began to reflect these changes as well. Not only was there a Mr. Whitman, I discovered, but a Mr. Langston Hughes.

_I, too, sing America_
_I am the darker brother._
_They send me to eat in the kitchen_
_When company comes,_
_But I laugh_
_And eat well,_
_And grow strong._

_Tomorrow,_
_I'll be at the table_
_When company comes._
_Nobody'll dare_
_Say to me,_
_"Eat in the kitchen,"
_Then._

_Besides,_
_They'll see how beautiful I am_
_And be ashamed --_
I, too, am America.

Oh, that was music to my ears! I understood what Mr. Hughes was saying: he was claiming his place in the chorus of American song. This was an important voice for a young girl of another culture and language and background to hear.

But the publishing world dragged its feet. In the early '80s, when I started sending out my manuscripts, the major publishers and mainstream market were reluctant to take a chance on new voices. Until they noticed that Afro-American literature had become a serious component of many college curriculums. That readers were buying up copies of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Oscar Hijuelos, Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gish Jen. The complexion of literary Americans had changed.

In 1991 when I was 41 years old, after over 25 years of struggling, my first novel, *How the García Girls lost Their Accents*, was published by a small publisher willing to take a chance on a new voice. Eleven years later the book has been adopted as a text in many high schools and colleges. I, too, am now singing America.

I tell this story of my struggle to become an American writer because it was a struggle I shared with a country that was also struggling to become a more inclusive and representative nation. I feel lucky and privileged to have been part of this historical process. America gave me the gift of helping me discover and cultivate my talents. I would not have become a writer had I not come to this country as a young girl in 1960.

But as President Kennedy said, a few months after our arrival in this country, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." My debt to my country is to pass on that opportunity to others. "The function of freedom," Toni Morrison has said, "is to free someone else." My work as well as my vote contribute to the richness and diversity of the whole. By our active and committed presence as citizens of different ethnicities, races, traditions, and linguistic backgrounds, we challenge America to expand its understanding and compassion and thus grow stronger as a nation. We infuse its literature with new energy. We sing new rhythms, inflections, stories, traditions into the whole.

But my responsibility does not stop within the American borders. Unlike the old model of immigration, many of us immigrants continue to go back to where we originally came from. With the vast migrations and mobility of the second half of this passing century, most of us no longer fit the tight definitions of identity we were born into. Last year in California I met an Afro-Dominican-American who had married a Japanese woman and had a little baby. Their son is an Afro-Dominican-Japanese-American. My Dominicana sister is married to a Danish man; her kids know Danish, English, and Spanish, and you know what they love to eat, arroz con habichuelas with pickled herrings. We are becoming a planet of racial and cultural hybrids. We need an open mind and a big heart and a compassionate imagination to allow for all the combinations we are becoming as a nation and as a human family. Mr. Whitman's words remind us: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. . . Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. . . . and the American bard shall be kosmos. . . glad to pass any thing to any one."
To create this kind of nation is to present a model of a world where we all belong. But this America can only be achieved if each person is free to be the rich and complex person he or she is. The dangers to be reductive are tempting, to hole down in our racial and ethnic bunkers and forget that out of the *pluribus* we have to make *unum*, one human family.

I would go even further and say that to embrace our selves in all our complexity and richness and also to embrace the multiplicity of selves out there -- that is our challenge not just as Americans but as human beings. Robert Desnos, the French poet who died in a concentration camp, once said: "The challenge of being a human being is not only to be oneself, but to become each one." Terrence, the Roman slave who freed himself with his writing, put it another way, "I am a human being," he said. "Nothing human is alien to me." By becoming all we can individually be and by never forgetting our responsibility of helping each other achieve that same goal, we can create a nation and a world where everyone belongs and where each and every one of us has our song.

In this spirit, I see myself more and more as an American writer, not just in the national but in the hemispheric sense. With my roots in the southern part of the Americas (my stories, my history, my traditions, my Spanish and Caribbean rhythms) and my training and experience and flowering in the northern part of the hemisphere, I am truly an all-American writer:

*I, Too, Sing América.*

*I know it’s been said before
but not in this voice
of the plátano
and the mango,
marimba y bongó,
not in this sancocho
of inglés
con español.

Ay sí,
it’s my turn
to oh say
what I see,
I’m going to sing America!
with all América
inside me:
from the soles
of Tierra del Fuego
to the thin waist
of Chiriquí
up the spine of the Mississippi
through the heartland
of the Yanquis
to the great plain face of Canada --
all of us
singing America,  
the whole hemispheric  
familia  
belting our canción,  
singing our brown skin  
into that white  
and red and blue song --  
the big song  
that sings  
all America,  
el canto  
que cuenta  
con toda América:  
un new song!

Ya llegó el momento,  
our moment  
under the sun --  
eso sol that shines  
on everyone.

So, hit it maestro!  
give us that Latin beat,  
¡Uno-dos-tres!  
One-two-three!  
Ay sí,  
(y bilingually):  
Yo también soy América  
I, too, am America.

Read more:  http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/May/20080625200016eaifas0.5940515.html#ixzz0xA0Bym3i
The Compulsory Power of American Dreams

For the past four years I have been working on a coming-of-age memoir, the original point of which was to explore from a number of vantages how I factored my way through the ancient Freudian equation of love and work to arrive at a sense of my vocation as a writer, but which turned out, far more than I could have imagined, to be an account of my struggle with my sense of heritage, an exploration of how my densely grown Latvian root-system could have produced a growth so yearningly American. And if I felt, when I recently finished, that I had at last come to grips with the major issues of identity formation, I also discovered as soon as I let my parents and siblings read the result that however much I had achieved resolution on the page, in the family realm – the force-field of origins – I had only confirmed my troubled apostasy. The question of how being an American informs my life as a writer remains in many ways as charged as it has ever been.

Some background: I was born in Pontiac, Michigan, in 1951 to Latvian parents, both recently immigrated from displaced-persons areas in Germany where they had found themselves at the end of the war. Both sides of the family claimed artistic pedigree. My mother's father was a landscape painter trained at the Moscow Academy, while my father's parents were both literary intellectuals – his mother a folklorist, philologist, and teacher, and his father the author of many books of psychology, sociology, and folklore studies.

While Latvian culture – and the Latvian language in particular – were sacrosanct in our household, my parents themselves were not, unlike many of their fellow Latvian-Americans, cultural preservationists. Rather, they saw themselves as riding the wave of emancipated modernism and were keenly attuned to the contemporary. My father, a highly ambitious young architect, worked at Eero Saarinen's legendary firm in Bloomfield Hills, sitting elbow to elbow with young designers like Kevin Roche, Robert Venturi,
Cesar Pelli, and Charles Eames. Here was the gospel of the new, of an international language of form, even as, in my father's case, it was cut across with, if not at some level contradicted by, a deep rootedness in the powerful folk culture of the homeland.

Myself, I knew no division of loyalties—not consciously, anyway. My ruling obsession through all the years of my growing up was to shed every trace of foreignness—otherness—and to become a full-fledged American. And in this I suffered deeply and decisively. I knew so clearly what I wanted. I wanted to be cut to the pattern of the kids around me, in the neighborhood, at school. I wanted to be an easy athletic guy named Bob or Mark, or nicknamed "Chip," with a normal crewcut (I was cursed with thick curly hair) and acceptably normal-acting parents; I wanted the shine of a new Ford (my parents bought foreign cars), and an oiled mitt for playing catch in the yard with my Dad (who after all these years—he is in his late 70s—has never to my knowledge had a hand inside a baseball glove).

It was not a tall order, as dreams go, but I might just as well have asked to be a Ninja warrior or a gaucho from the Argentine pampas. For whatever things may have looked like from the outside, from my tyrannical perspective we could not even begin to fit in. We were strangers from a strange land. My father's name, not Jack or Ted, was Gunnar, my mother's, Sylvia. I was, God help me, Sven, though I contested the roll call every year on the first day of school and announced that I was Peter—"Pete"—which was my middle name. I could do nothing about the fact that we spoke Latvian at home, and that my parents had no qualms whatsoever about speaking the language when we were all together in public. I went through every family outing preemptively tensed against the inevitable eruption of the mother tongue. As for our house, it was all edges and glass inside, without a single concession to coziness. I kept my friends away.

