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Men and Women

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It tends to confound all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks to one common level.
Letters,
john adams
The definitions of woman's roles are as diverse as [American Indian] tribal cultures in the Americas. In some she is devalued, in others she wields considerable power. In some she is a familial/clan adjunct, in some she is as close to autonomous as her economic circumstances and psychological traits permit. But in no tribal definitions is she perceived in the same way as are women in western industrial and postindustrial cultures.
Where I Come from Is Like This,
paula gunn allen
These are hard times for men. Machismo is going out of style among the middle class, and any man who dares to play that role is likely to be snubbed, ridiculed, or karate-punched for his sexist foolishness. Hollywood heroes betray what's happening.
Between a Rock and a Soft Place: A Century of American Manhood,
peter filene
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.
On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst,

marianna de marco torgovnick
JOHN ADAMS AND ABIGAIL ADAMS

Letters: The Place of Women in the New American Republic
Abigail Adams was born in 1744 and her husband, John, in 1735. Prior to their term as President and First Lady of the United States, John and Abigail Adams were passionate supporters of the colonial revolution against British control. Their letters suggest that theirs was a marriage of the minds as well as a lifelong romance. The first letter, sent to John while he was in Philadelphia collaborating on the Declaration of Independence, suggests Abigail's wit as well as her consciousness of the need for increased attention to women's rights in the new republic. John's letters—both to his wife and to his colleague James Sullivan—show that although he was among the most liberal of the Declaration's framers, he still considered Abigail's request to "Remember the Ladies" a mere jest rather than a serious proposal.
Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
In what ways might the thoughts and values of women today differ from those of the women who were married to America's founding fathers?
2.
Who do you think has the upper hand in America today—men or women? Develop and explain your answer with specific examples from current events, your reading, and your own experience.

———

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams,
March 31, 1776

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy—and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticuliar care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebelion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in immitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams,
April 14, 1776

As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the hands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient—that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent—that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented—This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

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Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight. I am sure every good Politician would plot, as long as he would against Despotism, Empire, Monarchy, Aristocracy, Oligarchy, or Ochlocracy.—A fine Story indeed. I begin to think the Ministry as deep as they are wicked. After stirring up Tories, Landjobbers, Trimmers, Bigots, Canadians, Indians,

Negroes, Hanoverians, Hessians, Russians, Irish Roman Catholicks, Scotch Renegadoes, at last they have stimulated the[m] to demand new Priviledges and threaten to rebell.
Letter from John Adams to James Sullivan,
May 26, 1776
. . . The same reasoning which will induce you to admit all men who have no property, to vote, with those who have, for those laws which affect the person, will prove that you ought to admit women and children; for, generally speaking, women and children have as good judgments, and as independent minds, as those men who are wholly destitute of property; these last being to all intents and purposes as much dependent upon others, who will please to feed, clothe, and employ them, as women are upon their husbands, or children on their parents.
As to your idea of proportioning the votes of men, in money matters, to the property they hold, it is utterly impracticable. There is no possible way of ascertaining, at any one time, how much every man in a community is worth; and if there was, so fluctuating is trade and property, that this state of it would change in half an hour. . . .
Depend upon it, Sir, it is dangerous to open so fruitful a source of controversy and altercation as would be opened by attempting to alter the qualifications of voters; there will be no end of it. New claims will arise; women will demand a vote; lads from twelve to twenty-one will think their rights not enough attended to; and every man who has not a farthing, will demand an equal voice with any other, in all acts of state. It tends to confound all distinctions, and prostrate all ranks to one common level.
Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
Comment on the tone and purpose of Abigail's letter to her husband. From this short letter, what inferences can you draw about her? How does the image you get from this letter compare with your initial journal entry about early American women?
2.
Comment on the tone and purpose of John's letter to Abigail. What can you infer about his feelings and attitude toward his wife?
3.
With these two letters in mind, what conclusions can you draw about the balance of power in their relationship? Use specifics to support your answer.
4.
Compare and contrast John's tone and purpose in his letter to his wife with those in his letter to James Sullivan. What conclusions do you draw about John Adams the politician and John Adams the husband of Abigail?
Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Think about a topic that is of concern to you on a personal level as well as on a grander scale. Write a letter to a close friend about the personal nature of this problem, and then write a letter to the editor of your local paper using this same topic. Compare and contrast these two products when you've finished, and come to some conclusions about the writing decisions you made based on your audience.
2.

Find another historical document written at approximately this same time in American history, and analyze the language, tone, and purpose of this document.

PAULA GUNN ALLEN

Where I Come from Is Like This

Paula Gunn Allen comes from roots that include both the Laguna Pueblo and Sioux cultures. An acclaimed essayist, poet, and fiction writer, Allen's best-known novel is The Woman Who Owned the Shadows *(1983). Currently, she teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, where she is professor of Native American and ethnic studies. This selection comes from her collection of nonfiction essays,* The Sacred Hoop *(1986).*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.

In your journal, freewrite for twenty minutes by completing the following statement: "Where I come from is like. . . ."

2.

Set a timer for three minutes; then look at yourself in a mirror until the timer rings. Next, sit down and describe who you saw in that mirror and what you thought about as you studied your physical image.

———

I

Modern American Indian women, like their non-Indian sisters, are deeply engaged in the struggle to redefine themselves. In their struggle they must reconcile traditional tribal definitions of women with industrial and postindustrial non-Indian definitions. Yet while these definitions seem to be more or less mutually exclusive, Indian women must somehow harmonize and integrate both in their own lives.

An American Indian woman is primarily defined by her tribal identity. In her eyes, her destiny is necessarily that of her people, and her sense of herself as a woman is first and foremost prescribed by her tribe. The definitions of woman's roles are as diverse as tribal cultures in the Americas. In some she is devalued, in others she wields considerable power. In some she is a familial/clan adjunct, in some she is as close to autonomous as her economic circumstances and psychological traits permit. But in no tribal definitions is she perceived in the same way as are women in western industrial and postindustrial cultures.

In the west, few images of women form part of the cultural mythos, and these are largely sexually charged. Among Christians, the madonna is the female prototype, and she is portrayed as essentially passive: her contribution is simply that of birthing. Little else is attributed to her and she certainly possesses few of the characteristics that are attributed to mythic figures among Indian tribes. This image is countered (rather than balanced) by the witchgoddess/whore characteristics designed to reinforce cultural beliefs about women, as well as western adversarial and dualistic perceptions of reality.

The tribes see women variously, but they do not question the power of femininity. Sometimes they see women as fearful, sometimes peaceful, sometimes omnipotent and omniscient, but they never portray women as mindless, helpless, simple, or oppressed.

And while the women in a given tribe, clan, or band may be all these things, the individual woman is provided with a variety of images of women from the interconnected supernatural, natural, and social worlds she lives in.

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As a half-breed American Indian woman, I cast about in my mind for negative images of Indian women, and I find none that are directed to Indian women alone. The negative images I do have are of Indians in general and in fact are more often of males than of females. All these images come to me from non-Indian sources, and they are always balanced by a positive image. My ideas of womanhood, passed on largely by my mother and grandmothers, Laguna Pueblo women, are about practicality, strength, reasonableness, intelligence, wit, and competence. I also remember vividly the women who came to my father's store, the women who held me and sang to me, the women at Feast Day, at Grab Days, the women in the kitchen of my Cubero home, the women I grew up with; none of them appeared weak or helpless, none of them presented herself tentatively. I remember a certain reserve on those lovely brown faces; I remember the direct gaze of eyes framed by bright-colored shawls draped over their heads and cascading down their backs. I remember the clean cotton dresses and carefully pressed hand-embroidered aprons they always wore; I remember laughter and good food, especially the sweet bread and the oven bread they gave us. Nowhere in my mind is there a foolish woman, a dumb woman, a vain woman, or a plastic woman, though the Indian women I have known have shown a wide range of personal style and demeanor.

My memory includes the Navajo woman who was badly beaten by her Sioux husband; but I also remember that my grandmother abandoned her Sioux husband long ago. I recall the stories about the Laguna woman beaten regularly by her husband in the presence of her children so that the children would not believe in the strength and power of femininity. And I remember the women who drank, who got into fights with other women and with the men, and who often won those battles. I have memories of tired women, partying women, stubborn women, sullen women, amicable women, selfish women, shy women, and aggressive women. Most of all I remember the women who laugh and scold and sit uncomplaining in the long sun on feast days and who cook wonderful food on wood stoves, in beehive mud ovens, and over open fires outdoors.

Among the images of women that come to me from various tribes as well as my own are White Buffalo Woman, who came to the Lakota long ago and brought them the religion of the Sacred Pipe which they still practice; Tinotzin the goddess who came to Juan Diego to remind him that she still walked the hills of her people and sent him with her message, her demand and her proof to the Catholic bishop in the city nearby. And from Laguna I take the images of Yellow Woman, Coyote Woman, Grandmother Spider (Spider Old Woman), who brought the light, who gave us weaving and medicine, who gave us life. Among the Keres she is known as Thought Woman who created us all and who keeps us in creation even now. I remember Iyatiku, Earth Woman, Corn Woman, who guides and counsels the people to peace and who welcomes us home when we cast off this coil of flesh as huskers cast off the leaves that wrap the corn. I remember Iyatiku's sister, Sun Woman, who held metals and cattle, pigs and sheep, highways and engines and so many things in her bundle, who went away to the east saying that one day she would return.

II

Since the coming of the Anglo-Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century, the fragile web of identity that long held tribal people secure has gradually been weakened and torn. But the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways. The oral tradition is vital; it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past. Its adaptability has always been required, as many generations have experienced. Certainly the modern American Indian woman bears slight resemblance to her forebears—at least on superficial examination—but she is still a tribal woman in her deepest being. Her tribal sense of relationship to all that is continues to flourish. And though she is at times beset by her knowledge of the enormous gap between the life she lives and the life she was raised to live, and while she adapts her mind and being to the circumstances of her present life, she does so in tribal ways, mending the tears in the web of being from which she takes her existence as she goes.

My mother told me stories all the time, though I often did not recognize them as that. My mother told me stories about cooking and childbearing; she told me stories about menstruation and pregnancy; she told me stories about gods and heroes, about fairies and elves, about goddesses and spirits; she told me stories about the land and the sky, about cats and dogs, about snakes and spiders; she told me stories about climbing trees and exploring the mesas; she told me stories about going to dances and getting married; she told me stories about dressing and undressing, about sleeping and waking; she told me stories about herself, about her mother, about her grandmother. She told me stories about grieving and laughing, about thinking and doing; she told me stories about school and about people; about darning and mending; she told me stories about turquoise and about gold; she told me European stories and Laguna stories; she told me Catholic stories and Presbyterian stories; she told me city stories and country stories; she told me political stories and religious stories. She told me stories about living and stories about dying. And in all of those stories she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be, whom I came from, and who would follow me. In this way she taught me the meaning of the words she said, that all life is a circle and everything has a place within it. That's what she said and what she showed me in the things she did and the way she lives.

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Of course, through my formal, white, Christian education, I discovered that other people had stories of their own—about women, about Indians, about fact, about reality—and I was amazed by a number of startling suppositions that others made about tribal customs and beliefs. According to the un-Indian, non-Indian view, for instance, Indians barred menstruating women from ceremonies and indeed segregated them from the rest of the people, consigning them to some space specially designed for them. This showed that Indians considered menstruating women unclean and not fit to enjoy the company of decent (nonmenstruating) people, that is, men. I was surprised and confused to hear this because my mother had taught me that white people had strange attitudes toward menstruation: they thought something was bad about it, that it meant you were sick, cursed, sinful, and weak and that you had to be very careful during that time. She taught me that menstruation was a normal occurrence, that I could go swimming or hiking or whatever else I wanted to do during my period. She actively scorned women who took to their beds, who were incapacitated by cramps, who "got the blues."

