Chapter 14

Race, Ethnicity, and
the Melting Pot

At the heart of this chapter is the contested concept of the “melting pot”—a phrase that belongs inside quotations as a mark of its uncertain status. To what extent does it actually exist, some merging of diverse peoples into an undifferentiated national whole? To what extent is it a utopian dream? More troublingly, might it be a sham that serves entrenched interests and oppresses others—those to be “melted”? Lurking in many of the selections in this unit is an alternative term to melting pot: rainbow (itself a Biblical sign of promise). The image here is one of separate bands of color harmoniously aligned.

It is probably accurate to say that matters of race and ethnicity in U.S. history have been powder kegs. They have often found homes in the vitriol of diatribes and jeremiads rather than in more dispassionate and subtle reflection. The writers assembled here offer a kind of tonic response to the usual clamoring. They comprise a community of voices who occupy very different positions but all, in one way or another, see the questions raised by the prospect of assimilation as anything but easy and clear.

About the Readings in This Chapter

Over half of the selections in the unit are first-person narratives: stories by people who chronicle their own divided allegiance to the expectations of their more local ethnic neighborhood on the one hand, and to the lures of a denatured—but really “whiter”?—American dream of assimilation on the other. These narratives are framed by a range of essays that treat matters of race and assimilation from a broader social scientific perspective.

The chapter opens with three of these framing lenses. First, comes a trenchant analysis by Benjamin DeMott of interracial buddy films in which, as he says, “the long-running struggle between disenfranchised blacks and the majority white culture” is presented as easily reparable by one-on-one acts of friendship and good will. DeMott indicts the attempts of modern America to forget about white guilt and thus also to deny the need for affirmative action. Next, Peter Salins offers a brief history of the “melting pot,” seen in the context of the tension between assimilation and multiculturalism. Then Peggy McIntosh considers the long-term historical effects of
institutionalized racial oppression as she catalogues the nearly invisible privileges that accrue to white folks on the basis of race.

These three rather theoretical pieces contextualize the first-person memoirs that follow—analyses that spring from personal experience but do not remain there. Richard Rodriguez invites us to imagine a nation transformed by the marriage of Latin culture with the Protestant individualism that has been our country’s past. The British-born novelist and essayist Zadie Smith considers the fear of losing a culture in the context of voice, of ways of speaking. She posits a space, for her a dream space, in which people may be double-voiced and where the unified single self is an illusion. Amy Tan offers a complementary view of differently voiced cultures in a daughter’s attempt to inhabit two different verbal worlds, her own and that of her Chinese mother’s “fractured” English. Then Henry Louis Gates, Jr. recalls his childhood experience with African-American hairstyles: a platform for thinking about identity and difference.

Next, there are two narratives about neighborhoods. Ishmael Reed focuses on the implications of moving into the kind of African-American neighborhood in Oakland, California, that his parents had “spent about a third of their lives trying to escape.” By contrast, in Marianna Torgovnick’s homecoming to her Italian-American neighborhood in Brooklyn, the comforts of the neighborhood and the past are undercut by the claustrophobia and potential for violence in the present.

The chapter ends with two pieces, one theoretical and one narrative, that seek to test the limits of the category. Michael Jonas reviews a study by Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam that complicates the orthodoxy that our differences make us stronger. Finally, the Northern Irish novelist Robert McLiam Wilson brings matters to a close by challenging many of the assumptions the other writers share. To what extent, he wonders, are national and even some racial identities inevitably fabrications?
Benjamin DeMott

Put on a Happy Face: Masking the Differences between Blacks and Whites

Focusing on the “romance” of black-white friendship represented in popular American films, this piece argues, with angry irony, that “the cleansing social force” of friendship has been embraced by mainstream white culture as an easy out from the responsibility for historically produced and institutionalized racism. “People forget the theoretically unforgettable—the caste history of American blacks, the connection between no schools for longer than a century and bad school performance now,” declares Benjamin DeMott, and this essay, which first appeared in Harper’s Magazine in 1995, seeks to make us remember. A scholar and cultural critic who taught at Amherst College for more than forty years, DeMott wrote a popular trilogy of books on Americans’ difficulties thinking about class, race, and gender. The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can’t Think Straight about Class (1990), The Trouble with Friendship: Why Americans Can’t Think Straight about Race (1995), and Killer Woman Blues: Why Americans Can’t Think Straight about Gender (2000).

At the movies these days, questions about racial injustice have been amicably resolved. Watch Pulp Fiction or Congo or A Little Princess or any other recent film in which both blacks and whites are primary characters and you can, if you want, forget about race. Whites and blacks greet one another on the screen with loving candor, revealing their common humanity. In Pulp Fiction, an armed black mobster (played by Samuel L. Jackson) looks deep into the eyes of an armed white thief in the middle of a holdup (played by Tim Roth) and shares his version of God’s word in Ezekiel, whereupon the two men lay aside their weapons, both more or less redeemed. The moment inverts an earlier scene in which a white boxer (played by Bruce Willis) risks his life to save another black mobster (played by Ving Rhames), who is being sexually tortured as a prelude to his execution.

Pulp Fiction (gross through July [1995]: $107 million) is one of a series of films suggesting that the beast of American racism is tamed and harmless. Close to the start of Die Hard with a Vengeance (gross through July [1995]: $95 million), the camera finds a white man wearing sandwich boards on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 138th Street in Harlem. The boards carry a horrific legend: I HATE NIGGERS. A group of young blacks approach the man with murderous intent, bearing guns and knives. They are figures straight out of a national nightmare—ugly, enraged, terrifying. No problem. A black man, again played by Jackson, appears and rescues the white man, played by...
Willis. The black man and white man come to know each other well. In time the white man declares flatly to the black, “I need you more than you need me.” A moment later he charges the black with being a racist—with not liking whites as much as the white man likes blacks—and the two talk frankly about their racial prejudices. Near the end of the film, the men have grown so close that each volunteers to die for the other.

*Pulp Fiction* and *Die Hard with a Vengeance* follow the pattern of *Lethal Weapon 1*, *2*, and *3*, the Danny Glover/Mel Gibson buddy vehicles that collectively grossed $357 million, and *White Men Can’t Jump*, which, in the year of the L.A. riots, grossed $76 million. In *White Men Can’t Jump*, a white dropout, played by Woody Harrelson, ekes out a living on black-dominated basketball courts in Los Angeles. He’s arrogant and aggressive but never in danger because he has a black protector and friend, played by Wesley Snipes. At the movie’s end, the white, flying above the hoop like a stereotypical black player, scores the winning basket in a two-on-two pickup game on an alley-oop pass from his black chum, whereupon the two men fall into each other’s arms in joy. Later, the black friend agrees to find work for the white at the store he manages.

**white (helpless):** I gotta get a job. Can you get me a job?

**black (affectionately teasing):** Got any references?

**white (shy grin):** You.

Such dialogue is the stuff of romance. What’s dreamed of and gained is a place where whites are unafraid of blacks, where blacks ask for and need nothing from whites, and where the sameness of the races creates a common fund of sweet content.¹ The details of the dream matter less than the force that makes it come true for both races, eliminating the constraints of objective reality and redistributing resources, status, and capabilities. That cleansing social force supersedes political and economic fact or policy; that force, improbably enough, is friendship.

Watching the beaming white men who know how to jump, we do well to remind ourselves of what the camera shot leaves out. Black infants die in America at twice the rate of white infants. (Despite the increased numbers of middle-class blacks, the rates are diverging, with black rates actually rising.) One out of every two black children lives below the poverty line (as compared with one out of seven white children). Nearly four times as many black families exist below the poverty line as white families. More than 50 percent of African-American families have incomes below $25,000. Among black youths under age twenty, death by murder occurs nearly ten times as often as among whites. Over 60 percent of births to black mothers occur out of wedlock, more than four times the rate for white mothers. The net worth of the typical white household is ten times that of the typical black household. In many states, five to ten times as many blacks as whites age eighteen to thirty are in prison.
The good news at the movies obscures the bad news in the streets and confirms the Supreme Court’s recent decisions on busing, affirmative action, and redistricting. Like the plot of White Men Can’t Jump, the Court postulates the existence of a society no longer troubled by racism. Because black-white friendship is now understood to be the rule, there is no need for integrated schools or a congressional Black Caucus or affirmative action. The Congress and state governors can guiltlessly cut welfare, food assistance, fuel assistance, Head Start, housing money, fellowship money, vaccine money. Justice Anthony Kennedy can declare, speaking for the Supreme Court majority last June, that creating a world of genuine equality and sameness requires only that “our political system and our society cleanse themselves . . . of discrimination.”

The deep logic runs as follows: Yesterday white people didn’t like black people, and accordingly suffered guilt, knowing that the dislike was racist and knowing also that as moral persons they would have to atone for the guilt. They would have to ante up for welfare and Head Start and halfway houses and free vaccine and midnight basketball and summer jobs for schoolkids and graduate fellowships for promising scholars and craft-union apprenticeships and so on, endlessly. A considerable and wasteful expense. But at length came the realization that by ending dislike or hatred it would be possible to end guilt, which in turn would mean an end to redress: no more wasteful ransom money. There would be but one requirement: the regular production and continuous showing forth of evidence indisputably proving that hatred has totally vanished from the land.

I cannot tell the reader how much I would like to believe in this sunshine world. After the theater lights brighten and I’ve found coins for a black beggar on the way to my car and am driving home through downtown Springfield, Massachusetts, the world invented by Die Hard with a Vengeance and America’s highest court gives way only slowly to the familiar urban vision in my windshield—homeless blacks on trash-strewn streets, black prostitutes staked out on a corner, and signs of a not very furtive drug trade. I know perfectly well that most African-Americans don’t commit crimes or live in alleys. I also know that for somebody like myself, downtown Springfield in the late evening is not a good place to be.

The movies reflect the larger dynamic of wish and dream. Day after day the nation’s corporate ministries of culture churn out images of racial harmony. Millions awaken each morning to the friendly sight of Katie Couric nudging a perky elbow into good buddy Bryant Gumbel’s side. My mailbox and millions of demographically similar others are choked with flyers from companies (Wal-Mart, Victoria’s Secret) bent on publicizing both their wares and their social bona fides by displaying black and white models at cordial ease with one another. A torrent of goodwill messages about race arrives daily—revelations of corporate largesse, commercials, news features, TV specials, all proclaiming that whites like me feel strongly positive impulses of friendship.
for blacks and that those same admirable impulses are effectively eradicating racial differences, rendering blacks and whites the same. BellSouth TV commercials present children singing “I am the keeper of the world”—first a white child, then a black child, then a white child, then a black child. Because Dow Chemical likes black America, it recruits young black college grads for its research division and dramatizes, in TV commercials, their tearful-joyful partings from home. (“Son, show ’em what you got,” says a black lad’s father.) American Express shows an elegant black couple and an elegant white couple sitting together in a theater, happy in one another’s company. (The couples share the box with an oversized Gold Card.) During the evening news I watch a black mom offer Robitussin to a miserably coughing white mom. Here’s People magazine promoting itself under a photo of John Lee Hooker, the black bluesman. “We’re these kinds of people, too,” People claims in the caption. In [a recent] production of Hamlet on Broadway, Horatio [was] played by a black actor. On The 700 Club, Pat Robertson joshes Ben Kinchlow, his black sidekick, about Ben’s far-out ties.

What counts here is not the saccharine clumsiness of the interchanges but the bulk of them—the ceaseless, self-validating gestures of friendship, the humming, buzzing background theme: All decent Americans extend the hand of friendship to African-Americans; nothing but nothing is more auspicious for the African-American future than this extended hand. Faith in the miracle cure of racism by change-of-heart turns out to be so familiar as to have become unnoticeable. And yes, the faith has its benign aspect. Even as they nudge me and others toward belief in magic (instant pals and no-money-down equality), the images and messages of devoted relationships between blacks and whites do exert a humanizing influence.

Nonetheless, through these same images and messages the comfortable majority tells itself a fatuous untruth. Promoting the fantasy of painless answers, inspiring groundless self-approval among whites, joining the Supreme Court in treating “cleansing” as inevitable, the new orthodoxy of friendship incites culture-wide evasion, justifies one political step backward after another, and greases the skids along which, tomorrow, welfare block grants will slide into state highway-resurfacing budgets. Whites are part of the solution, says this orthodoxy, if we break out of the prison of our skin color, say hello, as equals, one-on-one, to a black stranger, and make a black friend. We’re part of the problem if we have an aversion to black people or are frightened of them, or if we feel that the more distance we put between them and us the better, or if we’re in the habit of asserting our superiority rather than acknowledging our common humanity. Thus we shift the problem away from politics—from black experience and the history of slavery—and perceive it as a matter of the suspicion and fear found within the white heart; solving the problem asks no more of us than that we work on ourselves, scrubbing off the dirt of ill will.
The approach miniaturizes, personalizes, and moralizes; it removes the large and complex dilemmas of race from the public sphere. It tempts audiences to see history as irrelevant and to regard feelings as decisive—to believe that the fate of black Americans is shaped mainly by events occurring in the hearts and minds of the privileged. And let’s be frank: the orthodoxy of friendship feels nice. It practically consecrates self-flattery. The “good” Bill Clinton who attends black churches and talks with likable ease to fellow worshipers was campaigning when Los Angeles rioted in ’92. “White Americans,” he said, “are gripped by the isolation of their own experience. Too many still simply have no friends of other races and do not know any differently.” Few black youths of working age in South-Central L.A. had been near enough to the idea of a job even to think of looking for work before the Rodney King verdict, but the problem, according to Clinton, was that whites need black friends.

Most of the country’s leading voices of journalistic conscience (editorial writers, television anchorpersons, syndicated columnists) roundly endorse the doctrine of black-white friendship as a means of redressing the inequalities between the races. Roger Rosenblatt, editor of the Columbia Journalism Review and an especially deft supplier of warm and fuzzy sentiment, published an essay in Family Circle arguing that white friendship and sympathy for blacks simultaneously make power differentials vanish and create interracial identity between us, one by one. The author finds his exemplum in an episode revealing the personal sensitivity, to injured blacks, of one of his children.

“When our oldest child, Carl, was in high school,” he writes, “he and two black friends were standing on a street corner in New York City one spring evening, trying to hail a taxi. The three boys were dressed decently and were doing nothing wild or threatening. Still, no taxi would pick them up. If a driver spotted Carl first, he might slow down, but he would take off again when he saw the others. Carl’s two companions were familiar with this sort of abuse. Carl, who had never observed it firsthand before, burned with anger and embarrassment that he was the color of a world that would so mistreat his friends.”

Rosenblatt notes that when his son “was applying to colleges, he wrote his essay on that taxi incident with his two black friends. . . . He was able to articulate what he could not say at the time—how ashamed and impotent he felt. He also wrote of the power of their friendship, which has lasted to this day and has carried all three young men into the country that belongs to them. To all of us.”

In this homily white sympathy begets interracial sameness in several ways. The three classmates are said to react identically to the cabdrivers’ snub; i.e., they feel humiliated. “[Carl] could not find the words to express his humiliation and his friends would not express theirs.”
The anger that inspires the younger Rosenblatt’s college-admission essay on racism is seen as identical with black anger. Friendship brings the classmates together as joint, equal owners of the land of their birth (“the country that belongs to [all of] them”). And Rosenblatt supplies a still larger vision of essential black-white sameness near the end of his essay: “Our proper hearts tell the truth,” he declares, “which is that we are all in the same boat, rich and poor, black and white. We are helpless, wicked, heroic, terrified, and we need one another. We need to give rides to one another.”

Thus do acts of private piety substitute for public policy while the possibility of urgent political action disappears into a sentimental haze. “If we’re looking for a formula to ease the tensions between the races,” Rosenblatt observes, then we should “attack the disintegration of the black community” and “the desperation of the poor.” Without overtly mocking civil rights activists who look toward the political arena “to erase the tensions,” Rosenblatt alludes to them in a throwaway manner, implying that properly adjusted whites look elsewhere, that there was a time for politicking for “equal rights” but we’ve passed through it. Now is a time in which we should listen to our hearts at moments of epiphany and allow sympathy to work its wizardry, cleansing and floating us, blacks and whites “all in the same boat,” on a mystical undercurrent of the New Age.

Blacks themselves aren’t necessarily proof against this theme, as witness a recent essay by James Alan McPherson in the Harvard journal Reconstruction. McPherson, who received the 1977 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his collection of stories Elbow Room, says that “the only possible steps, the safest steps . . . small ones” in the movement “toward a universal culture” will be those built not on “ideologies and formulas and programs” but on experiences of personal connectedness.

“Just this past spring,” he writes, “when I was leaving a restaurant after taking a [white] former student to dinner, a black [woman on the sidewalk] said to my friend, in a rasping voice, ‘Hello, girlfriend. Have you got anything to spare?’” The person speaking was a female crack addict with a child who was also addicted. “But,” writes McPherson, when the addict made her pitch to his dinner companion, “I saw in my friend’s face an understanding and sympathy and a shining which transcended race and class. Her face reflected one human soul’s connection with another. The magnetic field between the two women was charged with spiritual energy.”

The writer points the path to progress through interpersonal gestures by people who “insist on remaining human, and having human responses. . . . Perhaps the best that can be done, now, is the offering of understanding and support to the few out of many who are capable of such gestures, rather than devising another plan to engineer the many into one.”

The elevated vocabulary (“soul,” “spiritual”) beatifies the impulse to turn away from the real-life agenda of actions capable of reducing racial injustice.
Wherever that impulse dominates, the rhetoric of racial sameness thrives, diminishing historical catastrophes affecting millions over centuries and inflating the significance of tremors of tenderness briefly troubling the heart or conscience of a single individual—the boy waiting for a cab, the woman leaving the restaurant. People forget the theoretically unforgettable—the caste history of American blacks, the connection between no schools for longer than a century and bad school performance now, between hateful social attitudes and zero employment opportunities, between minority anguish and majority fear.

How could this way of seeing have become conventional so swiftly? How did the dogmas of instant equality insinuate themselves so effortlessly into courts and mass audiences alike? How can a white man like myself, who taught Southern blacks in the 1960s, find himself seduced—as I have been more than once—by the orthodoxy of friendship? In the civil rights era, the experience for many millions of Americans was one of discovery. A hitherto unimaginied continent of human reality and history came into view, inducing genuine concern and at least a temporary setting aside of self-importance. I remember with utter clarity what I felt at Mary Holmes College in West Point, Mississippi, when a black student of mine was killed by tailgating red-necks; my fellow tutors and I were overwhelmed with how shamefully wrong a wrong could be. For a time, we were released from the prisons of moral weakness and ambiguity. In the year or two that followed—the mid-sixties—the notion that some humans are more human than others, whites more human than blacks, appeared to have been overturned. The next step seemed obvious: society would have to admit that when one race deprives another of its humanity for centuries, those who have done the depriving are obligated to do what they can to restore the humanity of the deprived. The obligation clearly entailed the mounting of comprehensive long-term programs of developmental assistance—not guilt-money handouts—for nearly the entire black population. The path forward was unavoidable.

It was avoided. Shortly after the award of civil rights and the institution, in 1966, of limited preferential treatment to remedy employment and educational discrimination against African-Americans, a measure of economic progress for blacks did appear in census reports. Not much, but enough to stimulate glowing tales of universal black advance and to launch the good-news barrage that continues to this day (headline in the New York Times, June 18, 1995: “Moving On Up: The Greening of America’s Black Middle Class”).

After Ronald Reagan was elected to his first term, the new dogma of black-white sameness found ideological support in the form of criticism of so-called coddling. Liberal activists of both races were berated by critics of both races for fostering an allegedly enfeebling psychology of dependency that discouraged African-Americans from committing themselves to individual self-development. In 1988, the charge was passionately voiced in an
essay in these pages, “I’m Black, You’re White, Who’s Innocent?” by Shelby Steele, who attributed the difference between black rates of advance and those of other minority groups to white folks’ pampering. Most blacks, Steele claimed, could make it on their own—as voluntary immigrants have done—were they not held back by devitalizing programs that presented them, to themselves and others, as somehow dissimilar to and weaker than other Americans. This argument was all-in-the-same-boatism in a different key; the claim remained that progress depends upon recognition of black-white sameness. Let us see through superficial differences to the underlying, equally distributed gift for success. Let us teach ourselves—in the words of the Garth Brooks tune—to ignore “the color of skin” and “look for . . . the beauty within.”

Still further support for the policy once known as “do-nothingism” came from points-of-light barkers, who held that a little something might perhaps be done if accompanied by enough publicity. Nearly every broadcaster and publisher in America moves a bale of reportage on pro bono efforts by white Americans to speed the advance of black Americans. Example: McDonald’s and the National Basketball Association distribute balloons when they announce they are addressing the dropout problem with an annual “Stay in School” scheme that gives schoolkids who don’t miss a January school day a ticket to an all-star exhibition. The publicity strengthens the idea that these initiatives will nullify the social context—the city I see through my windshield. Reports of white philanthropy suggest that the troubles of this block and the next should be understood as phenomena in transition. The condition of American blacks need not be read as the fixed, unchanging consequence of generations of bottom-caste existence. Edging discreetly past a beggar posted near the entrance to Zabar’s or H&H Bagels, or, while walking the dog, stepping politely around black men asleep on the sidewalk, we need not see ourselves and our fellows as uncaring accomplices in the acts of social injustice.

Yet more powerful has been the ceaseless assault, over the past generation, on our knowledge of the historical situation of black Americans. On the face of things it seems improbable that the cumulative weight of documented historical injury to African-Americans could ever be lightly assessed. Gifted black writers continue to show, in scene after scene—in their studies of middle-class blacks interacting with whites—how historical realities shape the lives of their black characters. In Killer of Sheep, the brilliant black filmmaker Charles Burnett dramatizes the daily encounters that suck poor blacks into will-lessness and contempt for white fairy tales of interracial harmony; he quickens his historical themes with images of faceless black meat processors gutting undifferentiated, unchoosing animal life. Here, say these images, as though talking back to Clarence Thomas, here is a basic level of black life unchanged over generations. Where there’s work, it’s miserably paid and ugly.
Space allotments at home and at work cramp body and mind. Positive expectation withers in infancy. People fall into the habit of jeering at aspiration as though at the bidding of physical law. Obstacles at every hand prevent people from loving and being loved in decent ways, prevent children from believing their parents, prevent parents from believing they themselves know anything worth knowing. The only true self, now as in the long past, is the one mocked by one's own race. “Shit on you, nigger,” says a voice in Killer of Sheep. “Nothing you say matters a good goddamn.”

For whites, these words produce guilt, and for blacks, I can only assume, pain and despair. The audience for tragedy remains small, while at the multiplex the popular enthusiasm for historical romance remains constant and vast. During the last two decades, the entertainment industry has conducted a siege on the pertinent past, systematically excising knowledge of the consequences of the historical exploitation of African-Americans. Factitious renderings of the American past blur the outlines of black-white conflict, redefine the ground of black grievances for the purpose of diminishing the grievances, restage black life in accordance with the illusory conventions of American success mythology, and present the operative influences on race history as the same as those implied to be pivotal in White Men Can’t Jump or a BellSouth advertisement.

Although there was scant popular awareness of it at the time (1977), the television miniseries Roots introduced the figure of the Unscathed Slave. To an enthralled audience of more than 80 million the series intimated that the damage resulting from generations of birth-ascribed, semi-animal status was largely temporary, that slavery was a product of motiveless malignity on the social margins rather than of respectable rationality, and that the ultimate significance of the institution lay in the demonstration, by freed slaves, that no force on earth can best the energies of American Individualism. (“Much like the Waltons confronting the Depression,” writes historian Eric Foner, a widely respected authority on American slavery, “the family in ‘Roots’ neither seeks nor requires outside help; individual or family effort is always sufficient.”) Ken Burns’s much applauded PBS documentary The Civil War (1990) went even further than Roots in downscaling black injury; the series treated slavery, birth-ascribed inferiority, and the centuries-old denial of dignity as matters of slight consequence. (By “implicitly denying the brutal reality of slavery,” writes historian Jeanie Attie, Burns’s programs crossed “a dangerous moral threshold.” To a group of historians who asked him why slavery had been so slighted, Burns said that any discussion of slavery “would have been lengthy and boring.”)

Mass media treatments of the civil rights protest years carried forward the process, contributing to the “positive” erasure of difference. Big-budget films like Mississippi Burning, together with an array of TV biographical
specials on Dr. Martin Luther King and others, presented the long-running struggle between disenfranchised blacks and the majority white culture as a heartwarming episode of interracial unity; the speed and caringness of white response to the oppression of blacks demonstrated that broadscale race conflict or race difference was inconceivable.

A consciousness that ingests either a part or the whole of this revisionism loses touch with the two fundamental truths of race in America; namely, that because of what happened in the past, blacks and whites cannot yet be the same; and that because what happened in the past was no mere matter of ill will or insult but the outcome of an established caste structure that has only very recently begun to be dismantled, it is not reparable by one-on-one goodwill. The word “slavery” comes to induce stock responses with no vital sense of a grinding devastation of mind visited upon generation after generation. Hoodwinked by the orthodoxy of friendship, the nation either ignores the past, summons for it a detached, correct “compassion,” or gazes at it as though it were a set of aesthetic conventions, like twisted trees and fragmented rocks in nineteenth-century picturesque painting—lifeless phenomena without bearing on the present. The chance of striking through the mask of corporate-underwritten, feel-good, ahistorical racism grows daily more remote. The trade-off—whites promise friendship, blacks accept the status quo—begins to seem like a good deal.