As I ached with all my being for an American normalcy and blazed with ill-concealed shame at the slightest mark of our difference, I went through my days playing a role, imitating my fortunate friends, wearing one mask after another, simulating in my least mannerism, my every slangy turn of phrase, a belonging I never felt for a moment. "Hey Rick, are you guys gonna hang around here?" And: "Naw, I can't, my dad wants me to do some stuff around the house—see ya." It was a complete charade, and it persisted, changing only its subtler inflections, well into my late teens, when the counterculture explosion suddenly made it permissible, even desirable, to be "weird" and "different."

From the first, then, my deepest sense of what it meant to be American was shaped by these fantasies of the unattainable other. There was nothing ecumenical, nothing remotely melting-pot, about any of it, no place for anything beyond stick-figure simplicity: the limber gods of the baseball diamond, their booster dads station-waggoning to games, their pert mothers hanging fresh-looking sheets on the line in the yard and filling shopping carts with hamburger buns and corn.

I was startled, years later, when I read Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), to feel a deep jolt of recognition in Alex Portnoy's fantasies about the essence of goyishness, embodied here in his fantasies of the perfect *shikse* ice-skater:

"But who wants character? I want Thereal McCoy! In her blue parka and her red earmuffs and her big white mittens—Miss America, on blades! With her mistletoe and her plum pudding (whatever that may be), and her one-family house with a banister and a staircase, and parents who are tranquil and patient
and dignified, and also a brother Billy who knows how to take motors apart and says "Much obliged," and isn't afraid of anything?"

And:

"I too want to be the boyfriend of Debbie Reynolds – it's the Eddie Fisher in me coming out, that's all, the longing in all us swarthy Jewboys for those bland blond exotics called shikses?" In my case the energy of longing was identical – it simply had as its target a whole imagined thing called Americanness. Though of course the imagined, the fantasied, is as real in its effects as any set of concrete circumstances.

What a drama of self-hatred – Roth's ethnic, mine – what, cultural? Where did it originate? For me it was less a matter of overtly despising my origins – though for many years I believed this to be the case – than it was of somehow believing, "buying," the rightness of the images beamed at me from all directions – from billboards and magazine ads, from our newly acquired black-and-white TV set with its streaming constant revelation of effortless American perfection, what we now all recognize as the kitsch of Ozzie and Harriet, The Donna Reed Show, My Three Sons, and the like. Through my daily jarring collisions with what I was not, I built my picture of authentic exalted Americanness.

This desire to assimilate could not have served for much in my literary formation, as a writer, except insofar as it deepened my self-evolved intuition of difference, of being somehow deeply alien, of not truly possessing those "inalienable" rights advertised in the Constitution. And certainly this latter awareness became the seedbed of various writerly longings. But the sense of difference, especially when one is young, does not exult in itself. It looks for connections, corroborations, anything that will cut against the feeling of being separate. And when that is not immediately available in the surrounding world, one searches by proxy. I found what I needed in books – almost right from the start. First via escapism and fantasy projection – living vicariously the perfectly American lives of the Hardy brothers, Frank and Joe, or the various athletes and heroes who bulked up so convincingly in the boys' books I devoured.

But these immersions were as nothing compared with what happened in my early teens when the first reversal happened. My reading shifted, became literary. Through The Catcher in the Rye, then A Separate Peace, and Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant novels, I encountered the voice of alienated adolescence. Now the plots quite literally thickened, and I experienced a major, route-altering swerve in my orientation to things. Hearing the voice of Holden Caulfield was like coming home. I understood that I was not alone in my view of the world. The universe of print was suddenly alive with possibility. Reading, and by extension writing, became a mission of rescue.

My feelings of disaffection and difference connected directly with the expressed outsidersness of my new literary heroes, and when this combined with the tectonic shifts in American cultural life – the bourgeoning of rock & roll, of hippiedom, of protest, of everything that would get brewed together as the counterculture of the late 1960s – a very different take on what had been my American "ideal" resulted. Now, indulging my frustration, my accumulated rage at the years of perceived exclusion, I inverted everything. The square-jawed, right-thinking American, my former ideal, was abruptly recast in my mind as the embodiment of the "hawk" mentality – he (my heroes had all been male) became the target of my most withering scorn. I mocked the very figures I had so fervently admired before. At the
same time, I struggled to make a place for all of those I had formerly ignored – the minorities, the poor, all of those apostrophized by Allen Ginsberg in "Howl," my revisionist American Bible. I was drawn to LeRoi Jones' *Blues People* and Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* – if only for the suggestion of the titles.

How has being American affected my thinking, my work as a writer? Better, maybe, to ask how being Latvian has affected my sense of what it means to be American. By young manhood, after the long frenzied interlude of the '60s, the most powerfully formative years behind me, I believed I had left that ancient vexation behind. I would even say I had stopped thinking in those terms, didn't question my Latvianness or Americanness. I had no room for the big generalities. I was too busy with the high-resolution immediacies of finding work, finding love, and trying to find a way to become a writer. The collapse of the counterculture and the prolonged sense of public ennui that followed had everyone tending their own gardens – so it seemed.

But of course the issues, the questions never went away. I simply stopped seeing them. When they resurfaced, it was covertly, and it would be years before I realized what was happening.

The change, the awakening, came when I was in my late 20s. I was living in Cambridge, barely supporting myself working as a bookstore clerk, profoundly depressed by the collapse of a long relationship, and utterly stalled in my efforts to write fiction. If there was any light, any sanity, in my life, it was reading. Always a reader, I went at it with a genuine fervor during this period. Days, weeks, months marched by outside the window while I sat in a cheap sling chair in my little room in the apartment I shared with a young would-be poet, smoking cigarettes and reading novels. More specifically, I read foreign novels, novels in translation, European novels. I read Knut Hamsun and Thomas Mann and Max Frisch and Heinrich B?and a dozen others, the more obscure the better. I found myself powerfully drawn to the settings of these novels, the moods, to everything that made them different from the domestic fiction I had been reading for years. I had no sense, though – none that I recall – of being drawn toward anything that felt like my own culture of origin. I just read and steered my daydreaming self through these strangely kindred atmospheres.

Then I had my breakthrough. In the course of my peregrinations, I fell into the extraordinary world of Robert Musil's great epic of pre-war Viennese life, *The Man Without Qualities*. And now, along with the more familiar sensations of psychological kinship came something new. Reading began to tip me back toward writing. Only now it was not fiction that compelled me, but reflection. I experienced a deep compulsion to get closer, to annex my various feelings and reactions by writing about them.

I labored for long weeks over an essay on Robert Musil and his unfinished masterpiece. I read everything that had been translated; I read books about the culture of Vienna in the early decades of the century. I projected myself at that world with great intensity, imagining the narrow streets, the public gardens, the cafes, the ritualized social lives of the Viennese bourgeoise. I seemed to see it all so clearly, the rituals and tonalities of that old world. The only thing I didn't see was the obvious, and this did not come to me until, decades later, I was in the last stages of writing my memoir.

I mean: In living for so long inside this vividly imagined world, I was, in essence, connecting with the story-world I had grown up with. Musil's Vienna – the times, the culture, the brooding baroque *mise en scene* – was in many ways a filter for Riga, for the lives of my grandparents and, to a lesser degree, my
parents in the childhoods I had dreamed for them. The images I drew upon were the images I had, in spite of myself, stored from the earliest days of my childhood. There was, I realized, a continuum, a direct flow of energy between everything I had absorbed of family lore, the photographs and postcards I had pondered (never mind my insistent desire to assimilate as a regular American boy), and the settings and atmospheres that held me in thrall in Musil’s novel. That Europe was deeply familiar to me; it was an intimate saturation that compelled me in every way.

The writing of that first essay led to others, many if not most of them on European subjects, and one day – ever slow about these recognitions – I saw that I had staked out a particular literary terrain: I was the critic who would broker between American literary culture and the great richness of literature in translation, mainly European. My first book was An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on Twentieth Century Literature, followed, two years later, by The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry. It was not until my third collection, American Energies: Essays on Fiction, that I was ready to take on the writers of my own culture.

I linger thus over my literary resume because it makes what suddenly seems like an obvious point, though one that I was oblivious to for years: that the whole path of my life – writing life included – has been profoundly conditioned, first by the determined rejection, and then the veiled acceptance of my culture of origins, and that this dynamic has been conditioned at the deepest root level by a very powerful, if distorted, sense of what it means to be American.