As I struggled to reconcile these very contradictory interpretations of American Indians' traditional beliefs concerning menstruation, I realized that the menstrual taboos were about power, not about sin or filth. My conclusion was later borne out by some tribes' own explanations, which, as you may well imagine, came as quite a relief to me.

The truth of the matter as many Indians see it is that women who are at the peak of their fecundity are believed to possess power that throws male power totally out of kilter. They emit such force that, in their presence, any male-owned or -dominated ritual or sacred object cannot do its usual task. For instance, the Lakota say that a menstruating woman anywhere near a yuwipi man, who is a special sort of psychic, spirit-empowered healer, for a day or so before he is to do his ceremony will effectively disempower him. Conversely, among many, if not most, tribes, important ceremonies cannot be held without the presence of women. Sometimes the ritual woman who empowers the ceremony must be unmarried and virginal so that the power she channels is unalloyed, unweakened by sexual arousal and penetration by a male. Other ceremonies require tumescent women, others the presence of mature women who have borne children, and still others depend for empowerment on postmenopausal women. Women may be segregated from the company of the whole band or village on certain occasions, but on certain occasions men are also segregated. In short, each ritual depends on a certain balance of power, and the positions of women within the phases of womanhood are used by tribal people to empower certain rites. This does not derive from a male-dominant view; it is not a ritual observance imposed on women by men. It derives from a tribal view of reality that distinguishes tribal people from feudal and industrial people.

Among the tribes, the occult power of women, inextricably bound to our hormonal life, is thought to be very great; many hold that we possess innately the blood-given power to kill—with a glance, with a step, or with a judicious mixing of menstrual blood into somebody's soup. Medicine women among the Pomo of California cannot practice until they are sufficiently mature; when they are immature, their power is diffuse and is likely to interfere with their practice until time and experience have it under control. So women of the tribes are not especially inclined to see themselves as poor helpless victims of male domination. Even in those tribes where something akin to male domination was present, women are perceived as powerful, socially, physically, and metaphysically. In times past, as in times present, women carried enormous burdens with aplomb. We were far indeed from the "weaker sex," the designation that white aristocratic sisters unhappily earned for us all.

I remember my mother moving furniture all over the house when she wanted it changed. She didn't wait for my father to come home and help—she just went ahead and moved the piano, a huge upright from the old days, the couch, the refrigerator. Nobody had told her she was too weak to do such things. In imitation of her, I would delight in loading trucks at my father's store with cases of pop or fifty-pound sacks of flour. Even when I was quite small I could do it, and it gave me a belief in my own physical strength that advancing middle age can't quite erase. My mother used to tell me about the Acoma Pueblo women she had seen as a child carrying huge ollas (water pots) on their heads as they wound their way up the tortuous stairwell carved into the face of the "Sky City" mesa, a feat I tried to imitate with books and tin buckets. ("Sky City" is the term used by the Chamber of Commerce for the mother village of Acoma, which is situated atop a high

sandstone table mountain.) I was never very successful, but even the attempt reminded me that I was supposed to be strong and balanced to be a proper girl.

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Of course, my mother's Laguna people are Keres Indian, reputed to be the last extreme mother-right people on earth. So it is no wonder that I got notably nonwhite notions about the natural strength and prowess of women. Indeed, it is only when I am trying to get non-Indian approval, recognition, or acknowledgment that my "weak sister" emotional and intellectual ploys get the better of my tribal woman's good sense. At such times I forget that I just moved the piano or just wrote a competent paper or just completed a financial transaction satisfactorily or have supported myself and my children for most of my adult life.

Nor is my contradictory behavior atypical. Most Indian women I know are in the same bicultural bind: we vacillate between being dependent and strong, self-reliant and powerless, strongly motivated and hopelessly insecure. We resolve the dilemma in various ways: some of us party all the time; some of us drink to excess; some of us travel and move around a lot; some of us land good jobs and then quit them; some of us engage in violent exchanges; some of us blow our brains out. We act in these destructive ways because we suffer from the societal conflicts caused by having to identify with two hopelessly opposed cultural definitions of women. Through this destructive dissonance we are unhappy prey to the self-disparagement common to, indeed demanded of, Indians living in the United States today. Our situation is caused by the exigencies of a history of invasion, conquest, and colonization whose searing marks are probably ineradicable. A popular bumper sticker on many Indian cars proclaims: "If You're Indian You're In," to which I always find myself adding under my breath, "Trouble."

III

No Indian can grow to any age without being informed that her people were "savages" who interfered with the march of progress pursued by respectable, loving, civilized white people. We are the villains of the scenario when we are mentioned at all. We are absent from much of white history except when we are calmly, rationally, succinctly, and systematically dehumanized. On the few occasions we are noticed in any way other than as howling, bloodthirsty beings, we are acclaimed for our noble quaintness. In this definition, we are exotic curios. Our ancient arts and customs are used to draw tourist money to state coffers, into the pocketbooks and bank accounts of scholars, and into support of the American-in-Disneyland promoters' dream. As a Roman Catholic child I was treated to bloody tales of how the savage Indians martyred the hapless priests and missionaries who went among them in an attempt to lead them to the one true path. By the time I was through high school I had the idea that Indians were people who had benefited mightily from the advanced knowledge and superior morality of the Anglo-Europeans. At least I had, perforce, that idea to lay beside the other one that derived from my daily experience of Indian life, an idea less dehumanizing and more accurate because it came from my mother and the other Indian people who raised me. That idea was that Indians are a people who don't tell lies, who care for their children and their old people. You never see an Indian orphan, they said. You always know when you're old that someone will take care of you—one of your children will. Then they'd list the old folks who were being taken care of by this child or that. No child is ever considered

illegitimate among the Indians, they said. If a girl gets pregnant, the baby is still part of the family, and the mother is too. That's what they said, and they showed me real people who lived according to those principles.

Of course the ravages of colonization have taken their toll; there are orphans in Indian country now, and abandoned, brutalized old folks; there are even illegitimate children, though the very concept still strikes me as absurd. There are battered children and neglected children, and there are battered wives and women who have been raped by Indian men. Proximity to the "civilizing" effects of white Christians has not improved the moral quality of life in Indian country, though each group, Indian and white, explains the situation differently. Nor is there much yet in the oral tradition that can enable us to adapt to these inhuman changes. But a force is growing in that direction, and it is helping Indian women reclaim their lives. Their power, their sense of direction and of self will soon be visible. It is the force of the women who speak and work and write, and it is formidable.

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Through all the centuries of war and death and cultural and psychic destruction have endured the women who raise the children and tend the fires, who pass along the tales and the traditions, who weep and bury the dead, who are the dead, and who never forget. There are always the women, who make pots and weave baskets, who fashion clothes and cheer their children on at powwow, who make fry bread and piki bread, and corn soup and chili stew, who dance and sing and remember and hold within their hearts the dream of their ancient peoples—that one day the woman who thinks will speak to us again, and everywhere there will be peace. Meanwhile we tell the stories and write the books and trade tales of anger and woe and stories of fun and scandal and laugh over all manner of things that happen every day. We watch and we wait.

My great-grandmother told my mother: Never forget you are Indian. And my mother told me the same thing. This, then, is how I have gone about remembering, so that my children will remember too.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

Allen believes that Indian women, like other women, must strive for harmony between traditional roles and those of modern-day society. What part of the traditional Indian role does Allen want to embrace? What new characteristics does she suggest the Indian women's role incorporate?

2.

In paragraph 5, Allen writes that she formed her ideas of womanhood from her female relatives. Although each woman was unique, Allen writes that they all had one thing in common: "none of them presented herself tentatively." What do you think Allen means by this phrase? Write a sentence that explains what your female or male relatives had in common. How does your phrase compare with Allen's? Use your phrase to develop an essay that explains male/female relationships "where you come from."

3.

Allen goes on to write that in her past, she remembers no woman who was "foolish," "dumb," "vain," or "plastic." Looking back on your own past, can you make the same claim? Can you make this claim about the men you know? Explain your responses.

4.
Throughout this piece, Allen uses personal as well as historical examples to support her ideas. Analyze the effects of this dual perspective on the reader, using your own responses to her explanations to show what you mean.
5.
Look closely at the topics that Allen's mother dealt with in her stories (paragraph 9). Categorize these various topics and then synthesize your findings to suggest the skills, knowledge, emotions, and values that are important to a Native American woman.

6.
According to Allen, how does a Native American woman view her "hormonal life," and how does this view differ from that of her white, middle-class counterpart? What cultural values does each view reflect?

7.
Allen writes that a Native American woman's goal in life is to become "strong and balanced." What two goals do you think the mothers in your own cultural community wish for their daughters today? What two goals do you think mothers in your own cultural community wish for their sons?

8.
Allen lists various ways in which Native American women deal with the conflicts inherent in womanhood (paragraph 16). Compare her list with the ways you believe women in your community deal with conflicts in their own lives. Do you see these coping strategies as different from those of the men in your community? Explain.

9.
Someone once wrote that you can tell the values of a culture by how it treats its young and its aged. How did the Native Americans care for these groups of people, and how do people in your community today care for these same groups? What conclusions can you draw about these two cultures on the basis of your answers?

10.
Allen's great-grandmother gave her the following advice: "Never forget you are an Indian." Suppose that you had one last piece of advice to give to your children, and complete the following sentence: Never forget ———. Why would you choose this advice for your children?
Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Research
1.
Choose a popular television show or movie today in which women assume the key roles. What roles do these media characters portray, and in what ways does a woman's real-life role differ from the media's version?

2.

Research the roles of women in another American Indian tribe, such as Hopi, Sioux, Iroquois, or Algonquin. Compare the rituals, roles, and values of these Indian women with those of the Laguna Pueblo women.

3.
Are gender roles determined by nature or nurture? Use this essay and your own experience, as well as the findings from three modern-day sociologists or psychologists, in order to answer this question in an extended essay.

PETER FILENE

Between a Rock and a Soft Place: A Century of American Manhood

Born in New York City in 1941, Peter Filene teaches history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Long interested in gender issues, Filene is the author of Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America. *"Between a Rock and a Soft Place" first appeared in* South Atlantic Quarterly *(Duke University Press, 1985).*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
From your experiences and observations, create a verbal portrait describing your image of the American male. What does he look like? How does he act? What's important to him? What does he need? What does he want? What does he believe? Reflecting on your "portrait," do you really know anyone who fits this image exactly?

2.
For women: Imagine you are a man, the same age and in the same circumstances that you are in now. What advantages do you have being a man? What disadvantages do you have?

For men: Imagine you are a woman, the same age and in the same circumstances that you are in now. What advantages do you have being a woman? What disadvantages do you have?

———

In middle-class circles these days, one can hardly drop into a conversation or pick up a magazine or skim through a book without encountering sentences that begin: "The trouble with men is . . ." These are not exclusively women's sentences; this is not a sexual class war, with Amazonian feminists launching guerrilla raids upon men. More and more, the accusations also come from men themselves.