Cosseted by Hollywood’s magic lantern and soothed by press releases from Washington and the American Enterprise Institute, we should never forget what we see and hear for ourselves. Broken out by race, the results of every social tabulation from unemployment to life expectancy add up to a chronicle of atrocity. The history of black America fully explains—to anyone who approaches it honestly—how the disaster happened and why neither guilt money nor lectures on personal responsibility can, in and of themselves, repair the damage. The vision of friendship and sympathy placing blacks and whites “all in the same boat,” rendering them equally able to do each other favors, “to give rides to one another,” is a smiling but monstrous lie.

Notes

Things to Do with the Reading

1. How does this essay use references to time? Look for mention of dates, of terms such as “history” and “long-term” and “centuries-old,” as well as various aspects of the present, the contemporary scene. Write a short essay in which you analyze DeMott’s argument about historical consciousness in America.

2. What is DeMott’s answer to the idea that blacks in America don’t need government aid because they should be able to harness “the energies of American individualism” to improve their condition? Write a short essay in answer to this question.

   The following question may help you to focus. So WHAT that DeMott holds both blacks and whites responsible for projecting these “positive erasures of difference” (paragraph 30)? Consider, for example, the message that DeMott says the African-American-made miniseries Roots sent about the situation of blacks in America and what they should rely on as their best hope for the future.

3. Link: Write a short essay in which you use DeMott as a lens for analyzing the representation of black-white relationships and black-black relationships in Ishmael Reed’s essay “My Neighborhood,” which appears later in this chapter. What are the chances DeMott would find Reed unduly “rosy” about black-black relationships?

4. Links Across Chapters: Notice how, in Chapter 15, James Peck defines melodrama against tragedy in his analysis, “September 11—A National Tragedy.” In what ways do Peck’s anxieties about representations of 9/11 occupy the same ground (sharing assumptions) with DeMott? Find sentences in each essay to put into conversation with each other. Write a short essay in which you consider the extent to which DeMott’s term romance means the same thing as Peck does by melodrama.

   Alternatively, study Kera Bolonik’s analysis of Will & Grace in her review entitled “Oy Gay!” in Chapter 16. Write an essay in which you ponder the extent to which the deception Bolonik sees in the television show resembles the one DeMott observes in his list of films.

5. Application: DeMott cites at least two dozen films that he says present “the long-running struggle between disenfranchised blacks and the majority white culture as a heartwarming episode of interracial unity” (see note at the end of the essay). Using the black-white buddy film White Men Can’t Jump as a primary example of what he calls the “good will messages about race,” DeMott argues that the effect of this cultural trend is to create the illusion that blacks and whites are “all in the same boat,” so that all that is needed to solve centuries of disaster for blacks are displays of warmhearted sympathy.
DeMott’s essay was published in 1995. Your task is to write an essay in which you update it in one of the following ways:

- Consider the extent to which the trend he describes in movies and other media is still alive and well today. Locate one or more current films or other media that seem to you to send the message of black-white friendship as an indication of sameness and as evidence that one-on-one compassion can solve the problems of race in America.

- Locate one or more films or other media that seem to be representative of a different trend in the way that black-white relationships are being represented now. Determine what you think this new trend offers as a message about the state of black-white relations in America, the situation of blacks in America, and what does or does not need to be done about it.

- Use DeMott’s analysis as a model for looking at representational trends depicting marginalized groups besides blacks in contemporary films or other media. Does the trend that you locate seem to fall into DeMott’s category of “deceptive romances”? Or, does the trend represent the group in a way that DeMott might be more optimistic about? In either case, what does this representation “say” about the situation of this group in America?
Assimilation, American Style

This essay offers a brief history of that influential American myth, “the melting pot.” It locates the melting pot in relation to such key terms in thinking about race as “assimilation” and “multiculturalism.” The piece was written in 1997 by the urban planning scholar Peter Salins, a professor of political science at SUNY at Stony Brook and a former Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs of the State University of New York system. Salins is also a senior fellow of the Manhattan Institute’s Center for State and Local Leadership. Along with his many academic books and articles, he has also published a number of articles in the popular press on the housing crisis in urban areas. His most recent book is The Smart Society: Strengthening America’s Greatest Resource, Its People (2014).

California Chinese, Boston Irish, Wisconsin Germans, yes, and Alabama Negroes, have more in common than they have apart. . . . It is a fact that Americans from all sections and of all racial extractions are more alike than the Welsh are like the English, the Lancashireman like the Cockney, or for that matter the Lowland Scot like the Highlander.

—John Steinbeck, 1962

Most Americans, both those who favor and those who oppose assimilation, believe that for immigrants to assimilate, they must abandon their original cultural attributes and conform entirely to the behaviors and customs of the majority of the native-born population. In the terminology of the armed forces, this represents a model of “up or out”: Either immigrants bring themselves “up” to native cultural standards or they are doomed to live “out” of the charmed circle of the national culture.

The notion is not entirely far-fetched because this is exactly what assimilation demands in other societies. North African immigrants to France are, for example, expected to assimilate by abandoning their native folkways with alacrity. Official French policy has been zealous in making North African and other Muslim women give up wearing their chador and, in the schools, instilling a disdain for North African and Muslim culture in their children. To varying degrees, most European countries that have had to absorb large numbers of immigrants since World War II interpret assimilation this way—an interpretation that has promoted national and ethnic disunity.

In America, however, assimilation has not meant repudiating immigrant culture. Assimilation, American style has always been much more flexible and accommodating and, consequently, much more effective in achieving its
purpose—to allow the United States to preserve its “national unity in the face of the influx of hordes of persons of scores of different nationalities,” in the words of the sociologist Henry Fairchild.

A popular way of getting hold of the assimilation idea has been to use a metaphor, and by far the most popular metaphor has been that of the “melting pot,” a term introduced in Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play of that name: “There she lies, the great Melting-Pot—Listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling? ... Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian, black and yellow ... Jew and Gentile. ... East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross—how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purifying flame! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God.”

For all its somewhat ahistorical idealism, the melting-pot metaphor still represents the standard around which fervent proponents of assimilation have rallied over the years. According to the melting-pot metaphor, assimilation involved the fine-grained intermingling of diverse ethnicities and cultures into a single national “alloy.” If taken literally, this metaphor implied two things. The point most commonly taken is that the new human products of the melting pot would, of necessity, be culturally indistinguishable. Presumably every piece of metal taken from a melting pot should have the same chemical composition. Less frequently understood is the metaphor’s implication that natives and their indigenous cultural characteristics would also be irreversibly changed—blended beyond recognition—because they constituted the base material of the melting pot.

These two corollaries of the melting-pot metaphor have long invited criticism by those who thought they were inconsistent with the ethnic realities of American society. Critics of the metaphor have spanned the ideological spectrum and mounted several different lines of attack on it. Empiricists submitted evidence that the melting pot wasn’t working as predicted and concluded, as did Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan in *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), “The point about the melting pot—is that it did not happen.” Other critics rejected the second corollary of the metaphor—that natives were changed by it, too—and saw no reason that native Americans should give up any part of their cultural attributes to “melt” into the alloy. If true assimilation were to occur, the criticism went, immigrants would have to abandon all their cultural baggage and conform to American ways. It is the immigrant, said Fairchild, representing the views of many Americans, “who must undergo the entire transformation; the true member of the American nationality is not called upon to change in the least.”

A third strain of criticism was first voiced by sociologist Horace Kallen in the early part of this century. Among the most prolific American scholars of ethnicity, Kallen argued that it was not only unrealistic but cruel and harmful to force new immigrants to shed their familiar, lifelong cultural attributes
as the price of admission to American society. In place of the melting pot, he called for “cultural pluralism.” In Kallen’s words, national policy should “seek to provide conditions under which each [group] might attain the cultural perfection that is proper to its kind.”

Kallen introduced the concept in 1916, only eight years after publication of Zangwill’s The Melting Pot, determined to challenge that work’s premises. Cultural pluralism rejects melting-pot assimilationism not on empirical grounds but on ideological ones. Kallen and his followers believed that immigrants to the United States should not “melt” into a common national ethnic alloy but, rather, should steadfastly hang on to their cultural ethnicity and band together for social and political purposes even after generations of residence in the United States. As such, cultural pluralism is not an alternative theory of assimilation; it is a theory opposed to assimilation.

Cultural pluralism is, in fact, the philosophical antecedent of modern multiculturalism—what I call “ethnic federalism”: official recognition of distinct, essentially fixed ethnic groups and the doling out of resources based on membership in an ethnic group. Ethnic federalism explicitly rejects the notion of a transcendent American identity, the old idea that out of ethnic diversity there would emerge a single, culturally unified people. Instead, the United States is to be viewed as a vast ethnic federation—Canada’s Anglo-French arrangement, raised to the nth power. Viewing ethnic Americans as members of a federation rather than a union, ethnic federalism, a.k.a. multiculturalism, asserts that ethnic Americans have the right to proportional representation in matters of power and privilege, the right to demand that their “native” culture and putative ethnic ancestors be accorded recognition and respect, and the right to function in their “native” language (even if it is not the language of their birth or they never learned to speak it), not just at home but in the public realm.

Ethnic federalism is at all times an ideology of ethnic grievance and inevitably leads to and justifies ethnic conflict. All the nations that have ever embraced it, from Yugoslavia to Lebanon, from Belgium to Canada, have had to live with perpetual ethnic discord.

Kallen’s views, however, stop significantly short of contemporary multiculturalism in their demands on the larger “native” American society. For Kallen, cultural pluralism was a defensive strategy for “unassimilable” immigrant ethnic groups that required no accommodation by the larger society. Contemporary multiculturalists, on the other hand, by making cultural pluralism the basis of ethnic federalism, demand certain ethnic rights and concessions. By emphasizing the failure of assimilation, multiculturalists hope to provide intellectual and political support for their policies.

The multiculturalists’ rejection of the melting-pot idea is seen in the metaphors they propose in its place. Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson suggested that Americans are members of a “rainbow coalition.” Former New York Mayor
David Dinkins saw his constituents constituting a “gorgeous mosaic.” Former Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm characterized America’s ethnic groups as being like ingredients in a “salad bowl.” Barbara Jordan, recent chairperson of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, said: “We are more than a melting-pot; we are a kaleidoscope.”

These counter-metaphors all share a common premise: that ethnic groups in the United States may live side by side harmoniously, but on two conditions that overturn both assumptions of the melting-pot metaphor. First, immigrants (and black Americans) should never have to (or maybe should not even want to) give up any of their original cultural attributes. And second, there never can or will be a single unified national identity that all Americans can relate to. These two principles are the foundations of cultural pluralism, the antithesis of assimilationism.

While all these metaphors—including the melting pot—are colorful ways of representing assimilation, they don’t go far in giving one an accurate understanding of what assimilation is really about. For example, across the ideological spectrum, they all invoke some external, impersonal assimilating agent. Who, exactly, is the “great alchemist” of the melting pot? What force tosses the salad or pieces together the mosaic? By picturing assimilation as an impersonal, automatic process and thus placing it beyond analysis, the metaphors fail to illuminate its most important secrets. Assimilation, if it is to succeed, must be a voluntary process, by both the assimilating immigrants and the assimilated-to natives. Assimilation is a human accommodation, not a mechanical production.

The metaphors also mislead as to the purposes of assimilation. The melting pot is supposed to turn out an undifferentiated alloy—a uniform, ethnically neutral, American protoperson. Critics have long pointed out that this idea is far-fetched. But is it even desirable? And if it is desirable, does it really foster a shared national identity? The greatest failing of the melting-pot metaphor is that it overreaches. It exaggerates the degree to which immigrants’ ethnicity is likely to be extinguished by exposure to American society and it exaggerates the need to extinguish ethnicity. By being too compelling, too idealistic, the melting-pot idea has inadvertently helped to discredit the very assimilation paradigm it was meant to celebrate.

On the other hand, behind their unexceptionable blandness, the antithetical cultural pluralist metaphors are profoundly insidious. By suggesting that the product of assimilation is mere ethnic coexistence without integration, they undermine the objectives of assimilation, even if they appear more realistic. Is assimilation only about diverse ethnic groups sharing the same national space? That much can be said for any multiethnic society. If the ethnic greens of the salad or the fragments of the mosaic do not interact and identify with each other, no meaningful assimilation is taking place.

Perhaps a new assimilation metaphor should be introduced—one that depends not on a mechanical process like the melting pot but on human
dynamics. Assimilation might be viewed as more akin to religious conversion than anything else. In the terms of this metaphor, the immigrant is the convert, American society is the religious order being joined, and assimilation is the process by which the conversion takes place. Just as there are many motives for people to immigrate, so are there many motives for them to change their religion: spiritual, practical (marrying a person of another faith), and materialistic (joining some churches can lead to jobs or subsidized housing). But whatever the motivation, conversion usually involves the consistent application of certain principles. Conversion is a mutual decision requiring affirmation by both the convert and the religious order he or she wishes to join. Converts are expected in most (but not all) cases to renounce their old religions. But converts do not have to change their behavior in any respects other than those that relate to the new religion. They are expected only to believe in its theological principles, observe its rituals and holidays, and live by its moral precepts. Beyond that, they can be rich or poor, practice any trade, pursue any avocational interests, and have any racial or other personal attributes. Once they undergo conversion, they are eagerly welcomed into the fellowship of believers. They have become part of “us” rather than “them.” This is undoubtedly what writer G. K. Chesterton had in mind when he said: “America is a nation with the soul of a church.”

Notes

1. Chadors are the long black veils worn by Muslim women.

Things to Do with the Reading

1. Salins’s essay is good at making the implicit explicit and at UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS (reasoning back to premises—see Chapter 2). He is especially interested in the implications of the metaphors that have been used to talk about cultural identity and assimilation in America, such as the melting pot. Using Salins's method as a model, write an essay in which you draw out the implications of Jesse Jackson’s metaphor—the rainbow coalition. (See Chapter 5 on figurative logic.)

   Here are some supporting questions. How is the rainbow metaphor like and unlike the melting pot metaphor? Next, draw out the implications of Salins’s proposed religious conversion metaphor as defined in the last paragraph of the essay. How is this metaphor like and unlike the rainbow and the melting pot?

2. A metaphor is a comparison, a way of thinking by analogy (see Chapter 5 on metaphor). In order to be persuasive and fair, the two things being
compared need to have enough in common to justify the comparison. What is compared to what in Salins’s conversion metaphor? Write a short essay on what this analogy suggests about Salins’s way of thinking about being (and becoming) American?

3. Though Salins’s piece is a historical analysis, it also is a problem/solution piece with a point of view. This point of view emerges gradually, but it becomes evident when you notice that the critique offered of each idea on assimilation, starting with the melting pot, is essentially the same critique. Write a few paragraphs in which you compare paragraphs 6 and 11, locating and exploring the significance of the common element.

4. Write a rhetorical analysis of the Salins essay (for discussion of rhetorical analyses, see especially Chapter 1). Locate word choice that seems to you to reveal something about Salins’s target audience and the kind of relationship he wishes to establish with these readers. What, for example, does the phrase “native folkways” (in the essay’s second paragraph) reveal in this regard?

5. **Links Across Chapters:** First visit the website for the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, of which Salins is a fellow. Then write an essay in which you apply the lexicon contained in Chris Borick’s “On Political Labels” (in Chapter 15) to the key words in the website’s articulation of its mission.

   Here are some ways to prompt your analysis. Where does the website fit in terms of the political categories discussed in Borick’s essay? Find language in Borick’s essay that would make Salins’s point of view identifiable among the categories discussed in “On Political Labels.”

6. **Application:** The issues and questions raised in Salins’s essay are far from dead. On the basis of the historical definitions Salins provides, spend some time (perhaps a week) observing and making note of the language used in the media (newspapers, websites, television) for talking about issues of assimilation and cultural identity. What metaphors do you find and what do these reveal about contemporary thinking on this issue? Write a short essay in which you present your results.
In this classic analysis, Peggy McIntosh takes a look at her own “overprivilege” by virtue of her skin color and asks the question, what do I take for granted as a white person in ways that I am blind to? To answer, she inventories herself, arriving at a list of “unacknowledged privileges” that express “unconscious oppressiveness” as she imagines it can be perceived by persons of color. For many years the associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, McIntosh is the founder and co-director of the National S.E.E.D (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project on Inclusive Curriculum.

Through work to bring materials and perspectives from Women’s Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men’s unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged in the curriculum, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages that men gain from women’s disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully recognized, acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon with a life of its own, I realized that since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege that was similarly denied and protected, but alive and real in its effects. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. This paper is a partial record of my personal observations and not a scholarly analysis. It is based on my daily experiences within my particular circumstances.

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.

Since I have had trouble facing white privilege, and describing its results in my life, I saw parallels here with men’s reluctance to acknowledge male
privilege. Only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging that women are
disadvantaged to acknowledging that men have unearned advantage, or
that unearned privilege has not been good for men’s development as human
beings, or for society’s development, or that privilege systems might ever be
challenged and changed.

I will review here several types or layers of denial that I see at work protect-
ing, and preventing awareness about, entrenched male privilege. Then I will
draw parallels, from my own experience, with the denials that veil the facts
of white privilege. Finally, I will list forty-six ordinary and daily ways in which
I experience having white privilege, by contrast with my African-American
colleagues in the same building. This list is not intended to be generalizable.
Others can make their own lists from within their own life circumstances.

Writing this paper has been difficult, despite warm receptions for the
talks on which it is based.¹ For describing white privilege makes one newly
accountable. As we in Women’s Studies work reveal male privilege and ask
men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white
privilege must ask, “Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?”

The denial of men’s overprivileged state takes many forms in discus-
sions of curriculum change work. Some claim that men must be central in
the curriculum because they have done most of what is important or dis-
tinctive in life or in civilization. Some recognize sexism in the curriculum
but deny that it makes male students seem unduly important in life. Others
agree that certain individual thinkers are male oriented but deny that there
is any systemic tendency in disciplinary frameworks or epistemology to
overempower men as a group. Those men who do grant that male privilege
takes institutionalized and embedded forms are still likely to deny that
male hegemony has opened doors for them personally. Virtually all men
deny that male overreward alone can explain men’s centrality in all the
inner sanctums of our most powerful institutions. Moreover, those few
who will acknowledge that male privilege systems have overempowered
them usually end up doubting that we could dismantle these privilege
systems. They may say they will work to improve women’s status, in the
society or in the university, but they can’t or won’t support the idea of
lessening men’s. In curricular terms, this is the point at which they say
that they regret they cannot use any of the interesting new scholarship
on women because the syllabus is full. When the talk turns to giving men
less cultural room, even the most thoughtful and fair-minded of the men I
know will tend to reflect, or fall back on, conservative assumptions about
the inevitability of present gender relations and distributions of power,
calling on precedent or sociobiology and psychobiology to demonstrate
that male domination is natural and follows inevitably from evolution-
ary pressures. Others resort to arguments from “experience” or religion or
social responsibility or wishing and dreaming.
After I realized, through faculty development work in Women's Studies, the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don’t see ourselves that way. At the very least, obliviousness of one's privileged state can make a person or group irritating to be with. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence, unable to see that it put me “ahead” in any way, or put my people ahead, overrewarding us and yet also paradoxically damaging us, or that it could or should be changed.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. At school, we are not taught about slavery in any depth; we are not taught to see slaveholders as damaged people. Slaves were seen as the only group at risk of being dehumanized. My schooling followed the pattern which Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us.” I think many of us know how obnoxious this attitude can be in men.

After frustration with men who would not recognize male privilege, I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. It is crude work, at this stage, but I will give here a list of special circumstances and conditions I experience that I did not earn but that I have been made to feel are mine by birth, by citizenship, and by virtue of being a conscientious law-abiding “normal” person of goodwill. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though these other privileging factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can see, my Afro-American co-workers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be reasonably sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives.

6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.

7. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.

10. I can be fairly sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.

11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another woman’s voice in a group in which she is the only member of her race.

12. I can go into a book shop and count on finding the writing of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.

13. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable.

14. I could arrange to protect our young children most of the time from people who might not like them.

15. I did not have to educate our children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

16. I can be pretty sure that my children’s teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others’ attitudes toward their race.

17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.

18. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.

19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.

20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

22. I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.

24. I can be reasonably sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.

25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.

26. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.

27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.

28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.

29. I can be fairly sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.

30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn’t a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.

31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.

32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.

33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.

34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.

35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.

36. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.

38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative, or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
43. If I have low credibility as a leader, I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my race.
45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me, white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one’s life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own. These perceptions mean also that my moral condition is not what I had been led to believe. The appearance of being a good citizen rather than a troublemaker comes in large part from having all sorts of doors open automatically because of my color.

A further paralysis of nerve comes from literary silence protecting privilege. My clearest memories of finding such analysis are in Lillian Smith’s unparalleled Killers of the Dream and Margaret Andersen’s review of Karen and Mamie Field’s Lemon Swamp. Smith, for example, wrote about walking toward black children on the street and knowing they would step into the gutter; Andersen contrasted the pleasure that she, as a white child, took on summer driving trips to the south with Karen Fields’ memories of driving in a closed car stocked with all necessities lest, in stopping, her black family should suffer “insult, or worse.” Adrienne Rich also recognizes and writes about daily experiences of privilege, but in my observation, white women’s writing in this area is far more often on systemic racism than on our daily lives as light-skinned women.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted, as neutral, normal, and universally available to everybody, just as I once thought of a male-focused curriculum as the neutral or accurate account that can speak for all. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these
varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive. Before proposing some more finely tuned categorization, I will make some observations about the general effects of these conditions on my life and expectations.

In this potpourri of examples, some privileges make me feel at home in the world. Others allow me to escape penalties or dangers that others suffer. Through some, I escape fear, anxiety, insult, injury, or a sense of not being welcome, not being real. Some keep me from having to hide, to be in disguise, to feel sick or crazy, to negotiate each transaction from the position of being an outsider or, within my group, a person who is suspected of having too close links with a dominant culture. Most keep me from having to be angry.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf. I could measure up to the cultural standards and take advantage of the many options I saw around me to make what the culture would call a success of my life. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as “belonging” in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely. My life was reflected back to me frequently enough so that I felt, with regard to my race, if not to my sex, like one of the real people.

Whether through the curriculum or in the newspaper, the television, the economic system, or the general look of people in the streets, I received daily signals and indications that my people counted and that others either didn’t exist or must be trying, not very successfully, to be like people of my race. I was given cultural permission not to hear voices of people of other races or a tepid cultural tolerance for hearing or acting on such voices. I was also raised not to suffer seriously from anything that darker-skinned people might say about my group, “protected,” though perhaps I should more accurately say prohibited, through the habits of my economic class and social group, from living in racially mixed groups or being reflective about interactions between people or differing races.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color.

For this reason, the word “privilege” now seems to me misleading. Its connotations are too positive to fit the conditions and behaviors which “privilege systems” produce. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned, or conferred by birth or luck. School graduates are reminded they are privileged and urged to use their (enviable) assets well. The word...
“privilege” carries the connotation of being something everyone must want. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work to systematically overempower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance, gives permission to control, because of one’s race or sex. The kind of privilege that gives license to some people to be, at best, thoughtless and, at worst, murderous should not continue to be referred to as a desirable attribute. Such “privilege” may be widely desired without being in any way beneficial to the whole society.

Moreover, though “privilege” may confer power, it does not confer moral strength. Those who do not depend on conferred dominance have traits and qualities that may never develop in those who do. Just as Women’s Studies courses indicate that women survive their political circumstances to lead lives that hold the human race together, so “underprivileged” people of color who are the world’s majority have survived their oppression and lived survivors’ lives from which the white global minority can and must learn. In some groups, those dominated have actually become strong through not having all of these unearned advantages, and this gives them a great deal to teach the others. Members of so-called privileged groups can seem foolish, ridiculous, infantile, or dangerous by contrast.

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systemically. Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is, in fact, permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society and should be considered as the entitlement of everyone. Others, like the privilege not to listen to less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups. Still others, like finding one’s staple foods everywhere, may be a function of being a member of a numerical majority in the population. Others have to do with not having to labor under pervasive negative stereotyping and mythology.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages that we can work to spread, to the point where they are not advantages at all but simply part of the normal civic and social fabric, and negative types of advantage that unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the positive “privilege” of belonging, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, fosters development and should not be seen as privilege for a few. It is, let us say, an entitlement that none of us should have to earn; ideally it is an unearned entitlement. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them. The negative “privilege” that gave me cultural permission not to take darker-skinned Others seriously can be seen as arbitrarily conferred dominance and should not be desirable for anyone. This paper results from a process of coming to see that some of the power that I originally saw as attendant on being a human being...
in the United States consisted in *uneearned advantage* and *conferred dominance*, as well as other kinds of special circumstance not universally taken for granted.

In writing this paper I have also realized that white identity and status (as well as class identity and status) give me considerable power to choose whether to broach this subject and its trouble. I can pretty well decide whether to disappear and avoid and not listen and escape the dislike I may engender in other people through this essay, or interrupt, answer, interpret, preach, correct, criticize, and control to some extent what goes on in reaction to it. Being white, I am given considerable power to escape many kinds of danger or penalty as well as to choose which risks I want to take.

There is an analogy here, once again with Women's Studies. Our male colleagues do not have a great deal to lose in supporting Women's Studies, but they do not have a great deal to lose if they oppose it either. They simply have the power to decide whether to commit themselves to more equitable distributions of power. They will probably feel few penalties whatever choice they make; they do not seem, in any obvious short-term sense, the ones at risk, though they are, we are all at risk because of the behaviors that have been rewarded in them.