I am talking here about the primitive, almost pre-logical compulsion I felt as a son of recent immigrants to merge myself with the world I saw around me, a world which, owing to accidents (or fates) of place and time, took on an absolute aspect. Interestingly, though, it was not just my chimera. This America I sought mapped almost perfectly to the stereotype that is to this day prominent, if not dominant, in the global image culture: the prosperous, athletic, decent, white all-American. In buying the American Dream, which I did with such zealous intensity, I was really buying a fantasy spun for me by Madison Avenue.

It took the ’60s to jolt me from those complacencies. Then, driven by the contrarian emancipatory energies of the counterculture and the encounters of experience, as well as by the recognitions of an ever-widening grasp of domestic and global reality – I set myself against the tyranny of that stereotype. I fought to reject these most deeply planted residues, and flattered myself – don't we all? – that I had succeeded. And indeed, I like to think that whatever I now comprehend as American has everything to do with notions of ethnicity and diversity (obligatory buzz-phrase though it is), and that transformed awareness exerts pressure on my thinking and writing at every turn. But, truth be told, it is not formative in the same way; it is laid on top of the other, the visceral. I might wish this otherwise. A different core awareness, a less obsessive investment in these fantasies of WASP normalcy might have made my passage easier, less painful. Alas, intriguing as these surmises can be, they lead us exactly nowhere. We are shaped by what we dream, and there we have no control.

Read more: http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/May/20080625200725eaifas0.4955364.html#ixzz0x6OIpoh3
What's American about American Poetry?

By Billy Collins

I never really considered myself a particularly American poet until I went to England some years ago to give a series of readings. I had put the tour together myself, and it looked it. The odd range of venues included a sixth form class, a jazz club in Brighton, a college of Sheffield University, and a community center in a small Yorkshire village. It was at this last site, by the way, that an elderly, agrarian-looking man rose from the audience during a question-and-answer session to ask: "Mr. Collins, are all your poems written in prose?" But regardless of the audience or the venue, each reading left me with the same small but nagging realization: that my poems were written not in English but in American. At every reading I could sense dead spots occurring when I would utter a phrase such as "eggs over easy" or "sweat the final." I became convinced that the mention of "a state flower" in one of my poems must sound to the British ear like "estate flower." I was discovering that idiomatic American is difficult to translate not only into French or German, but into English. Just as one cannot understand what it is to be an American until one leaves the country, I was not aware of my own American voice – my written accent, so to speak – until I had faced several audiences of British listeners.

I was especially surprised to discover how steeped many of my poems were in the American idiom, because for years I had consciously avoided using fad dialects or making references to contemporary culture. I knew that a phrase such as "frequent flyer," "hatch-back," or "Jello shot" would in time make a poem sound dated and thus could drastically shorten its shelf life. "Shelf life" is probably another example. I had tried to favor a more universal vocabulary, not a purely elemental diction of "rock," "cloud," "sky," and "tree," but a diction that leaned in that direction and was reluctant to allow in the linguistic news of the day. Ezra Pound put it most succinctly when he defined poetry as "the news that stays new." And I admired Mary Oliver's advice regarding a poet's notion of an audience: "...write for a stranger born in a distant country..."
hundreds of years from now." I wanted to include that stranger of the future in my audience, and I did not want him to have to consult a footnote for "Wonder Bread" or "Big Mac."

America, of course, is greater than the sum of its idioms, but if you selected a few poets from an international pool and asked them about the relationship of their poetry to their nationality, most would place their mother tongue at the center of their responses. Czeslaw Milosz might cite the expressive possibilities of Polish; Yannis Ritsos might discuss the feel of writing in demotic Greek. But American poets can claim no exclusive, nationalistic rights to a mother tongue, for the language they write in is shared by the rest of the English-speaking world, which at this time is the most rapidly expanding language community in the world.

So where does American-ness lie for a writer if not in his native tongue? D.H. Lawrence opens his seminal Studies in Classic American Literature by putting that question in the form of a challenge: "Where is this new bird called the true American? Show us the homunculus of the new era. Go on, show us him. Because all that is visible to the naked European eye, in America, is a sort of miscreant European." I find it odd that Lawrence calls the European eye "naked," for, if anything, compared to the bookish lenses covering the European eye, the American eye was the naked one; and the first poet to look at America with that naked eye – and, indeed, to appear naked before us – was Walt Whitman.

Lawrence recognized Whitman as the pioneer of a new American literature. He called him "the greatest and the first and the only American teacher ... the first white aboriginal" though in the same breath he mocks Whitman's universal gesturing and accuses him of bogus sympathy. Surely, Whitman was the first poet to try to get his arms around the continent so as to hold the lumberjack and the secretary and the Eskimo in one loving cosmic embrace. A Long Islander and a New Yorker, he refused to define himself as regional the way some American poets and ever more American novelists have done ever since. But the true aboriginal stroke was Whitman's breaking loose from the iambic collar of traditional English poetry. Leaves of Grass moves to the cadence of the Bible, not the British iambic two-step. The long poem was such a radical departure from customary meter and form that it triggered a critical debate as to whether it was really poetry, a debate which should have ended when one professor observed, "If this is not poetry, it is something greater than poetry."

Strangely, it took a long time for anyone to follow Whitman's liberating lead. As Lawrence put it, "Ahead of Whitman, nothing. Ahead of all poets, pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life, Whitman." Eventually, American poetry caught up with Whitman but not until his century had run out. By the early 1920s when Lawrence was making his assessments, many of the now canonical modernist poems were appearing, and whatever else defined their veerings away from convention, their freedom from the box of the stanza and the harness of the iambic was the most common evidence of their experimentations.

These days, of course, "free verse" is not the exciting license it once was; more often than not, it is simply an excuse to produce untidy, flat-footed poems, an excuse in no way limited to poets in America. The more powerful, more difficult, yet abiding lesson of Whitman lies in his outrageousness. The audacity of lines like "It is time to explain myself – let us stand" and "I sound my barbaric yawn over the rooftops of the world" make possible Ginsberg's "American, I
am putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" and with some added coyness, Frank O'Hara's "ah lunch! I think I am going crazy." Whitman's fearless, unheard-of voice shattered the glass of European gentility and eventually emboldened later generations of American poets to speak out in wilder tones.

If a writer is the sum of his or her influences, then my own poems are unavoidably the result of my exposure to the sounds and styles of both British and American poetry. I even find myself playing one diction off against another, usually for ironic effect. But more specifically, in thinking about myself as an "American poet," and thus committing the dangerous act of auto-literary criticism, I find that a number of my poems seem determined to establish an American rootedness distinct from European influence. "American Sonnet," for example, is a rejection of the Italian and English sonnet models in favor of the American postcard which, like the sonnet, limits expression to a confined space and, in addition, combines the verbal on one side with the pictorial on the other. Like the traditional love sonnet, the traveler's postcard has acquired its own ritualized conventions. The poem opens with an uncharacteristic "we," as if I were speaking for all American poets.

**AMERICAN SONNET**

We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser
and it is not fourteen lines
like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field

but the picture postcard, a poem on vacation,
that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms
or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.

We write on the back of a waterfall or lake,
adding to the view a caption as conventional
as an Elizabethan woman's heliocentric eyes.

We locate an adjective for weather.
We announce that we are having a wonderful time.
We express the wish that you were here

and hide the wish that we were where you are,
walking back from the mailbox, your head lowered
as you read and turn the thin message in your hands.

A slice of this faraway place, a width of white beach,
a piazza or carved spires of a cathedral
will pierce the familiar place where you remain,

and you will toss on the table this reversible display;
a few square inches of where we have strayed
and a compression of what we feel.
The ironic literary play of the first part of the poem gives way to a small drama of separation, distance, and longing. The poem tries, but of course fails, to mix irony and emotion with such equality as to achieve a perfectly ambiguous tone.