"We've been accused of everything from racism to sexism to warmaking to being generally responsible for trying to destroy the planet," a male freelance writer told readers of the *New York Times Magazine* in 1978. "Since the 50's, we've been forced to get to know ourselves a little better and some of us haven't liked what we've learned." Five years later, things had not improved. "I don't know what it's like on the East Coast," a thirty-seven-year-old California psychotherapist said, "but out here for the past twenty years, 'male' has been equivalent to 'negative.'" Back on the East Coast, meanwhile, arts commentator Lucy Lippard said it was like this: "While I'm only too glad to see men or anyone else 'working on themselves,' if I were completely honest I'd have to say it isn't working, or rather that there's something missing." Progressive-thinking men, she

claimed, were trying to be "more like women . . . —in touch with themselves, fluid, emotional, vulnerable, and able to cry, as well as to fuck authentically with affectionate passion." But Lippard concluded sadly that so far, the heart of male-female relationships contained only numbness or even less than that, a void.[1]

These are hard times for men. Machismo is going out of style among the middle class, and any man who dares to play that role is likely to be snubbed, ridiculed, or karate-punched for his sexist foolishness. Hollywood heroes betray what's happening. To be sure, James Bond continues to juggle glossy weapons and breathless blondes, but John Wayne has died, Superman giggles and blushes, and E. T. wants to go home. Even *Playboy,* that manual of robust self-indulgence, is showing signs of exhaustion. After twenty years of popular-ity among prosperous young men, its circulation has slumped. A new generation, both male and female, is coming on the scene, to whom Hugh Hefner's ideals of huge tits and anonymous sex acts seem less appetizing. In one of *Playboy'*s own cartoons a few years ago, you could hear the future arriving. There are the familiar ninety-pound weakling and his girl and the bully on the beach. But this time the weakling (in sandals) is kicking the sand, saying, "Get lost, creep! There's a new man on the beach and your macho bullshit doesn't cut it anymore!" And the bully replies: "That man is the biggest nuisance on the beach! Why can't he learn that real men today are gentle and sensitive and . . . ?" Meanwhile the girlfriend murmurs to herself: "This is getting a little weird . . ."[2]

Not only a little weird, but also a lot confusing. In the face of such outcries against men and among them, one is tempted to make either of two quick steps of diagnosis. The crisis of masculinity is new, one is tempted to think, and the women's movement is responsible for it. Or the crisis is as old as Adam, and the women's movement is finally calling it out into the open. Neither of these diagnoses contains the whole truth, however. Contrary to appearances, feminism is not entirely to blame for the trouble with men, nor are men themselves. The truth is more complex than villainy lying on one side of the war between the sexes. Even had there been no women's movement, men would be struggling against the push and pull of their social roles. For the masculine dilemma has to do only partly with women. On the other hand, the fault lies not entirely in ourselves, that we are men, but also in our circumstances.

5

Diagnosis becomes clearer if we take the long view—a century-long view. In this historical perspective we see that the trouble with American men has existed for more than a hundred years, but until our own century it was disguised or mitigated by three kinds of circumstances. As those circumstances gave way, the trouble emerged into the open and became unavoidable. As modernity developed around him, it became harder and harder for a boy to grow up into a man.

The first circumstance involves expectations. A middle-class boy grew up in Victorian America with much clearer prescriptions of how he was supposed to "be a man" than his modern-day grandson would be given. The ideal of "manly character" laid heavy demands upon the body, mind, and soul, but at least one knew what he was up against. When character dissolved into "self-fulfillment," however, the strictly masculine commandments gave way and the trouble began.

Along with the shift in expectations came changes in the opportunities for men to test those expectations. Rural America turned urban, work involved brain more than brawn,

individualism melted into corporate bureaucracy. While the content of ideal manhood was relaxing, the conditions of proving it were disintegrating. Ambiguity doubled. And it tripled when the roles of women began altering in drastic ways. As the domestic angel entered college and career, as the deferential lady demanded equal rights in politics and law and bed, the traditional gender arrangement fell apart. Men had depended upon women to perform one half of the division of labor, economic as well as emotional labor. Men had depended upon women's dependency. So when women stepped out of their role, men were left flailing inside their own.

Men's troubles are old troubles, at least a century old. But they have become so noticeable and bedeviling only as the supportive props of traditional manhood splintered. We look back to Victorian America, then, not to lament a golden age, but to explain how men have entered their recent dilemma and how they can get out of it.

Expectations

10

The words of Victorian fathers fell upon their sons like rain—cold, serious, and clear. To help nine-year-old Stanley "be a good man if God lets you grow up," Granville Bascom Hall in 1853 laid down six rules of conduct: "In the first place then, ask the advice of your parents. . . . 2nd, Hear all they have to say and remember it all. 3rd—Never reject their advice because *you cannot see* it to be wise. . . . 4th—Never . . ." But we need not read on through 4th and 5th and 6th, because they follow the same line of filial obedience in equally implacable words.[3]

Theodore Roosevelt, Senior, issued his asthmatic young son a manly prescription that was more varied but no less strict. "You have the mind but you have not the body, and without the help of the body the mind cannot go as far as it should. You must *make* your body." Ten years later, as Teddy went off to Harvard with well-developed body and mind, his father offered further advice: "Take care of your morals first, your health next, and finally your studies."[4]

Obedience, work, strength of body and mind, and then add to these ingredients a heavy dose of self-reliance and religion. In 1878 the Reverend Joseph Wilson wrote to "My Dearest Son" when Woodrow was a junior at Princeton:

It is not now my purpose to preach to you upon the subject of "ambition. . . ." To attain distinction is commendable. But, to *deserve* distinction is a far worthier aim than distinction itself. . . . You *have* talents—you have *character*—you have manly bearing. You have almost every advantage coupled I trust with genuine love for God. Do not allow yourself, then, to feed on dreams. . . . The roast beef of hard industry gives blood for climbing the hills of life. It is genius that usually gets to the highest tops—but, what is the secret heart of genius? the ability to work with painstaking self-denial.[5]

And when a son forgot these manly lessons, a father took pains to remind him. Twenty-six-year-old Lincoln Steffens landed in New York City, completing three carefree years of European study, and was handed an envelope containing one hundred dollars and a letter. "My dear son," it began, and then went on to tell Lennie that his father was finally cutting the purse strings. "By now you must know about all there is to know of the theory of life, but there's a practical side as well. It's worth knowing. I suggest that you learn it, and the way to study it, I think, is to stay in New York and hustle."[6]

Eugene Debs escaped this sort of reprimand by leaving home and school at age fifteen to work on the railroad. Self-reliance, he soon discovered, was a frightening business. "Sometimes I am all alone and I am so homesick, I hardly know what to do," he confessed to his parents. Moreover, jobs were scarce in the depression of the 1870s, and poverty hovered menacingly around him. But he was determined "to prove that I can act manly when must be."[7]

One way or another, each boy grew up to be a man, a "true man." They pursued different occupations: Hall was a psychologist, Roosevelt a writer, cowboy, soldier, and politician; Wilson a scholar and politician; Steffens a journalist; and Debs a trade unionist and socialist. But all climbed the hills of life dutifully, piously, industriously, self-reliantly, and self-denyingly, all hearing the same paternal adverbs tolling in their consciences as they proved their manly character. They waged furious ideological quarrels with one another: Hall denounced Rooseveltian imperialism in 1898 and praised the Wilsonian crusade in 1917; Wilson and Roosevelt competed against each other twice for the presidency; Wilson jailed Debs for antiwar activity; Steffens denounced Wilson's peace treaty and embraced Lenin instead. Nevertheless, all five men acted out the same basic script of Victorian masculinity.

A century later, the style of that script seems as quaint as detachable collars and spats. But once you deflate the pompous pieties and straighten out the baroque syntax, the expectations heaped upon Victorian boys sound remarkably similar to the ones heaped upon modern boys. Be tough, be courageous, take risks; don't cry or show weakness; work, achieve, succeed; depend upon yourself.[8] Although twentieth-century middle-class fathers tended to be more affectionate and supportive than their own fathers had been, in their children's memory they still were the background parent. Mom played the leading role on childhood's stage, making meals, nursing hurt knees and feelings, saying yes or no. More to the point, when modern Dad did become involved, he tended to treat sons and daughters differently. On the would-be man he concentrated more directiveness, support, and strict discipline—an active posture; on the would-be woman he was content with affection and protection.[9]

Boys should learn not to be sissies, in other words, and girls not to be tomboys. When modern children left parental laps and went to school, they met up with the same teachings. In eighty percent of grade-school books of the 1960s, and almost as large a majority of books in the 1970s, boys outnumbered and "out-did" girls. Boys stood, climbed, and rode bikes, performed chemistry experiments and helped Dad build things, rescued people from cattle stampedes, and never cried. Girls sat and watched and daydreamed, cared for pets or siblings, helped Mom make cookies, rode as passengers on boys' bikes, and cried frequently.[10] If we advance the plot from childhood to adolescence, it was *Sports Illustrated* versus *Seventeen*.

Traditional stereotyping of the two sexes governs more strongly than we may have believed. That contrast should not blind us, however, to significant evolution within the masculine ideal. Brother Jack and sister Jill may be steered in very different directions, but Jack is not looking toward the same ideals as his grandfather. Instead of unquestioning obedience to his parents, a modern middle-class son expects to negotiate and reason because his parents (long before Dr. Spock, by the way) have prized a "democratic" family. Amid this new sort of domestic political system, self-reliance and

rugged competition become obstreperous traits. Children of both sexes are encouraged to be more pliable citizens. Be true to yourself, think for yourself, but also be tolerant of others. Work hard, strive for success, but also get along with other people, be a good member of the team. In the course of a century, "character" has evolved into "personality." As part of that transformed sense of self, the notion of masculinity has softened and expanded, still bearing many Victorian inheritances but also turning increasingly "feminine."[11]

From one perspective, this broadened repertoire of expectations has made things easier for boys. Instead of the narrow identity permitted by all those "thou shalt not" commandments of nineteenth-century parents, boys are permitted a more spacious self. But there is a less happy perspective. If one sees this space as sheer vacancy, offering too few guidelines and asking too much self-direction, then spaciousness makes things harder. Is the identity bottle half-full or half-empty? A man's perspective ultimately depends on his temperament. But I suspect that the balance these days is tipping toward "empty"—toward hardship, toward "the trouble with men" that both sexes have been grumbling about. Even in the best of circumstances, ambiguity of expectations can be troubling. When the two other once-supportive circumstances of masculinity are no longer giving support, then ambiguity will be very troubling indeed. And that is what has occurred. The prescriptions of masculinity may be wider, but the opportunities for proving it are narrower. And modern masculinity—like Victorian manliness—requires proof.

Opportunities

You must make your body, Theodore Roosevelt, Senior, insisted; you must make your mind. A hundred years later, manhood remains a matter of "making" rather than becoming. It is not a phase into which a boy inevitably graduates over time, but a status which he must achieve by struggle. A girl grows into womanhood, translating childhood nurturance into wifely and motherly nurturance. A boy, by contrast, must prove himself a man, earning mastery over his inner weaknesses and the outer challenges of the world.[12] When the world was rural, the challenges were harsh but at least they were tangible, and so the proof was just as tangible. At Harvard, Theodore Roosevelt showed manliness by diligent study and moral purity. But how much more emphatically he could show it in the Dakota Bad Lands! Hunting buffalo, elk, and bear, rounding up boat thieves and cattle, riding horseback for twelve or twenty-four hours through subzero weather, Theodore left no doubt in anyone's mind that he was a "true man" and, eventually, the emblematic man of his era.[13] A smelly buffalo hide declared graduation from boyhood far better than any sheepskin diploma.

Coming from patrician New York City, Roosevelt never fully escaped the status of dude (which is perhaps why he tried so hard and boasted so much). His future friend Lincoln Steffens, by contrast, was a westerner by birth, galloping through his California youth as "the boy on horseback." No asthma for Lennie, nor much early schooling except in the school of hard knocks. But not much conventional success either, and Steffens eventually went to New York to show his father and himself that he could succeed in some career or other. Business was his father's recommendation, literary writing was his own hope. In the end, the job market settled the argument, and Steffens became a newspaper journalist

covering the rough-and-tumble "beat" of the Lower East Side. "Will it make a man of me?" Steffens asked himself.[14] In a remarkably short time it did. As a muckraker fighting with his pen against urban outlaws, Steffens became nationally famous.