Through Women's Studies work I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance and if so, what we will do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. We need more down-to-earth writing by people about these taboo subjects. We need more understanding of the ways in which white “privilege” damages white people, for these are not the same ways in which it damages the victimized. Skewed white psyches are an inseparable part of the picture, though I do not want to confuse the kinds of damage done to the holders of special assets and to those who suffer the deficits. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn’t affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see “whiteness” as a racial identity. Many men likewise think that Women's Studies does not bear on their own existences because they are not female; they do not see themselves as having gendered identities. Insisting on the universal “effects” of “privilege” systems, then, becomes one of our chief tasks, and being more explicit about the *particular* effects in particular contexts is another. Men need to join us in this work.

In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need to similarly examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation. Professor Marnie Evans suggested to me that in many ways the list I made also applies directly to heterosexual privilege. This is a still more taboo subject than race privilege: the daily ways
in which heterosexual privilege makes some persons comfortable or pow-
erful, providing supports, assets, approvals, and rewards to those who live
or expect to live in heterosexual pairs. Unpacking that content is still more
difficult, owing to the deeper imbeddedness of heterosexual advantage and
dominance and stricter taboos surrounding these.

But to start such an analysis I would put this observation from my own
experience: The fact that I live under the same roof with a man triggers all
kinds of societal assumptions about my worth, politics, life, and value and
triggers a host of unearned advantages and powers. After recasting many
elements from the original list I would add further observations like these:

1. My children do not have to answer questions about why I live with my
   partner (my husband).
2. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our
   household.
3. Our children are given texts and classes that implicitly support our
   kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic
   partnership.
4. I can travel alone or with my husband without expecting embarrass-
   ment or hostility in those who deal with us.
5. Most people I meet will see my marital arrangements as an asset to my
   life or as a favorable comment on my likability, my competence, or my
   mental health.
6. I can talk about the social events of a weekend without fearing most
   listeners’ reactions.
7. I will feel welcomed and “normal” in the usual walks of public life, insti-
   tutional and social.
8. In many contexts, I am seen as “all right” in daily work on women
   because I do not live chiefly with women.

Difficulties and dangers surrounding the tasks of finding parallels are
many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advan-
tages associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it
is hard to isolate aspects of unearned advantage that derive chiefly from
social class, economic class, race, religion, region, sex, or ethnic identity.
The oppressions are both distinct and interlocking, as the Combahee River
Collective statement of 1977 continues to remind us eloquently.3

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They
take both active forms that we can see and embedded forms that members
of the dominant group are taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not
see myself as racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in indi-
vidual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems
conferring racial dominance on my group from birth. Likewise, we are taught
to think that sexism or heterosexism is carried on only through intentional, individual acts of discrimination, meanness, or cruelty, rather than in invisible systems conferring unsought dominance on certain groups. Disapproving of the systems won’t be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes; many men think sexism can be ended by individual changes in daily behavior toward women. But a man’s sex provides advantage for him whether or not he approves of the way in which dominance has been conferred on his group. A “white” skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate, but cannot end, these problems. To redesign social systems, we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist.

Obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already. Though systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and I imagine for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken invisible privilege systems and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power-systems on a broader base.

Notes

1 This paper was presented at the Virginia Women’s Studies Association conference in Richmond in April 1986, and the American Educational Research Association conference in Boston in October 1986, and discussed with two groups of participants in the Dodge seminars for Secondary School Teachers in New York and Boston in the spring of 1987.


Things to Do with the Reading

1. McIntosh organizes her essay around a single simile (comparison) in the fourth paragraph: “White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.” Find and discuss single sentences and short passages in the essay that explain some of the word choice in this simile—“invisible,” for example, and “weightless.” Also paraphrase both the sentence we’ve quoted and the ones you find. Then write a short interpretive essay on the items in the backpack as listed in the quoted sentence and other similar ones. To what does the figurative language in these sentences correspond?

2. McIntosh presents this essay (originally given as a paper at a Women’s Studies conference) as a personal reflection: “This paper is a partial record of my personal observations and not a scholarly analysis. It is based on my daily experiences within my particular circumstances.” Even though the piece is written in the first person and includes the author’s personal experience, it also employs language characteristic of academic discourse in the social sciences. The more specialized, more academic language allows McIntosh to give her argument greater specificity.

Do Paraphrase × 3 (see Chapter 2) with the following sentences from the essay and then write a short essay in which you explain what these add to the essay’s way of defining white privilege.

- “Others agree that certain individual thinkers are male oriented but deny that there is any systemic tendency in disciplinary frameworks or epistemology to overempower men as a group” (paragraph 8).
- “The negative ‘privilege’ that gave me cultural permission not to take darker-skinned Others seriously can be seen as arbitrarily conferred dominance and should not be desirable for anyone” (paragraph 22).

3. Write a short essay in which you explore McIntosh’s analogy between male privilege and white privilege. What features of her experience—as a white woman—does McIntosh posit as analogous to those of white males?

4. Link: Write an essay in which you use the following two sentences, one from McIntosh’s essay and one from DeMott’s, to put these two writers’ thinking into conversation. Which key words in each quote are the best indications of common ground between McIntosh and DeMott? (See Chapter 7 on putting sources into conversation with each other.)

- McIntosh: “Obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United
States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all” (paragraph 30).

- DeMott: “Factitious renderings of the American past blur the outlines of black-white conflict, redefine the ground of black grievances for the purpose of diminishing those grievances, [and] restage black life in accordance with the illusory conventions of American success mythology” (paragraph 28).

5. **Application**: Before she offers her list of privileges, McIntosh offers a somewhat disingenuous disclaimer—“This list is not intended to be generalizable”—and then proceeds to invite her readers to undergo the same self-scrutiny she has undertaken: “Others can make their own lists from within their own life circumstances.”

   This challenge brings to mind two obvious applications: to expand McIntosh’s list and/or to corroborate it (that is, find confirming evidence) with your own experience.

   Give yourself at least a week. Carry around a special notebook for the purpose. Keep the idea of unacknowledged privilege alive in the back of your mind, as you visit sites where people congregate—a square, a shopping district, a lunchroom—with the conscious project of conducting observation.

   At the end of the week, write up your results. Start with a list, but then take the most vivid instances and expand them into brief narratives.
Richard Rodríguez

The Fear of Losing a Culture

Richard Rodríguez provides a distinctively Latin American spin on the concept of the melting pot. He argues that Latin America was “formed by a rape that became a marriage” and goes on to tell his North American audience, “Expect marriage.” A teacher, journalist (formerly on PBS), and award-winning essayist, Rodríguez is the child of Mexican American immigrants. He earned degrees at Stanford and Columbia and also did graduate work at UC-Berkeley, before deciding to become a freelance essayist. In addition to his famous 1982 memoir, Hunger of Memory, from which this piece is taken, Rodríguez has written four other books, including Brown and in 2013, Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography, a collection of essays about spirituality that focus on the failure of our sense of place in the world.

What is culture?

The immigrant shrugs. Latin American immigrants come to the United States with only the things they need in mind—not abstractions like culture. Money. They need dollars. They need food. Maybe they need to get out of the way of bullets.

Most of us who concern ourselves with Hispanic-American culture, as painters, musicians, writers—or as sons and daughters—are the children of immigrants. We have grown up on this side of the border, in the land of Elvis Presley and Thomas Edison; our lives are prescribed by the mall, by the DMV and the Chinese restaurant. Our imaginations yet vacillate between an Edenic Latin America (the blue door)—which nevertheless betrayed our parents—and the repellent plate glass of a real American city—which has been good to us.

Hispanic-American culture is where the past meets the future. Hispanic-American culture is not a Hispanic milestone only, not simply a celebration at the crossroads. America transforms into pleasure what America cannot avoid. Is it any coincidence that at a time when Americans are troubled by the encroachment of the Mexican desert, Americans discover a chic in cactus, in the decorator colors of the Southwest? In sand?

Hispanic-American culture of the sort that is now showing (the teen movie, the rock songs) may exist in an hourglass; may in fact be irrelevant to the epic. The U.S. Border Patrol works through the night to arrest the flow of illegal immigrants over the border, even as Americans wait in line to get into “La Bamba.” Even as Americans vote to declare, once and for all, that English shall be the official language of the United States, Madonna starts recording in Spanish.
But then so is Bill Cosby's show irrelevant to the 10 o'clock news, where families huddle together in fear on porches, pointing at the body of the slain boy bagged in tarpaulin. Which is not to say that Bill Cosby or Michael Jackson are irrelevant to the future or without neo-Platonic influence. Like players within the play, they prefigure, they resolve. They make black and white audiences aware of a bond that may not yet exist.

Before a national TV audience, Rita Moreno tells Geraldo Rivera that her dream as an actress is to play a character rather like herself: “I speak English perfectly well . . . I'm not dying from poverty . . . I want to play that kind of Hispanic woman, which is to say, an American citizen.” This is an actress talking, these are showbiz pieties. But Moreno expresses as well the general Hispanic-American predicament. Hispanics want to belong to America without betraying the past.

Hispanics fear losing ground in any negotiation with the American city. We come from an expansive, an intimate culture that has been judged second-rate by the United States of America. For reasons of pride, therefore, as much as of affection, we are reluctant to give up our past. Hispanics often express a fear of “losing” culture. Our fame in the United States has been our resistance to assimilation.

The symbol of Hispanic culture has been the tongue of flame—Spanish. But the remarkable legacy Hispanics carry from Latin America is not language—an inflatable skin—but breath itself, capacity of soul, an inclination to live. The genius of Latin America is the habit of synthesis.

We assimilate. Just over the border there is the example of Mexico, the country from which the majority of U.S. Hispanics come. Mexico is mestizo—Indian and Spanish. Within a single family, Mexicans are light-skinned and dark. It is impossible for the Mexican to say, in the scheme of things, where the Indian begins and the Spaniard surrenders.

In culture as in blood, Latin America was formed by a rape that became a marriage. Due to the absorbing generosity of the Indian, European culture took on new soil. What Latin America knows is that people create one another as they marry. In the music of Latin America you will hear the litany of bloodlines—the African drum, the German accordion, the cry from the minaret.

The United States stands as the opposing New World experiment. In North America the Indian and the European stood apace. Whereas Latin America was formed by a medieval Catholic dream of one world—of meltdown conversion—the United States was built up from Protestant individualism. The American melting pot washes away only embarrassment; it is the necessary initiation into public life. The American faith is that our national strength derives from separateness, from “diversity.” The glamour of the United States is a carnival promise: You can lose weight, get rich as Rockefeller, tough up your roots, get a divorce.

Immigrants still come for the promise. But the United States wavers in its faith. As long as there was space enough, sky enough, as long as economic success validated individualism, loneliness was not too high a price to pay. (The cabin on the prairie or the Sony Walkman.)
As we near the end of the American century, two alternative cultures beckon the American imagination—both highly communal cultures—the Asian and the Latin American. The United States is a literal culture. Americans devour what we might otherwise fear to become. Sushi will make us corporate warriors. Combination Plate #3, smothered in mestizo gravy, will burn a hole in our hearts.

Latin America offers passion. Latin America has a life—I mean life—big clouds, unambiguous themes, death, birth, faith, that the United States, for all its quality of life, seems without now. Latin America offers communal riches: an undistressed leisure, a kitchen table, even a full sorrow. Such is the solitude of America, such is the urgency of American need, Americans reach right past a fledgling, homegrown Hispanic-American culture for the real thing—the darker bottle of Mexican beer; the denser novel of a Latin American master.

For a long time, Hispanics in the United States withheld from the United States our Latin American gift. We denied the value of assimilation. But as our presence is judged less foreign in America, we will produce a more generous art, less timid, less parochial. Carlos Santana, Luis Valdez, Linda Ronstadt—Hispanic Americans do not have a “pure” Latin American art to offer. Expect bastard themes, expect ironies, comic conclusions. For we live on this side of the border, where Kraft manufactures bricks of “Mexican style” Velveeta, and where Jack in the Box serves “Fajita Pita.”

The flame-red Chevy floats a song down the Pan American Highway: From a rolled-down window, the grizzled voice of Willie Nelson rises in disembodied harmony with the voice of Julio Iglesias. Gabby Hayes and Cisco are thus resolved.

Expect marriage. We will change America even as we will be changed. We will disappear with you into a new miscegenation.

Along the border, real conflicts remain. But the ancient tear separating Europe from itself—the Catholic Mediterranean from the Protestant north—may yet heal itself in the New World. For generations, Latin America has been the place—the bed—of a confluence of so many races and cultures that Protestant North America shuddered to imagine it.

Imagine it.

Things to Do with the Reading

1. Rodriguez has an interesting fix on the way that Americans react to other cultures. He says that “America transforms into pleasure what America cannot avoid” (paragraph 4) and that “Americans devour what we might otherwise fear to become” (paragraph 14). Try paraphrasing these remarks in their given context, as a way of uncovering their implications. Be alert to figurative language—why, for example, “devour”? Write a short essay on the rhetoric the essay employs to talk about
(crossing) cultural boundaries. You might find it useful to focus on the use of figurative language in particular (see Chapter 5).

2. Paraphrase the following assertions from Rodriguez’s essay: “Expect bastard themes” and “We will disappear with you into a new miscegenation.” Be sure to look up the word “miscegenation” and the history of anti-miscegenation laws in America. Then use your paraphrases to write a paragraph or so on where you think Rodriguez stands on a sliding scale in which the melting pot, standing for assimilation, is at one end and Jesse Jackson’s metaphor of the rainbow coalition, standing for coexistence and respect for diversity, is on the other.

3. One of your ongoing projects in this unit should be to work out the logic and implications of these two governing metaphors: rainbow and melting pot. Rodriguez says, for example, that “The genius of Latin America is the habit of synthesis.” To what extent do “synthesis” and “assimilation” have subtly but significantly different meanings?

4. Link: What is the source of hope in Rodriguez’s argument? What objections, if any, do you think DeMott would have to Rodriguez’s position on the issue of diversity vs. assimilation, and how might Rodriguez respond?

5. Link: In an interview conducted 15 years after the publication of *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez said, “I am no more in favor of assimilation than I am in favor of the Pacific Ocean. Assimilation is not something to oppose or favor—it just happens.” Write an essay in which you explore how Rodriguez’s point of view conflicts with the view of assimilation offered by Peter Salins in “Assimilation, American Style.” How might we account for the difference in the two writers’ perspectives? What are the assumptions that underlie each of their essays? (For UNCOVERING ASSUMPTIONS, see Chapter 2.)

6. Take the passage at the end of paragraph 16, which reads, “Expect bastard themes, expect ironies, comic conclusions. For we live on this side of the border where Kraft manufactures bricks of ‘Mexican style’ Velveeta, and where Jack in the Box serves ‘Fajita Pita.’” How does the essay condition us to respond to this passage? In what verbal strands (see THE METHOD, Chapter 1) does this language participate? This passage occurs shortly before the conclusion. Write a short essay on the way Rodriguez chooses to bring his ruminations to a close in the final five paragraphs.
Zadie Smith

Speaking in Tongues

Whereas DeMott’s “Put On a Happy Face” suggests that diversity is more real, more terrible, and more intractable than feel-good assimilationist films want us to think, Zadie Smith argues in “Speaking in Tongues” that assimilation is also real—and that difference can be easy to lose and impossible to reclaim. Originally a lecture given at the New York Public Library in 2008, this essay begins as a memoir but then expands to include Eliza Doolittle (from Pygmalion and My Fair Lady), Shakespeare, and most notably, Barack Obama—all speakers with “double voices.” One of the most important younger novelists writing in English, Zadie Smith was born and raised in a London suburb as a member of a mixed race family. She is the author of three novels (most famously, White Teeth) and a collection of essays.

1.

Hello. This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place—this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged Clarissa and a taste for port. Maybe this fact is only what it seems to be—a case of bald social climbing—but at the time I genuinely thought this was the voice of lettered people, and that if I didn’t have the voice of lettered people I would never truly be lettered. A braver person, perhaps, would have stood firm, teaching her peers a useful lesson by example: not all lettered people need be of the same class, nor speak identically. I went the other way. Partly out of cowardice and a constitutional eagerness to please, but also because I didn’t quite see it as a straight swap, of this voice for that. My own childhood had been the story of this and that combined, of the synthesis of disparate things. It never occurred to me that I was leaving the London district of Willesden for Cambridge. I thought I was adding Cambridge to Willesden, this new way of talking to that old way. Adding a new kind of knowledge to a different kind I already had. And for a while, that’s how it was: at home, during the holidays, I spoke with my old voice, and in the old voice seemed to feel and speak things that I couldn’t express in college, and vice versa. I felt a sort of wonder at the flexibility of the thing. Like being alive twice.

But flexibility is something that requires work if it is to be maintained. Recently my double voice has deserted me for a single one, reflecting the smaller world into which my work has led me. Willesden was a big, colorful, working-class sea; Cambridge was a smaller, posher pond, and almost univo- cal; the literary world is a puddle. This voice I picked up along the way is no

longer an exotic garment I put on like a college gown whenever I choose—
now it is my only voice, whether I want it or not. I regret it; I should have kept
both voices alive in my mouth. They were both a part of me. But how the cul-
ture warns against it! As George Bernard Shaw delicately put it in his preface
to the play Pygmalion, “many thousands of [British] men and women . . . have
sloughed off their native dialects and acquired a new tongue.”

Few, though, will admit to it. Voice adaptation is still the original British
sin. Monitoring and exposing such citizens is a national pastime, as popular
as sex scandals and libel cases. If you lean toward the Atlantic with your high-
rising terminals you’re a sell-out; if you pronounce borrowed European words
in their original style—even if you try something as innocent as parmigiano
for “parmesan”—you’re a fraud. If you go (metaphorically speaking) down the
British class scale, you’ve gone from Cockney to “mockney,” and can expect a
public tar and feathering; to go the other way is to perform an unforgivable
act of class betrayal. Voices are meant to be unchanging and singular. There’s
no quicker way to insult an ex-pat Scotsman in London than to tell him he’s
lost his accent. We feel that our voices are who we are, and that to have more
than one, or to use different versions of a voice for different occasions, repre-
sents, at best, a Janus-faced duplicity, and at worst, the loss of our very souls.

Whoever changes their voice takes on, in Britain, a queerly tragic dimen-
sion. They have betrayed that puzzling dictum “To thine own self be true,”
so often quoted approvingly as if it represented the wisdom of Shakespeare
rather than the hot air of Polonius. “What’s to become of me? What’s to become of
me?” wails Eliza Doolittle, realizing her middling dilemma. With a voice too
posh for the flower girls and yet too redolent of the gutter for the ladies in
Mrs. Higgins’s drawing room.

But Eliza—patron saint of the tragically double-voiced—is worthy of
closer inspection. The first thing to note is that both Eliza and Pygmalion are
entirely didactic, as Shaw meant them to be. “I delight,” he wrote:

in throwing [Pygmalion] at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the
parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my conten-
tion that art should never be anything else.

He was determined to tell the unambiguous tale of a girl who changes
her voice and loses herself. And so she arrives like this:

Don’t you be so saucy. You ain’t heard what I come for yet. Did you tell
him I come in a taxi? . . . Oh, we are proud! He ain’t above giving les-
sions, not him: I heard him say so. Well, I ain’t come here to ask for any
compliment; and if my money’s not good enough I can go elsewhere . . .
Now you know, don’t you? I’m come to have lessons, I am. And to pay
for em too: make no mistake . . . I want to be a lady in a flower shop
stead of selling at the corner of Tottenham Court Road. But they won’t
take me unless I can talk more genteel.
And she leaves like this:

I can’t. I could have done it once; but now I can’t go back to it. Last night, when I was wandering about, a girl spoke to me; and I tried to get back into the old way with her; but it was no use. You told me, you know, that when a child is brought to a foreign country, it picks up the language in a few weeks, and forgets its own. Well, I am a child in your country. I have forgotten my own language, and can speak nothing but yours.

By the end of his experiment, Professor Higgins has made his Eliza an awkward, in-between thing, neither flower girl nor lady, with one voice lost and another gained, at the steep price of everything she was, and everything she knows. Almost as afterthought, he sends Eliza’s father, Alfred Doolittle, to his doom, too, securing a three-thousand-a-year living for the man on the condition that Doolittle lecture for the Wannafeller Moral Reform World League up to six times a year. This burden brings the philosophical dust-man into the close, unwanted embrace of what he disdainfully calls “middle class morality.” By the time the curtain goes down, both Doolittles find themselves stuck in the middle, which is, to Shaw, a comi-tragic place to be, with the emphasis on the tragic. What are they fit for? What will become of them?

How persistent this horror of the middling spot is, this dread of the interim place! It extends through the specter of the tragic mulatto, to the plight of the transsexual, to our present anxiety—disguised as genteel concern—for the contemporary immigrant, tragically split, we are sure, between worlds, ideas, cultures, voices—whatever will become of them? Something’s got to give—one voice must be sacrificed for the other. What is double must be made singular.

But this, the apparent didactic moral of Eliza’s story, is undercut by the fact of the play itself, which is an orchestra of many voices, simultaneously and perfectly rendered, with no shade of color or tone sacrificed. Higgins’s Harley Street high-handedness is the equal of Mrs. Pierce’s lower-middle-class gentility, Pickering’s kindhearted aristocratic imprecision every bit as convincing as Arthur Doolittle’s Nietzschein Cockney-by-way-of-Wales. Shaw had a wonderful ear, able to reproduce almost as many quirks of the English language as Shakespeare’s. Shaw was in possession of a gift he wouldn’t, or couldn’t, give Eliza: he spoke in tongues.

It gives me a strange sensation to turn from Shaw’s melancholy Pygmalion story to another, infinitely more hopeful version, written by the new president of the United States of America. Of course, his ear isn’t half bad either. In Dreams from My Father, the new president displays an enviable facility for dialogue, and puts it to good use, animating a cast every bit as various as the one James Baldwin—an obvious influence—conjured for his own many-voiced novel Another Country. Obama can do young Jewish male, black old
lady from the South Side, white woman from Kansas, Kenyan elders, white
Harvard nerds, black Columbia nerds, activist women, churchmen, security
guards, bank tellers, and even a British man called Mr. Wilkerson, who on
a starry night on safari says credibly British things like: “I believe that’s the
Milky Way.” This new president doesn’t just speak for his people. He can speak
them. It is a disorienting talent in a president; we’re so unused to it. I have
to pinch myself to remember who wrote the following well-observed scene,
seemingly plucked from a comic novel:

“Man, I’m not going to any more of these bullshit Punahou parties.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said the last time . . . .”

“I mean it this time . . . . These girls are A-1, USDA-certified racists. All
of ‘em. White girls. Asian girls—shoot, these Asians worse than the
whites. Think we got a disease or something.”

“Maybe they’re looking at that big butt of yours. Man, I thought you
were in training.”

“Get your hands out of my fries. You ain’t my bitch, nigger . . . buy your
own damn fries. Now what was I talking about?”

“Just ‘cause a girl don’t go out with you doesn’t make her a racist.”

This is the voice of Obama at seventeen, as remembered by Obama. He’s
still recognizably Obama; he already seeks to unpack and complicate appar-
etly obvious things (“Just ‘cause a girl don’t go out with you doesn’t make
her a racist”); he’s already gently cynical about the impassioned dogma of
other people (“Yeah, that’s what you said the last time”). And he has a sense
of humor (“Maybe they’re looking at that big butt of yours”). Only the voice is
different: he has made almost as large a leap as Eliza Doolittle. The conclu-
sions Obama draws from his own Pygmalion experience, however, are subtler
than Shaw’s. The tale he tells is not the old tragedy of gaining a new, false
voice at the expense of a true one. The tale he tells is all about addition. His
is the story of a genuinely many-voiced man. If it has a moral it is that each
man must be true to his selves, plural.

For Obama, having more than one voice in your ear is not a burden, or
not solely a burden—it is also a gift. And the gift is of an interesting kind, not
well served by that dull publishing-house title Dreams from My Father: A Story
of Race and Inheritance with its suggestion of a simple linear inheritance, of
paternal dreams and aspirations passed down to a son, and fulfilled. Dreams
from My Father would have been a fine title for John McCain’s book Faith of My
Fathers, which concerns exactly this kind of linear masculine inheritance,
in his case from soldier to soldier. For Obama’s book, though, it’s wrong,
lopsided. He corrects its misperception early on, in the first chapter, while
discussing the failure of his parents’ relationship, characterized by their only
son as the end of a dream. “Even as that spell was broken,” he writes, “and the
Chapter 14 Race, Ethnicity, and the Melting Pot

To occupy a dream, to exist in a dreamed space (conjured by both father and mother), is surely a quite different thing from simply inheriting a dream. It’s more interesting. What did Pauline Kael call Cary Grant? “The Man from Dream City.” When Bristolian Archibald Leach became suave Cary Grant, the transformation happened in his voice, which he subjected to a strange, indefinable manipulation, resulting in that heavenly sui generis accent, neither west country nor posh, American nor English. It came from nowhere, he came from nowhere. Grant seemed the product of a collective dream, dreamed up by moviegoers in hard times, as it sometimes feels voters have dreamed up Obama in hard times. Both men have a strange reflective quality, typical of the self-created man—we see in them whatever we want to see. “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant,” said Cary Grant. “Even I want to be Cary Grant.” It’s not hard to imagine Obama having that same thought, backstage at Grant Park, hearing his own name chanted by the hopeful multitude. Everyone wants to be Barack Obama. Even I want to be Barack Obama.

2.

But I haven’t described Dream City. I’ll try to. It is a place of many voices, where the unified singular self is an illusion. Naturally, Obama was born there. So was I. When your personal multiplicity is printed on your face, in an almost too obviously thematic manner, in your DNA, in your hair and in the neither this nor that beige of your skin—well, anyone can see you come from Dream City. In Dream City everything is doubled, everything is various. You have no choice but to cross borders and speak in tongues. That’s how you get from your mother to your father, from talking to one set of folks who think you’re not black enough to another who figure you insufficiently white. It’s the kind of town where the wise man says “I” cautiously, because “I” feels like too straight and singular a phoneme to represent the true multiplicity of his experience. Instead, citizens of Dream City prefer to use the collective pronoun “we.”