Another poem titled "Consolation" pretends to celebrate the pleasures of spending the summer at home in the States rather than embarking on the traditional European holiday. "How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy," the poem opens; then goes on to express the ease of staying put on native soil, cruising "these local, familiar streets,/ fully grasping the meaning of every road sign and billboard/and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots." "Instead of slouching in a cafe ignorant of the word for ice," the speaker prefers "the coffee shop and the waitress known as Dot" where he will not have to have his photograph taken with the owner or figure out the exchange rate when the bill arrives. For him, "It is enough to climb back into the car/as if it were the great car of English itself/and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off/ down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna." The poem is a mock-rejection of literary Eurocentricism delivered by a speaker whose modest tastes echo the sweet provincialism of the Wallace Shawn character in the film *My Dinner with Andre*.

"Lines Written Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey," as the title implies, provides another example of this process of "Americanization," as Wordworth's famous autobiographical lyric is imported into the speaker's American, and again, domestic, life.

I was here before, a long time ago,
and now I am here again
is an observation that occurs in poetry
as frequently as rain occurs in life.

The fellow may be gazing
over an English landscape,
hillsides dotted with sheep,
a row of tall trees topping the downs,
or he could be moping through the shadows
of a dark Bavarian forest,
a wedge of cheese and a volume of fairy tales
tucked into his rucksack.

But the feeling is always the same:
it was better the first time.
This time is not nearly as good.
I'm not feeling as chipper as I did back then.

Something is always missing –
Swans, a glint on the surface of a lake,
some minor but essential touch.
Or the quality of things has diminished.
The sky was a deeper, more dimensional blue,
clouds were more cathedral-like,
and water rushed over rock
with greater effervescence.

From our chairs we have watched
the poor author in his waistcoat
as he recalls the dizzying icebergs of childhood
and mills around in a field of weeds.

We have heard the poets long dead
declare their dying
from a promontory, a riverbank,
next to a haycock, within a shadowy copse.

We have listened to their dismay,
the kind that issues from poems
the way water issues forth from hoses,
the way the match always gives its little speech on fire.

And when we put down the book at last,
lean back, close our eyes,
stinging with print,
and slip in the bookmark of sleep,

we will be schooled enough to know
that when we wake up
a little before dinner
things will not be nearly as good as they once were.

Something will be missing
from this long, coffin-shaped room,
the walls and windows now
only two different shades of gray,

the glossy gardenia drooping
in its chipped terra-cotta pot.
And on the floor, shoes, socks,
the browning core of an apple.

Nothing will be as it was
a few hours ago, back in the glorious past
before our naps, back in that Golden Age
that drew to a close sometime shortly after lunch.
The revisionist speaker's disenchantment with the Romantic theme of loss is evident in his lumping together all the complaining poets of the 19th century, both English and German. The domestication of this pattern of loss begins with the homely images of the garden hose and the match. Time is compressed from an autobiographical span to a few hours between lunch and dinner, and the dated landscape of "promontory," "haycock," and "copse" is compressed into an ordinary room-scape with its drooping flower and strewing of shoes and socks. Romantic agony is reduced to reader fatigue. The Golden Age lies irretrievably behind us in an earlier part of the afternoon.

What makes poetry American can be measured in the kind of steps it makes away from the poetry of the "Old World" as the schoolbooks used to say. Poetry can also be American because of its idioms, its landscape, its irreverence toward the European past, its audacious egotism, its ironic stances, its freedom of fixed cadences, but most of all because of its immense variety. This last quality – its democratic expansiveness and inclusiveness – was best expressed in a short poem by Louis Simpson, who, for the moment, deserves to have the last word on the subject.

**AMERICAN POETRY**

Whatever it is, it must have  
A stomach that can digest  
Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.

Like the shark, it contains a shoe.  
It must swim for miles through the desert  
Uttering cries that are almost human.

Read more: [http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/May/20080625203040eaifas0.9836497.html#ixzz0x6WtAeCj](http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/May/20080625203040eaifas0.9836497.html#ixzz0x6WtAeCj)
CHAPTER 13

From Goodbye, Columbus

Philip Roth

Philip Roth (1933–) was born in Newark, New Jersey, to Jewish-American parents who were the children of Eastern European immigrants. Roth’s father was an insurance manager and his mother a homemaker. Roth spent a year at Newark College of Rutgers University; he received his BA from Bucknell University and his MA in English from the University of Chicago. Roth, whose fiction often focuses on middle-class Jewish families, has published over 20 novels, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 for American Pastoral. Goodbye, Columbus (1959), which won the National Book Award, was Roth’s first novel, written when he was 26. In the opening chapter, reproduced here, Roth explores the worlds of working-class urban Jews and wealthy Jewish families who moved to the suburbs in the post-World War II era.

The first time I saw Brenda she asked me to hold her glasses. Then she stepped out to the edge of the diving board and looked foggily into the pool; it could have been drained, myopic Brenda would never have known it. She dove beautifully, and a moment later she was swimming back to the side of the pool, her head of shortclipped auburn hair held up, straight ahead of her, as though it were a rose on a long stem. She glided to the edge and then was beside me. “Thank you,” she said, her eyes watery though not from the water. She extended a hand for her glasses but did not put them on until she turned and headed away. I watched her move off. Her hands suddenly appeared behind her. She caught the bottom of her suit between thumb and index finger and flicked what flesh had been showing back where it belonged. My blood jumped.

That night, before dinner, I called her.

“Who are you calling?” my Aunt Gladys asked.

“Some girl I met today.”

“Doris introduced you?”

“Doris wouldn’t introduce me to the guy who drains the pool, Aunt Gladys.”

“Don’t criticize all the time. A cousin’s a cousin. How did you meet her?”

“I didn’t really meet her. I saw her.”
“Who is she?”

“Her last name is Patimkin.”

“Patimkin I don’t know,” Aunt Gladys said, as if she knew anybody who belonged to the Green Lane Country Club. “You’re going to call her you don’t know her?”

“Yes,” I explained. “I’ll introduce myself.”

“Casanova,” she said, and went back to preparing my uncle’s dinner. None of us ate together: my Aunt Gladys ate at five o’clock, my cousin Susan at five-thirty, me at six, and my uncle at six-thirty. There is nothing to explain this beyond the fact that my aunt is crazy.

“Where’s the suburban phone book?” I asked after pulling out all the books tucked under the telephone table.

“What?”

“The suburban phone book. I want to call Short Hills.”

“That skinny book? What, I gotta clutter my house with that, I never use it?”

“Where is it?”

“Under the dresser where the leg came off.”

“For God’s sake,” I said.

“Call information better. You’ll go yanking around there, you’ll mess up my drawers. Don’t bother me, you see your uncle’ll be home soon. I haven’t even fed you yet.”

“Aunt Gladys, suppose tonight we all eat together. It’s hot, it’ll be easier for you.”

“Sure, I should serve four different meals at once. You eat pot roast, Susan with the cottage cheese, Max has steak. Friday night is his steak night, I wouldn’t deny him. And I’m having a little cold chicken. I should jump up and down twenty different times? What am I, a workhorse?”

“Why don’t we all have steak, or cold chicken – ”

“Twenty years I’m running a house. Go call your girl friend.”

But when I called, Brenda Patimkin wasn’t home. She’s having dinner at the club, a woman’s voice told me. Will she be home after (my voice was two octaves higher than a choirboy’s)? I don’t know, the voice said, she may go driving golf balls. Who is this? I mumbled some words – nobody she wouldn’t know I’ll call back no message thank you sorry to bother… I hung up somewhere along in there. Then my aunt called me and I steeled myself for dinner.

She pushed the black whirring fan up to High and that way it managed to stir the cord that hung from the kitchen light.

“What kind of soda you want? I got ginger ale, plain seltzer, black raspberry, and a bottle cream soda I could open up.”

“None, thank you.”

“You want water?”

“I don’t drink with my meals. Aunt Gladys, I’ve told you that every day for a year already – ”

“Max could drink a whole case with his chopped liver only. He works hard all day. If you worked hard you’d drink more.”
At the stove she heaped up a plate with pot roast, gravy, boiled potatoes, and peas and carrots. She put it in front of me and I could feel the heat of the food in my face. Then she cut two pieces of rye bread and put that next to me, on the table.

I forked a potato in half and ate it, while Aunt Gladys, who had seated herself across from me, watched. "You don't want bread," she said, "I wouldn't cut it if it should go stale."

"I want bread," I said.

"You don't like with seeds, do you?" I tore a piece of bread in half and ate it.

"How's the meat?" she said.

"Okay. Good."

"You'll fill yourself with potatoes and bread, the meat you'll leave over I'll have to throw it out."