As his story suggests, however, the circumstances of success were changing at the turn of the century. In modernizing America, the message was "Go east, young man." The prairies were being crisscrossed by railroad tracks and asphalt sidewalks. Buffalo Bill worked in Barnum and Bailey's Circus. People were crowding into cities, businesses were growing into corporations and corporations into multimillion-dollar trusts, John Henry was losing to the inexhaustible machine. In 1870, two of three men were self-employed; in 1920, only one of three (and today only one of ten). By 1910, six of ten wage-earners in manufacturing were working for companies of more than 100 employees; by 1929, seven of ten. (Today, 30 percent of the entire nonagricultural labor force works for businesses with more than five hundred employees.) Amid such "progress," men yearned desperately for tangible proofs of manly character.[15]

In 1917, Harvard senior John Dos Passos complained to a friend: "I think we are all of us a pretty milky lot,—don't you?—with our tea-table convictions and our radicalism that keeps so consistently within the bounds of decorum. . . . And what are we fit for when they turn us out of Harvard? We're too intelligent to be successful businessmen and we haven't the sand or the energy to be anything else."[16] Thirty years earlier, Roosevelt had set out for the Bad Lands. But twenty-four years earlier, historian Frederick Jackson Turner had declared the frontier was gone. As the open land closed, where was an aspiring youth to test his manliness?

Well, there was still the battlefield. War offered a more genuine red badge of courage than any fight against corruption or monopolies. When William James's father refused to let him fight in the Civil War, but younger brother Wilky managed to enlist and be wounded, nineteen-year-old William felt "one of the very lightest of featherweights," lacking "the grip and energy" of other men. When Stanley Hall's father secured him an army exemption rather than let him wage war against the Confederacy, he inflicted on his son "the very sorest of all memories." Dos Passos was luckier. In 1917 he went to France, crouched beneath the blood-red explosions of a German bombardment, and exclaimed:

> But gosh I want to be able to express, later, all of this, all the tragedy and hideous excitement of it . . . the grey crooked fingers of the dead, the dark look of dirty mangled bodies . . . , the vast tomtom of the guns, the ripping tear shells make when they explode. . . . When one shell comes I want another, nearer, nearer. . . . I want to throw the dice at every turn with the old roisterer Death . . . and through it all I feel more alive than ever before.[17]

Wars served as crucibles of manhood, but they interrupted rather than reversed the inexorable socioeconomic trends. The heroic world was vanishing. War itself was fought by tanks and then planes and then missiles as much as by men. After 1865 the wilderness steadily retreated before cities and highways, until the only frontier hung in the transatlantic air for Lindbergh and other pioneers to fly and then—higher yet, beyond gravity and the reach of anyone but a few astronauts—the frontier became outer space. Meanwhile the occupational world was modernizing. Middle-class work became

segmented by specialization, depersonalized by bureaucracies, abstracted by computers, muffled by fringe benefits and pension plans.

In this setting, what place is there for "the roast beef of hard industry"? Old-fashioned ambition continues in new-fashioned modes. Up-and-coming professional men of the twentieth century work as many hours as they would have worked in the nineteenth: more than fifty-five hours per week for one fourth of them, more than sixty hours for one sixth. They live the strenuous life of the court room, the operating room, or the corporate board room. For more physical proof of themselves they turn, not to battlefields, but to the racquet ball court, the jogging track, or the Nautilus-equipped gym in their office building. Like their sons hunched for hours in front of Star War video games, repelling Darth Vader armies with their thumbs, their fathers enjoy the recreational equivalent of war.

In short, middle-class men have adapted their behavior to modern circumstances. They have sublimated, displaced, replaced—call it what you will, they have in any case learned how to update traditional manly activity. But the satisfaction is not what it once was. "I work hard and take a full briefcase home most nights," says Chuck Powell, a forty-one-year-old comptroller with a Big Board company. "My life in the past five years has . . . become frenetic. . . . I feel a lot of pressure and I get more tired than I'm willing to admit, even to myself." His biggest dissatisfaction, he says, comes from lack of recognition by his employers. But the dilemma embraces more than the part of himself he brings to the office. "I guess I've got a puritanical streak in me that says profit and all that jazz aren't the be-all and end-all of my life. At sixty what am I going to tell my kids I did with my life? . . . I guess my personal and business values just don't click at times. And that's really frustrating."[18]

There are many Chuck Powells out there in the skyscraper heights of the corporate economy. According to repeated surveys by the University of Michigan in 1969, 1973, and 1977, job satisfaction has declined significantly, most of all among college graduates. Men's discontent is directed not at inadequate pay or hours, but inadequate meaning. They want to be able to say: "My work is important and gives me a feeling of accomplishment."

The issue is not simply work, however, but work as a part of the rest of their lives. According to those same surveys, one third of married workers feel that their jobs interfere with family life "somewhat" or "a lot." And family matters to them. "What are the important things to you?" a sociologist asked two hundred executives in a large company. Sixty percent said "family," fewer than 20 percent said "career." Even more troubled testimony emerges from an American Management Association poll in 1973, which reported that four of five businessmen placed their major aspirations not in the firms that employed them, but in their home life. Likewise, a Louis Harris poll in 1979 of men aged eighteen to fifty found that the vast majority rated health, love, peace of mind, and family as being personally "very important"; work came in a distant fifth. In other words, Superman wants more time off from fighting Lex Luther and stopping runaway express trains. He wants more opportunity to shed his blue tights and become good old Clark Kent playing at home with Lois Lane and Superbaby.[19]

So how do men resolve this conflict between the way they spend most of their waking hours (on the job) and the way they would like to spend some of them (with family and

self)? One resolution is a midlife crisis. According to social psychologists like Daniel Levinson (*The Seasons of a Man's Life*), our lives move through a cycle. The thirties are the time when a man settles down, works hard to make his niche, and enters the "BOOM" phase of "Becoming One's Own Man." Near the age of forty, however, a typical man enters midlife transition, a period of renewed questions and fresh tasks. Now that "the returns are in" from his youthful dreams of money, fame, and power, he must look at the options he chose against, the desires he postponed, the other voices in the other rooms of his self. In particular, a middle-aged man becomes aware of his inclination toward creativity and human attachment (what Erik Erikson calls "generativity"). He cultivates imagination, sensitivity to others' needs, and loving friendships. It is time, at last, for the "feminine" side of his personality to be given life.[20]

Modern social psychologists have popularized the concept of midlife transition, but it is not simply a modern story. Looking back a century, we see the same cycle among Victorian men. At first it is easy to overlook, because they rode into middle age without the label of "midlife crisis" and with less of a jolt. But we should not mistake what was happening. During their late thirties came the same troubled turn of life, although it made less trouble for them than for us because Victorian circumstances were more supportive of conventional manliness.

Consider, for example, Lincoln Steffens at the age of thirty-six. When he was offered the chance to become managing editor of *McClure's,* the most prestigious American magazine of the day, it should have been a jubilant moment. But not at all. "I am home—sick today," he told his father. "Some symptoms of nervous prostration. . . . All signs are pointing to a temporary retirement." The months-long breakdown occurred because, on the verge of occupational triumph, Steffens realized—first subconsciously and later consciously—that he was failing in other realms. His novel was unwritten, his marriage was loveless and childless. In conventional public terms he was a successful man, but those terms did not cover the private man. He finally took the *McClure's* job, crisscrossed the nation on research and speaking tours, winning extraordinary acclaim. But in the process he drifted farther and farther from his wife. He became a husband who slept alone in hotel rooms as he rode the circuit of celebrity. Only in his fifties, after his first wife died and he remarried, did Steffens fulfill "one of the deepest desires of my life"—fatherhood. Radiant fatherhood is what he called it. "The best rectification I have ever had is (my son) Pete, who lets me love him more and more and ever more."[21]

Eugene Debs suffered the same bittersweet blend of public celebrity and private regret. As the charismatic spokesman of socialism, he journeyed from crowd to ardent crowd, interview upon interview, one presidential candidacy after another. The personal price, however, was high. Like Steffens, Debs was evading a loveless, childless marriage, collapsing under periodic psychosomatic illnesses, and harboring an inner hollowness. He too fell in love with another woman. But here the two biographies part company. Katherine Debs had not died and Mabel Curry was married. During the last decade of his life, Debs slid into depression and despair, but it is hard to say whether his wartime sentence to the federal penitentiary or his prison of unrequited love was more responsible.[22]

"No man can be a good citizen who is not a good husband and a good father," Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed.[23] Roosevelt himself, as you would expect, was better than good:

an ardent husband to one wife and then, after she died, to a second wife, while also a devoted father of five children. Few Victorian men matched his overachievement. In fact, many seemed unaware of their domestic needs before entering middle age. They put up with indifferent marriages, or rationalized them, or turned their backs on them, investing their primary hopes in successful careers. Only during their forties did they stop, look homeward, and reckon the emotional gains and losses.

Midlife crisis may be part of an innate sequence (a "season") or it may be caused by external events. Social psychologists are arguing hotly about this issue, and it is too soon to say where the truth lies. Either way, it seems that men of a century ago and men of our own time have tended to go through a common pattern. Both groups have struggled to "live up to" the script of manliness, only to discover—in the second act of their lives—that they must struggle to rewrite the script along gentler, more vulnerable, less masculine lines. "*Plus ça change,*" one is tempted to say, wryly. Play it again, Sam, and yet again, this same old story, the quest for fame and glory, a case of do or die, as a century of time goes by.

But it is not quite the same old story. It has turned more difficult and more uncertain. For one thing, the modern manly script has been liberalized, permitting more interpretation by the actors, emphasizing personality more than character. At the same time the opportunities for proving one's manliness have become less tangible and physical. Together these trends produce an unsettling vagueness. "What exactly does it mean to be a man, and how will I know that I have made myself into one?" Victorians provided answers that were rigid but also clear-cut, so that a man could measure how much he had succeeded or failed. Modern men, by contrast, pursue the plastic goals of "growth" and "happiness." And they pursue it in a plastic world of bureaucratic organizations that produce services or ideas rather than tangible goods. Little wonder, then, that modern men—at midlife or even earlier—seek gratification less in their careers than in their families. A sales account or a computer does not hug, kiss, and whisper "I love you."

But here enters the third and most troubling change of circumstance. Women no longer are acting out their old-fashioned script of domesticity and deference. While the modern male script resembles the Victorian version, the modern female script has been radically rewritten. As a result, the drama of the genders has turned chaotic. Actor and actress are talking past each other, singing a duet of different songs, as the director angrily shouts: "The trouble with men is . . ."

Women

Until recently, marriage was presumed to be a woman's career. In 1885, for example, Woodrow Wilson wrote to his fiancée Ellen Axson, while she was taking art courses in New York City. He felt "guiltily selfish" in reminding her, he said, but "of course there's that fact that marriage will take away almost all your chance to work" in art. "Ah, sweetheart, this thing has torn my heart more than once," Wilson went on. "And yet that is what is involved in becoming a wife; we shall want to go to house-keeping as soon as possible." How did Ellen respond to this selfish fact? She said yes, and yes, and yes. Ten years and three daughters later, she continued to say yes: "How I thank God for you my darling—noble man, perfect husband that you are—my own true love, so absolutely *all* that a woman could desire the man to be to whom she gives her heart and life."[24]

It is hard for us today to take such gush at face value. We suspect Mrs. Wilson of self-delusion, brainwashing, or masochism to be so happily dedicating herself to husband and family. Where she sees love, we see exploitation; where she talks of giving, we mutter of giving away. Higher education for women, two feminist movements, and more relaxed attitudes towards religious duty and divorce have made the traditional division of labor seem obsolete. As a result, Woodrow Wilson's grandson cannot depend on his fiancée today to respond the way Ellen did. Modern women give drastically different answers. In 1982 George Gallup asked a national sample of women: "Which one of the alternatives on this list do you feel would provide the most interesting and satisfying life for you personally?" Eight of ten told him that their ideal lifestyle is to be married with children, but half of these hopeful mothers wanted to combine motherhood with a full-time job (10 percent more than in 1975). Among younger women the choice was more emphatic; by a two-to-one margin they voted for "doing it all."[25] Female equality of roles, rights, and power remains more an ideal than a reality, of course. Nevertheless, the egalitarian principle has decisively displaced nineteenth-century notions of a wife's relationship to her husband. She will be neither the better half nor the subordinate half, only the other half.