Throughout his campaign Obama was careful always to say we. He was noticeably wary of “I.” By speaking so, he wasn’t simply avoiding a singularity he didn’t feel, he was also drawing us in with him. He had the audacity to suggest that, even if you can’t see it stamped on their faces, most people come from Dream City, too. Most of us have complicated back stories, messy histories, multiple narratives.

It was a high-wire strategy, for Obama, this invocation of our collective human messiness. His enemies latched on to its imprecision, emphasizing the exotic, un-American nature of Dream City, this ill-defined place where you could be from Hawaii and Kenya, Kansas and Indonesia all at the same time, where you could jive talk like a street hustler and orate like a senator. What kind of a crazy place is that? But they underestimated how many
people come from Dream City, how many Americans, in their daily lives, conjure contrasting voices and seek a synthesis between disparate things. Turns out, Dream City wasn’t so strange to them.

Or did they never actually see it? We now know that Obama spoke of Main Street in Iowa and of sweet potato pie in Northwest Philly, and it could be argued that he succeeded because he so rarely misspoke, carefully tailoring his intonations to suit the sensibility of his listeners. Sometimes he did this within one speech, within one line: “We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don’t like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states.” Awesome God comes to you straight from the pews of a Georgia church; poking around feels more at home at a kitchen table in South Bend, Indiana. The balance was perfect, cunningly counterpoised and never accidental. It’s only now that it’s over that we see him let his guard down a little, on 60 Minutes, say, dropping in that culturally, casually black construction “Hey, I’m not stupid, man, that’s why I’m president,” something it’s hard to imagine him doing even three weeks earlier. To a certain kind of mind, it must have looked like the mask had slipped for a moment.

Which brings us to the single-voiced Obamanation crowd. They rage on in the blogs and on the radio, waiting obsessively for the mask to slip. They have a great fear of what they see as Obama’s doubling ways. “He says one thing but he means another”—this is the essence of the fear campaign. He says he’s a capitalist, but he’ll spread your wealth. He says he’s a Christian, but really he’s going to empower the Muslims. And so on and so forth. These are fears that have their roots in an anxiety about voice. Who is he? people kept asking. I mean, who is this guy, really? He says sweet potato pie in Philly and Main Street in Iowa! When he talks to us, he sure sounds like us—but behind our backs he says we’re clinging to our religion, to our guns. And when Jesse Jackson heard that Obama had lectured a black church congregation about the epidemic of absent black fathers, he experienced this, too, as a tonal betrayal; Obama was “talking down to black people.” In both cases, there was the sense of a double-dealer, of someone who tailors his speech to fit the audience, who is not of the people (because he is able to look at them objectively) but always above them.

The Jackson gaffe, with its Oedipal violence (“I want to cut his nuts out”), is especially poignant because it goes to the heart of a generational conflict in the black community, concerning what we will say in public and what we say in private. For it has been a point of honor, among the civil rights generation, that any criticism or negative analysis of our community, expressed, as they often are by white politicians, without context, without real empathy or understanding, should not be repeated by a black politician when the white community is listening, even if (especially if) the criticism happens to be true (more than half of all black American children live in single-parent households). Our business is our business. Keep it in the family; don’t wash your
dirty linen in public; stay unified. (Of course, with his overheard gaffe, Jackson unwittingly broke his own rule.)

Until Obama, black politicians had always adhered to these unwritten rules. In this way, they defended themselves against those two bogeymen of black political life: the Uncle Tom and the House Nigger. The black politician who played up to, or even simply echoed, white fears, desires, and hopes for the black community was in danger of earning these epithets—even Martin Luther King was not free from such suspicions. Then came Obama, and the new world he had supposedly ushered in, the postracial world, in which what mattered most was not blind racial allegiance but factual truth. It was felt that Jesse Jackson was sadly out of step with this new postracial world: even his own son felt moved to publicly repudiate his “ugly rhetoric.” But Jackson’s anger was not incomprehensible nor his distrust unreasonable. Jackson lived through a bitter struggle, and bitter struggles deform their participants in subtle, complicated ways. The idea that one should speak one’s cultural allegiance first and the truth second (and that this is a sign of authenticity) is precisely such a deformation.

Right up to the wire, Obama made many black men and women of Jackson’s generation suspicious. How can the man who passes between culturally black and white voices with such flexibility, with such ease, be an honest man? How will the man from Dream City keep it real? Why won’t he speak with a clear and unified voice? These were genuine questions for people born in real cities at a time when those cities were implacably divided, when the black movement had to yell with a clear and unified voice, or risk not being heard at all. And then he won. Watching Jesse Jackson in tears in Grant Park, pressed up against the varicolored American public, it seemed like he, at least, had received the answer he needed: only a many-voiced man could have spoken to that many people.

A clear and unified voice. In that context, this business of being biracial, of being half black and half white, is awkward. In his memoir, Obama takes care to ridicule a certain black girl called Joyce—a composite figure from his college days who happens also to be part Italian and part French and part Native American and is inordinately fond of mentioning these facts, and who likes to say:

I’m not black. . . . I’m multiracial. . . . Why should I have to choose between them? . . . It’s not white people who are making me choose. . . . No—it’s black people who always have to make everything racial. They’re the ones making me choose. They’re the ones who are telling me I can’t be who I am. . . .

He has her voice down pat and so condemns her out of her own mouth. For she’s the third bogeyman of black life, the tragic mulatto, who secretly wishes she “passed,” always keen to let you know about her white heritage. It’s the fear of being mistaken for Joyce that has always ensured that I ignore the box marked “biracial” and tick the box marked “black” on any
questionnaire I fill out, and call myself unequivocally a black writer and roll my eyes at anyone who insists that Obama is not the first black president but the first biracial one. But I also know in my heart that it’s an equivocation; I know that Obama has a double consciousness, is black and, at the same time, white, as I am, unless we are suggesting that one side of a person’s genetics and cultural heritage cancels out or trumps the other.

But to mention the double is to suggest shame at the singular. Joyce insists on her varied heritage because she fears and is ashamed of the singular black. I suppose it’s possible that subconsciously I am also a tragic mulatto, torn between pride and shame. In my conscious life, though, I cannot honestly say I feel proud to be white and ashamed to be black or proud to be black and ashamed to be white. I find it impossible to experience either pride or shame over accidents of genetics in which I had no active part. I understand how those words got into the racial discourse, but I can’t sign up to them. I’m not proud to be female either. I am not even proud to be human—I only love to be so. As I love to be female and I love to be black, and I love that I had a white father.

It’s telling that Joyce is one of the few voices in Dreams from My Father that is truly left out in the cold, outside of the expansive sympathy of Obama’s narrative. She is an entirely didactic being, a demon Obama has to raise up, if only for a page, so everyone can watch him slay her. I know the feeling. When I was in college I felt I’d rather run away with the Black Panthers than be associated with the Joyces I occasionally met. It’s the Joyces of this world who “talk down to black folks.” And so to avoid being Joyce, or being seen to be Joyce, you unify, you speak with one voice.

And the concept of a unified black voice is a potent one. It has filtered down, these past forty years, into the black community at all levels, settling itself in that impossible injunction “keep it real,” the original intention of which was unification. We were going to unify the concept of Blackness in order to strengthen it. Instead we confined and restricted it. To me, the instruction “keep it real” is a sort of prison cell, two feet by five. The fact is, it’s too narrow. I just can’t live comfortably in there. “Keep it real” replaced the blessed and solid genetic fact of Blackness with a flimsy imperative. It made Blackness a quality each individual black person was constantly in danger of losing. And almost anything could trigger the loss of one’s Blackness: attending certain universities, an impressive variety of jobs, a fondness for opera, a white girlfriend, an interest in golf. And of course, any change in the voice. There was a popular school of thought that maintained the voice was at the very heart of the thing; fail to keep it real there and you’d never see your Blackness again.

How absurd that all seems now. And not because we live in a postracial world—we don’t—but because the reality of race has diversified. Black reality has diversified. It’s black people who talk like me, and black people who talk
like L’il Wayne. It’s black conservatives and black liberals, black sportsmen and black lawyers, black computer technicians and black ballet dancers and black truck drivers and black presidents. We’re all black, and we all love to be black, and we all sing from our own hymn sheet. We’re all surely black people, but we may be finally approaching a point of human history where you can’t talk up or down to us anymore, but only to us. He’s talking down to white people — how curious it sounds the other way round! In order to say such a thing one would have to think collectively of white people, as a people of one mind who speak with one voice—a thought experiment in which we have no practice. But it’s worth trying. It’s only when you play the record backward that you hear the secret message.

3.

For reasons that are obscure to me, those qualities we cherish in our artists we condemn in our politicians. In our artists we look for the many-colored voice, the multiple sensibility. The apogee of this is, of course, Shakespeare: even more than for his wordplay we cherish him for his lack of allegiance. Our Shakespeare sees always both sides of a thing, he is black and white, male and female—he is everyman. The giant lacunae in his biography are merely a convenience; if any new facts of religious or political affiliation were ever to arise we would dismiss them in our hearts anyway. Was he, for example, a man of Rome or not? He has appeared, to generations of readers, not of one religion but of both, in truth, beyond both. Born into the middle of Britain’s fierce Catholic–Protestant culture war, how could the bloody absurdity of those years not impress upon him a strong sense of cultural contingency?

It was a war of ideas that began for Will—as it began for Barack—in the dreams of his father. For we know that John Shakespeare, a civic officer in Protestant times, oversaw the repainting of medieval frescoes and the destruction of the rood loft and altar in Stratford’s own fine Guild Chapel, but we also know that in the rafters of the Shakespeare home John hid a secret Catholic “Spiritual Testament,” a signed profession of allegiance to the old faith. A strange experience, to watch one’s own father thus divided, professing one thing in public while practicing another in private. John Shakespeare was a kind of equivocator: it’s what you do when you’re in a corner, when you can’t be a Catholic and a loyal Englishman at the same time. When you can’t be both black and white. Sometimes in a country ripped apart by dogma, those who wish to keep their heads—in both senses—must learn to split themselves in two.

And this we still know, here, at a four-hundred-year distance. No one can hope to be president of these United States without professing a committed and straightforward belief in two things: the existence of God and the principle of American exceptionalism. But how many of them equivocated, and who, in their shoes, would not equivocate, too?
Fortunately, Shakespeare was an artist and so had an outlet his father didn’t have—the many-voiced theater. Shakespeare’s art, the very medium of it, allowed him to do what civic officers and politicians can’t seem to: speak simultaneous truths. (Is it not, for example, experientially true that one can both believe and not believe in God?) In his plays he is woman, man, black, white, believer, heretic, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim. He grew up in an atmosphere of equivocation, but he lived in freedom. And he offers us freedom: to pin him down to a single identity would be an obvious diminishment, both for Shakespeare and for us. Generations of critics have insisted on this irreducible multiplicity, though they have each expressed it different ways, through the glass of their times. Here is Keats’s famous attempt, in 1817, to give this quality a name:

At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

And here is Stephen Greenblatt doing the same, in 2004:

There are many forms of heroism in Shakespeare, but ideological heroism—the fierce, self-immolating embrace of an idea or institution—is not one of them.

For Keats, Shakespeare’s many voices are quasi-mystical as suited the Romantic thrust of Keats’s age. For Greenblatt, Shakespeare’s negative capability is sociopolitical at root. Will had seen too many wild-eyed martyrs, too many executed terrorists, too many wars on the Catholic terror. He had watched men rage absurdly at rood screens and write treatises in praise of tables. He had seen men disemboweled while still alive, their entrails burned before their eyes, and all for the preference of a Latin Mass over a common prayer or vice versa. He understood what fierce, singular certainty creates and what it destroys. In response, he made himself a diffuse, uncertain thing, a mass of contradictory, irresolvable voices that speak truth plurally. Through the glass of 2009, “negative capability” looks like the perfect antidote to “ideological heroism.”

From our politicians, though, we still look for ideological heroism, despite everything. We consider pragmatists to be weak. We call men of balance naive fools. In England, we once had an insulting name for such people: trimmers. In the mid-1600s, a trimmer was any politician who attempted to straddle the reviled middle ground between Cavalier and Roundhead, Parliament and the Crown; to call a man a trimmer was to accuse him of being insufficiently committed to an ideology. But in telling us of these times, the nineteenth-century English historian Thomas Macaulay draws our attention to Halifax,
great statesman of the Privy Council, set up to mediate between Parliament and Crown as London burned. Halifax proudly called himself a trimer, assuming it, Macaulay explains, as a title of honour, and vindicating, with great vivacity, the dignity of the appellation. Everything good, he said, trims between extremes. The temperate zone trims between the climate in which men are roasted and the climate in which they are frozen. The English Church trims between the Anabaptist madness and the Papist lethargy. The English constitution trims between the Turkish despotism and Polish anarchy. Virtue is nothing but a just temper between propensities any one of which, if indulged to excess, becomes vice.

Which all sounds eminently reasonable and Aristotelian. And Macaulay’s description of Halifax’s character is equally attractive:

His intellect was fertile, subtle, and capacious. His polished, luminous, and animated eloquence . . . was the delight of the House of Lords. . . . His political tracts well deserve to be studied for their literary merit.

In fact, Halifax is familiar—he sounds like the man from Dream City. This makes Macaulay’s caveat the more striking:

Yet he was less successful in politics than many who enjoyed smaller advantages. Indeed, those intellectual peculiarities which make his writings valuable frequently impeded him in the contests of active life. For he always saw passing events, not in the point of view in which they commonly appear to one who bears a part in them, but in the point of view in which, after the lapse of many years, they appear to the philosophic historian.

To me, this is a doleful conclusion. It is exactly men with such intellectual peculiarities that I have always hoped to see in politics. But maybe Macaulay is correct: maybe the Halifaxes of this world make, in the end, better writers than politicians. A lot rests on how this president turns out—but that’s a debate for the future. Here I want instead to hazard a little theory, concerning the evolution of a certain type of voice, typified by Halifax, by Shakespeare, and very possibly the President. For the voice of what Macaulay called “the philosophic historian” is, to my mind, a valuable and particular one, and I think someone should make a proper study of it. It’s a voice that develops in a man over time; my little theory sketches four developmental stages.

The first stage in the evolution is contingent and cannot be contrived. In this first stage, the voice, by no fault of its own, finds itself trapped between two poles, two competing belief systems. And so this first stage necessitates the second: the voice learns to be flexible between these two fixed points, even to the point of equivocation. Then the third stage: this native flexibility leads to a sense of being able to “see a thing from both sides.” And then the final stage, which I think of as the mark of a certain kind of genius: the voice
relinquishes ownership of itself, develops a creative sense of disassociation in which the claims that are particular to it seem no stronger than anyone else’s. There it is, my little theory—I’d rather call it a story. It is a story about a wonderful voice, occasionally used by citizens, rarely by men of power. Amidst the din of the 2008 culture wars it proved especially hard to hear.

In this lecture I have been seeking to tentatively suggest that the voice that speaks with such freedom, thus unburdened by dogma and personal bias, thus flooded with empathy, might make a good president. It’s only now that I realize that in all this utilitarianism I’ve left joyfulness out of the account, and thus neglected a key constituency of my own people, the poets! Being many-voiced may be a complicated gift for a president, but in poets it is a pure delight in need of neither defense nor explanation. Plato banished them from his uptight and annoying republic so long ago that they have lost all their anxiety. They are fancy-free.

“I am a Hittite in love with a horse,” writes Frank O’Hara.

I don’t know what blood’s
in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs
in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall
I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist
in which a face appears
and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana
I am a dictator looking at his wife I am a doctor eating a child
and the child’s mother smiling I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain
I am a child smelling his father’s underwear I am an Indian
sleeping on a scalp
and my pony is stamping in
the birches,
and I’ve just caught sight of the
Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria.

What land is this, so free?

Frank O’Hara’s republic is of the imagination, of course. It is the only land of perfect freedom. Presidents, as a breed, tend to dismiss this land, thinking it has nothing to teach them. If this new president turns out to be different, then writers will count their blessings, but with or without a president on board, writers should always count their blessings. A line of O’Hara’s reminds us of this. It’s carved on his gravestone. It reads: “Grace to be born and live as variously as possible.”

But to live variously cannot simply be a gift, endowed by an accident of birth; it has to be a continual effort, continually renewed. I felt this with force the night of the election. I was at a lovely New York party, full of lovely people, almost all of whom were white, liberal, highly educated, and celebrating with one happy voice as the states turned blue. Just as they called Iowa my phone
rang and a strident German voice said: “Zadie! Come to Harlem! It’s vild here. I’m in za middle of a crazy Reggae bar—it’s so vonderful! Vy not come now!”

I mention he was German only so we don’t run away with the idea that flexibility comes only to the beige, or gay, or otherwise marginalized. Flexibility is a choice, always open to all of us. (He was a writer, however. Make of that what you will.)

But wait: all the way uptown? A crazy reggae bar? For a minute I hesitated, because I was at a lovely party having a lovely time. Or was that it? There was something else. In truth I thought: but I’ll be ludicrous, in my silly dress, with this silly posh English voice, in a crowded bar of black New Yorkers celebrating. It’s amazing how many of our cross-cultural and cross-class encounters are limited not by hate or pride or shame, but by another equally insidious, less-discussed, emotion: embarrassment. A few minutes later, I was in a taxi and heading uptown with my Northern Irish husband and our half-Indian, half-English friend, but that initial hesitation was ominous; the first step on a typical British journey. A hesitation in the face of difference, which leads to caution before difference and ends in fear of it. Before long, the only voice you recognize, the only life you can empathize with, is your own. You will think that a novelist’s screwy leap of logic. Well, it’s my novelist credo and I believe it. I believe that flexibility of voice leads to a flexibility in all things. My audacious hope in Obama is based, I’m afraid, on precisely such flimsy premises.

It’s my audacious hope that a man born and raised between opposing dogmas, between cultures, between voices, could not help but be aware of the extreme contingency of culture. I further audaciously hope that such a man will not mistake the happy accident of his own cultural sensibilities for a set of natural laws, suitable for general application. I even hope that he will find himself in agreement with George Bernard Shaw when he declared, “Patriotism is, fundamentally, a conviction that a particular country is the best in the world because you were born in it.” But that may be an audacious hope too far. We’ll see if Obama’s lifelong vocal flexibility will enable him to say proudly with one voice “I love my country” while saying with another voice “It is a country, like other countries.” I hope so. He seems just the man to demonstrate that between those two voices there exists no contradiction and no equivocation but rather a proper and decent human harmony.

**Things to Do with the Reading**

1. In the early part of the essay, in reference to her own life, Zadie Smith argues that assimilation is real, and potentially a threat: you can lose your multilingualism, and be left stranded, like Eliza Doolittle, between two identity groups. On the other hand, the essay also discloses a lot of anxiety about what Smith calls “the concept of a unified black voice.” As she remarks, the “impossible injunction ‘keep it real’”—which was
intended to produce “unification,” a single black voice—“is a sort of prison cell.” How, ultimately, does the essay work out this dilemma?

2. The word “dream” is a key repetition in this essay. Apply The Method (see Chapter 1) and Reformulating Binaries (see Chapter 2) to the essay. Most immediately, the piece is a meditation on race in response to Obama’s memoir, Dreams from My Father. The term resurfaces with the idea of “Dream City,” which initially refers to the self-created persona of the actor Cary Grant, “The Man from Dream City.” And later Smith attaches the term to the statesman of the Privy Council, Halifax (“he sounds like the man from Dream City”). Study the sentences in which the dream language occurs. What are the values (ideological values) attached to it? You should be able to discover the contexts in which the dream is a source of anxiety for Smith, as well as the contexts in which it is associated with a kind of admirable middle ground. The essay is full of binary oppositions: what are the key terms against which “dream” is paired? What ultimately is the status of dream in this essay, and how is it related, if at all, to the central organizing binary between separation/singlevoicedness versus integration/multivoicedness?

3. **Link:** Discuss the differences between Smith’s and Rodriguez’s visions for the future. How might Zadie Smith respond to the following short paragraph from Richard Rodriguez’s essay: “Expect marriage. We will change America even as we will be changed. We will disappear with you into a new miscegenation”? (paragraph 18). Also consider his remark that “The genius of Latin America is the habit of synthesis” (paragraph 9) and that we should all “expect bastard themes” (paragraph 16). To what extent do these notions conflict with Smith’s concept of double voicing and of the unified self as an illusion? See Chapter 3, Difference within Similarity.

4. Near the end of the essay, just as she introduces the poem by Frank O’Hara, Smith remarks, “being many-voiced may be a complicated gift for a president, but in poets it is a pure delight in need of neither defense nor explanation.” Implicit here are a range of interesting binaries. List them. Why does Smith distinguish the “land” of the imagination from the usual presidential terrain? At the very end of the essay, Smith refers to two voices, the one that utters “I love my country” and the one that says “It is a country, like other countries.” Are these the voices, respectively, of the statesman and the artist? Why, in any case, is uniting them so important for Smith in this essay?
In this provocative essay about her mother’s “broken” English, the novelist Amy Tan distinguishes at least four different “Englishes” that she learned to speak as a Chinese American daughter called upon to succeed in U.S. schools, to communicate with her mother, and to become a writer. Along the way she provides glimpses into the quandaries that face children for whom standard English is not the language spoken at home: we see how the particular language she learns there does not equip her to navigate standardized tests in which, for example, she must discern whether “a sunset precedes nightfall” is analogous to “a chill precedes a fever.” The author of seven novels and a number of nonfiction works, Tan’s most recent novel is *The Valley of Amazement* (2013).

I am not a scholar of English or literature. I cannot give you much more than personal opinions on the English language and its variations in this country or others. I am a writer. And by that definition, I am someone who has always loved language. I am fascinated by language in daily life. I spend a great deal of my time thinking about the power of language—the way it can evoke an emotion, a visual image, a complex idea, or a simple truth. Language is the tool of my trade. And I use them all—all the Englishes I grew up with.

Recently, I was made keenly aware of the different Englishes I do use. I was giving a talk to a large group of people, the same talk I had already given to half a dozen other groups. The nature of the talk was about my writing, my life, and my book, *The Joy Luck Club*. The talk was going along well enough, until I remembered one major difference that made the whole talk sound wrong. My mother was in the room. And it was perhaps the first time she had heard me give a lengthy speech, using the kind of English I have never used with her. I was saying things like, “The intersection of memory upon imagination” and “There is an aspect of my fiction that relates to thus-and-thus”—a speech filled with carefully wrought grammatical phrases, burdened, it suddenly seemed to me, with nominalized forms, past perfect tenses, conditional phrases, all the forms of standard English that I had learned in school and through books, the forms of English I did not use at home with my mother.

Just last week, I was walking down the street with my mother, and I again found myself conscious of the English I was using, the English I do use with her. We were talking about the price of new and used furniture and I heard myself saying this: “Not waste money that way.” My husband was with us as...
well, and he didn’t notice any switch in my English. And then I realized why. It’s because over the twenty years we’ve been together I’ve often used that same kind of English with him, and sometimes he even uses it with me. It has become our language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with.

So you’ll have some idea of what this family talk I heard sounds like, I’ll quote what my mother said during a recent conversation, which I videotaped and then transcribed. During this conversation, my mother was talking about a political gangster in Shanghai who had the same last name as her family’s, Du, and how the gangster in his early years wanted to be adopted by her family, which was rich by comparison. Later, the gangster became more powerful, far richer than my mother’s family, and one day showed up at my mother’s wedding to pay his respects. Here’s what she said in part: “Du Yusong having business like fruit stand. Like off the street kind. He is Du like Du Zong—but not Tsung-ming Island people. The local people call putong, the river east side, he belong to that side local people. That man want to ask Du Zong father take him in like become own family. Du Zong father wasn’t look down on him, but didn’t take seriously, until that man big like become a mafia. Now important person, very hard to inviting him. Chinese way, came only to show respect, don’t stay for dinner. Respect for making big celebration, he shows up. Mean gives lots of respect. Chinese custom. Chinese social life that way. If too important won’t have to stay too long. He come to my wedding. I didn’t see, I heard it. I gone to boy’s side, they have YMCA dinner. Chinese age I was nineteen.”

You should know that my mother’s expressive command of English belies how much she actually understands. She reads the Forbes report, listens to Wall Street Week, converses daily with her stockbroker, reads all of Shirley MacLaine’s books with ease—all kinds of things I can’t begin to understand. Yet some of my friends tell me they understand 50 percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand 80 to 90 percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother’s English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It’s my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

Lately, I’ve been giving more thought to the kind of English my mother speaks. Like others, I have described it to people as “broken” or “fractured” English. But I wince when I say that. It has always bothered me that I can think of no way to describe it other than “broken,” as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness. I’ve heard other terms used, “limited English,” for example. But they seem just as bad, as if everything is limited, including people’s perceptions of the limited English speaker.

I know this for a fact, because when I was growing up, my mother’s “limited” English limited my perception of her. I was ashamed of her English.
believed that her English reflected the quality of what she had to say. That is, because she expressed them imperfectly her thoughts were imperfect. And I had plenty of empirical evidence to support me: the fact that people in department stores, at banks, and at restaurants did not take her seriously, did not give her good service, pretended not to understand her, or even acted as if they did not hear her.