Suddenly she leaped up from the chair. "Salt!" When she returned to the table she plunked a salt shaker down in front of me – pepper wasn't served in her home: she'd heard on Galen Drake that it was not absorbed by the body, and it was disturbing to Aunt Gladys to think that anything she served might pass through a gullet, stomach, and bowel just for the pleasure of the trip.

"You're going to pick the peas out is all? You tell me that, I wouldn't buy with the carrots."

"I love carrots," I said, "I love them." And to prove it, I dumped half of them down my throat and the other half onto my trousers.

"Pig," she said.

Though I am very fond of desserts, especially fruit, I chose not to have any. I wanted, this hot night, to avoid the conversation that revolved around my choosing fresh fruit over canned fruit, or canned fruit over fresh fruit; whichever I preferred, Aunt Gladys always had an abundance of the other jamming her refrigerator like stolen diamonds. "He wants canned peaches, I have a refrigerator full of grapes I have to get rid of..." Life was a throwing off for poor Aunt Gladys, her greatest joys were taking out the garbage, emptying her pantry, and making threadbare bundles for what she still referred to as the Poor Jews in Palestine. I only hope she dies with an empty refrigerator, otherwise she'll ruin eternity for everyone else, what with her Velveeta turning green, and her navel oranges growing fuzzy jackets down below.

My Uncle Max came home and while I dialed Brenda's number once again, I could hear soda bottles being popped open in the kitchen. The voice that answered this time was high, curt, and tired. "Hullo."

I launched into my speech. "Hello-Brenda-Brenda-you-don't-know-me-that-is-you-don't-know-my-name-but-I-held-your-glasses-for-you-this-afternoon-at-the-club... You-asked-me-to-I'm-not-a-member-my-cousin-Doris-is-Doris-Klugman-I-asked-who-you-were..." I breathed, gave her a chance to speak, and then went ahead and answered the silence on the other end. "Doris? She's the one who's always reading War and Peace. That's how I know it's the summer, when Doris is reading War and Peace." Brenda didn't laugh; right from the start she was a practical girl.
“What’s your name?” she said.

“Neil Klugman. I held your glasses at the board, remember?”

She answered me with a question of her own, one, I’m sure, that is an embarrassment to both the homely and the fair. “What do you look like?”

“I’m . . . dark.”

“Are you a Negro?”

“No,” I said.

“What do you look like?”

“May I come see you tonight and show you?”

“That’s nice,” she laughed. “I’m playing tennis tonight.”

“I thought you were driving golf balls.”

“I drove them already.”

“How about after tennis?”

“I’ll be sweaty after,” Brenda said.

It was not to warn me to clothespin my nose and run in the opposite direction; it was a fact, it apparently didn’t bother Brenda, but she wanted it recorded.

“I don’t mind,” I said, and hoped by my tone to earn a niche somewhere between the squeamish and the grubby. “Can I pick you up?”

She did not answer a minute; I heard her muttering, “Doris Klugman, Doris Klugman . . .” Then she said, “Yes, Briarpath Hills, eight-fifteen.”

“I’ll be driving a – ” I hung back with the year, “a tan Plymouth. So you’ll know me. How will I know you?” I said with a sly, awful laugh.

“I’ll be sweating,” she said and hung up.

Once I’d driven out of Newark, past Irvington and the packed-in tangle of railroad crossings, switchmen shacks, lumberyards, Dairy Queens, and used-car lots, the night grew cooler. It was, in fact, as though the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven, for the sun itself became bigger, lower, and rounder, and soon I was driving past long lawns which seemed to be twirling water on themselves, and past houses where no one sat on stoops, where lights were on but no windows open, for those inside, refusing to share the very texture of life with those of us outside, regulated with a dial the amounts of moisture that were allowed access to their skin. It was only eight o’clock, and I did not want to be early, so I drove up and down the streets whose names were those of eastern colleges, as though the township, years ago, when things were named, had planned the destinies of the sons of its citizens. I thought of my Aunt Gladys and Uncle Max sharing a Mounds bar in the cindery darkness of their alley, on beach chairs, each cool breeze sweet to them as the promise of afterlife, and after a while I rolled onto the gravel roads of the small park where Brenda was playing tennis.

Inside my glove compartment it was as though the map of The City Streets of Newark had metamorphosed into crickets, for those mile-long tarry streets did not exist for me any longer, and the night noises sounded loud as the blood whacking at my temples.
I parked the car under the black-green canopy of three oaks, and walked towards the sound of the tennis balls. I heard an exasperated voice say, “Deuce again.” It was Brenda and she sounded as though she was sweating considerably. I crackled slowly up the gravel and heard Brenda once more. “My ad,” and then just as I rounded the path, catching a cuff full of burrs, I heard, “Game!” Her racket went spinning up in the air and she caught it neatly as I came into sight.

“Hello,” I called.

“Hello, Neil. One more game,” she called. Brenda’s words seemed to infuriate her opponent, a pretty brown-haired girl, not quite so tall as Brenda, who stopped searching for the ball that had been driven past her, and gave both Brenda and myself a dirty look. In a moment I learned the reason why: Brenda was ahead five games to four, and her cocksureness about there being just one game remaining aroused enough anger in her opponent for the two of us to share.

As it happened, Brenda finally won, though it took more games than she’d expected. The other girl, whose name sounded like Simp, seemed happy to end it at six all, but Brenda, shifting, running, up on her toes, would not stop, and finally all I could see moving in the darkness were her glasses, a glint of them, the clasp of her belt, her socks, her sneakers, and, on occasion, the ball. The darker it got the more savagely did Brenda rush the net, which seemed curious, for I had noticed that earlier, in the light, she had stayed back, and even when she had had to rush, after smashing back a lob, she didn’t look entirely happy about being so close to her opponent’s racket. Her passion for winning a point seemed outmatched by an even stronger passion for maintaining her beauty as it was. I suspected that the red print of a tennis ball on her cheek would pain her more than losing all the points in the world. Darkness pushed her in, however, and she stroked harder, and at last Simp seemed to be running on her ankles. When it was all over, Simp refused my offer of a ride home and indicated with a quality of speech borrowed from some old Katherine Hepburn movie that she could manage for herself; apparently her manor lay no further than the nearest briar patch. She did not like me and I her, though I worried it, I’m sure, more than she did.

“Who is she?”

“Laura Simpson Stolowitch.”

“Why don’t you call her Stolo?” I asked.

“Simp is her Bennington name. The ass.”

“Is that where you go to school?” I asked.

She was pushing her shirt up against her skin to dry the perspiration. “No. I go to school in Boston.”

I disliked her for the answer. Whenever anyone asks me where I went to school I come right out with it: Newark Colleges of Rutgers University. I may say it a bit too ringingly, too fast, too up-in-the-air, but I say it. For an instant Brenda reminded me of the pug-nosed little bastards from Montclair who come down to the library during vacations, and while I stamp out their books, they stand around tugging their
elephantine scarves until they hang to their ankles, hinting all the while at "Boston" and "New Haven."

"Boston University?" I asked, looking off at the trees.
"Radcliffe."

We were still standing on the court, bounded on all sides by white lines. Around the bushes back of the court, fireflies were cutting figure eights in the thorny-smelling air and then, as the night suddenly came all the way in, the leaves on the trees shone for an instant, as though they'd just been rained upon. Brenda walked off the court, with me a step behind her. Now I had grown accustomed to the dark, and as she ceased being merely a voice and turned into a sight again, some of my anger at her "Boston" remark floated off and I let myself appreciate her. Her hands did not twitch at her bottom, but the form revealed itself, covered or not, under the closeness of her khaki Bermudas. There were two wet triangles on the back of her tiny-collared white polo shirt, right where her wings would have been if she'd had a pair. She wore, to complete the picture, a tartan belt, white socks, and white tennis sneakers.

As she walked she zipped the cover on her racket.
"Are you anxious to get home?" I said.
"No."
"Let's sit here. It's pleasant."
"Okay."

We sat down on a bank of grass slanted enough for us to lean back without really leaning; from the angle it seemed as though we were preparing to watch some celestial event, the christening of a new star, the inflation to full size of a half-balloonned moon. Brenda zipped and unzipped the cover while she spoke; for the first time she seemed edgy. Her edginess coaxed mine back, and so we were ready now for what, magically, it seemed we might be able to get by without: a meeting.