A house divided cannot stand. As women revise their part of the division of economic and emotional labor, men have been left holding their own part in bewilderment. Knowingly or unknowingly, selfishly or generously, in weakness or strength, they had depended upon their wives for support in the symbiosis of marriage. "My own darling," twenty-seven-year-old Woodrow Wilson wrote to Ellen shortly after she agreed to marry him, "I suppose there never was a man more dependent than I on love and sympathy, more devoted to home and home life; and, my darling, my heart is overflowing with gratitude and gladness because of the assurance that it now has a new love to lean upon—a love which will some day be the centre of a new home and the joy of new home life. I shall not begin to live a complete life, my love, until you are my wife."[26]

He meant every word of it. During their thirty years of marriage Wilson's devotion flowed unwaveringly, unabashedly, in pages of purple prose when they were apart and presumably in oratory and whispers when they were together. Without a wife, his life was not complete—*he* was not complete. He meant it. When Ellen died of Bright's disease at the age of fifty-four, he remarried within a year and a half.

If marriage was a Victorian woman's career, it was no less presumed by men for themselves. By a melancholy coincidence, Steffens, Roosevelt, and Hall each suffered the premature death of his first wife, and each remarried (Roosevelt within a year, Hall within nine years, and Steffens first living with one woman until, ten years later, he married another). All of them thus rejoined the ranks of the other 70 percent of their gender in 1900 who were married.[27] "Spinster" had derisory connotations, but "bachelor"—whatever gay-doggish image it carried—meant for most men what Wilson said it meant for him: less than a fully happy life.

Much has changed in middle-class marriages since 1900: the average number of children; attitudes toward the practice of sexuality, especially women's sexuality; the frequency and the acceptability of divorce; and wives' employment. But men continue to want—to need—to be married. The persistently high rates of marriage and remarriage testify to that. So does the rate of mental illness, physical illness, and suicide among unmarried

men—a rate significantly higher than among married men and also among unmarried women.[28] *Playboy* may preach the swinging single life, and singles bars may welcome the playboys, and Andy Capp may complain on the comics page every morning about his henpecked fate. But the truth is that the happiest, healthiest men are husbands.

And the probability is that they have found health and happiness in a symbiotic relationship. Her softness complements his toughness, her attention to people complements his attention to things, her feeling complements his doing, and together they make him whole. This arrangement worked well so long as both partners played their parts. But as women have begun to step out of role, reclaiming the rest of their possibilities, the arrangement has collapsed. The men who are left behind in their half of the old symbiosis are left wanting, almost as incomplete as if they were unmarried.

Is it any surprise, then, that they have had trouble with the women's movement? At first they went through a stage of self-defense against feminists: (angrily) "How dare you accuse me, you bitch, after all I've done for you?" or (plaintively) "What have I done to deserve this, my darling?" As they learned that they would survive female independence, however, growing numbers of liberal middle-class males in the 1970s turned from defensiveness to support: "If you want a career and a baby, I'll help you, dear." When they did attack, they attacked themselves: "The trouble with men is . . ." And that seems to be as far as liberated men have come: between a rock and a soft place.

From Here On

What is the way out of this trap? One way is for men to stop reacting and to begin acting—in other words, to learn the lessons of their history and to take a hand in shaping their future. Although the feminist movement has forced men to change their traditional attitudes and practices, their troubles did not begin with feminism nor will they end with men becoming feminists. Men sidestep the truth when they blame women for their dilemma. But they take only half a step forward when they placate or imitate women. At a time when injustices to women remain flagrant, they deserve to occupy center stage in the drama we call "sexual inequality." But the gender problem will not end if women win equality of rights and opportunities. Even if that idealistic day should arrive, men would still be left with their century-old dilemma of trying to define their own roles in the face of drastically altered "manly" expectations and opportunities. Feminism has taught us that women deserve to be asked, in the words of Gallup's pollsters, "Which one of the alternatives on this list do you feel would provide the most interesting and satisfying life for you personally?" The past century of history teaches us that the same question needs to be asked of men, too.

A few men have, in effect, been doing exactly that. Beyond supporting women and rejecting machoism, they have been widening the social space for both genders. That is what gay men have done, occupying a part of the sexual and emotional spectrum previously restricted to women. That is what straight men have done who are staying home as househusbands or taking custody of their children after divorce. But we need not resort to such exceptional cases to find examples of egalitarianism.

A survey asked a national sample of Americans in 1977 whether they preferred the idea of shared marriage roles or a traditional marriage. Among the general public, shared roles emerged the slight but surprising winner, 48 to 43 percent. Among persons aged eighteen to twenty-nine, however, that preference won by a resounding margin of three to one. For

more exciting portents, listen to the 28,000 readers of *Psychology Today* who responded in 1977 to a lengthy questionnaire about masculinity. Most of the men wanted to be warmer, gentler, and more loving, and they disdained competition, aggressiveness, or sexual conquest (although they still had trouble asking for directions when they became lost while driving). Most of the women, in turn, shared these same ideals for men as well as for themselves.[29] To be sure, *Psychology Today* readers are younger, more educated, and more affluent than most Americans, but people like them usually point which way the cultural wind is blowing.

Opinions are one thing, but behavior is more convincing. Consider the behavior of those innumerable husbands who stand beside their wives under the hot lights of the operating room, coaching their wives breath by breath, push by pelvic push, toward the moment of birth.[30] These men of Lamaze are not extirpating some awful macho part of themselves, nor trying to be "like a woman." They are becoming full partners in parenthood—no longer content with simply having planted that sperm nine months earlier and then sitting off-stage in the waiting room. By accompanying their wives throughout pregnancy, labor, and delivery, they have enhanced their own power without subtracting from women's. One gender's gain does not necessarily mean the other gender's loss. On the contrary, beyond stereotypes lies more space for people to move about. Out there, beyond stereotypes, a man coaches his wife and also coaches his son's (or daughter's) Little League team.

Even the most forward-looking Americans have not arrived there, not by a long shot. In fact, we still are groping to find words for what is happening—"househusband," "parenting," "dual-career families," all clumsy efforts to articulate half-formed ideas. But slowness and clumsiness are hardly surprising, because we are talking about a profound cultural realignment. The winds of change blew for years before women won the vote, another half-century before the modern feminist movement began. They will have to blow far into the next century, no doubt, before men will have outgrown their troubles. In the meantime, we can nurture ourselves with images of a future when a man is free to weep and wear cowboy boots, to bathe his children and then watch the Pittsburgh Steelers, to bake bread on Thursday and play poker with the guys on Friday, to ask for a hug from a male friend or a female friend, whoever happens to be there when you need it.

Notes

1. Stephen Singular, "Moving On: Reaping the Rewards of the Women's Movement," *New York Times Magazine,* 30 April 1978, 18; John Skow, "In California: Roar, Lion, Roar," *Time,* 7 November 1983, 17; Lucy Lippard, "Coming Soon: The Fall and Rise of the New Man," *Village Voice,* 1 November 1983, 96.

2. *Playboy,* September 1974, 147. For background, see Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979), 267–69.

3. "St. Nicholas" (G. B. Hall) to G. Stanley Hall, 1 January 1853, quoted in Dorothy Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago, 1972), 5. Let me take a moment and a footnote to talk about methodology. I have chosen five middle-class men as the spokes by which the Victorian half of this essay evolves:

Theodore Roosevelt

Birthplace

Occupation

then radical

Occupation

Birthplace

Occupation

Political
Ideology

Father's
Occupation
———
G. Stanley Hall
(1844–1924)

Mass.

psychologist

?

farmer
Eugene V. Debs
(1855–1926)

Ind.

unionist

socialist

merchant
Woodrow Wilson
(1856–1924)

Va.

teacher,
politician

liberal
Democrat

minister
Theodore Roosevelt
(1858–1919)

N.Y.

politician

liberal
Republican

banker
Lincoln Steffens
(1886–1936)

Calif.

journalist

liberal,
then radical

banker
They do not qualify as a social-scientific "sample." But they are geographically, occupationally, and ideologically diverse, while concentric in time, class, and (as the essay will show) attitudes toward masculinity. Therefore I claim them as representative men.

4. Quoted in Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1979), 60; and quoted in Carleton Putnam, *Theodore Roosevelt: The Formative Years, 1858–1886* (New York, 1958), 1:141.

5. Joseph Ruggles Wilson to Woodrow Wilson, 25 January 1878, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link (Princeton, N.J., 1966), 1:345–46.

6. Quoted in Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography* (New York, 1931), 169.

7. Debs to "Dear Parents," 29 September 1874, and to Louise Debs, 3 and 8 October 1874, quoted in Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, Ill., 1982), 18–19.

8. Deborah David and Robert Brannon, eds., *The Forty-nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role* (Reading, Mass., 1976), 11–36.

9. Wanda C. Bronson, Edith S. Katten, and Norman Livson, "Patterns of Authority and Affection in Two Generations," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58 (March 1959): 148–50; Leonard Benson, *Fatherhood: A Sociological Perspective* (New York, 1968), 192–95, 234–37; Melvin L. Kohn, *Class and Conformity: A Study in Values* (Homewood, Ill., 1969), 112–15, 123, 125; Robert A. Fein, "Research on Fathering: Social Policy and an Emergent Perspective," in *Family in Transition: Rethinking Marriage, Child Rearing, and Family Organization*, ed. Arlene and Jerome H. Skolnick, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1980), 399.