My mother has long realized the limitations of her English as well. When I was fifteen, she used to have me call people on the phone to pretend I was she. In this guise, I was forced to ask for information or even to complain and yell at people who had been rude to her. One time it was a call to her stockbroker in New York. She had cashed out her small portfolio and it just so happened we were going to go to New York the next week, our very first trip outside California. I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, “This is Mrs. Tan.” And my mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, “Why he don’t send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money. And then I said in perfect English, ‘Yes, I’m getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn’t arrived.’” Then she began to talk more loudly. “What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?” And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, “I can’t tolerate any more excuses. If I don’t receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I’m in New York next week.” And sure enough, the following week there we were in front of this astonished stockbroker, and I was sitting there red-faced and quiet, and my mother, the real Mrs. Tan, was shouting at his boss in her impeccable broken English.

We used a similar routine just five days ago, for a situation that was far less humorous. My mother had gone to the hospital for an appointment, to find out about a benign brain tumor a CAT scan had revealed a month ago. She said she had spoken very good English, her best English, no mistakes. Still, she said, the hospital did not apologize when they said they had lost the CAT scan and she had come for nothing. She said they did not seem to have any sympathy when she told them she was anxious to know the exact diagnosis, since her husband and son had both died of brain tumors. She said they would not give her any more information until the next time and she would have to make another appointment for that. So she said she would not leave until the doctor called her daughter. She wouldn’t budge. And when the doctor finally called her daughter, me, who spoke in perfect English—lo and behold—we had assurances the CAT scan would be found, promises that a conference call on Monday would be held, and apologies for any suffering my mother had gone through for a most regrettable mistake.

I think my mother’s English almost had an effect on limiting my possibilities in life as well. Sociologists and linguists probably will tell you that
a person’s developing language skills are more influenced by peers. But I do think that the language spoken in the family, especially in immigrant families which are more insular, plays a large role in shaping the language of the child. And I believe that it affected my results on achievement tests, I.Q. tests, and the SAT. While my English skills were never judged as poor, compared to math, English could not be considered my strong suit. In grade school I did moderately well, getting perhaps B’s, sometimes B-pluses, in English and scoring perhaps in the sixtieth or seventieth percentile on achievement tests. But those scores were not good enough to override the opinion that my true abilities lay in math and science, because in those areas I achieved A’s and scored in the ninetieth percentile or higher.

This was understandable. Math is precise; there is only one correct answer. Whereas, for me at least, the answers on English tests were always a judgment call, a matter of opinion and personal experience. Those tests were constructed around items like fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, such as, “Even though Tom was ________, Mary thought he was ________.” And the correct answer always seemed to be the most bland combinations of thoughts, for example, “Even though Tom was shy, Mary thought he was charming” with the grammatical structure “even though” limiting the correct answer to some sort of semantic opposites, so you wouldn’t get answers like, “Even though Tom was foolish, Mary thought he was ridiculous.” Well, according to my mother, there were very few limitations as to what Tom could have been and what Mary might have thought of him. So I never did well on tests like that.

The same was true with word analogies, pairs of words in which you were supposed to find some sort of logical, semantic relationship—for example, “Sunset is to nightfall as ________ is to ________.” And here you would be presented with a list of four possible pairs, one of which showed the same kind of relationship: red is to stoplight, bus is to arrival, chills is to fever, yawn is to boring. Well, I could never think that way. I knew what the tests were asking, but I could not block out of my mind the images already created by the first pair, “sunset is to nightfall”—and I would see a burst of colors against a darkening sky, the moon rising, the lowering of a curtain of stars. And all the other pairs of words—red, bus, stoplight, boring—just threw up a mass of confusing images, making it impossible for me to sort out something as logical as saying: “A sunset precedes nightfall” is the same as “a chill precedes a fever.” The only way I would have gotten that answer right would have been to imagine an associative situation, for example, my being disobedient and staying out past sunset, catching a chill at night, which turns into feverish pneumonia as punishment, which indeed did happen to me.

I have been thinking about all this lately, about my mother’s English, about achievement tests. Because lately I’ve been asked, as a writer, why there are not more Asian-Americans represented in American literature. Why are there few Asian-Americans enrolled in creative writing programs?
Why do so many Chinese students go into engineering? Well, these are broad sociological questions I can’t begin to answer.

But I have noticed in surveys—in fact, just last week—that Asian students, as a whole, always do significantly better on math achievement tests than in English. And this makes me think that there are other Asian-American students whose English spoken in the home might also be described as “broken” or “limited.” And perhaps they also have teachers who are steering them away from writing and into math and science, which is what happened to me.

Fortunately, I happen to be rebellious in nature and enjoy the challenge of disproving assumptions made about me. I became an English major my first year in college, after being enrolled as pre-med. I started writing nonfiction as a freelancer the week after I was told by my former boss that writing was my worst skill and I should hone my talents toward account management.

But it wasn’t until 1985 that I finally began to write fiction. And at first I wrote using what I thought to be wittily crafted sentences, sentences that would finally prove I had mastery over the English language. Here’s an example from the first draft of a story that later made its way into The Joy Luck Club, but without this line: “That was my mental quandary in its nascent state.” A terrible line, which I can barely pronounce.

Fortunately, for reasons I won’t get into today, I later decided I should envision a reader for the stories I would write. And the reader I decided upon was my mother, because these were stories about mothers. So with this reader in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as “broken”; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as “watered down”; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English nor a Chinese structure. I wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts. Apart from what any critic had to say about my writing, I knew I had succeeded where it counted when my mother finished reading my book and gave me her verdict: “So easy to read.”

Things to Do with the Reading

1. **Link:** Imagine that Peggy McIntosh, the author of “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” read Tan’s essay. Write an essay in which you first identify and discuss passages from both essays that illustrate some common ground. Then determine the biggest difference between these two
women writers’ points of view, and Ask So What? (see Chapter 1 on the So What? question.) Then answer it. You might use the heuristic in Chapter 3 that we call Looking for Difference within Similarity.

2. One organizing binary in the essay is between standard English and Tan’s mother’s English. (See The Method in Chapter 1 and Reformulating Binaries in Chapter 2.) What claims does Tan make for the advantages of her mother’s English? Why does she speak it with her non-Chinese husband? Use these questions to develop an essay on the extent to which Tan implicitly critiques standard English, even as she uses it. What is it that Tan seems to believe standard English cannot so easily say?

3. **Link:** Write an essay in which you compare and contrast Tan’s complex point of view on assimilation with that of Richard Rodriguez in “The Fear of Losing a Culture.” To what extent do both writers complicate the melting pot model of assimilation? If you wish, consider the role that style plays in establishing each author’s point of view. (See the beginning of Chapter 10 on style.)

4. **Link:** To whose experience and point of view do Tan’s seem closest—Richard Rodriguez or Zadie Smith? Cite and reflect on specific sentences from the three readings in support of your answer. Pay particular attention to the way that Tan’s essay ends. What does Tan hope to accomplish in her writing—and why?
In the Kitchen

In this carefully crafted and subtly inflected memoir, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. uses his own memories of African-American hairstyling figuratively—as a way of thinking about more than just hair. Neither an apology nor a diatribe, the piece offers a complex and affectionate parable of assimilation. Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr., is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University, and director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research at the university. He is the author or editor of over twenty-five books, and he has been involved in a series of films. Most recently, in 2014 “The African-Americans: Many Rivers to Cross with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” won a Peabody Award for this PBS miniseries in which he served as producer, writer, and host. Like a number of authors included in this book, he, too, won a MacArthur “genius” Fellowship.

1 We always had a gas stove in the kitchen, in our house in Piedmont, West Virginia, where I grew up. Never electric, though using electric became fashionable in Piedmont in the sixties, like using Crest toothpaste rather than Colgate, or watching Huntley and Brinkley rather than Walter Cronkite. But not us: gas, Colgate, and good ole Walter Cronkite, come what may. We used gas partly out of loyalty to Big Mom, Mama’s Mama, because she was mostly blind and still loved to cook, and could feel her way more easily with gas than with electric. But the most important thing about our gas-equipped kitchen was that Mama used to do hair there. The “hot comb” was a fine-toothed iron instrument with a long wooden handle and a pair of iron curlers that opened and closed like scissors. Mama would put it in the gas fire until it glowed. You could smell those prongs heating up.

I liked that smell. Not the smell so much, I guess, as what the smell meant for the shape of my day. There was an intimate warmth in the women’s tones as they talked with my Mama, doing their hair. I knew what the women had been through to get their hair ready to be “done,” because I would watch Mama do it to herself. How that kink could be transformed through grease and fire into that magnificent head of wavy hair was a miracle to me, and still is.

Mama would wash her hair over the sink, a towel wrapped around her shoulders, wearing just her slip and her white bra. (We had no shower—just a galvanized tub that we stored in the kitchen—until we moved down Rat Tail Road into Doc Wolverton’s house, in 1954.) After she dried it, she would grease her scalp thoroughly with blue Bergamot hair grease, which came in a short, fat jar with a picture of a beautiful colored lady on it. It’s important

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to grease your scalp real good, my Mama would explain, to keep from burning yourself. Of course, her hair would return to its natural kink almost as soon as the hot water and shampoo hit it. To me, it was another miracle how hair so “straight” would so quickly become kinky again the second it even approached some water.

My Mama had only a few “clients” whose heads she “did”—did, I think, because she enjoyed it, rather than for the few pennies it brought in. They would sit on one of our red plastic kitchen chairs, the kind with the shiny metal legs, and brace themselves for the process. Mama would stroke that red-hot iron—which by this time had been in the gas fire for half an hour or more—slowly but firmly through their hair, from scalp to strand’s end. It made a scorching, crinkly sound, the hot iron did, as it burned its way through kink, leaving in its wake straight strands of hair, standing long and tall but drooping over at the ends, their shape like the top of a heavy willow tree. Slowly, steadily, Mama’s hands would transform a round mound of Odetta kink into a darkened swamp of everglades. The Bergamot made the hair shiny; the heat of the hot iron gave it a brownish-red cast. Once all the hair was as straight as God allows kink to get, Mama would take the well-heated curling iron and twirl the straightened strands into more or less loosely wrapped curls. She claimed that she owed her skill as a hairdresser to the strength in her wrists, and as she worked her little finger would poke out, the way it did when she sipped tea. Mama was a southpaw, and wrote upside down and backward to produce the cleanest, roundest letters you’ve ever seen.

The “kitchen” she would all but remove from sight with a handheld pair of shears, bought just for this purpose. Now, the kitchen was the room in which we were sitting—the room where Mama did hair and washed clothes, and where we all took a bath in that galvanized tub. But the word has another meaning, and the kitchen that I’m speaking of is the very kinky bit of hair at the back of your head, where your neck meets your shirt collar. If there was ever a part of our African past that resisted assimilation, it was the kitchen. No matter how hot the iron, no matter how powerful the chemical, no matter how stringent the mashed-potatoes-and-lye formula of a man’s “process,” neither God nor woman nor Sammy Davis, Jr., could straighten the kitchen. The kitchen was permanent, irredeemable, irresistible kink. Unassimilably African. No matter what you did, no matter how hard you tried, you couldn’t de-kink a person’s kitchen. So you trimmed it off as best you could.

When hair had begun to “turn,” as they’d say—to return to its natural kinky glory—it was the kitchen that turned first (the kitchen around the back, and nappy edges at the temples). When the kitchen started creeping up the back of the neck, it was time to get your hair done again.

Sometimes, after dark, a man would come to have his hair done. It was Mr. Charlie Carroll. He was very light-completed and had a ruddy nose—it made me think of Edmund Gwenn, who played Kris Kringle in “Miracle on
34th Street.” At first, Mama did him after my brother, Rocky, and I had gone to sleep. It was only later that we found out that he had come to our house so Mama could iron his hair—not with a hot comb or a curling iron but with our very own Proctor-Silex steam iron. For some reason I never understood, Mr. Charlie would conceal his Frederick Douglass-like mane under a big white Stetson hat. I never saw him take it off except when he came to our house, at night, to have his hair pressed. (Later, Daddy would tell us about Mr. Charlie’s most prized piece of knowledge, something that the man would only confide after his hair had been pressed, as a token of intimacy. “Not many people know this,” he’d say, in a tone of circumspection, “but George Washington was Abraham Lincoln’s daddy.” Nodding solemnly, he’d add the clincher: “A white man told me.” Though he was in dead earnest, this became a humorous refrain around our house—“a white man told me”—which we used to punctuate especially preposterous assertions.)

My mother examined my daughters’ kitchens whenever we went home to visit, in the early eighties. It became a game between us. I had told her not to do it, because I didn’t like the politics it suggested—the notion of “good” and “bad” hair. “Good” hair was “straight,” “bad” hair kinky. Even in the late sixties, at the height of Black Power, almost nobody could bring themselves to say “bad” for good and “good” for bad. People still said that hair like white people’s hair was “good,” even if they encapsulated it in a disclaimer, like “what we used to call ‘good.’”

Maggie would be seated in her high chair, throwing food this way and that, and Mama would be cooing about how cute it all was, how I used to do just like Maggie was doing, and wondering whether her flinging her food with her left hand meant that she was going to be left-handed like Mama. When my daughter was just about covered with Chef Boyardee Spaghetti-O’s, Mama would seize the opportunity: wiping her clean, she would tilt Maggie’s head to one side and reach down the back of her neck. Sometimes Mama would even rub a curl between her fingers, just to make sure that her bifocals had not deceived her. Then she’d sigh with satisfaction and relief: No kink . . . yet. Mama! I’d shout, pretending to be angry. Every once in a while, if no one was looking, I’d peek, too.

I say “yet” because most black babies are born with soft, silken hair. But after a few months it begins to turn, as inevitably as do the seasons or the leaves on a tree. People once thought baby oil would stop it. They were wrong. Everybody I knew as a child wanted to have good hair. You could be as ugly as homemade sin dipped in misery and still be thought attractive if you had good hair. “Jesus moss,” the girls at Camp Lee, Virginia, had called Daddy’s naturally “good” hair during the war. I know that he played that thick head of hair for all it was worth, too.

My own hair was “not a bad grade,” as barbers would tell me when they cut it for the first time. It was like a doctor reporting the results of the first
full physical he has given you. Like “You’re in good shape” or “Blood pressure’s kind of high—better cut down on salt.”

I spent most of my childhood and adolescence messing with my hair. I definitely wanted straight hair. Like Pop’s. When I was about three, I tried to stick a wad of Bazooka bubble gum to that straight hair of his. I suppose what fixed that memory for me is the spanking I got for doing so: he turned me upside down, holding me by my feet, the better to paddle my behind. Little nigger, he had shouted, walloping away. I started to laugh about it two days later, when my behind stopped hurting.

When black people say “straight,” of course, they don’t usually mean literally straight—they’re not describing hair like, say, Peggy Lipton’s (she was the white girl on “The Mod Squad”), or like Mary’s of Peter, Paul & Mary fame; black people call that “stringy” hair. No, “straight” just means not kinky, no matter what contours the curl may take. I would have done anything to have straight hair—and I used to try everything, short of getting a process.

Of the wide variety of techniques and methods I came to master in the challenging prestidigitation of the follicle, almost all had two things in common: a heavy grease and the application of pressure. It’s not an accident that some of the biggest black-owned companies in the fifties and sixties made hair products. And I tried them all, in search of that certain silken touch, the one that would leave neither the hand nor the pillow sullied by grease.

I always wondered what Frederick Douglass put on his hair, or what Phillis Wheatley put on hers. Or why Wheatley has that rag on her head in the little engraving in the frontispiece of her book. One thing is for sure: you can bet that when Phillis Wheatley went to England and saw the Countess of Huntingdon she did not stop by the Queen’s coiffeur on her way there. So many black people still get their hair straightened that it’s a wonder we don’t have a national holiday for Madame C. J. Walker, the woman who invented the process of straightening kinky hair. Call it Jheri-Kurled or call it “relaxed,” it’s still fried hair.

I used all the greases, from sea-blue Bergamot and creamy vanilla Duke (in its clear jar with the orange-white-and-green label) to the godfather of grease, the formidable Murray’s. Now, Murray’s was some serious grease. Whereas Bergamot was like oily Jell-O, and Duke was viscous and sickly sweet, Murray’s was light brown and hard. Hard as lard and twice as greasy, Daddy used to say. Murray’s came in an orange can with a press-on top. It was so hard that some people would put a match to the can, just to soften the stuff and make it more manageable. Then, in the late sixties, when Afros came into style, I used Afro Sheen. From Murray’s to Duke to Afro Sheen: that was my progression in black consciousness.

We used to put hot towels or wash-rags over our Murray-coated heads, in order to melt the wax into the scalp and the follicles. Unfortunately, the wax also had the habit of running down your neck, ears, and forehead. Not to
mention your pillowcase. Another problem was that if you put two palmfuls of Murray's on your head your hair turned white. (Duke did the same thing.) The challenge was to get rid of that white color. Because if you got rid of the white stuff you had a magnificent head of wavy hair. That was the beauty of it: Murray's was so hard that it froze your hair into the wavy style you brushed it into. It looked really good if you wore a part. A lot of guys had parts cut into their hair by a barber, either with the clippers or with a straightedged razor. Especially if you had kinky hair—then you'd generally wear a short razorcut, or what we called a Quo Vadis.

We tried to be as innovative as possible. Everyone knew about using a stocking cap, because your father or your uncle wore one whenever something really big was about to happen, whether sacred or secular: a funeral or a dance, a wedding or a trip in which you confronted official white people. Any time you were trying to look really sharp, you wore a stocking cap in preparation. And if the event was really a big one, you made a new cap. You asked your mother for a pair of her hose, and cut it with scissors about six inches or so from the open end—the end with the elastic that goes up to the top of the thigh. Then you knotted the cut end, and it became a beehive-shaped hat, with an elastic band that you pulled down low on your forehead and down around your neck in the back. To work well, the cap had to fit tightly and snugly, like a press. And it had to fit that tightly because it was a press: it pressed your hair with the force of the hose's elastic. If you greased your hair down real good, and left the stocking cap on long enough, voila: you got a head of pressed-against-the-scalp waves. (You also got a ring around your forehead when you woke up, but it went away.) And then you could enjoy your concrete do. Swore we were bad, too, with all that grease and those flat heads. My brother and I would brush it out a bit in the mornings, so that it looked—well, “natural.” Grown men still wear stocking caps—especially older men, who generally keep their stocking caps in their top drawers, along with their cufflinks and their see-through silk socks, their “Maverick” ties, their silk handkerchiefs, and whatever else they prize the most.

A Murrayed-down stocking cap was the respectable version of the process, which, by contrast, was most definitely not a cool thing to have unless you were an entertainer by trade. Zeke and Keith and Poochie and a few other stars of the high-school basketball team all used to get a process once or twice a year. It was expensive, and you had to go somewhere like Pittsburgh or D.C. or Union-town—somewhere where there were enough colored people to support a trade. The guys would disappear, then reappear a day or two later, strutting like peacocks, their hair burned slightly red from the lye base. They'd also wear “rags”—cloths or handkerchiefs—around their heads when they slept or played basketball. Do-rags, they were called. But the result was straight hair, with just a hint of wave. No curl. Do-it-yourselfers took their chances at home with a concoction of mashed potatoes and lye.
The most famous process of all, however, outside of the process Malcolm X describes in his “Autobiography,” and maybe the process of Sammy Davis, Jr., was Nat King Cole’s process. Nat King Cole had patent-leather hair. That man’s got the finest process money can buy, or so Daddy said the night we saw Cole’s TV show on NBC. It was November 5, 1956. I remember the date because everyone came to our house to watch it and to celebrate one of Daddy’s buddies’ birthdays. Yeah, Uncle Joe chimed in, they can do shit to his hair that the average Negro can’t even think about—secret shit.

Nat King Cole was clean. I’ve had an ongoing argument with a Nigerian friend about Nat King Cole for twenty years now. Not about whether he could sing—any fool knows that he could—but about whether or not he was a handkerchief head for wearing that patent-leather process.

Sammy Davis, Jr.’s process was the one I detested. It didn’t look good on him. Worse still, he liked to have a fried strand dangling down the middle of his forehead, so he could shake it out from the crown when he sang. But Nat King Cole’s hair was a thing unto itself, a beautifully sculpted work of art that he and he alone had the right to wear. The only difference between a process and a stocking cap, really, was taste; but Nat King Cole, unlike, say, Michael Jackson, looked good in his. His head looked like Valentino’s head in the twenties, and some say it was Valentino the process was imitating. But Nat King Cole wore a process because it suited his face, his demeanor, his name, his style. He was as clean as he wanted to be.

I had forgotten all about that patent-leather look until one day in 1971, when I was sitting in an Arab restaurant on the island of Zanzibar surrounded by men in fezzes and white caftans, trying to learn how to eat curried goat and rice with the fingers of my right hand and feeling two million miles from home. All of a sudden, an old transistor radio sitting on top of a china cupboard stopped blaring out its Swahili music and started playing “Fly Me to the Moon,” by Nat King Cole. The restaurant’s din was not affected at all, but in my mind’s eye I saw it: the King’s magnificent sleek black tiara. I managed, barely, to blink back the tears.

**Things to Do with the Reading**

1. Write a short essay in which you identify the attitude in this piece towards the way that the America in which the author grew up dealt with the “problem” of kinky hair. What sentences in the piece seem most revealing of the point of view that Gates wishes us to take? How in particular does the piece make use of the various meanings of the word “kitchen”?

2. Endings of essays are sites where some resolution of an issue or problem usually occurs. So WHAT that Gates is in an Arab restaurant on the island
of Zanzibar trying to eat curried goat with his right hand when he hears Nat King Cole’s “Fly Me to the Moon” and sees in his mind’s eye “King’s magnificent sleek black tiara”? What makes this a fitting end to the essay? What complex attitude does it invite us to have on assimilation vs. diversity? How would the ending of the essay have been different if Gates had tried to picture Nat King Cole with naturally curly hair rather than with his “process”?

3. **Link:** The subject of assimilation is a primary thread of this chapter. Write an essay in which you determine how this piece compares with Salins’s and Rodriguez’s outlooks on assimilation. Consider especially the impact of the essay’s final paragraph in this regard.
My Neighborhood

In this piece, Ishmael Reed takes the reader on a meditative tour through the various neighborhoods in which he has dwelled as an adult, using these places as sites for thinking about race and matters of assimilation. Reed has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and twice shortlisted for the National Book Award. He has published novels, essays, poems, and stories. The musician Max Roach has called him the Charlie Parker of American fiction, and in the biographical sketch of him in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (author of the previous selection) argued that he has “no true predecessor or counterpart” in American letters. His most recent publication is Going Too Far: Essays About America’s Nervous Breakdown (2012).

My stepfather is an evolutionist. He worked for many years at the Chevrolet division of General Motors in Buffalo, a working-class auto and steel town in upstate New York, and was able to rise from relative poverty to the middle class. He believes that each succeeding generation of Afro-Americans will have it better than its predecessor. In 1979 I moved into the kind of neighborhood that he and my mother spent about a third of their lives trying to escape. According to the evolutionist integrationist ethic, this was surely a step backward, since “success” was seen as being able to live in a neighborhood in which you were the only black and joined your neighbors in trying to keep out “them.”

My neighborhood, bordered by Genoa, Market Street, and 48th and 55th streets in North Oakland, is what the media refer to as a “predominantly black neighborhood.” It’s the kind of neighborhood I grew up in before leaving for New York City in 1962. My last New York residence was an apartment in a brownstone, next door to the building in which poet W. H. Auden lived. There were trees in the backyard, and I thought it was a swell neighborhood until I read in Robert Craft’s biography of [the composer] Stravinsky that “when Stravinsky sent his chauffeur to pick up his friend Auden, the chauffeur would ask, ‘Are you sure Mr. Auden lives in this neighborhood?’” By 1968 my wife and I were able to live six months of the year in New York and the other six in California. This came to an end when one of the people I sublet the apartment to abandoned it. He had fled to England to pursue a romance. He didn’t pay the rent, and so we were evicted long distance.

My first residence in California was an apartment on Santa Ynez Street, near Echo Park Lake in Los Angeles, where I lived for about six months in 1967. I was working on my second novel, and Carla Blank, my wife, a dancer, was

teaching physical education at one of Eddie Rickenbacker’s camps, located on an old movie set in the San Bernardino Mountains. Carla’s employers were always offering me a cabin where they promised I could write without interruption. I never took them up on the offer, but for years I’ve wondered about what kind of reception I would have received had they discovered that I am black.

During my breaks from writing I would walk through the shopping areas near Santa Ynez, strolling by vending machines holding newspapers whose headlines screamed about riots in Detroit. On some weekends we’d visit novelist Robert Gover (The One Hundred Dollar Misunderstanding) and his friends in Malibu. I remember one of Gover’s friends, a scriptwriter for the Donna Reed Show, looking me in the eye and telling me that if he were black he’d be “on a Detroit rooftop, sniping at cops,” as he reclined, glass of scotch in hand, in a comfortable chair whose position gave him a good view of the rolling Pacific.

My Santa Ynez neighbors were whites from Alabama and Mississippi, and we got along fine. Most of them were elderly, left behind by white flight to the suburbs, and on weekends the street would be lined with cars belonging to relatives who were visiting. While living here I observed a uniquely Californian phenomenon. Retired men would leave their houses in the morning, enter their cars, and remain there for a good part of the day, snoozing, reading newspapers, or listening to the radio.

I didn’t experience a single racial incident during my stay in this Los Angeles neighborhood of ex-southerners. Once, however, I had a strange encounter with the police. I was walking through a black working-class neighborhood on my way to the downtown Los Angeles library. Some cops drove up and rushed me. A crowd gathered. The cops snatched my briefcase and removed its contents: books and notebooks having to do with my research of voodoo. The crowd laughed when the cops said they thought I was carrying a purse.