"What does your cousin Doris look like?" she asked.
"She's dark –"
"Is she –"?
"No," I said. "She has freckles and dark hair and she's very tall."
"Where does she go to school?"
"Northampton."

She did not answer and I don't know how much of what I meant she had understood.

"I guess I don't know her," she said after a moment. "Is she a new member?"
"I think so. They moved to Livingston only a couple of years ago."
"Oh."

No new star appeared, at least for the next five minutes.
"Did you remember me from holding your glasses?" I said.
"Now I do," she said. "Do you live in Livingston too?"
"No. Newark."
"We lived in Newark when I was a baby," she offered.
“Would you like to go home?” I was suddenly angry.
“No. Let’s walk though.”
Brenda kicked a stone and walked a step ahead of me.
“Why is it you rush the net only after dark?” I said.
She turned to me and smiled. “You noticed? Old Simp the Simpleton doesn’t.”
“Why do you?”
“I don’t like to be up too close, unless I’m sure she won’t return it.”
“Why?”
“My nose.”
“What?”
“I’m afraid of my nose. I had it bobbed.”
“What?”
“I had my nose fixed.”
“What was the matter with it?”
“It was bumpy.”
“A lot?”
“No,” she said, “I was pretty. Now I’m prettier. My brother’s having his fixed in the fall.”
“Does he want to be prettier?”
She didn’t answer and walked ahead of me again.
“I don’t mean to sound facetious. I mean why’s he doing it?”
“He wants to . . . unless he becomes a gym teacher . . . but he won’t,” she said. “We all look like my father.”
“Is he having his fixed?”
“Why are you so nasty?”
“Is he having his fixed?”
“I’m not. I’m sorry.” My next question was prompted by a desire to sound interested and thereby regain civility; it didn’t quite come out as I’d expected – I said it too loud. “How much does it cost?”
Brenda waited a moment but then she answered. “A thousand dollars. Unless you go to a butcher.”
“Let me see if you got your money’s worth.”
She turned again; she stood next to a bench and put the racket down on it. “If I let you kiss me would you stop being nasty?”
We had to take about two too many steps to keep the approach from being awkward, but we pursued the impulse and kissed. I felt her hand on the back of my neck and so I tugged her towards me, too violently perhaps, and slid my own hands across the side of her body and around to her back. I felt the wet spots on her shoulder blades, and beneath them, I’m sure of it, a faint fluttering, as though something stirred so deep in her breasts, so far back it could make itself felt through her shirt. It was like the fluttering of wings, tiny wings no bigger than her breasts. The smallness of the wings did not bother me – it would not take an eagle to carry me up those lousy hundred and eighty feet that make summer nights so much cooler in Short Hills than they are in Newark.
Study Questions

1. Provide three examples from the chapter that tell you about the differences between working-class urban and middle-class suburban family life in New Jersey during the 1950s. How important is class in explaining these differences?

2. Why is Neil’s Aunt Gladys worried about his interest in Brenda Patimkin?

3. What do you learn about 1950s dating patterns, education, work, and leisure-time activities from this chapter?

4. How does Roth’s portrayal of Jewish migration to the suburbs compare with the Chicago Blues’ presentation of black migration from the South to the North in the postwar era?
How Does Being an American Inform What I Write?

By Richard Ford

Of course, it's a tail-chasing question to begin with, a literary chicken-or-egg riddle. You have only to raise the stakes sublimely to see what I mean: How did being Russian influence Chekhov? How did being a woman affect Virginia Woolf? How did being a pint-sized sailor determine the public pronouncements of Popeye, who finally knew the answer and said it best: "I am what I am. That's all that I am."

To break this logic I have to dream up an answer, not find one that's already there. This is generally the novelist's assignment: to go beyond the obvious toward the new, create a fresh awareness, add to the sum of available reality, crack open the frozen sea within us – however you imagine the new to be achieved.

Two preliminary matters need disposing of right away, both pertaining to matters un-American. In reply to the question posed by the title How does being an American inform what I write? – one might want to say: "Well, being an American means I felt free to write whatever I chose, and so I did. Q.E.D." But, couldn't I have done as much in Denmark, Canada or Britain, and been one of theirs? It's true of the U.S., but it's not uniquely true. And second, while being an American may have made me a writer and stamped my efforts indelibly, it hasn't necessarily made me a better writer than some other country's. A look into world literature tells us that. For all I know, I might've been better as a Frenchman.

I don't remember when I first realized I was an American. Pledging allegiance to the flag at age six. Registering for the Selective Service at eighteen. Joining the Marines at twenty. I'm certain,
though, that long before any of these happened I was made quite aware that I was first, a Mississippian – a Jacksonian in fact – a southerner, a son of parents who were not themselves Mississippians, but Arkansans, and so slightly different from me. All these unique local identities, of course, presume me to be an American, since the Republic, the country and principles it embodies contain all the others. Thus, anything about me and my productions that I might attribute to being a southerner, etc., can also be attributable – by radiating logic – to being an American.

But when I was growing up in Mississippi, in the 1940s and '50s, the mood pertaining to the South's allegiance to the larger American nation was noticeably equivocal. The Depression and World War II were not long past. A cousin I knew was at Pearl Harbor (my family talked about it at dinner). The Korean War was under way. Communism was perceived as a threat to what most southerners felt was our national security, if not in fact our entire identity. My parents voted. Roosevelt and Truman were our Presidents. I pledged allegiance. America was ours, and we belonged to it – at least for the purposes of preserving and defending it.

And yet, where other, important socio-political issues were concerned – particularly race, voting rights, equal opportunity, free access to the American bounty, and that quaintly-American constitutional cornerstone called Federalism, known regionally as "states' rights" – one felt that many in the South might've preferred to be attached to another mother country entirely: South Africa or Paraguay for many whites; France or Sweden if one were black. From any side of these life-bending issues, being an American, believing in the nation's expressed goals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, became tumultuous, disharmonious, debatable and occasionally dangerous to one's health.

Self-consciously acknowledging one's national identity and speaking it to oneself is, obviously, only one manifestation of having an identity. Indeed, much about our identity we Americans traditionally prefer to take for granted, in order to concentrate more intensely on the fruits of belonging. It's an implicit aim of our republican form of government that citizens not be so preoccupied with the mechanics and philosophy of citizenship, but rather that we concern ourselves with acting – even if blithely – as citizens. National identity is, thus, a means to the end of individual freedom, not an end to itself.

But for me, in Mississippi, in the South, in my formative years between 1950 and 1962, being an American and assuming my national identity, meant being pre-occupyingly (not at all blithely) immersed in an Impassioned, publicly argued, and quite grave welter of sentiments and competing ideas about American citizenship. The heart of this debate was: How do I reconcile belonging in this country of my birth when this country seems bent on oppressing what I believe are my most fundamental and necessarily unalienable individual rights? To white segregationists, this supposed right was the one that entitled them to segregate those different from themselves away from themselves; whereas to blacks and integrationist whites the opposing right was the one that freed them to move wherever and associate however they pleased without fear of harm when they did so. In this commotion and in the disputation surrounding it – a long disputation called the American Civil Rights Movement – many people lost their lives in order that justice and right should prevail, which it did, if not perfectly.
I've never felt comfortable judging any attitude, persona, behavior, character quality, experience or belief to be "typically American." When I'm in another country and someone who reads my books asks me if a story I've written is typically American, I demur. And then I say: Think of flying over an American suburb in a helicopter, and seeing a man in a pork-pie hat out mowing his lawn. Surely, this would be the typical American. Who is he? (We might think we know.) But, when we come for a closer look, gently lift the hat off the man's head, we discover he's a Pakistani, an immigrant, or a third- generation Ghanian or Chinese-American. And the route that has brought him to his lawn, in this town, on this day dispels most notions of typicality and exposes its tendency to blur or exclude specific qualities that don't fit. Generality is in this way proved unreliable by specificity – which is the point most great literature seeks to prove: We can see most clearly by looking most closely – and we should.

Whether my experience growing up in Mississippi in the '50s could be said to be any more typically American than the Pakistani immigrant's experience is, of course, moot. I am, as he is, an American. Our experience is the American experience or part of it: tumult (in my case), a complicated and ambivalent experience of citizenry, national identity and divisive regionalism, all incompletely reconciled by a large political idealism which comprehends much while it attempts to oppress and coerce as few as possible. (Maybe I should agree that the immigrant and I have more in common than I imagined.)