10. Elizabeth Fisher, "Children's Books: the Second Sex, Junior Division," in *And Jill Came Tumbling After: Sexism in American Education*, ed. Judith Stacey, Susan Bereaud, and Joan Daniels (New York, 1974), 116–22; Women on Words & Images, *Dick and*

Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers, 2nd ed. (Princeton, N.J., 1975), chs. 4, 7, and passim.
11. On the family, see Peter G. Filene, *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America* (New York, 1975), 162–66, 197–99. On character versus personality, I am indebted to Warren Susman's lecture at the University of North Carolina in 1975. See also Daniel R. Miller and Guy E. Swanson, *The Changing American Parent: A Study in the Detroit Area* (New York, 1958), 52–54.
12. Benson, *Fatherhood,* 188–92; Ruth E. Hartley, "Sex-Role Pressures in the Socialization of the Male Child," *Psychological Reports,* 5 (1959): 457–68, reprinted in *Men and Masculinity,* ed. Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974).
13. Morris, *Roosevelt,* chs. 8, 11, esp. pp. 285–95, 301–03, 322–31.
14. Steffens to his father, 3 November 1893, Steffens Papers, Columbia University.
15. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York, 1977), 15–16; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1982–1983*.
16. Dos Passos to Arthur K. McComb, 3 July 1917, quoted in Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to U.S.A.: A Political Biography, 1912–1936* (Boulder, Colo., 1972), 56.
17. Jean Strouse, *Alice James: A Biography* (Boston, 1980), 70–72; Ross, *Hall,* 10; Dos Passos, "Notebook," 26 August (1917), reprinted in introduction to Dos Passos, *One Man's Initiation: 1917* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1969), 22.
18. Quoted in Barrie S. Greiff and Preston K. Munter, "Tradeoffs," *Harvard Magazine,* May– June 1980, 48C. See also Peter M. Grath, "Faster than a Speeding Bullet . . . ," *The Washingtonian,* September 1981, 150–55. For an insightful general interpretation, based on national polls in 1957 and repeated in 1976, see Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard Kulka, *The Inner American: A Self Portrait from 1957 to 1976* (New York, 1981), esp. 17–25, 292–97.
19. *New Ways to Work Newsletter* (Palo Alto, Calif.), Spring 1979; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Social Indicators: 1976—Selected Data on Social Conditions and Trends in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1976), 389; the executive poll is in Kanter, *Men and Women,* 105; the AMA poll is in *The New York Times,* 3 June 1973, 4:12; Louis Harris and Associates, "The Playboy Report on American Men: A Study of the Values, Attitudes, and Goals of U.S. Males 18–49 Years Old" (Chicago, 1979).
20. Daniel J. Levinson et al., *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York, 1978), chs. 9, 13, 15, esp. 196–200 and 228–39; Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society,* 2nd ed. (New York, 1963), 266–68.
21. Steffens to his father, 4 May 1901, to Laura Suggett, 16 April 1924, and to Marie Howe, 8 February 1926, in *The Letters of Lincoln Steffens,* 2 vols., ed. Ella Winter and Granville Hicks (New York, 1938), 1:137, 2:64, and 2:734. Also Steffens, "Radiant Fatherhood: An Old Father's Confession of Superiority," (1925), reprinted in *Lincoln Steffens Speaking* (New York, 1936), 5–6.
22. Salvatore, *Debs,* 277–80, 288, 339–40, and ch. 10 passim.
23. Quoted in *Theodore Roosevelt,* ed. Dewey Grantham (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), 41.
24. Wilson to Ellen Axson, 27 March 1885, and Ellen to Woodrow Wilson, 6 February 1894, in *The Priceless Gift: The Love Letters of Woodrow Wilson and Ellen Axson Wilson,* ed. Eleanor Wilson McAdoo (New York, 1962), 126–27, 185.
25. *The Gallup Report,* no. 203, August 1982, 27.

26. Wilson to Axson, 2 October 1883, in *Priceless Gift,* ed. McAdoo, 19.
27. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970,* Bicentennial Ed., pt. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1975), 21.
28. Jessie Bernard. *The Future of Marriage* (New Haven, Conn., 1982), 17, 21, 31–32.
29. *New York Times,* 27 November 1977, p. 75; Carol Tavris, "Men and Women Report Their Views on Masculinity," *Psychology Today,* January 1977, 35–42, 87.
30. "New Science of Birth," *Newsweek,* 15 November 1976, 60; "A New Kind of Life with Father," ibid., 30 November 1981, 93.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
In a sentence, what is Filene's main point in this piece? What specific sources does he rely on to support this point?

2.
Evaluate the various sources that Filene uses in this piece. Are these sources fair, unbiased, credible, representative of a total population of men, sufficient, and varied?

3.
What three circumstances, according to Filene, have made men's roles so complicated today? What specifics for each circumstance does Filene mention?

4.
Compare fathers of today with fathers in the Victorian period as suggested by this essay. What characteristics do these two groups share? What characteristics are different?

5.
In what ways, according to Filene, has the husband/wife relationship changed from the days of early America to the present day? Do you agree or disagree with his contentions?

6.
In the end, what does Filene propose as a goal for American men today? What specifics does he propose as the means for reaching these goals? Can you provide any other specifics that might assist men in reaching this goal?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Complete the following title and write an essay that supports it: A Century of American Womanhood: Between a ——— and a ———.

2.
Examine a specific gender role in your own culture during this past century from another country's cultural viewpoint.

DAVID HALDANE

Asian Girls: A Cultural Tug of War

Born in 1949, David Haldane studied psychology, political science, and creative writing at UCLA and Goddard College. Since his graduation from Goddard, he has worked as a journalist and has been widely published in both alternative press publications such as the Berkeley Barb *and mainstream magazines and newspapers such as the* Los Angeles Times, *where this essay first appeared in 1988.*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
In what ways does your value system differ from the value system of those a generation or two removed from you—your children or your parents or grandparents?
2.
Imagine that you must marry someone whom your parents chose for you. What are the positive and negative aspects to such an arrangement? Can you be happy in such an arrangement? Explain.
3.
Write about a topic on which you and your parents most likely would not see eye-to-eye. Try to figure out why there's such a gap here, and what might have to happen in order for this gap to close.

———

In many respects Crystal Hul, 16, is more American than Cambodian. The daughter of a well-known leader in Southern California's Cambodian refugee community, she has been in the United States since the age of 4. She speaks fluent English, gets good grades, was recently nominated for sophomore princess by her classmates and hopes to pursue a career in political science.

Yet when Crystal walks through the front door of her Long Beach home, she enters a different world. Here she must never allow her head to rise above that of her father's. She must continually refill his rice bowl until he finishes dinner and signals that she may eat. She must never leave the house alone. She is not allowed to date, drive a car, enter a movie theater or attend any party not also attended by her brothers. And she fully expects her parents to eventually choose a husband for her—with whom she is unlikely to even speak before the wedding.

"The rules are different at home than at school," she said. "We respect our father and mother as gods. I could never find the heart to disobey them." Meet an unusual group of immigrant Americans. They are young Asians deeply rooted in ancient cultures that consider women subservient. And for the girls especially, life in America can be one of stark contrasts, even two clashing existences: life at home and life outside.

5

"I trust my parents to make the right decisions for me," Crystal said. "I feel loved. But sometimes it's hard." So hard, according to psychologists and social workers, that increasing numbers are breaking under the strain.

The story of these young women's struggle to balance two worlds has its beginnings in ancient history. Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Chinese philosopher Confucius, whose teachings form the basis for much of Asian society, preached the subservience of women and the suppression of individual needs in favor of those of the group.

"It's the sense that the family is more important than the individual," said Lucie Cheng, a professor of sociology at UCLA who is a Chinese-American and director of the university's Center for Pacific Rim Studies. "The idea that it's not individuals expressing their individualism that is important, but how everyone can preserve the harmony within the family to keep it going and minimize conflicts."

While similar values prevailed to some extent in early Western societies, experts say, the rapid technological development of the West tended to mitigate them while the lingering agricultural life styles of the East allowed them to flourish. Thus for generations, especially in East and Southeast Asian countries, women were taught to serve their husbands without question, a role they began preparing for almost from birth.

And while their male siblings were also under pressure to respect and obey their elders, the girls in particular were raised as revered and protected beings who learned their proper roles at their mothers' apron strings.

10

Recent years have seen some disruptions in that tradition. In mainland China, for instance, where the Communist government has long discouraged traditional views of femininity, young people have discovered the sexual revolution with the result that as many as 30% have experienced premarital sex, according to one recent estimate.

Japan, strongly influenced by the West through economic and cultural ties, has also undergone some liberalization of its values regarding women.

And during the 1960s and '70s Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos came under Communist rule, with the result that traditional family ties and gender roles there were severely challenged. It is refugees from these Southeast Asian countries—about 340,000 of whom have settled in California since 1975—who tend to cling to their traditional values most strongly.

"They feel guilty about leaving their countries," said Florentius Chan, a psychologist and director of the Asian Pacific Mental Health Center in Long Beach. Buffeted by media portrayals of what they perceive as an alien and dangerous American culture and wracked by uncertainties regarding their own future in it, the refugees in many cases are interpreting their own traditions more rigidly than they ever did at home. "The only thing they can control," said Chan, who was born in Taiwan, "is their value system."

For some families, the effort seems to be working. Crystal, for instance, says that despite occasional teasing from her friends, she is comfortable with the way she is being brought up, including the eventual selection of a mate by her parents, and intends to raise her own daughters the same way. "My husband will love me as a daughter, a little sister and a wife," the teenager says. "I know that my mom and dad will make a good decision. It's one less thing I have to worry about."

15

For others, though, the attempt to live Asian lives in a Western culture can prove devastating. One 18-year-old Cambodian student, who did not want her name used, said she became so upset at her mother's attempts at controlling her life that she ran away from home, spent several nights in a seedy hotel, got drunk and attempted suicide. "She tried to bring me up in the Cambodian way," the young woman said, "but I just didn't know how to act. I was young when we left Cambodia; it's too difficult to act like that."

Eventually, the youngster received counseling and returned to her Long Beach home, where she says her mother is now somewhat less restrictive.

Another girl, age 16, said she rebelled by moving into a Cambodian Buddhist Temple. Later she moved to a shelter, then to a foster home. "I didn't like that way I was being treated," said the girl, who continues to live in the foster home, where she says she is freer to pursue her own interests.

These problems are often aggravated, experts say, because many immigrant parents expect their daughters to get good educations and pursue careers as well as behave in traditionally feminine ways. Thus, added to the pressures on Asian-American students of both genders to excel in their academic and professional pursuits is the demand that young women do so without sacrificing their traditional feminine passivity. The resulting tension has been well chronicled in the art and literature of Asian-Americans.

In 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston, a Chinese-American woman born and raised in Stockton, won the National Book Critics Circle Award for "Woman Warrior," a memoir of her girlhood based on stories her mother told her while working in the family laundry.

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In the book, Kingston, who now lives in Studio City, told of purposely acting stupid and clumsy in the presence of young Chinese men chosen by her parents as potential mates. The idea, she said, was to make herself undesirable enough to be left alone.

"I refused to cook," Kingston wrote. "When I had to wash the dishes, I would crack one or two. 'Bad girl!' my mother yelled, and sometimes that made me gloat rather than cry. Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?"

Jude Narita, a young Japanese-American, presented a one-woman play last year called "Coming Into Passion/Song for a Sansei." Working through a series of vignettes, the show, which recently closed at the Fountain Theater in Hollywood, explored the lives of several Asian-American women, including an American teen-ager of Japanese descent, a Filipina mail-order bride, a Vietnamese prostitute and a grown-up who had been detained at a World War II camp for Japanese-Americans.

"Education changes everything," Narita said. "The benefit of coming to America is unlimited opportunity, but one of the side effects is that you lose total control of your children. That's the natural progression: the older generation tries to hold it back, but it's like trying to hold back the wind." Experts say they have no overall statistics on how many Asian girls are running away, becoming involved with drugs and prostitution or attempting suicide as a result of these cultural pressures. Most, however, say such cases are on the rise.

Chan's experience in Long Beach, where his agency deals primarily with Cambodians, may be instructive. Of his 30 current cases, the psychologist said, two-thirds involve girls who are having serious problems adjusting to the expectations of two cultures. Based on his experience, Chan said, he estimates that as many as half of the area's Cambodian families are encountering similar difficulties, with the number of cases requiring professional help increasing by about 20% per year. Chan attributes the increase to the continuing influx of refugees, combined with the fact that more and more girls who were very young when they arrived in the United States are reaching the rebellious teen-age years.

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"It's getting worse and worse," Chan said. "We have parents calling us crying—they just don't know what to do." Joselyn Yap, director of the child and youth division of the Asian Pacific Counseling and Treatment Center in Los Angeles, reports an alarming increase in child-abuse cases—the majority involving girls—among clients from the Philippines, Vietnam and China, where some segments of the population consider corporal punishment acceptable. Of the 100 cases her agency sees each month, Yap said, about 20%—a twenty-fold increase since 1985—involve abused children.