In 1968 my wife and I moved to Berkeley, where we lived in one Bauhaus box after another until about 1971, when I received a three-book contract from Doubleday. Then we moved into the Berkeley Hills, where we lived in the downstairs apartment of a very grand-looking house on Bret Harte Way. There was a Zen garden with streams, waterfalls, and bridges outside, along with many varieties of flowers and plants. I didn’t drive, and Carla was away at Mills College each day, earning a master’s degree in dance. I stayed holed up in that apartment for two years, during which time I completed my third novel, Mumbo Jumbo.

During this period I became exposed to some of the racism I hadn’t detected on Santa Ynez or in the Berkeley flats. As a black male working at home, I was regarded with suspicion. Neighbors would come over and warn me about a heroin salesman they said was burglarizing the neighborhood, all the while looking over my shoulder in an attempt to pry into what I was up to. Once, while I was eating breakfast, a policeman entered through the garden door, gun drawn. “What on earth is the problem, officer?” I asked. He
said they got word that a homicide had been committed in my apartment, which I recognized as an old police tactic used to gain entry into somebody's house. Walking through the Berkeley Hills on Sundays, I was greeted by unfriendly stares and growling, snarling dogs. I remember one pest who always poked her head out of her window whenever I'd walk down Bret Harte Way. She was always hassling me about parking my car in front of her house. She resembled Miss Piggy. I came to think of this section of Berkeley as "Whitetown."

Around 1974 the landlord raised the rent on the house in the hills, and we found ourselves again in the Berkeley flats. We spent a couple of peaceful years on Edith Street, and then moved to Jayne Street, where we encountered another next-door family of nosy, middle-class progressives. I understand that much time at North Berkeley white neighborhood association meetings is taken up with discussion of and fascination with blacks who move through the neighborhoods, with special concern given those who tarry, or who wear dreadlocks. Since before the Civil War, vagrancy laws have been used as political weapons against blacks. Appropriately, there has been talk of making Havana—where I understand a woman can get turned in by her neighbors for having too many boyfriends over—Berkeley's sister city.

In 1976 our landlady announced that she was going to reoccupy the Jayne Street house. I facetiously told a friend that I wanted to move to the most right-wing neighborhood he could think of. He mentioned El Cerrito. There, he said, your next-door neighbor might even be a cop. We moved to El Cerrito. Instead of the patronizing nosiness blacks complain about in Berkeley, I found the opposite on Terrace Drive in El Cerrito. The people were cold, impersonal, remote. But the neighborhood was quiet, serene even—the view was Olympian, and our rented house was secluded by eucalyptus trees. The annoyances were minor. Occasionally a car would careen down Terrace Drive full of white teenagers, and one or two would shout, "Hey, nigger!" Sometimes as I walked down The Arlington toward Kensington Market, the curious would stare at me from their cars, and women I encountered would give me nervous, frightened looks. Once, as I was walking to the market to buy magazines, a white child was sitting directly in my path. We were the only two people on the street. Two or three cars actually stopped, and their drivers observed the scene through their rearview mirrors until they were assured I wasn't going to abduct the child.

At night the Kensington Market area was lit with a yellow light, especially eerie during a fog. I always thought that this section of Kensington would be a swell place to make a horror movie—the residents would make great extras—but whatever discomfort I felt about traveling through this area at 2 A.M. was mixed with the relief that I had just navigated safely through Albany, where the police seemed always to be lurking in the shadows, prepared to ensnare blacks, hippies, and others they didn't deem suitable for such a neighborhood.
In 1979 our landlord, a decent enough fellow in comparison to some of the others we had had (who made you understand why the communists shoot the landlords first when they take over a country), announced he was going to sell the house on Terrace Drive. This was the third rented house to be sold out from under us. The asking price was way beyond our means, and so we started to search for another home, only to find that the ones within our price range were located in North Oakland, in a “predominantly black neighborhood.” We finally found a huge Queen Anne Victorian, which seemed to be about a month away from the wrecker’s ball if the termites and the precarious foundation didn’t do it in first, but I decided that I had to have it. The oldest house on the block, it was built in 1906, the year the big earthquake hit Northern California, but left Oakland unscathed because, according to Bret Harte, “there are some things even the earth can’t swallow.” If I was apprehensive about moving into this neighborhood—on television all black neighborhoods resemble the commotion of the station house on Hill Street Blues—I was later to learn that our neighbors were just as apprehensive about us. Were we hippies? Did I have a job? Were we going to pay as much attention to maintaining our property as they did to theirs? Neglected, the dilapidated monstrosity I’d got myself into would blight the entire block.

While I was going to college I worked as an orderly in a psychiatric hospital, and I remember a case in which a man was signed into the institution, after complaints from his neighbors that he mowed the lawn at four in the morning. My neighbors aren’t that finicky, but they keep very busy pruning, gardening, and mowing their laws. Novelist Toni Cade Bambara wrote of the spirit women in Atlanta who plant by moonlight and use conjure to reap gorgeous vegetables and flowers. A woman on this block grows roses the size of cantaloupes.

On New Year’s Eve, famed landscape architect John Roberts accompanied me on my nightly walk, which takes me from 53rd Street to Aileen, Shattuck, and back to 53rd Street. He was able to identify plants and trees that had been imported from Asia, the Middle East, and Australia. On Aileen Street he discovered a banana tree! And Arthur Monroe, a painter and art historian, traces the “Tabby” garden design—in which seashells and plates are mixed with lime, sand, and water to form decorative borders, found in this Oakland neighborhood, and others—to the influence of Islamic slaves brought to the Gulf Coast.

I won over my neighbors, I think, after I triumphed over a dozen generations of pigeons that had been roosting in the crevices of this house for many years. It was a long and angry war, and my five year old constantly complained to her mother about Daddy’s bad words about the birds. I used everything I could get my hands on, including chicken wire and mothballs, and I would have tried the clay owls if the only manufacturer hadn’t gone out of business. I also learned never to underestimate the intelligence of
pigeons; just when you think you’ve got them whipped, you’ll notice that they’ve regrouped on some strategic rooftop to prepare for another invasion. When the house was free of pigeons and their droppings, which had spread to the adjoining properties, the lady next door said, “Thank you.”

Every New Year’s Day since then our neighbors have invited us to join them and their fellow Louisianans for the traditional Afro-American good luck meal called Hoppin’ John. This year the menu included black-eyed peas, ham, corn bread, potato salad, chitterlings, greens, fried chicken, yams, head cheese, macaroni, rolls, sweet potato pie, and fruitcake. I got up that morning weighing 214 pounds and came home from the party weighing 220.

We’ve lived on 53rd Street for three years now. Carla’s dance and theater school, which she operates with her partner, Jody Roberts—Roberts and Blank Dance/Drama—is already five years old. I am working on my seventh novel and a television production of my play Mother Hubbard. The house has yet to be restored to its 1906 glory, but we’re working on it.

I’ve grown accustomed to the common sights here—teenagers moving through the neighborhood carrying radios blasting music by Grandmaster Flash and Prince, men hovering over cars with tools and rags in hand, decked-out female church delegations visiting the sick. Unemployment up, one sees more men drinking from sacks as they walk through Market Street or gather in Helen McGregor Plaza, on Shattuck and 52nd Street, near a bench where mothers sit with their children, waiting for buses. It may be because the bus stop is across the street from Children’s Hospital (exhibiting a brand-new antihuman, postmodern wing), but there seem to be a lot of sick black children these days. The criminal courts and emergency rooms of Oakland hospitals, both medical and psychiatric, are also filled with blacks.

White men go from door to door trying to unload spoiled meat. Incredibly sleazy white contractors and hustlers try to entangle people into shady deals that sometimes lead to the loss of a home. Everybody knows of someone, usually a widow, who has been gypped into paying thousands of dollars more than the standard cost for, say, adding a room to a house. It sure ain’t El Cerrito. In El Cerrito the representatives from the utilities were very courteous. If they realize they’re speaking to someone in a black neighborhood, however, they become curt and sarcastic. I was trying to arrange for the gas company to come out to fix a stove when the woman from Pacific Gas and Electric gave me some snide lip. I told her, “Lady, if you think what you’re going through is an inconvenience, you can imagine my inconvenience paying the bills every month.” Even she had to laugh.

The clerks in the stores are also curt, regarding blacks the way the media regard them, as criminal suspects. Over in El Cerrito the cops were professional, respectful—in Oakland they swagger about like candidates for a rodeo. In El Cerrito and the Berkeley Hills you could take your time paying some bills, but in this black neighborhood if you miss paying a bill by one
day, “reminders” printed in glaring and violent typefaces are sent to you, or you’re threatened with discontinuance of this or that service. Los Angeles police victim Eulia Love, who was shot in the aftermath of an argument over an overdue gas bill, would still be alive if she had lived in El Cerrito or the Berkeley Hills.

I went to a bank a few weeks ago that advertised easy loans on television, only to be told that I would have to wait six months after opening an account to be eligible for a loan. I went home and called the same bank, this time putting on my Clark Kent voice, and was informed that I could come in and get the loan the same day. Other credit unions and banks, too, have different lending practices for black and white neighborhoods, but when I try to tell white intellectuals that blacks are prevented from developing industries because the banks find it easier to lend money to communist countries than to American citizens, they call me paranoid. Sometimes when I know I am going to be inconvenienced by merchants or creditors because of my 53rd Street address, I give the address of my Berkeley studio instead. Others are not so fortunate.

Despite the inconveniences and antagonism from the outside world one has to endure for having a 53rd Street address, life in this neighborhood is more pleasant than grim. Casually dressed, well-groomed elderly men gather at the intersections to look after the small children as they walk to and from school, or just to keep an eye on the neighborhood. My next-door neighbor keeps me in stitches with his informed commentary on any number of political comedies emanating from Washington and Sacramento. Once we were discussing pesticides, and the man who was repairing his porch told us that he had a great garden and didn’t have to pay all that much attention to it. As for pesticides, he said, the bugs have to eat, too.

There are people on this block who still know the subsistence skills many Americans have forgotten. They can hunt and fish (and if you don’t fish, there is a man who covers the neighborhood selling fresh fish and yelling, “Fishman,” recalling a period of ancient American commerce when you didn’t have to pay the middleman). They are also loyal Americans, they vote, they pay taxes—but you don’t find the extreme patriots here that you find in white neighborhoods. Although Christmas, Thanksgiving, New Year’s, and Easter are celebrated with all get-out, I’ve never seen a flag flying on Memorial Day, or on any holiday that calls for the showing of the flag. Blacks express their loyalty in concrete ways. For example, you rarely see a foreign car in this neighborhood. And this 53rd Street neighborhood, as well as black neighborhoods like it from coast to coast, will supply the male children who will bear the brunt of future jungle wars, just as they did in Vietnam.

We do our shopping on a strip called Temescal, which stretches from 46th to 51st streets. Temescal, according to Oakland librarian William Sturm, is an Aztec word for “hothouse,” or “bathhouse.” The word was borrowed from the Mexicans by the Spanish to describe similar hothouses, early saunas, built
by the California Indians in what is now North Oakland. Some say the hot-houses were used to sweat out demons; others claim the Indians used them for medicinal purposes. Most agree that after a period of time in the steam, the Indians would rush en masse into the streams that flowed through the area. One still runs underneath my backyard—I have to mow the grass there almost every other day.

Within these five blocks are the famous Italian restaurant Bertola’s, “Since 1932”; Siam restaurant; La Belle Creole, a French-Caribbean restaurant; Asmara, an Ethiopian restaurant; and Ben’s Hof Brau, where white and black senior citizens, dressed in the elegance of a former time, congregate to talk or to have an inexpensive though quality breakfast provided by Ben’s hardworking and courteous staff.

The Hof Brau shares its space with Vern’s market, where you can shop to the music of DeBarge. To the front of Vern’s is the Temescal Delicatessen, where a young Korean man makes the best po’ boy sandwiches north of Louisiana, and near the side entrance is Ed Fraga’s Automotive. The owner is always advising his customers to avoid stress, and he says goodbye with a “God bless you.” The rest of the strip is taken up by the Temescal Pharmacy, which has a resident health advisor and a small library of health literature; the Aikido Institute; an African bookstore; and the internationally known Genova deli, to which people from the surrounding cities travel to shop. The strip also includes the Clausen House thrift shop, which sells used clothes and furniture. Here you can buy novels by J.D. Salinger and John O’Hara for ten cents each.

Space that was recently occupied by the Buon Gusto Bakery is now for rent. Before the bakery left, an Italian lady who worked there introduced me to a crunchy, cookie-like treat called “bones,” which she said went well with Italian wine. The Buon Gusto had been a landmark since the 1940s, when, according to a guest at the New Year’s Day Hoppin’ John supper, North Oakland was populated by Italians and Portuguese. In those days a five-room house could be rented for $45 a month, she said.

The neighborhood is still in transition. The East Bay Negro Historical Society, which was located around the corner on Grove Street, included in its collection letters written by nineteenth-century macho man Jack London to his black nurse. They were signed, “Your little white pickaninny.” It’s been replaced by the New Israelite Delight restaurant, part of the Israelite Church, which also operates a day care center. The restaurant offers homemade Louisiana gumbo and a breakfast that includes grits.

Unlike the other California neighborhoods I’ve lived in, I know most of the people on this block by name. They are friendly and cooperative, always offering to watch your house while you’re away. The day after one of the few whites who lives on the block—a brilliant muckraking journalist and former student of mine—was robbed, neighbors gathered in front of his house to offer assistance.
In El Cerrito my neighbor was indeed a cop. He used pomade on his curly hair, sported a mustache, and there was a grayish tint in his brown eyes. He was a handsome man, with a smile like a movie star’s. His was the only house on the block I entered during my three-year stay in that neighborhood, and that was one afternoon when we shared some brandy. I wanted to get to know him better. I didn’t know he was dead until I saw people in black gathered on his doorstep.

I can’t imagine that happening on 53rd Street. In a time when dour thinkers view alienation and insensitivity toward the plight of others as characteristics of the modern condition, I think I’m lucky to live in a neighborhood where people look out for one another.

A human neighborhood.

### Things to Do with the Reading

1. How does Reed’s account of his battle to remove pigeons from his house in the “predominantly black neighborhood” (paragraph 15) function in the essay’s tonally complex account of integrated vs. segregated neighborhoods? What is ironic about Reed’s battle to evict the pigeons, especially in the context of his essay’s opening paragraph?

2. At one point in the essay (paragraph 14), Reed goes on a New Year’s Eve walk with a landscape architect who identifies plants imported from “Asia, the Middle East, and Australia. On Aileen Street he discovered a banana tree!” Reed tells us in the same paragraph that a painter and art historian had traced the “Tabby” garden design in Oakland gardens to the “influence of Islamic slaves brought to the Gulf Coast.” Like the paragraph in which Reed recounts his battle with the pigeons, this seemingly trivial account of an evening’s walk is richly suggestive of the kind of thinking Reed is inviting us to do in response to the piece. Write a paragraph in which you make the implicit explicit in this paragraph. So What that the walkers discover a banana tree? So What that the garden design owes to the influence of Islamic slaves? See Chapter 1, Move 3: Make the Implicit Explicit.

3. Reed’s essay is whimsical in tone and often comic. How does Reed manage to get us to understand and feel the harmful effects of racism while still maintaining the essay’s relatively light tone? How, for example, does the use of the word “inconvenienced” (paragraph 21) function in this regard? What is the effect of Reed’s use of the word “swell” in paragraphs 2 and 11? What does Reed accomplish in his brief recounting of the incident when a scriptwriter friend of one of his friends said “looking me in the eye [. . .] that if he were black he’d be ‘on a Detroit rooftop, sniping
at cops,’ as he reclined, glass of scotch in hand, in a comfortable chair whose position gave him a good view of the rolling Pacific” (paragraph 4)?

4. Track and analyze the ways that the police function as a strand (see Chapter 2 on The Method) in the essay. See especially paragraphs 6, 8, and 20, as well as the essay’s last four paragraphs. Write up your results in a short essay.

5. **Link:** Consider paragraphs 25–28 wherein Reed catalogues the names and ethnic origins of shops—mostly shops selling food in his neighborhood. Use Rodriguez’s essay as a lens for thinking about Reed’s essay, starting with this point of contact between the two essays: food. Write an essay on how Reed’s thinking about assimilation fits and does not fit with Rodriguez’s. Would Salins see Reed as an “ethnic federalist”?

6. **Link Across Chapters:** Put Reed’s discussion of the various neighborhoods he has lived in into conversation with Jane Jacobs’s essay “The Uses of Sidewalks” in Chapter 13. How would Jacobs respond to the different neighborhoods Reed describes? What perspective might Reed offer on the New York City neighborhood Jacobs lived in (the West Village of Manhattan) and loved?
On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst

A visit to her old neighborhood in Brooklyn shortly after a racially motivated killing provides the occasion for Marianna Torgovnick to reevaluate her conflicted attitudes toward her own past. Wandering the neighborhood, she reflects on the legacy of ethnic and gender prejudice in her own family, on the desire it bore in her not only to escape her upbringing but to obscure it, and ultimately, on the cost of doing so. Torgovnick is a professor of English at Duke University with a special interest in cultural studies. A version of this essay appeared in her 1994 book, Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian-American Daughter, which won the American Book Award.

The mafia protects the neighborhood, our fathers say, with that peculiar satisfied pride with which law-abiding Italian-Americans refer to the Mafia: the Mafia protects the neighborhood from “the coloreds.” In the fifties and sixties, I heard that information repeated, in whispers, in neighborhood parks and in the yard at school in Bensonhurst. The same information probably passes today in the parks (the word now “blacks,” not “coloreds”) but perhaps no longer in the schoolyards. From buses each morning, from neighborhoods outside Bensonhurst, spill children of all colors and backgrounds—American black, West Indian black, Hispanic, and Asian. But the blacks are the only ones especially marked for notice. Bensonhurst is no longer entirely protected from “the coloreds.” But in a deeper sense, at least for Italian-Americans, Bensonhurst never changes.

Italian-American life continues pretty much as I remember it. Families with young children live side by side with older couples whose children are long gone to the suburbs. Many of those families live “down the block” from the last generation or, sometimes still, live together with parents or grandparents. When a young family leaves, as sometimes happens, for Long Island or New Jersey or (very common now) for Staten Island, another arrives, without any special effort being required, from Italy or a poorer neighborhood in New York. They fill the neat but anonymous houses that make up the mostly tree-lined streets: two-, three-, or four-family houses for the most part (this is a working, lower to middle-middle class area, and people need rents to pay mortgages), with a few single family or small apartment houses tossed in at random. Tomato plants, fig trees, and plaster madonnas often decorate small but well-tended yards which face out onto the street; the grassy front lawn, like the grassy back yard, is relatively uncommon.

Crisscrossing the neighborhood and making out ethnic zones—Italian, Irish, and Jewish, for the most part, though there are some Asian Americans and some people (usually Protestants) called simply Americans—are the great shopping streets: Eighty-sixth Street, Kings Highway, Bay Parkway, Eighteenth Avenue, each with its own distinctive character. On Eighty-sixth Street, crowds bustle along sidewalks lined with ample, packed fruit stands. Women wheeling shopping carts or baby strollers check the fruit carefully, piece by piece, and often bargain with the dealer, cajoling for a better price or letting him know that the vegetables, this time, aren’t up to snuff. A few blocks down, the fruit stands are gone and the streets are lined with clothing and record shops, mobbed by teenagers. Occasionally, the el rumbles overhead, a few stops out of Coney Island on its way to the city, a trip of around one hour.

On summer nights, neighbors congregate on stoops which during the day serve as play yards for children. Air conditioning exists everywhere in Bensonhurst, but people still sit outside in the summer—to supervise children, to gossip, to stare at strangers. “Buona sera,” I say, or “Buona notte,” as I am ritually presented to Sal and Lily and Louie, the neighbors sitting on the stoop. “Grazie,” I say when they praise my children or my appearance. It’s the only time I use Italian, which I learned at high school, although my parents (both second-generation Italian-Americans, my father Sicilian, my mother Calabrian) speak it at home to each other but never to me or my brother. My accent is the Tuscan accent taught at school, not the southern Italian accents of my parents and the neighbors.

It’s important to greet and please the neighbors, any break in this decorum would seriously offend and aggrieve my parents. For the neighbors are the stern arbiters of conduct in Bensonhurst. Does Mary keep a clean house? Did Gina wear black long enough after her mother’s death? Was the food good at Tony’s wedding? The neighbors know and pass judgment. Any news of family scandal (my brother’s divorce, for example) provokes from my mother the agonized words: “But what will I tell people?” I sometimes collaborate in devising a plausible script.

A large sign on the church I attended as a child sums up for me the ethos of Bensonhurst. The sign urges contributions to the church building fund with the message, in huge letters: “Each year St. Simon and Jude saves this neighborhood one million dollars in taxes.” Passing the church on the way from largely Jewish and middle-class Sheepshead Bay (where my in-laws live) to Bensonhurst, year after year, my husband and I look for the sign and laugh at the crass level of its pitch, its utter lack of attention to things spiritual. But we also understand exactly the values it represents.

In the summer of 1989, my parents were visiting me at my house in Durham, North Carolina, from the apartment in Bensonhurst where they have lived since 1942: three small rooms, rent-controlled, floor clean enough to eat off, every corner and crevice known and organized. My parents’ longevity in a single apartment is unusual even for Bensonhurst, but not that
unusual; many people live for decades in the same place or move within a ten-block radius. When I lived in this apartment, there were four rooms; one has since been ceded to a demanding landlord, one of the various landlords who have haunted my parents’ life and must always be appeased lest the ultimate threat—removal from the rent-controlled apartment—be brought into play. That summer, during their visit, on August 23 (my younger daughter’s birthday) a shocking, disturbing, news report issued from the neighborhood: it had become another Howard Beach.

Three black men, walking casually through the streets at night, were attacked by a group of whites. One was shot dead, mistaken, as it turned out, for another black youth who was dating a white, although part-Hispanic, girl in the neighborhood. It all made sense: the crudely protective men, expecting to see a black arriving at the girl’s house and overreacting; the rebellious girl dating the outsider boy; the black dead as a sacrifice to the feelings of the neighborhood.

I might have felt outrage, I might have felt guilt or shame, I might have despised the people among whom I grew up. In a way I felt all four emotions when I heard the news. I expect that there were many people in Bensonhurst who felt the same rush of emotions. But mostly I felt that, given the setup, this was the only way things could have happened. I detested the racial killing, but I also understood it. Those streets, which should be public property available to all, belong to the neighborhood. All the people sitting on the stoops on August 23 knew that as well as they knew their own names. The black men walking through probably knew it too—though their casual walk sought to deny the fact that, for the neighbors, even the simple act of blacks walking through the neighborhood would be seen as invasion.

Italian-Americans in Bensonhurst are notable for their cohesiveness and provinciality; the slightest pressure turns those qualities into prejudice and racism. Their cohesiveness is based on the stable economic and ethical level that links generation to generation, keeping Italian-Americans in Bensonhurst and the Italian American community alive as the Jewish-American community of my youth is no longer alive. (Its young people routinely moved to the suburbs or beyond and were never replaced, so that Jews in Bensonhurst today are almost all very old people.) Their provinciality results from the Italian-Americans’ devotion to jealous distinctions and discriminations. Jews are suspect, but (the old Italian women admit) “they make good husbands.” The Irish are okay, fellow Catholics, but not really “like us”; they make bad husbands because they drink and gamble. Even Italians come in varieties, by region (Sicilian, Calabrian, Neapolitan, very rarely any region further north) and by history in this country (the newly arrived and ridiculed “gaffoon” versus the second or third generation).

Bensonhurst is a neighborhood dedicated to believing that its values are the only values; it tends toward certain forms of inertia. When my parents
visit me in Durham, they routinely take chairs from the kitchen and sit out on the lawn in front of the house, not on the chairs on the back deck; then they complain that the streets are too quiet. When they walk around my neighborhood (these De Marcos who have friends named Travaglianti and Occhipinti), they look at the mailboxes and report that my neighbors have strange names. Prices at my local supermarket are compared, in unbelievable detail, with prices on Eighty-sixth Street. Any rearrangement of my kitchen since their last visit is registered and criticized. Difference is not only unwelcome, it is unacceptable. One of the most characteristic things my mother ever said was in response to my plans for renovating my house in Durham. When she heard my plans, she looked around, crossed her arms, and said, “If it was me, I wouldn’t change nothing.” My father once asked me to level with him about a Jewish boyfriend who lived in a different part of the neighborhood, reacting to his Jewishness, but even more to the fact that he often wore Bermuda shorts: “Tell me something, Marianna. Is he a Communist?” Such are the standards of normality and political thinking in Bensonhurst.

I often think that one important difference between Italian-Americans in New York neighborhoods like Bensonhurst and Italian-Americans elsewhere is that the others moved on—to upstate New York, to Pennsylvania, to the Midwest. Though they frequently settled in communities of fellow Italians, they did move on. Bensonhurst Italian-Americans seem to have felt that one large move, over the ocean, was enough. Future moves could be only local: from the Lower East Side, for example, to Brooklyn, or from one part of Brooklyn to another. Bensonhurst was for many of these people the summa of expectations. If their America were to be drawn as a *New Yorker* cover, Manhattan itself would be tiny in proportion to Bensonhurst and to its satellites, Staten Island, New Jersey, and Long Island.

“Oh, no,” my father says when he hears the news about the shooting. Though he still refers to blacks as “coloreds,” he’s not really a racist and is upset that this innocent youth was shot in his neighborhood. He has no trouble acknowledging the wrongness of the death. But then, like all the news accounts, he turns to the fact, repeated over and over, that the blacks had been on their way to look at a used car when they encountered the hostile mob of whites. The explanation is right before him but, “Yeah,” he says, still shaking his head, “yeah, but what were they doing there? They didn’t belong.”