And so, how does my experience inform the books I've written?

Better, probably, to say how might it have informed what I've written, since tracing literary expression from one side of the human imagination to the other, from the side where it's nothing but randomness and sensation, across to the side where it becomes something (a story), is speculative, often specious. Indeed, my own inadequate ability to distinguish my intentions from my actual accomplishments, my willingness to inflect what I've already written to "prove" an influence, and my entire authorial understanding of what I've written as distinct from a reader's understanding – all these make me not the most disinterested or discerning of self-critics. Therefore I feel safe saying only a very few things.

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera, in a letter to his American colleague Philip Roth, wrote that "the novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question.... In a [totalitarian] world built on sacrosanct certainties, the novel is dead." And so, consonant with my American experience (not at all totalitarian, but contested, complex, ambiguous, diverse, often disharmonious to the point of profound unsettlement), I have always tried to write stories and novels that testify to the nature of human kind as it is displayed by the purifying heat of adversity and disharmony and interrogation – lovers seeking but failing to find intimacy, mutual understanding, sympathy, consolation; fathers and sons, sons and mothers viewing one another longingly but imperfectly across gaps of misunderstanding, struggling with inexact expressions of affection, trying to meet the other face to face in order to say what needs to be said. These were the circumstances – tumultuous, rivalrous, thorny, proprietary – under which I came to recognize what it meant to be an American: civil rights' struggles and Viet Nam, each of which divided families; the McCarthy purges, which divided the nation; the aftermath of the Depression, followed by world war and the prosperity of the Fifties.
As a second matter, I have – and apropos of my native experience – acted on the need and freedom to write about and adopt diverse personas, ones that aren't my own (women, other races, other nationalities, children) in an effort to answer the fundamental American question specifically posed by my citizenship: How are we so different, yet so alike? I've written stories so as to make such ambiguity tolerable, interesting, even pleasant and beautiful.

I have also engaged politics small, in the intimate, ground-level lives of its human participants. It was surely at that level, locked away in a small family, in a small American city, far from the centers of power and public rhetoric, that I first saw right and wrong enacted. Though, indeed, at some moment I couldn't have planned for, I left the South as a subject-home, following only my curiosity, and assuming that my local intelligence would translate to a larger American audience, and tried to take the entire country as my setting, and more hopefully as a subject.

And finally – and in this I don't have to speculate about what informs what – as a writer I've always trusted America to be a setting within which universally human events and actions and their motives and moral consequences can be portrayed and understood as important from any vantage point on the planet. American human experience, while not a model for the rest of the world, has seemed at least a plausible experience, and worthy of notice.

Ascribing one's influences is always heady, squeamishly self-important business. And I come to this end now bemused, thinking yes, had these influences not worked on me all these years, nothing of me or mine would be the same. Though, of course, nothing of me would be at all. You can't remove a crucial term from the equation and have the same equation. Popeye can't be a jet pilot or a bond salesman and be the Popeye we love.

Today there's a writer in Chechnya writing about the influence of, well...Chechnya on his body of work. And he's writing the same sort of things I've written, or better things. Good, I say. For if all these years of being an American have only readied me to realize my likeness, my kinship, my collegiality with someone I'll never know, made me able to live literature's most precious wisdom – then being an American, and a writer no less, has served me very well indeed.

Read more: http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/May/20080625205242eaifas0.3627133.html#ixzz0x6Y6aexn
CHAPTER 40

The Making and Unmaking of Modern Families

Judith Stacey

Professor of gender studies and sociology, Judith Stacy (1945–) was born in Irvington, New Jersey, to a meat dealer and a decorator. Noted for her expertise on contemporary gender, family, and sexuality issues, she has consulted on five documentary films, appeared on TV, and contributed numerous articles to newspapers and magazines. Her books include In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in a Postmodern Age (1996) and Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth-Century America (1991), from which the “Introduction” is excerpted here.

On a spring afternoon half a century from today, the Joneses are gathering to sing “Happy Birthday” to Junior.

There’s Dad and his third wife, Mom and her second husband, Junior’s two half brothers from his father’s first marriage, his six stepsisters from his mother’s spouse’s previous unions, 100-year-old Great-Grandpa, all eight of Junior’s current “grandparents,” assorted aunts, uncles-in-law and stepcousins.

While one robot scoops up the gift wrappings and another blows out the candles, Junior makes a wish – that he didn’t have so many relatives.

The family tree by the year 2033 will be rooted as deeply as ever in America’s social landscape, but it will be sprouting some odd branches.

– U.S. News & World Report

In the summer of 1986 I attended a wedding ceremony in a small Christian pentecostal church in the Silicon Valley. The service celebrated the same “traditional” family patterns and values that two years earlier had inspired a “profamily” movement to assist Ronald Reagan’s landslide reelection to the presidency of the United States. At the same time, however, the pastor’s rhetoric displayed substantial sympathy with feminist criticisms of patriarchal marriage. “A ring is not a shackle, and
marriage is not a relationship of domination,” he instructed the groom. Moreover, complex patterns of divorce, remarriage, and stepkinship linked the members of the wedding party and their guests. The group bore far greater resemblance to the postmodern family of the imaginary twenty-first-century Joneses than it did to the image of “traditional” family life that arouses the nostalgic fantasies so widespread among critics of contemporary family practices.

In the final decades before the twenty-first century, passionate contests over changing family life in the United States have polarized vast numbers of citizens. Outside the Supreme Court of the United States, righteous, placard-carrying Right-to-Lifers square off against feminists and civil libertarians demonstrating their anguish over the steady dismantling of women’s reproductive freedom. On the same day in July 1989 when New York’s highest court expanded the legal definition of a family to extend rent-control protection to gay couples, a coalition of conservative clergymen in San Francisco blocked implementation of their city’s new “domestic partners” ordinance. “It is the totality of the relationship,” proclaimed the New York judge, “As evidenced by the dedication, caring and self-sacrifice of the parties which should, in the final analysis, control” the definition of family. But just this concept of family is anathema to “profamily” activists. Declaring that the attempt by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors to grant legal status to unmarried heterosexual and homosexual couples “arbitrarily redefined the time-honored and hallowed nature of the family,” the clergymen’s petition was signed by sufficient citizens to force the ordinance into a referendum battle. The reckoning came in November 1989, when the electorate of the city many consider to be the national capital of family change narrowly defeated the domestic partners law.

Most popular, as well as many scholarly, assessments of family change anxiously and misguidedly debate whether “the family” will survive the twentieth century at all. Anxieties like these are far from new. “For at least 150 years,” historian Linda Gordon writes, “there have been periods of fear that ‘the family’ – meaning a popular image of what families were supposed to be like, by no means a correct recollection of any actual ‘traditional’ family – was in decline; and these fears have tended to escalate in periods of social stress.” The actual subject of this recurring, fretful discourse is a historically specific form and concept of family life, one that most historians identify as the “modern” family. Students in a course I teach called “The Making and Unmaking of Modern Families” helped me realize that many of us who write and teach about American family life have not abetted public understanding of family change with our counterintuitive use of the concept, the “modern” family. The “modern” family of sociological theory and historical convention designates a form no longer prevalent in the United States – an intact nuclear household unit composed of a male breadwinner, his full-time homemaker wife, and their dependent children. This is precisely the form of family life that many mistake for an ancient, essential, and now-endangered institution.

“How many of you grew up in a modern family?” I used to ask my students at the beginning of each term. I expected the proportion of raised hands to decline, like the modern family, with the years. It baffled me at first to receive precisely the inverse
response. Just when demographers were reporting that twice as many American households were headed by divorced, separated, and never-married individuals as were occupied by “modern” families, increasing numbers of my students claimed to have grown up in “modern” ones. This seemingly anomalous finding was the product, of course, of my poorly conceived survey question. Just as I had anticipated, over the years fewer and fewer of my students were coming of age in Ozzie and Harriet families. Quite sensibly, however, unlike me, they did not regard such families as “modern”; to them they were archaic “traditional” ones. Those contemporary family relationships that my students took to be modern comprise the “post-modern” family terrain that is the central subject of this book. [. . .]