Yap attributes the increase in reported incidents of abuse to the rising level of stress felt by immigrants dealing with the changing cultural values of their children, as well as enhanced professional awareness of the problem. One teacher was very surprised that when she said she had to discipline a child, the parents said that "that was OK as long as she didn't break any of the child's bones," recalled Ben Marte, a behavioral science consultant with the agency. And Johng Song, intervention program coordinator for Los Angeles' Korean Youth Center, said that about 40% of his agency's estimated 450 clients each year are girls having trouble adapting to their dual roles.

A smattering of academic studies have touched on various aspects of the problem. A 1980 paper done at Columbia University focused on Chinese women who had immigrated to the United States. Among its conclusions: that the earlier in their lives they emigrated, the less likely they were to suffer from serious emotional maladjustments. In 1984 a psychologist at UCLA published a paper documenting impaired motivation, increased conflict with children and a growing divorce rate among female Southeast Asian refugees.

One result of this attention has been a proliferation of special programs aimed at helping Asian parents and children. Yap's agency, for instance, offers classes for parents designed to improve their child-rearing skills, as well as individual and group therapy sessions for teen-age boys and girls. At Song's center, teen-agers are encouraged to discuss their culture's double standard for males and females at special workshops. The Asian Pacific Family Center in Rosemead offers therapy designed to help ease the acculturation process.

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"Our goal is to change the conflict model into more of an integration adjustment model," said George Choi, the center's clinical director. "One can adapt by recognizing the boundaries in either world, working comfortably within those boundaries and still being comfortable with one's self. A lot of the time, [the girls] are not trying to abdicate either role as much as trying to integrate both."

Indeed, many young Asian women seem to be doing so. Shung Kim, a 19-year-old Korean who has been in the country since age 3 and studies psychology at UCLA, said she has learned to accept the fact that her parents expect her home by 11:30 p.m., while her 17-year-old brother is permitted to stay out until 2 a.m.

"For a while I challenged them," she said, "but it's pretty much instilled in me now. I'm like a combination of Korean and American: right in the middle."

Thuly Nguyen, 16, a Vietnamese high school student who lives in Wilmington, says she understands why her parents won't let her date. "They've been over there longer than they've been over here," she said. "I can't expect them to change that much."

And at 23, Vuthy Chek, a Cambodian refugee, has finally worked out an arrangement that she believes she can live with. A student at Cal State Long Beach with a full-time job, she still resides with her parents, is allowed to date only in groups and must be home by 11 p.m.

35

But when it comes time to marry, she said, her family will make a slight departure from tradition. "They would love to have an arranged marriage," Chek said, "but they have compromised. I have the right to say no."

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
Based on the approach, information, and language in this piece, what type of person might be the author's intended audience?
2.
Choose any topic and write an introduction modeled after the first three paragraphs in this essay. What do you think of this introduction? Where do you think it might lead you next?
3.
In general, with whom do your sympathies lie in this piece? The parents? The obedient daughters? The rebellious daughters? Please explain.
4.
Regardless of nationality conflicts, in what ways can parents control their children's value systems when the values in the home conflict with the values in the immediate American culture?
5.
What problems do the Asian daughters have in common with the majority of American teenage females? What problems are specific to the Asian daughters?
Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Take the role of one of the young women profiled in this article, and write a letter to her parents on her behalf, asking them to let her do something she's not allowed to do. Aim for a respectful yet forceful tone.
2.
Using your own experience as your primary resource, write an essay explaining which has been more powerful in shaping your beliefs and values: your family or society.
MARIANNA DE MARCO TORGOVNICK

On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst
Born in 1949, Marianna De Marco Torgovnick was raised in the Italian American community in Bensonhurst, New York. A professor of literature at Duke University, she has published many essays, a number of which use incidents from her own life to illustrate cultural commentary. She is particularly interested in the relationships between art and culture as demonstrated in Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives *(1990), a book that examines the values and goals of late-twentieth-century American society through analysis of fiction, biography, political science, history, and anthropology. "On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst" appeared first in* Partisan Review *and was then selected for inclusion in* Best American Essays 1991.
Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
Describe the makeup of either a past or present neighborhood. Aim for as many adjectives as possible in order to give this sketch color, life, and accuracy.
2.

In what ways do your values and beliefs differ from or reflect your parents' values and beliefs?

3.

If you could change one thing about your parents or your cultural ancestry, what would you change and why?

———

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 marking 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.

5

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 more 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 set-up, 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.

10

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 coifed 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.

15

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 antipodes 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 parrk or 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 this 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.

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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 shirttails sloppily tucked into his pants and a cigar almost always dangling from his lips, Dave was stereotyped Jew but also, my parents always said, a nice guy, a decent man.

Years later, 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 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.*

35

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.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
Having never met the author of this piece before, what conclusions do you draw about her from this reading alone? Is she someone whom you would choose as a friend? A confidante? Would she be someone with whom you'd like to work? Someone you'd like as your boss? Explain.

2.
In general, do you think Torgovnick is being fair-minded in her assessment of her family's cultural biases and neighborhood closeness? Why or why not?

3.
Compare Torgovnick's worries with those of her mother in paragraph 17. With these worries in mind, whose life, do you think, is better, easier, simpler?

4.
Discuss what Torgovnick's parents have lost or gained by their refusal to change their ideas as well as their location.

5.
Comment on the three scenes Torgovnick includes in this essay. What might be her reasons for including these scenes, and how effective do you find them? What, if anything, might have been lost had she not included them?

6.
In what ways has Torgovnick been shaped by her Italian American culture, and what values does she still cling to today?

7.
What are the main gender issues apparent in Torgovnick's upbringing and present family interactions?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Research the effects that constant change and moving has on Americans, and compare or contrast it to the effects of staying in one place.

2.
In this essay, Torgovnick talks about both the choking and nutritive power of her roots. In a carefully balanced argument based on inductive reasoning, explore first the parts of your roots that choked you; then examine the roots that nourished you. Finally, come to some conclusion: were you more nourished or choked by your past?

TONI CADE BAMBARA

My Man Bovanne

Born in 1939, Toni Cade Bambara grew up in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York. After earning a B.A. from Queens College and an M.A. from the City College of New York and studying in Italy and Paris, she took a position as a social worker with the New York State Department of Welfare. In addition, she has worked as a youth counselor, a community organizer, and a freelance writer. Many of her stories focus on the lives of black women and their varied experiences in relationship to their families, their professional lives, and their communities. "My Man Bovanne" first appeared in her collection of short fiction Gorilla, My Love *(1972).*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
At what age is a woman in America considered past her prime as far as the dating and social scene goes? Explain.

2.
What do you think is the best time in a woman's life? What is the best time in a man's life?

———

Blind people got a hummin jones if you notice. Which is understandable completely once you been around one and notice what no eyes will force you into to see people, and you get past the first time, which seems to come out of nowhere, and it's like you in church again with fat-chest ladies and old gents gruntin a hum low in the throat to whatever the preacher be saying. Shakey Bee bottom lip all swole up with Sweet Peach and me explainin how come the sweetpotato bread was a dollar-quarter this time stead of dollar regular and he say uh hunh he understand, then he break into this *thizzin* kind of hum which is quiet, but fiercesome just the same if you ain't ready for it. Which I wasn't. But I got used to it and the onliest time I had to say somethin bout it was when he was playin checkers on the stoop one time and he commenst to hummin quite churchy seem to me. So I says, "Look here Shakey Bee, I can't beat you and Jesus too." He stop.

So that's how come I asked My Man Bovanne to dance. He ain't my man mind you, just a nice ole gent from the block that we all know cause he fixes things and the kids like him. Or used to fore Black Power got hold their minds and mess em around till they can't be civil to ole folks. So we at this benefit for my niece's cousin who's runnin for somethin with this Black party somethin or other behind her. And I press up close to dance with Bovanne who blind and I'm hummin and he hummin, chest to chest like talkin. Not jammin my breasts into the man. Wasn't bout tits. Was bout vibrations. And he dug it and asked me what color dress I had on and how my hair was fixed and how I was doing without a man, not nosy but nice-like, and who was at this affair and was the canapes dainty-stingy or healthy enough to get hold of proper. Comfy and cheery is what I'm trying to get across. Touch talkin like the heel of the hand on the tambourine or on a drum.

But right away Joe Lee come up on us and frown for dancin so close to the man. My own son who knows what kind of warm I am about; and don't grown men call me long distance and in the middle of the night for a little Mama comfort? But he frown. Which ain't right since Bovanne can't see and defend himself. Just a nice old man who fixes

toasters and busted irons and bicycles and things and changes the lock on my door when my men friends get messy. Nice man. Which is not why they invited him. Grassroots you see. Me and Sister Taylor and the woman who does heads at Mamies and the man from the barber shop, we all there on account of we grassroots. And I ain't never been souther than Brooklyn Battery and no more country than the window box on my fire escape. And just yesterday my kids tellin me to take them countrified rags off my head and be cool. And now can't get Black enough to suit em. So everybody passin sayin My Man Bovanne. Big deal, keep stepping and don't even stop a minute to get the man a drink or one of them cute sandwiches or tell him what's goin on. And him standin there with a smile ready case someone do speak he want to be ready. So that's how come I pull him on the dance floor and we dance squeezin past the tables and chairs and all them coats and people standin round up in each other face talkin bout this and that but got no use for this blind man who mostly fixed skates and skooters for all these folks when they was just kids. So I'm pressed up close and we touch talkin with the hum. And here come my daughter cuttin her eye at me like she do when she tell me about my "apolitical" self like I got hoof and mouf disease and there ain't no hope at all. And I don't pay her no mind and just look up in Bovanne shadow face and tell him his stomach like a drum and he laugh. Laugh real loud: And here come my youngest, Task, with a tap on my elbow like he the third-grade monitor and I'm cuttin up on the line to assembly.

"I was just talkin on the drums," I explained when they hauled me into the kitchen. I figured drums was my best defense. They can get ready for drums what with all this heritage business. And Bovanne stomach just like that drum Task give me when he come back from Africa. You just touch it and it hum thizzim, thizzim. So I stuck to the drum story. "Just drummin that's all."

5

"Mama, what are you talkin about?"

"She had too much to drink," say Elo to Task cause she don't hardly say nuthin to me direct no more since that ugly argument about my wigs.

"Look here, Mama," say Task, the gentle one. "We just tryin to pull your coat. You were makin a spectacle of yourself out there dancing like that."

"Dancin like what?"

Task run a hand over his left ear like his father for the world and his father before that.

10

"Like a bitch in heat," say Elo.

"Well uhh, I was goin to say like one of them sex-starved ladies gettin on in years and not too discriminating. Know what I mean?"

I don't answer cause I'll cry. Terrible thing when your own children talk to you like that. Pullin me out the party and hustlin me into some stranger's kitchen in the back of a bar just like the damn police. And ain't like I'm old old. I can still wear me some sleeveless dresses without the meat hangin off my arm. And I keep up with some thangs through my kids. Who ain't kids no more. To hear them tell it. So I don't say nuthin.

"Dancin with that tom," say Elo to Joe Lee, who leanin on the folks' freezer. "His feet can smell a cracker a mile away and go into their shuffle number post haste. And them eyes. He could be a little considerate and put on some shades. Who wants to look into them blown-out fuses that—"

"Is this what they call the generation gap?" I say.