Over the next few days, the television news is even more disturbing. Rows of screaming Italians lining the streets, most of them looking like my relatives. I focus especially on one woman who resembles almost completely my mother: stocky but not fat, mid-seventies but well preserved, full face showing only minimal wrinkles, ample steel-gray hair neatly if rigidly coiffed in a modified beehive hairdo left over from the sixties. She shakes her fist at the camera, protesting the arrest of the Italian American youths in the neighborhood and the incursion of more blacks into the neighborhood, protesting the
shooting. I look a little nervously at my mother (the parent I resemble), but she has not even noticed the woman and stares impassively at the television.

What has Bensonhurst to do with what I teach today and write? Why did I need to write about this killing in Bensonhurst, but not in the manner of a news account or a statistical sociological analysis? Within days of hearing the news, I began to plan this essay, to tell the world what I knew, even though I was aware that I could publish the piece only someplace my parents or their neighbors would never see or hear about it. I sometimes think that I looked around from my baby carriage and decided that someday, the sooner the better, I would get out of Bensonhurst. Now, much to my surprise, Bensonhurst—the antipode of the intellectual life I sought, the least interesting of places—had become a respectable intellectual topic. People would be willing to hear about Bensonhurst—and all by the dubious virtue of a racial killing in the streets.

The story as I would have to tell it would be to some extent a class narrative: about the difference between working class and upper middle class, dependence and a profession, Bensonhurst and a posh suburb. But I need to make it clear that I do not imagine myself as writing from a position of enormous self-satisfaction, or even enormous distance. You can take the girl out of Bensonhurst (that much is clear), but you may not be able to take Bensonhurst out of the girl. And upward mobility is not the essence of the story, though it is an important marker and symbol.

In Durham today, I live in a twelve-room house surrounded by an acre of trees. When I sit on my back deck on summer evenings, no houses are visible through the trees. I have a guaranteed income, teaching English at an excellent university, removed by my years of education from the fundamental economic and social conditions of Bensonhurst. The one time my mother ever expressed pleasure at my work was when I got tenure, what my father still calls, with no irony intended, “ten years.” “What does that mean?” my mother asked when she heard the news. Then she reached back into her experience as a garment worker, subject to periodic layoffs. “Does it mean they can’t fire you just for nothing and can’t lay you off?” When I said that was exactly what it means, she said, “Very good. Congratulations. That's wonderful.” I was free from the padrones, from the network of petty anxieties that had formed, in large part, her very existence. Of course, I wasn’t really free of petty anxieties: would my salary increase keep pace with my colleagues’, how would my office compare, would this essay be accepted for publication, am I happy? The line between these worries and my mother’s is the line between the working class and the upper middle class.

But getting out of Bensonhurst never meant to me a big house, or nice clothes, or a large income. And it never meant feeling good about looking down on what I left behind or hiding my background. Getting out of Bensonhurst meant freedom—to experiment, to grow, to change. It also meant knowledge
in some grand, abstract way. All the material possessions I have acquired, I acquired simply along the way—and for the first twelve years after I left Bensonhurst, I chose to acquire almost nothing at all. Now, as I write about the neighborhood, I recognize that although I’ve come far in physical and material distance, the emotional distance is harder to gauge. Bensonhurst has everything to do with who I am and even with what I write. Occasionally I get reminded of my roots, of their simultaneously choking and nutritive power.

Scene one: It’s after a lecture at Duke, given by a visiting professor from Princeton. The lecture was long and a little dull and—bad luck—I had agreed to be one of the people having dinner with the lecturer afterward. We settle into our table at the restaurant: this man, me, the head of the comparative literature program (also a professor of German), and a couple I like who teach French, the husband at my university, the wife at one nearby. The conversation is sluggish, as it often is when a stranger, like the visiting professor, has to be assimilated into a group, so I ask the visitor from Princeton a question to personalize things a bit. “How did you get interested in what you do? What made you become a professor of German?” The man gets going and begins talking about how it was really unlikely that he, a nice Jewish boy from Bensonhurst, would have chosen, in the mid-fifties, to study German. Unlikely indeed.

I remember seeing Judgment at Nuremberg in a local movie theater and having a woman in the row in back of me get hysterical when some clips of a concentration camp were shown. “My God,” she screamed in a European accent, “look at what they did. Murderers, MURDERERS!”—and she had to be supported out by her family. I couldn’t see, in the dark, whether her arm bore the neatly tattooed numbers that the arms of some of my classmates’ parents did—and that always affected me with a thrill of horror. Ten years older than me, this man had lived more directly through those feelings, lived with and among those feelings. The first chance he got, he raced to study in Germany. I myself have twice chosen not to visit Germany, but I understand his impulse to identify with the Other as a way of getting out of the neighborhood.

At the dinner, the memory about the movie pops into my mind but I pick up instead on the Bensonhurst—I’m also from there, but Italian-American. Like a flash, he asks something I haven’t been asked in years: Where did I go to high school and (a more common question) what was my maiden name? I went to Lafayette High School, I say, and my name was De Marco. Everything changes: his facial expression, his posture, his accent, his voice. “Soo, Dee Maw-ko,” he says, “dun anything wrong at school today—got enny pink slips? Wanna meet me later at the park on maybe bye the Baye?” When I laugh, recognizing the stereotype that Italians get pink slips for misconduct at school and the notorious chemistry between Italian women and Jewish men, he says, back in his Princetonian voice: “My God, for a minute I felt like I was turning into a werewolf.”
It’s odd that although I can remember almost nothing else about this man—his face, his body type, even his name—I remember this lapse into his “real self” with enormous vividness. I am especially struck by how easily he was able to slip into the old, generic Brooklyn accent. I myself have no memory of ever speaking in that accent, though I also have no memory of trying not to speak it, except for teaching myself, carefully, to say “oil” rather than “earl.”

But the surprises aren’t over. The female French professor, whom I have known for at least five years, reveals for the first time that she is also from the neighborhood, though she lived across the other side of Kings Highway, went to a different, more elite high school, and was Irish American. Three of six professors, sitting at an eclectic vegetarian restaurant in Durham, all from Bensonhurst—a neighborhood where (I swear) you couldn’t get The New York Times at any of the local stores.

Scene two: I still live in Bensonhurst. I’m waiting for my parents to return from a conference at my school, where they’ve been summoned to discuss my transition from elementary to junior high school. I am already a full year younger than any of my classmates, having skipped a grade, a not uncommon occurrence for “gifted” youngsters. Now the school is worried about putting me in an accelerated track through junior high, since that would make me two years younger. A compromise was reached: I would be put in a special program for gifted children, but one that took three, not two, years. It sounds okay.

Three years later, another wait. My parents have gone to school this time to make another decision. Lafayette High School has three tracks: academic, for potentially college-bound kids; secretarial, mostly for Italian American girls or girls with low aptitude-test scores (the high school is de facto segregated, so none of the tracks is as yet racially coded, though they are coded by ethnic group and gender); and vocational, mostly for boys with the same attributes, ethnic or intellectual. Although my scores are superb, the guidance counselor has recommended the secretarial track; when I protested, the conference with my parents was arranged. My mother’s preference is clear: the secretarial track—college is for boys; I will need to make a “good living” until I marry and have children. My father also prefers the secretarial track, but he wavers, half proud of my aberrantly high scores, half worried. I press the attack, saying that if I were Jewish I would have been placed, without question, in the academic track. I tell him I have sneaked a peek at my files and know that my IQ is at genius level. I am allowed to insist on the change into the academic track.

What I did, and I was ashamed of it even then, was to play upon my father’s competitive feelings with Jews: his daughter could and should be as good as theirs. In the bank where he was a messenger, and at the insurance company where he worked in the mailroom, my father worked with
Jews, who were almost always his immediate supervisors. Several times, my father was offered the supervisory job but turned it down after long conversations with my mother about the dangers of making a change, the difficulty of giving orders to friends. After her work in a local garment shop, after cooking dinner and washing the floor each night, my mother often did piecework making bows; sometimes I would help her for fun, but it wasn’t fun, and I was free to stop while she continued for long, tedious hours to increase the family income. Once a week, her part-time boss, Dave, would come by to pick up the boxes of bows. Short, round, with his shirrtails sloppily tucked into his pants and a cigar almost always dangling from his lips, Dave was a stereotyped Jew but also, my parents always said, a nice guy, a decent man.

Years after, similar choices come up, and I show the same assertiveness I showed with my father, the same ability to deal for survival, but tinged with Bensonhurst caution. Where will I go to college? Not to Brooklyn College, the flagship of the city system—I know that, but don’t press the invitations I have received to apply to prestigious schools outside of New York. The choice comes down to two: Barnard, which gives me a full scholarship, minus five hundred dollars a year that all scholarship students are expected to contribute from summer earnings, or New York University, which offers me one thousand dollars above tuition as a bribe. I waver. My parents stand firm: they are already losing money by letting me go to college; I owe it to the family to contribute the extra thousand dollars plus my summer earnings. Besides, my mother adds, harping on a favorite theme, there are no boys at Barnard; at NYU I’m more likely to meet someone to marry. I go to NYU and do marry in my senior year, but he is someone I didn’t meet at college. I was secretly relieved, I now think (though at the time I thought I was just placating my parents’ conventionality), to be out of the marriage sweepstakes.

The first boy who ever asked me for a date was Robert Lubitz, in eighth grade: tall and skinny to my average height and teenage chubbiness. I turned him down, thinking we would make a ridiculous couple. Day after day, I cast my eyes at stylish Juliano, the class cutup; day after day, I captivated Robert Lubitz. Occasionally, one of my brother’s Italian American friends would ask me out, and I would go, often to ROTC dances. My specialty was making political remarks so shocking that the guys rarely asked me again. After a while I recognized destiny: the Jewish man was a passport out of Bensonhurst. I of course did marry a Jewish man, who gave me my freedom and, very important, helped remove me from the expectations of Bensonhurst. Though raised in a largely Jewish section of Brooklyn, he had gone to college in Ohio and knew how important it was, as he put it, “to get past the Brooklyn Bridge.” We met on neutral ground, in Central Park, at a performance of Shakespeare. The Jewish-Italian marriage is a common enough catastrophe in Bensonhurst.
for my parents to have accepted, even welcomed, mine—though my parents continued to treat my husband like an outsider for the first twenty years (“Now Marianna. Here’s what’s going on with you brother. But don’t tell-a you husband”).

Along the way I make other choices, more fully marked by Bensonhurst cautiousness. I am attracted to journalism or the arts as careers, but the prospects for income seem iffy. I choose instead to imagine myself as a teacher. Only the availability of NDEA fellowships when I graduate, with their generous terms, propels me from high school teaching (a thought I never much relished) to college teaching (which seems like a brave new world). Within the college teaching profession, I choose offbeat specializations: the novel, interdisciplinary approaches (not something clear and clubby like Milton or the eighteenth century). Eventually I write the book I like best about primitive others as they figure within Western obsessions: my identification with “the Other,” my sense of being “Other,” surfaces at last. I avoid all mentoring structures for a long time but accept aid when it comes to me on the basis of what I perceive to be merit. I’m still, deep down, Italian-American Bensonhurst, though by this time I’m a lot of other things as well.

Scene three: In the summer of 1988, a little more than a year before the shooting in Bensonhurst, my father woke up trembling and in what appeared to be a fit. Hospitalization revealed that he had a pocket of blood on his brain, a frequent consequence of falls for older people. About a year earlier, I had stayed home, using my children as an excuse, when my aunt, my father’s much loved sister, died, missing her funeral; only now does my mother tell me how much my father resented my taking his suggestion that I stay home. Now, confronted with what is described as brain surgery but turns out to be less dramatic than it sounds, I fly home immediately.

My brother drives three hours back and forth from New Jersey every day to chauffeur me and my mother to the hospital: he is being a fine Italian-American son. For the first time in years, we have long conversations alone. He is two years older than I am, a chemical engineer who has also left the neighborhood but has remained closer to its values, with a suburban, Republican inflection. He talks a lot about New York, saying that (except for neighborhoods like Bensonhurst) it’s a “third-world city now.” It’s the summer of the Tawana Brawley incident, when Brawley accused white men of abducting her and smearing racial slurs on her body with her own excrement. My brother is filled with dislike for Al Sharpton and Brawley’s other vocal supporters in the black community—not because they’re black, he says, but because they’re troublemakers, stirring things up. The city is drenched in racial hatred that makes itself felt in the halls of the hospital: Italians and Jews in the beds and as doctors; blacks as nurses and orderlies.
This is the first time since I left New York in 1975 that I have visited Brooklyn without once getting into Manhattan. It's the first time I have spent several days alone with my mother, living in her apartment in Bensonhurst. My every move is scrutinized and commented on. I feel like I am going to go crazy.

Finally, it's clear that my father is going to be fine, and I can go home. She insists on accompanying me to the travel agent to get my ticket for home, even though I really want to be alone. The agency (a mafia front?) has no one who knows how to ticket me for the exotic destination of North Carolina and no computer for doing so. The one person who can perform this feat by hand is out. I have to kill time for an hour and suggest to my mother that she go home, to be there for my brother when he arrives from Jersey. We stop in a Pork Store, where I buy a stash of cheeses, sausages, and other delicacies unavailable in Durham. My mother walks home with the shopping bags, and I'm on my own.

More than anything I want a kind of sorbetto or ice I remember from my childhood, a cremolata, almond-vanilla-flavored with large chunks of nuts. I pop into the local bakery (at the unlikely hour of 11 a.m.) and ask for a cremolata, usually eaten after dinner. The woman—a younger version of my mother—refuses: they haven’t made a fresh ice yet, and what’s left from the day before is too icy, no good. I explain that I’m about to get on a plane for North Carolina and want that ice, good or not. But she has her standards and holds her ground, even though North Carolina has about the same status in her mind as Timbuktoo and she knows I will be banished, perhaps forever, from the land of cremolata.

Then, while I’m taking a walk, enjoying my solitude, I have another idea. On the block behind my parents’ house, there’s a club for men, for men from a particular town or region in Italy: six or seven tables, some on the sidewalk beneath a garish red, green, and white sign; no women allowed or welcome unless they’re with men, and no women at all during the day when the real business of the club—a game of cards for old men—is in progress. Still, I know that inside the club would be coffee and a cremolata ice. I’m thirty-eight, well-dressed, very respectable looking; I know what I want. I also know I’m not supposed to enter that club. I enter anyway, asking the teenage boy behind the counter firmly, in my most professional tones, for a cremolata ice. Dazzled, he complies immediately. The old men at the card table have been staring at this scene, unable to place me exactly, though my facial type is familiar. Finally, a few old men’s hisses pierce the air. “Strega,” I hear as I leave, “mala strega”—“witch,” or “brazen whore.” I have been in Bensonhurst less than a week, but I have managed to reproduce, on my final day there for this visit, the conditions of my youth. Knowing the rules, I have broken them. I shake hands with my discreetly rebellious past, still an outsider walking through the neighborhood, marked and insulted—though unlikely to be shot.
Things to Do with the Reading

1. It's a paradox of effective reading that sometimes you can see more out of the corner of your eye than by staring straight ahead. That is, looking at issues aslant, from one side, rather than directly, can be especially revealing. Write an essay on the functions that Torgovnick's brother, husband, high school boyfriends, and the female French professor who has been her friend for five years serve in her larger discussion of ethnicity and the melting pot.

2. A key word in this essay is the often-capitalized “Other.” It is used in reference to the visiting lecturer at the end of paragraph 20, for example: “I myself have twice chosen not to visit Germany, but I understand his impulse to identify with the Other as a way of getting out of the neighborhood.” Find other references in the essay to the Other, or situations of Otherness, and write an essay on how this concept operates in Torgovnick's struggle to understand Assimilation American Style.

3. Torgovnick explicitly names social class as a barrier between, for example, herself and her parents. In paragraph 16, Torgovnick asserts, “The story as I would have to tell it would be to some extent a class narrative” (our italics). To what extent? As you write in response to this question, take care to look for ways that her thinking about class—and about her parents—changes as the essay progresses.

4. **Link:** Write an essay on how Torgovnick's Bensonhurst compares and contrasts with Reed's El Cerrito. What features of El Cerrito might Reed point to as preventing it from having the kind of provinciality that Torgovnick shows us leads to racism and violence in Bensonhurst? To what extent do Reed and Torgovnick find similar things to celebrate in their largely unassimilated neighborhoods?

5. **Link:** Write an essay analyzing the brief scene in which Torgovnick is treated as an outsider by a group of Italian-American men. In this case, they have verbally insulted her primarily for her gender. Where else does gender discrimination appear in the essay? How does it compare as a lens—seeing as a woman—with the lens of race adopted by Reed and Gates in their essays? What are the biggest similarities? And given those similarities, what's the biggest difference? (See Chapter 3 on Difference within Similarity.)

6. **Link Across Chapters:** Torgovnick's essay begins with the issue of neighborhood safety as seen by her Italian-American parents and neighbors, wherein safety and racism are directly connected. Write an essay in which you put Torgovnick's piece into conversation with Jacobs' essay, “Uses of Sidewalks: Safety” in Chapter 13. What might Jacobs find to
praise about Bensonhurst, and why? What’s different about the neighborhoods that Jacobs describes that apparently make them safer for strangers and outsiders? How is Bensonhurst different from the neighborhood around the White Horse Tavern that Jacobs describes, and So What?

7. **Application**: Equipped with a notebook or laptop, spend an afternoon wandering around your old neighborhood. Make a point of stopping every half hour or so to freewrite on the question, “How has my neighborhood shaped me?” Obviously, the readings in this chapter should have enriched the implications of that question for you, to include such matters as:

- the marks of social class
- the elements in yourself you have wished to conceal or make over
- your tastes to this day, but also your “local” prejudices
- your own ambivalence to your past, that strange mix of reverence and dread that neighborhoods specialize in inspiring

Make at least three entries of 20 minutes or more. (If you are currently living away from your neighborhood, you can write from memory.) Then return to these—type them if you have handwritten them—and revise and expand them. If you carried this project through to some sort of completion, one or more of them might open out into your own personal essay about the complex hold that a neighborhood can claim on who and what we become. See Chapter 2 on freewriting.
Michael Jonas

The Downside of Diversity

With this analysis of a controversial survey by Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, the chapter opens back out to a wider theoretical frame, providing a new context for reconsidering the series of first-person memoirs by Rodriguez, Smith, Tan, Gates, Reed, and Torgovnick. It is the first of two concluding readings to this chapter, both aimed at challenging conventional assumptions about the melting pot. The article, which first appeared in the Boston Globe, discusses Putnam’s findings—suggesting racial and ethnic diversity diminishes rather than increases civic strength. The article also surveys the responses Putnam’s findings evoked from both the right and the left, as well as the rhetorical challenges Putnam faced in finding a way to contextualize results that challenged his own vision of the melting pot. The author of the piece, Michael Jonas, is executive editor of CommonWealth, a journal published by MassINC, an independent think tank using nonpartisan research, civic journalism, and public forums to stimulate debate and shape public policy.

1 It has become increasingly popular to speak of racial and ethnic diversity as a civic strength. From multicultural festivals to pronouncements from political leaders, the message is the same: our differences make us stronger.

But a massive new study, based on detailed interviews of nearly 30,000 people across America, has concluded just the opposite. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam—famous for Bowling Alone, his 2000 book on declining civic engagement—has found that the greater the diversity in a community, the fewer people vote and the less they volunteer, the less they give to charity and work on community projects. In the most diverse communities, neighbors trust one another about half as much as they do in the most homogenous settings. The study, the largest ever on civic engagement in America, found that virtually all measures of civic health are lower in more diverse settings.

“The extent of the effect is shocking,” says Scott Page, a University of Michigan political scientist.

The study comes at a time when the future of the American melting pot is the focus of intense political debate, from immigration to race-based admissions to schools, and it poses challenges to advocates on all sides of the issues. The study is already being cited by some conservatives as proof of the
harm large-scale immigration causes to the nation’s social fabric. But with demographic trends already pushing the nation inexorably toward greater diversity, the real question may yet lie ahead: how to handle the unsettling social changes that Putnam’s research predicts.

“We can’t ignore the findings,” says Ali Noorani, executive director of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition. “The big question we have to ask ourselves is, what do we do about it; what are the next steps?”

The study is part of a fascinating new portrait of diversity emerging from recent scholarship. Diversity, it shows, makes us uncomfortable—but discomfort, it turns out, isn’t always a bad thing. Unease with differences helps explain why teams of engineers from different cultures may be ideally suited to solve a vexing problem. Culture clashes can produce a dynamic give-and-take, generating a solution that may have eluded a group of people with more similar backgrounds and approaches. At the same time, though, Putnam’s work adds to a growing body of research indicating that more diverse populations seem to extend themselves less on behalf of collective needs and goals.

His findings on the downsides of diversity have also posed a challenge for Putnam, a liberal academic whose own values put him squarely in the pro-diversity camp. Suddenly finding himself the bearer of bad news, Putnam has struggled with how to present his work. He gathered the initial raw data in 2000 and issued a press release the following year outlining the results. He then spent several years testing other possible explanations.

When he finally published a detailed scholarly analysis in June in the journal *Scandinavian Political Studies*, he faced criticism for straying from data into advocacy. His paper argues strongly that the negative effects of diversity can be remedied, and says history suggests that ethnic diversity may eventually fade as a sharp line of social demarcation.

“Having aligned himself with the central planners intent on sustaining such social engineering, Putnam concludes the facts with a stern pep talk,” wrote conservative commentator Ilana Mercer, in a recent *Orange County Register* op-ed titled “Greater diversity equals more misery.”

Putnam has long staked out ground as both a researcher and a civic player, someone willing to describe social problems and then have a hand in addressing them. He says social science should be “simultaneously rigorous and relevant,” meeting high research standards while also “speaking to concerns of our fellow citizens.” But on a topic as charged as ethnicity and race, Putnam worries that many people hear only what they want to.
“It would be unfortunate if a politically correct progressivism were to deny the reality of the challenge to social solidarity posed by diversity,” he writes in the new report. “It would be equally unfortunate if a historical and ethnocentric conservatism were to deny that addressing that challenge is both feasible and desirable.”

Putnam is the nation’s premier guru of civic engagement. After studying civic life in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, Putnam turned his attention to the United States, publishing an influential journal article on civic engagement in 1995 that he expanded five years later into the best-selling *Bowling Alone*. The book sounded a national wake-up call on what Putnam called a sharp drop in civic connections among Americans. It won him audiences with presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, and made him one of the country’s best known social scientists.

Putnam claims the United States has experienced a pronounced decline in “social capital,” a term he helped popularize. Social capital refers to the social networks—whether friendships or religious congregations or neighborhood associations—that he says are key indicators of civic well-being. When social capital is high, says Putnam, communities are better places to live. Neighborhoods are safer; people are healthier; and more citizens vote.

The results of his new study come from a survey Putnam directed among residents in 41 U.S. communities, including Boston. Residents were sorted into the four principal categories used by the U.S. Census: black, white, Hispanic, and Asian. They were asked how much they trusted their neighbors and those of each racial category, and questioned about a long list of civic attitudes and practices, including their views on local government, their involvement in community projects, and their friendships. What emerged in more diverse communities was a bleak picture of civic desolation, affecting everything from political engagement to the state of social ties.

Putnam knew he had provocative findings on his hands. He worried about coming under some of the same liberal attacks that greeted Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s landmark 1965 report on the social costs associated with the breakdown of the black family. There is always the risk of being pilloried as the bearer of “an inconvenient truth,” says Putnam.

After releasing the initial results in 2001, Putnam says he spent time “kicking the tires really hard” to be sure the study had it right. Putnam realized, for instance, that more diverse communities tended to be larger, have greater income ranges, higher crime rates, and more mobility among their residents—all factors that could depress social capital independent of any impact ethnic diversity might have.
“People would say, ‘I bet you forgot about X,’” Putnam says of the string of suggestions from colleagues. “There were 20 or 30 X’s.”

But even after statistically taking them all into account, the connection remained strong: Higher diversity meant lower social capital. In his findings, Putnam writes that those in more diverse communities tend to “distrust their neighbors, regardless of the color of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television.”

“People living in ethnically diverse settings appear to ‘hunker down’—that is, to pull in like a turtle,” Putnam writes.

In documenting that hunkering down, Putnam challenged the two dominant schools of thought on ethnic and racial diversity, the “contact” theory and the “conflict” theory. Under the contact theory, more time spent with those of other backgrounds leads to greater understanding and harmony between groups. Under the conflict theory, that proximity produces tension and discord.

Putnam’s findings reject both theories. In more diverse communities, he says, there were neither great bonds formed across group lines nor heightened ethnic tensions, but a general civic malaise. And in perhaps the most surprising result of all, levels of trust were not only lower between groups in more diverse settings, but even among members of the same group.

“Diversity, at least in the short run,” he writes, “seems to bring out the turtle in all of us.”

The overall findings may be jarring during a time when it’s become commonplace to sing the praises of diverse communities, but researchers in the field say they shouldn’t be.

“It’s an important addition to a growing body of evidence on the challenges created by diversity,” says Harvard economist Edward Glaeser.

In a recent study, Glaeser and colleague Alberto Alesina demonstrated that roughly half the difference in social welfare spending between the United States and Europe—Europe spends far more—can be attributed to the greater ethnic diversity of the U.S. population. Glaeser says lower national social welfare spending in the United States is a “macro” version of the decreased civic engagement Putnam found in more diverse communities within the country.