Feminism as Midwife to Postindustrial Society

Feminists intentionally accelerated the modern family’s demise. The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan’s best-selling critique of “the problem that has no name,” inspired the awakening women’s movement to launch a full-scale attack on the exploitative and stultifying effects of women’s confinement and dependency as homemaker. Soon feminist scholars were warning women that “in truth, being a housewife makes women sick.” This backward-looking critique of a declining institution and culture, one that I personally embraced wholeheartedly and helped to disseminate, colluded unwittingly in postindustrial processes, and at considerable political cost to the feminist movement. Although we intended the institutions of domesticity and their male beneficiaries to be the targets of our critique, we placed housewives on the defensive just when sizable numbers of working-class women were attaining this long-denied status. Feminists provided ideological support for divorce and for the soaring rates of female-headed households. Feminist enthusiasm for female autonomy encouraged women’s massive entry into the postindustrial labor market. This, in turn, abetted the corporate deunionization strategies that have accompanied the reorganization of the US economy.

Millions of women like myself, derived enormous, tangible benefits from the changes in postindustrial home and work life and from the ways in which feminist ideology encouraged us to initiate and cope with such changes. The lioness’s share of these benefits, however, fell to privileged women. As postindustrial society became entrenched, many women, perhaps the majority, found their economic and personal conditions worsening. While unionized occupations and real wages began to decline, women were becoming the postindustrial “proletariat,” performing most of the nation’s low-skilled, poorly paid jobs. As the overall percentage of jobs that were secure and well paying declined, particularly within blue-collar occupations, increasing numbers of even white men swelled the ranks of the under- and unemployed. Nonetheless, most white male workers still labored at jobs that were skilled and comparatively well paid. The devastating economic effects on women and children of endemic marital instability became widely known. Increasing percentages of
women were rearing children by themselves, generally with minimal economic contributions from former husbands and fathers. Yet rising numbers of single mothers who worked full time, year-round, were not earning wages sufficient to lift their families above the official poverty line.

Even as marriage bonds lost their adhesive, they came to serve as a major axis of economic and social stratification. Increasingly, families required two incomes to sustain a middle-class way of life. The married female “secondary” wage earner can lift a former working-class or middle-class family into relative affluence, while the loss or lack of access to a male income drove millions of women and children into poverty. In short, the drastic increase in women’s paid employment in the post-industrial period yielded lots more work for mother, but with very unevenly distributed economic benefits and only modest improvements in relative earnings between women and men.

In the context of these developments, many women (and men) became susceptible to the profamily appeals of an antifeminist backlash. Because of our powerful and highly visible critique of the modern family, and because of the sensationalized way by which the media disseminated this critique, feminists received much of the blame for family and social crises that attended the transition from an industrial to a postindustrial order in the United States. “Feminist ideology told women how foolish and exploited they were to be wives and mothers,” turning them into “a vicious cartoon,” wrote Connaught Marshner, “chairman” of the National Pro-Family Coalition, in her manifesto for the profamily movement, The New Traditional Woman. [...]

Ronald Reagan was an undeserving beneficiary of the profamily reaction, as humorist Delia Ephron observes in a book review of Maureen Reagan’s dutiful memoir: “It is funny and a bit pathetic that Ronald and Nancy Reagan keep finding out their family secrets by reading their children’s books. It is also ironic that this couple who symbolized a return to hearth, home and 1950’s innocence should, in reality, be candidates for a very 1980s study on the troubled family.” The former president’s less dutiful daughter, Patti Davis, agrees: “Anyone who hasn’t been living in a coma for the past eight years knows that we’re not a close-knit family.” It seems an astonishing testimony to Reagan’s acclaimed media magic, therefore, that despite his own divorce and his own far-from-happily blended family, he and his second lady managed to serve so effectively as the symbolic figureheads of a profamily agenda, which his economic and social policies helped to further undermine.

The demographic record demonstrates that postmodern gender and kinship changes proceeded unabated throughout the Reagan era. The proportion of American households headed by single mothers grew by 21 percent, while rates of employment by mothers of young children continued their decades of ascent. When “profamily” forces helped elect Reagan to his first term in 1980, 20 percent of American children lived with a single parent, and 41 percent of mothers with children under the age of three had joined the paid labor force. When Reagan completed his second term eight years later, these figures had climbed to 24 and 54 [...]
percent respectively. The year of Reagan’s landslide reelection, 1984, was the first year that more working mothers placed their children in public group child care than in family day care. Reaganites too hastily applauded a modest decline in divorce rates during the 1980s – to a level at which more than half of first marriages still were expected to dissolve before death. But demographers who studied marital separations as well as divorce found the years from 1980 to 1985 to show “the highest level of marital disruption yet recorded for the U.S.” Likewise, birth rates remained low, marriage rates fell, and homeownership rates, which had been rising for decades, declined throughout the Reagan years.

Recombinant Family Life

[W]omen and men have been creatively remaking American family life during the past three decades of postindustrial upheaval. Out of the ashes and residue of the modern family, they have drawn on a diverse, often incongruous array of cultural, political, economic, and ideological resources, fashioning these resources into new gender and kinship strategies to cope with postindustrial challenges, burdens, and opportunities. For example, we observe people turning divorce into a kinship resource rather than a rupture, creating complex, divorce-extended families like those gathered to celebrate Junior’s not-so-futuristic birthday. [We have also found] religious “traditionalists” who draw on biblical and human potential movement precepts to form communal households that join married and single members of an evangelical ministry.

And as Americans have been remaking family life, the vast majority, even those seemingly hostile to feminism, have been selectively appropriating feminist principles and practices and fusing these, patchwork style, with old and new gender, kinship, and cultural patterns. In our society, married women struggle to involve reluctant spouses in housework and child care; unmarried white women choose to have children on their own; homosexual couples exchange marriage vows and share child-rearing commitments; evangelical ministers counsel Christian husbands to learn to communicate with their wives and advise battered women to leave their abusive mates.

I call the fruits of these diverse efforts to remake contemporary family life “the postmodern family.” I do this, despite my reservations about employing such a fashionable and elusive cultural concept, to signal the contested, ambivalent, and undecided character of contemporary gender and kinship arrangements. “What is the post-modern?” art historian Clive Dilnot asks rhetorically in the title of a detailed discussion of literature on postmodern culture, and his answers apply readily to the domain of present family conditions in the United States. The postmodern, he maintains, “is first, an uncertainty, an insecurity, a doubt.” Most of the “post-” words provoke uneasiness, because they imply simultaneously “both the end, or at least the radical transformation of, a familiar pattern of activity or group of ideas” and the
emergence of “new fields of cultural activity whose contours are still unclear and whose meanings and implications . . . cannot yet be fathomed.” The postmodern, moreover, is “characterized by the process of the linking up of areas and the crossing of the boundaries of what are conventionally considered to be disparate realms of practice.”

Like postmodern culture, contemporary family arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved. Postindustrial social transformations have opened up such a diverse range of gender and kinship relationships as to undermine the claim in the memorable opening line from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*: “All happy families are alike, but every unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion.”

Today even happy families no longer are all alike! No longer is there a single culturally dominant family pattern to which the majority of Americans conform and most of the rest aspire. Instead, Americans today have crafted a multiplicity of family and household arrangements that we inhabit uneasily and reconstitute frequently in response to changing personal and occupational circumstances. [. . .]

We are living, I believe, through a transitional and contested period of family history, a period after the modern family order, but before what we cannot foretell. Precisely because it is not possible to characterize with a single term the competing sets of family cultures that coexist at present, I identify this family regime as postmodern. The postmodern family is not a new model of family life, not the next stage in an orderly progression of family history, but the stage when the belief in a logical progression of stages breaks down. Rupturing evolutionary models of family history and incorporating both experimental and nostalgic elements, “the” postmodern family lurches forward and backward into an uncertain future. [. . .]

### Study Questions

1. Why do you think Stacey titled her book, *Brave New Families*? What is “new” and what is “brave” about the American families she discusses? What do you think are her most interesting examples? Why?

2. What are the differences between the traditional, modern, and postmodern families that Stacey describes? Which of these patterns best describe your family over the past three generations?

3. What does Stacey mean when she says that feminism shaped the postmodern family?

4. What other kinds of postmodern family formations can you think of besides the ones that Stacey discusses? If she were writing her book today, how would she have to update her “Introduction”? 