Economists Matthew Kahn of UCLA and Dora Costa of MIT reviewed 15 recent studies in a 2003 paper, all of which linked diversity with lower levels
of social capital. Greater ethnic diversity was linked, for example, to lower school funding, census response rates, and trust in others. Kahn and Costa's own research documented higher desertion rates in the Civil War among Union Army soldiers serving in companies whose soldiers varied more by age, occupation, and birthplace.

Birds of different feathers may sometimes flock together, but they are also less likely to look out for one another. “Everyone is a little self-conscious that this is not politically correct stuff,” says Kahn.

So how to explain New York, London, Rio de Janeiro, Los Angeles—the great melting-pot cities that drive the world’s creative and financial economies?

The image of civic lassitude dragging down more diverse communities is at odds with the vigor often associated with urban centers, where ethnic diversity is greatest. It turns out there is a flip side to the discomfort diversity can cause. If ethnic diversity, at least in the short run, is a liability for social connectedness, a parallel line of emerging research suggests it can be a big asset when it comes to driving productivity and innovation. In high-skill workplace settings, says Scott Page, the University of Michigan political scientist, the different ways of thinking among people from different cultures can be a boon.

“Because they see the world and think about the world differently than you, that’s challenging,” says Page, author of The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies. “But by hanging out with people different than you, you’re likely to get more insights. Diverse teams tend to be more productive.”

In other words, those in more diverse communities may do more bowling alone, but the creative tensions unleashed by those differences in the workplace may vault those same places to the cutting edge of the economy and of creative culture.

Page calls it the “diversity paradox.” He thinks the contrasting positive and negative effects of diversity can coexist in communities, but “there’s got to be a limit.” If civic engagement falls off too far, he says, it’s easy to imagine the positive effects of diversity beginning to wane as well. “That’s what’s unsettling about his findings,” Page says of Putnam’s new work.

Meanwhile, by drawing a portrait of civic engagement in which more homogeneous communities seem much healthier, some of Putnam’s worst fears about how his results could be used have been realized. A stream of conservative commentary has begun—from places like the Manhattan Institute and “The American Conservative”—highlighting the harm the study suggests will come from large-scale immigration. But Putnam says he’s also received hundreds of complimentary emails laced with bigoted language. “It certainly is not pleasant when David Duke’s website hails me as the guy who found out racism is good,” he says.
In the final quarter of his paper, Putnam puts the diversity challenge in a broader context by describing how social identity can change over time. Experience shows that social divisions can eventually give way to “more encompassing identities” that create a “new, more capacious sense of ‘we,’” he writes.

Growing up in the 1950s in a small Midwestern town, Putnam knew the religion of virtually every member of his high school graduating class because, he says, such information was crucial to the question of “who was a possible mate or date.” The importance of marrying within one’s faith, he says, has largely faded since then, at least among many mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.

While acknowledging that racial and ethnic divisions may prove more stubborn, Putnam argues that such examples bode well for the long-term prospects for social capital in a multiethnic America.

In his paper, Putnam cites the work done by Page and others, and uses it to help frame his conclusion that increasing diversity in America is not only inevitable, but ultimately valuable and enriching. As for smoothing over the divisions that hinder civic engagement, Putnam argues that Americans can help that process along through targeted efforts. He suggests expanding support for English-language instruction and investing in community centers and other places that allow for “meaningful interaction across ethnic lines.”

Some critics have found his prescriptions underwhelming. And in offering ideas for mitigating his findings, Putnam has drawn scorn for stepping out of the role of dispassionate researcher. “You’re just supposed to tell your peers what you found,” says John Leo, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank. “I don’t expect academics to fret about these matters.”

But fretting about the state of American civic health is exactly what Putnam has spent more than a decade doing. While continuing to research questions involving social capital, he has directed the Saguaro Seminar, a project he started at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government that promotes efforts throughout the country to increase civic connections in communities.

“Social scientists are both scientists and citizens,” says Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, who sees nothing wrong in Putnam’s efforts to affect some of the phenomena he studies.

Wolfe says what is unusual is that Putnam has published findings as a social scientist that are not the ones he would have wished for as a civic leader. There are plenty of social scientists, says Wolfe, who never produced research results at odds with their own worldview.

“The problem too often,” says Wolfe, “is people are never uncomfortable about their findings.”
Things to Do with the Reading

1. There are at least two primary foci to this piece: Putnam’s findings and his subsequent struggles with how to present these findings. What, according to Jonas, are the issues at stake in the second focus—the question of presentation? Find the various places where Jonas treats this question, both from Putnam’s point of view and that of his detractors. What are the larger issues here—issues involving the ethics of presentation, the partisan nature of all research projects, and the like? Once you have drafted some answers to these questions, write an essay on how, finally, Jonas invites us to regard Putnam and his work.

2. **Link:** Imagine that Ishmael Reed had read “The Downside of Diversity” and sent Putnam “My Neighborhood,” and then they arranged to meet. Write an essay in which you discuss what each would find most interesting in the other’s work. The following questions might help to guide you.

   How does Reed reflect on what Putnam terms “social capital”? Find sentences in Reed that shed light on how he might respond to Putnam’s challenges to the “contact” theory and the “conflict” theory of ethnic and racial diversity. Ultimately, what common ground do the two figures share, and where do they appear to diverge most significantly? (See Chapter 7 on conversing with sources.)

3. **Link:** Imagine that Peter Salins read the article by Michael Jonas, and the two met for conversation. Both writers are affiliated with think tanks—Jonas with MassINC and Salins with the Manhattan Institute (which Jonas references near the end of his piece). Write an essay in which you imagine what Salins and Jonas might have to say to each other. Locate sentences from both pieces that might justify your answer.

4. **Application:** According to Jonas, “Putnam claims the US has experienced a pronounced decline in ‘social capital,’” defined as “social networks—whether friendships or religious congregations or neighborhood associations—that are key indicators of civic well-being.” Write an essay in which you assess the status of the social capital of some social network on your campus or in your neighborhood. How would you begin to make a case for the civic health of some particular aspect of your local community? Your report will of necessity be largely anecdotal, comprised mainly of what you can observe.
Robert McLiam Wilson

Sticks and Stones: The Irish Identity

In this salty, iconoclastic piece, the Northern Irish novelist Robert McLiam Wilson offers a broadly subversive response to many of the assumptions about both national identity and racial identity shared by the other contributors to this chapter. “Our racial authenticity,” Wilson says of the Irish, “is an extremely negotiable commodity”—a flabby myth, prone to marketing and mistruth.

I am five foot eleven. I weigh around 170 pounds. I have brown hair, green eyes, and no real distinguishing marks. I’m heterosexual, atheist, liberal, and white. I don’t shave as often as I should and I have pale, Irish skin. I smoke and I always wear a suit. I drive a small black car and I don’t drink much alcohol. I prefer cats to dogs.

I don’t know what that makes me, but I suspect that it makes me what I am.

When I was seventeen, I decided that I wanted to be Jewish. Like most Roman Catholics, I had only the vaguest notion of what this might entail. I stopped being good at sports and frequented the only kosher butcher in the city. (How he blushed for me, the poor man). I could never understand why no one took me seriously. I could never understand why I should not simply decide such questions for myself. Why was I such a goy? Who had decided that this should be so?

Like that of most citizens of Belfast, my identity is the subject of some local dispute. Some say I’m British, some say I’m Irish, some even say that there’s no way I’m five foot eleven and that I’m five ten at best. In many ways I’m not permitted to contribute to this debate. If the controversy is ever satisfactorily concluded, I will be whatever the majority of people tell me I am.

As a quotidian absolute, nationality is almost meaningless. For an Italian living in Italy, Italianness is patently not much of a distinction. What really gives nationality its chiaroscuro, its flavor, is a little dash of hatred and fear. Nobody really knows or cares what they are until they meet what they don’t want to be. Then it’s time for the flags and guns to come out.

So when the airport cops ask me what I am, how do I explain that I live in the northeastern segment of an island sliced like a cheap pizza and with as many titles as a bar full of yuppie cocktails— Ireland, Northern Ireland, Britain, Eire, Ulster, etc. How do I explain how little that would tell them?

I suppose I could tell them that I live in a place where people have killed and died in an interminable fight over the names they should call themselves and each other. (In Belfast, sticks and stones may break your bones but names will blow you to pieces on a regular basis.) I could tell them about the

self-defeating eugenic templates of racial purity by which no human being still living on the island can be properly deemed Irish. That the English and the Scottish have been here a long time and that we’re all smudged by now—café au lait, mulattoes, half-breeds, spicks, wops, and dagos. I could tell them that I don’t really understand the question.

Irishness is unique amongst the self-conscious nationalisms. A self-conscious Frenchman bores everyone. A self-conscious American is a nightmare. And a self-conscious Englishman makes you want to lie down in a darkened room. But a self-conscious Irishman is a friend to the world and the world listens attentively. The reviews are always good. There’s a global appetite for Irishness that is almost without parallel.

Nationalistic self-obsession is corrupt, corrosive, and bogus enough without this extra angle. When well-received, this fake concoction of myth and bullshit is reflected in the mirror of imprecise good will and sentimental foolishness. This in itself produces further distortions which are then seamlessly incorporated into the “genuine” article. Over the years I’ve watched the fundamental concepts of what it is to be Irish being altered by common-currency American errors. Here in the “old country,” when we hear that New Yorkers are marching in green-kilted bagpipe bands (an entirely Scottish phenomenon) on St. Patrick’s Day, we immediately look around for somewhere to buy green kilts and bagpipes. Our racial authenticity is an extremely negotiable commodity.

Yet I’ve always believed that such Americans have it just about right. Their ideas of Irishness are as fake as a hooker’s tit, but then so are ours.

To understand all things Irish, you must understand something fundamental. Everyone knows that Ireland is the land of myth. And myth is a beautiful and resonant word. It sounds so profound, so spiritual. There is something visceral in it. Our mythmaking is vital to the self-imposed standardized norms of nationality that are current here at home. Catholics are Irish, so Irish, and Protestants are British, poor things. The common assumption that the Irish language, Irish music, and Irish history are pure Catholic monoliths, and the oft-suppressed expression of the indigenous culture, ignores the truth that the Irish linguistic, musical, and cultural revivals were the product of nineteenth-century Protestant historicism. Everything we say is myth. The lies are old and dusty. The waters are muddy and the truth long gone.

Even our understanding of our own history—you know the kind of thing, perfidious Albion, eight hundred years of oppression, etc.—teems with bullshit. King William of Orange waged war in seventeenth-century Ireland and is still a Catholic-baiting Protestant icon who causes trouble here. No one remembers that he was blessed by the Pope. Wolfe Tone is a much-loved historical rebel leader who sailed with a French army to liberate Catholic Ireland. No one mentions that he was defeated by a Catholic militia. The President of
Ireland called on a German minister to express his official condolences after Hitler’s suicide at the end of World War II. Nobody wrote any songs about that.

In some ways, the Irish tendency for romancing can be seen as harmless, almost charming. It is, after all, what produces our leprechauns, our fairy rings, all our beguiling fakery. But it also produces people who will murder for lies they only half-believe and certainly never understand—for the Irish have always armed their ideas. We don’t have any white lies here anymore. We only have the deadly barbaric type.

Given the wildest differences in latitude and climate, it is remarkable how countries can remind you of one another. In cold March Manhattan, the air is as thick, dark, and injurious as any Berlin winter. In Paris, the rain falls and stains the pale stone with the same dispiriting grace you find in Cambridge on most days of the year. London can look and feel like everywhere.

If true of the places, how much truer of the people. *Quod erat demonstrandum* and then some.

We are a pretty poor species. Even the most gifted of us, the wisest and most studious of us, are weak-minded. We toss aside our Pushkin and read Judith Krantz. We watch goofy TV shows and asinine movies. We can’t help liking big noises, colored lights, and pictures of naked people.

Our beliefs are often fantastic alloys of fear, self-interest, prejudice, and ignorance. As Tolstoy gloriously demonstrates, our finest moments of heroism, selflessness, and grandeur are usually founded on the meanest egotisms and vanities. Our notion of the sublime is laughable. In acts of worship, many of us pay homage to some form of invisible man who mimics us in the pettiest detail. Apart from our uncharacteristic capacity for love (a mistake, a design flaw), we’re a shambles.

It is the things we say that most prove what monkeys we still are. We are driven to generalize, to sweep on through, to prognosticate, to diagnose. Typically male, we say, typically female. That’s the problem with rich people, we opine. The poor were ever so. Gentlemen prefer blondes. Fuck right off, I can’t help thinking.

Our most outrageous banalities are reserved for questions of race and nationality. This is how the French behave, we say. How do we know? Have we met them all? Have we asked any of them? Millions of people are summoned and dismissed in a few moments of robust fatuousness.

I’m five foot eleven. I weigh around 170 pounds. I have brown hair, green eyes, and so on. Irish or British is very far down on my list—somewhere below my favorite color. Nonetheless, I must concede that nationality is tenacious. People have real stamina when it comes to this business. I must further concede that Irishness is a great arena for disquisitions on national identity. Because the Irish conflict is internecine (it has nothing to do with the English anymore), definitions of Irishness have particular charm. Nationalities primarily define themselves by what they’re not. The Swiss are not German, the Scottish are not English, and the Canadians are definitely
not American. But the Irish make internal distinctions as well. Some of the Irish aren’t properly Irish. Some of the Irish aren’t even vaguely Irish. In pursuit of the mantle of absolute Irishness, brother kills brother and sisters look on and applaud.

A few years ago I had an apartment on a leafy South Belfast street called Adelaide Park. A police station was being rebuilt across the street from my building (the original had been flattened by a bomb a few years before). It was a controversial building site, naturally. Apart from their well-known attacks on the policemen, soldiers, prison officers, and almost everyone else, the IRA liked to target construction workers who helped build police stations. Thus, the site was guarded round the clock by the police. For nearly six months there were always a couple of cops standing in my driveway, all peaked caps, submachine guns, and high anxiety. This was okay in the spring. It was fine in the summer, and manageable in the fall. But as winter set in, the position of these guys became more and more unpleasant. It was windy and cold, and it rained for months. As night fell, I would look out my apartment window and watch the damp rozzers. It was obviously not a good gig.

For weeks I debated whether or not I should take them cups of coffee. It was more complicated than it might sound. Policemen and soldiers here are very unlikely to accept such things from the public now. Twenty-five years of ground glass, rat poison, and Drano in friendly cups of tea discouraged them from accepting such largesse. Not long before, a woman had handed some soldiers a bomb in a biscuit tin in a charming incident near Derry. Additionally, of course, there might have been swathes of people willing to do me grief for being nice to the police.

Policemen are usually Protestant and I myself am customarily Catholic. They couldn’t have known that I was a Catholic, but they would have been suspicious. (In this country, the big haters can’t really tell each other apart. How we envy those who hate black or white people—that obvious difference, that demonstrable objection.)

It was a small thing, a minor transaction, an unimportant detail. The weeks passed, the wind blew, and the rain rained. I didn’t hand out any coffee.

—July 1997

Things to Do with the Reading

1. Wilson’s essay is the kind of writing that sometimes gets called a tour de force (a feat of strength, power or skill, according to the OED). In writing of this sort, authors often deliberately overstate their points, using exaggeration and an aggressively assertive tone to jolt people into seeing absurdity in what they might otherwise wish to guard as cherished positions. There is strategy in this. If the writer tries to take a mile, we
might be cajoled by his sheer audacity into giving him an inch, which is perhaps all that he really wanted in the first place.

Write an essay in which you determine what you think Wilson actually hoped to accomplish, given that his piece is unlikely to cause the Irish (or any other group) to completely give up on “Irishness.” Start with paragraphs 16 and 17 and analyze the rhetoric of Wilson's piece. What do these two paragraphs reveal about Wilson's aims and his means of achieving those aims through style?

2. **Link:** Wilson's essay challenges and interestingly undercuts many of the assumptions about cultural identity that inform previous essays in this chapter. For reasons particular to his own circumstances as a citizen of Belfast (Northern Ireland), Wilson is extremely dubious about the concept of national identity. “Nationalistic self-obsession,” he writes, “is corrupt, corrosive, and bogus. . . . When well-received, this fake concoction of myth and bullshit is reflected in the mirror of imprecise goodwill and sentimental foolishness. This in itself produces further distortions which are then seamlessly incorporated into the ‘genuine’ article” (paragraph 9). A repeated word in the essay is “bullshit,” part of a strand including “fake,” “fake concoction,” “myth,” “beguiling fakery,” “bogus,” and “lies.” The word “genuine” is placed emphatically in quotes.

Write an essay in which you reflect backward from Wilson’s piece to one or more other pieces in this chapter that you think illuminates. What might Wilson say, for example, about Salins’s position on the importance of people choosing to “convert” to being American? Alternatively, how might he respond to Jesse Jackson’s rainbow metaphor or to what Salins has to say about ethnic federalism or to Torgovnick's mixed emotions about the cohesiveness and tenacity of Italian-American neighborhoods?

3. **Link:** Because of the long-standing civil war in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants—between proponents of a United Ireland and those supporting Northern Ireland remaining under English rule—Wilson worries about the potential of nationalism and cultural identities to fuel violence. “In pursuit of the mantle of absolute Irishness,” he writes, “brother kills brother and sisters look on and applaud.” In the second to last paragraph of his essay, however, he writes, “In this country, the big haters can’t really tell each other apart. How we envy those who hate black or white people—that obvious difference, that demonstrable objection.”

What are we to do about racial identities—whether the product of mythologizing and stereotyping or not—where physical difference and long histories of struggle and oppression come more starkly into play? To what extent can these be willed out of existence? Write a paper in
which you bring Wilson’s point of view on cultural and racial difference into conversation with one or more of the following writers: Reed, Smith, and Rodriguez. To what extent would Rodriguez agree with Wilson on the phoniness and foolishness and even the potential danger of so valuing distinct national identities? What sort of conversation do you imagine Reed or Smith would have with Wilson on the same issue?

4. **Application:** It is interesting to consider which of our personal tendencies and traits each of us would choose to include if asked to identify ourselves to others. This is especially interesting to think about in America, which contains so many different racial, national, and ethnic groups, and so many different religions, customs, and regions. Write your own version of Wilson’s opening paragraph as a means of generating some thinking about the markers of particular identities in America. The second sentence of Wilson’s essay is, “I don’t know what that makes me, but I suspect that it makes me what I am.” After you have written your paragraph of identifying traits, write a second paragraph in which you try to explain how the information you chose to include in your first paragraph makes you what you are.
FOR FURTHER RESEARCH: RACE, ETHNICITY, AND THE MELTING POT

By Kelly Cannon, Reference Librarian

The readings and activities that follow invite you to explore further the theme of Race, Ethnicity, and the Melting Pot. URLs are provided for those readings that you can access freely online. For proprietary resources, ask your librarian about print or online access.

Open Access


Perhaps the litmus test of the melting-pot theory, interracial dating and marriage find much greater acceptance among millennials than among preceding generations, in a study conducted by the Pew Research Center.

Explore: To what extent do the results of this survey ring true to you? Find out more about the Pew Research Center. What is it? What is its agenda? To what extent does this agenda support or detract from the validity of the findings? Can you infer what Peter Salins would think about interracial dating, given his article in this chapter?


A long report, summarized at this website, looks closely at how young Latinos navigate two worlds, American and Latin American.

Explore: To what extent does the behavior of Latin American youth in the majority assert or contradict the melting-pot theory? How so? Why did the Pew Research Center launch the Pew Hispanic Center? To what extent do you think the center is well-positioned to fulfill its mission? Why?


Part of an extensive study on Hispanic populations in the United States.

Explore: Visit the Facebook page referred to in the article and add your own comments about ethnic identity if you wish. Follow the link to the Pew study When Labels Don’t Fit to find a wealth of data on this subject of identity. In light of Zadie Smith’s and Richard Rodriguez’s essays,
contemplate how identity is complicated by individuals and cultures that are fundamentally mixed, mestizo. How might that lead one to resist any labels? How and why do the labels persist?

A Princeton University student decries claims that he is where he is because of white male privilege.

*Explore:* In light of this editorial, and the response to it (link accessible via a link at the end of the essay), consider Benjamin DeMott’s essay on the persistent challenges of being black in America. How much do the effects of history persist in the present day? And what about Peggy McIntosh’s essay on privilege? To what extent is the individual ever truly free of the burdens or privileges of history one finds oneself born into?

Looks succinctly yet eloquently at assimilation and the melting pot through the lens of Asian America.

*Explore:* How important is it that an essay on this topic be written by someone from the subject community, in this case Asian American? To what extent do the struggles of representation to the larger culture surface? How do such struggles converse with those outlined in the McLiam Wilson essay on Irishness? How does Amy Tan’s thesis correspond with that of Le?

17 minutes of highlights from the award-winning film documentary of an interracial couple in 1960s Virginia whose case for the right to marry one another went all the way to the Supreme Court.

*Explore:* Zadie Smith writes of a multivocal, multiracial America epitomized by Barack Obama. To what extent could the *Loving* case be seen as the legal precursor to race in America today? What most threatened white Virginia in the Sixties in the legal case before them? How has America adjusted, or not, to the dramatic demographic change witnessed in the past few decades? Are their winners or losers? How so? To what extent do the questions underlying the *Loving* case correspond with questions of assimilation described by Ishmael Reed and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.?

Essay and supporting primary documents related to an extensive assimilation effort in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States.

**Explore:** How does this essay and supporting documents inform the discussion of the melting pot and assimilation? What is desirable in a culture? What is earnestly sought for in such initiatives, a mosaic or an “undifferentiated alloy”? In light of the essay by Richard Rodriguez, to what extent is assimilation a gentle, natural process or a violent act? Do the subjects of assimilation have anything to fear? How so? Examine some of the supporting documents provided with Carolyn Marr’s essay. How do such artifacts help to support her arguments about assimilation?


Noah conjectures that assimilation à la the melting pot may be what sets American Muslims apart from Muslims in other parts of the world.

**Explore:** The author of this conjectural piece refers to a study conducted by the Pew Foundation. Link to this study. Scan the sections of this study and ask yourself, to what extent does it appear to confirm Noah’s hypothesis about American Muslims and the melting pot? How does this essay confirm or contradict the ideas of assimilation presented by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Ishmael Reed? To what extent does this article confirm Peter Salins’s claims about the melting pot vs. multiculturalism in his essay printed in the chapter?


This essay good naturedly takes issue with anyone who would argue that the dilution of racial distinctiveness is a good thing. Piper’s view finds its counterpoint in the companion piece “Genetic Carpool” by Jeremiah Lewis.

**Explore:** Scroll to the bottom of the page and click on “About Cultural Imperialist.” What rhetorical space has this website carved out for itself? To what extent has it been successful in its enterprise, as illustrated by the two opposing articles named above? Consider the subject of racial or ethnic dilution presented here in light of Marianna Torgovnick’s essay on Bensonhurst. What is the substance of attitudes that allow or even encourage “mixing.”? What leads others to draw clear racial and ethnic boundaries? Compare these arguments with those espoused in the Peter Salins piece.

A landmark study documenting the changing racial and ethnic composition of America.

Explore: Referencing Zadie Smith’s essay that explores the implications of Barack Obama’s biracial identity, consider this study of the changing racial composition of the United States. How does biracial or multiracial identity coordinate with changing attitudes about race? To what extent did Obama’s election as President promote or discourage a change in racial attitudes?


On the surface, Cecil D. Hylton High School, just outside of D.C., exemplifies assimilation. And yet those who speak English and those who are learning English as a second language exist in two separate worlds, all under the same roof.

Explore: Click on the interactive map adjacent to the article. What do you think contributes to the high number of ESL students in the following counties? Fairfax County, VA? Chatham County, NC? Todd County, SD? Where does your home county fall in this respect? To what extent do multilingual areas like Northern Virginia share in what Zadie Smith calls “Dream City”? To what extent might Amy Tan have been representative of students in such a multilingual area? Do the concerns about educating a diverse population echo the concerns voiced in the essay on diversity by Michael Jonas? How so?

Proprietary


A Spanish professor whose native language is Spanish but who teaches in the United States reveals some discontent over his bilingual existence.

Explore: What is at the heart of Firmat’s discontent? If you speak a second language, how does this affect your “language loyalty”? Does some of Firmat’s discontent correspond with that felt by McLiam Wilson regarding Irish Americanness? What do both essays say about mixed identities?


Food serves as the litmus test here of assimilation, with a paradoxical outcome.

Explore: How does food both permit and restrict assimilation? In your own experience, how does the food you prepare and eat reinforce your sense of who you are?
A comparison between two “cosmopolitan” figures, the late zoologist Cedric Dover, from India, and Barack Obama, both of whom embraced blackness, though each of them was in fact multiracial.

Explore: How can this essay on Dover and Obama inform Zadie Smith’s essay on Barack Obama? What is cosmopolitanism? Does being multiracial insist upon cosmopolitanism? How so? How does language—how one describes oneself and writes and speaks to the larger community—assist or undermine cosmopolitanism?

A thought-provoking peer-reviewed article forecasting the apocalyptic effect that changing demographics will have on world powers. Europe is losing population rapidly. In the United States, non-European minorities will soon be the majority.

Explore: What does Utkin think of the melting-pot idea? How important is immigrant assimilation in determining the future? Do you agree with the author’s prediction, or does it seem extreme? How so? To what extent does Utkin’s essay compare with Peter Salins’s?

A population study that indicates startling differences in segregation geographically and between different minority groups.

Explore: Reflect on how your own community is or is not racially segregated. To what extent does it reflect the trends in this article? How have things changed, or not, since the middle and latter twentieth century, as described in the essays by Ishmael Reed and Marianna Torgovnick?