15
“Generation gap,” spits Elo, like I suggested castor oil and fricassee possum in the milk shakes or somethin. “That’s a white concept for a white phenomenon. There’s no generation gap among Black people. We are a col—”
“Yeh, well never mind,” says Joe Lee. “The point is Mama . . . well, it’s pride. You embarrass yourself and us too dancin like that.”
“I wasn’t shame.” Then nobody say nuthin. Them standin there in they pretty clothes with drinks in they hands and gangin up on me, and me in the third-degree chair and nary a olive to my name. Felt just like the police got hold to me.
“First of all,” Task say, holding up his hand and tickin off the offenses, “the dress. Now that dress is too short, Mama, and too low cut for a woman your age. And Tamu’s going to make a speech tonight to kick off the campaign and will be introducin you and expecting you to organize the council of elders—”
“Me? Didn nobody ask me nuthin. You mean Nisi? She change her name?”
<+20
“Well, Norton was supposed to tell you about it. Nisi wants to introduce you and then encourage the older folks to form a Council of the Elders to act as an advisory—”
“And you going to be standing there with your boobs out and that wig on your head and that hem up to your ass. And people’ll say, ‘Ain’t that the horny bitch that was grindin with the blind dude?”’
“Elo, be cool a minute,” say Task, gettin to the next finger. “And then there’s the drinkin. Mama, you know you can’t drink cause next thing you know you be laughin loud and carryin on,” and he grab another finger for the loudness. “And then there’s the dancin. You been tattooed on the man for four records straight and slow draggin even on the fast numbers. How you think that look for a woman your age?”
“What’s my age?”
“What?”
25
“I’m axin you all a simple question. You keep talkin bout what’s proper for a woman my age. How old am I anyhow?” And Joe Lee slams his eyes shut and squinches up his face to figure. And Task run a hand over his ear and stare into his glass like the ice cubes goin calculate for him. And Elo just starin at the top of my head like she goin rip the wig off any minute now.
“Is your hair braided up under that thing? If so, why don’t you take it off? You always did do a neat cornroll.”
“Uh huh,” cause I’m think how she couldn’t undo her hair fast enough talking bout cornroll so countrified. None of which was the subject. “How old, I say?”
“Sixtee-one or—”
“You a damn lie Joe Lee Peoples.”
30
“And that’s another thing,” say Task on the fingers.
“You know what you all can kiss,” I say, gettin up and brushin the wrinkles out my lap.
“Oh, Mama,” Elo say, puttin a hand on my shoulder like she hasn’t done since she left home and the hand landin light and not sure it supposed to be there. Which hurt me to my heart. Cause this was the child in our happiness fore Mr. Peoples die. And I carried that child strapped to my chest till she was nearly two. We was close is what I’m tryin to tell

you. Cause it was more me in the child than the others. And even after Task it was the girl-child I covered in the night and wept over for no reason at all less it was she was a chub-chub like me and not very pretty, but a warm child. And how did things get to this, that she can't put a sure hand on me and say Mama we love you and care about you and you entitled to enjoy yourself cause you a good woman?
"And then there's Reverend Trent," say Task, glancin from left to right like they hatchin a plot and just now lettin me in on it. "You were suppose to be talking with him tonight, Mama, about giving us his basement for campaign headquarters and—"
"Didn nobody tell me nuthin. If grassroots mean you kept in the dark I can't use it. I really can't. And Reven Trent a fool anyway the way he tore into the widow man up there on Edgecombe cause he wouldn't take in three of them foster children and the woman not even comfy in the ground yet and the man's mind messed up and—"
35
"Look here," say Task. "What we need is a family conference so we can get all this stuff cleared up and laid out on the table. In the meantime I think we better get back into the other room and tend to business. And in the meantime, Mama, see if you can't get to Reverend Trent and—"
"You want me to belly rub with the Reven, that it?"
"Oh damn," Elo say and go through the swingin door.
"We'll talk about all this at dinner. How's tomorrow night, Joe Lee?" While Joe Lee being self-important I'm wonderin who's doin the cookin and how come nobody ax me if I'm free and do I get a corsage and things like that. Then Joe nod that it's O.K. and he go through the swingin door and just a little hubbub come through from the other room. Then Task smile his smile, lookin just like his daddy, and he leave. And it just me in this stranger's kitchen, which was a mess I wouldn't never let my kitchen look like. Poison you just to look at the pots. Then the door swing the other way and it's My Man Bovanne standin there saying Miss Hazel but lookin at the deep fry and then at the steam table, and most surprised when I come up on him from the other direction and take him on out of there. Pass the folks pushing up toward the stage where Nisi and some other people settin and ready to talk, and folks gettin to the last of the sandwiches and the booze fore they settle down in one spot and listen serious. And I'm thinkin bout tellin Bovanne what a lovely long dress Nisi got on and the earrings and her hair piled up in a cone and the people bout to hear how we all gettin screwed and gotta form our own party and everybody there listenin and lookin. But instead I just haul the man on out of there, and Joe Lee and his wife look at me like I'm terrible, but they ain't said boo to the man yet. Cause he blind and old and don't nobody there need him since they grown up and don't need they skates fixed no more.
"Where we goin, Miss Hazel?" Him knowin all the time.
40
"First we gonna buy you some dark sunglasses. Then you comin with me to the supermarket so I can pick up tomorrow's dinner, which is goin to be a grand thing proper and you invited. Then we goin to my house."
"That be fine. I surely would like to rest my feet." Bein cute, but you got to let men play out they little show, blind or not. So he chat on bout how tired he is and how he appreciate me taking him in hand this way. And I'm thinkin I'll have him change the lock on my door first thing. Then I'll give the man a nice warm bath with jasmine leaves in the

water and a little Epsom salt on the sponge to do his back. And then a good rubdown with rosewater and olive oil. Then a cup of lemon tea with a taste in it. And a little talcum, some of that fancy stuff Nisi mother sent over last Christmas. And then a massage, a good face massage round the forehead which is the worryin part. Cause you gots to take care of the older folks. And let them know they still needed to run the mimeo machine and keep the spark plugs clean and fix the mailboxes for folks who might help us get the breakfast program goin, and the school for the little kids and the campaign and all. Cause old folks is the nation. That what Nisi was sayin and I mean to do my part.
"I imagine you are a very pretty woman, Miss Hazel."
"I surely am," I say just like the hussy my daughter always say I was.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
After reading this piece, with whom are you most sympathetic—the children, the mother, or the blind man? Please explain.

2.
Describe the relationship between the mother and her children in this piece.

3.
What, besides their Mama's behavior, comes between the mother and her children?

4.
What are some of the reasons that the mother latches on to the blind man at this party? Is she simply out to have a good time? Is she leading him on or using him? Is he genuinely her friend?

5.
Why does the mother reminisce so much about her relationship with her daughter? What's your reaction to this relationship? Is it typical of all mother-daughter relationships, or is it exclusive to black culture, perhaps?

6.
In what ways does blindness serve as a most apt metaphor in this story? What other symbols do you find that connect to the major theme in this piece?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Interview a mother in her late forties or early fifties in order to discover what struggles and joys are apt to be a part of this stage in life.

2.
Research and report on the differences between male midlife-crisis experiences and female midlife-crisis experiences.

3.
Read Tillie Olsen's short story "I Stand Here Ironing" and analyze the gender conflicts apparent in this piece.

DANA GIOIA

The Sunday News

Born in 1950, Dana Gioia grew up in Los Angeles and later received an M.A. from Harvard and an M.B.A. from Stanford. Both degrees serve him well: he currently works

as marketing manager for General Foods Corporation and in addition is a widely published freelance writer. He is also the author of three volumes of poetry, Summer *(1983),* Daily Horoscope *(1986), and* The Gods of Winter *(1991)*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
Write about the first real love of your life.

2.
Reflect on what you consider to be the most important ingredient in a successful marriage or relationship.

Looking for something in the Sunday paper,
I flipped by accident through *Local Weddings,*
Yet missed the photograph until I saw
Your name among the headings.
5
And there you were, looking almost unchanged,
Your hair still long, though now long out of style,
And you still wore that stiff and serious look
You called a smile.
I felt as though we sat there face to face.
10
My stomach tightened. I read the item through.
It said too much about both families,
Too little about you.
Finished at last, I threw the paper down,
Stung by jealousy, my mind aflame,
15
Hating this man, this stranger whom you loved,
This printed name.
And yet I clipped it out to put away
Inside a book like something I might use,
A scrap I knew I wouldn't read again
20
But couldn't bear to lose.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
What are your reactions to the speaker after your initial reading of this poem? Why do you think you reacted in this manner?

2.
Glance at the poem again and circle the two or three words that seem to jump off of the page and attack your senses.

3.
On your own or with two or three peers, go back through each stanza now with the intent to discover what type of person the speaker might be. For example, in the first stanza,

what do his actions say about him? In stanza 2, what kind of an attitude does he have? How can you tell? Write down the various interpretations, and come to some conclusions as to why this relationship didn't work out.

4.

From the language alone, what can you infer about this speaker?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Write a parody of this poem, staying close to the rhythm and level of language, but using your own topic. After this new poem is written, write a reflection on the frustrations, joys, successes, and failures you meet throughout the writing process.

2.

Analyze several reports of weddings from your local paper in order to discover what an outsider can or cannot learn from such reports.

3.

Read in between the lines of this poem and turn this short poem into a detailed short story.

———

TOPICS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS:
MEN AND WOMEN

1.

Compare Peter Filene's assessment of the American male conflict with Paula Allen's description of the Native American woman's conflict in "Where I Come from Is Like This."

2.

Watch a few popular sitcoms on television today, noting especially the roles that men and women play. After several observations, compare these media roles with those mentioned in any two essays in this chapter. Do the media portrayals support the conflicts mentioned in either of the essays? As far as your own experience is concerned, which portrayal is most true?

3.

Write an essay in which you analyze the relationships between men and women as presented by several sources in this chapter. Feel free to synthesize your own personal knowledge on this topic into the essay as well.

4.

Which sex really has the upper hand in America today? Write an essay in which you argue effectively for either the men or the women.

5.

In what ways does a black man's life differ from a white man's life? Write an essay in which you compare these two groups and draw some conclusions about what traits these men share, as well as what, if anything, keeps them distinct and apart.

6.

In what ways do you see white women's lives in the United States as different from the lives of minority women? Write an essay in which you analyze these two groups in order to find the similarities and the differences among women according to their culture.

7.
"Am I really my brother's or sister's keeper?" Write an essay in which you explore whether or not each human has a moral responsibility to aid fellow humans. Explore your own philosophy on this question and refer as well to several sources in this chapter.

8.
Write a possible solution to one of the social problems mentioned in this chapter. First, set the scope of the problem, and explore several possibilities. Then settle on what you feel may be the best solution.

9.
Working as a group with several other students in your class, design a questionnaire that raises questions about how men view women on your college campus or how women view men. Distribute the questionnaire among faculty, staff, and students. After studying the data you gather, write an essay in which you draw conclusions from the information you received and from the discussions with your group about these data. Do your conclusions coincide with or contradict any of the writers in this chapter?

10.
Compare the power that men have with the power that women possess. Are these two groups equally "strong," or does one group have an advantage over the other? Make sure you document your findings with sources from this chapter and any outside sources you wish to consult.

11.
You have the choice of being born a white man, a black man, a Native American man, a white woman, a black woman, or a Native American woman. From the opinions and facts offered in this chapter, make a decision. Support your answer not from a personal standpoint but from the standpoint that you are "unborn" and have only these sources to guide you.

12.
Working with a group of your fellow students, interview professional women to discover how the feminist movement has affected their careers, their roles, and the quality of their lives. Interview professional men for the same purpose. Then write a report explaining and evaluating your findings. Do these findings contradict or confirm the beliefs of any author in this chapter? Do they contradict or confirm your own?

ROBIN LAKOFF
Talking Like a Lady
Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Robin Lakoff is a professor of linguistics at the University of California–Berkeley; one of her areas of expertise is language and gender.

She has written a number of books, including Face Value: The Politics of Beauty *(1984),* Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives *(1990),* Father Knows Best: The Use and Abuse of Therapy in Freud's Case of Dora *(1993), and* Language Wars *(2000). "Talking Like a Lady" is excerpted from her book* Language and a Woman's Place *(1975).*

Suggestion for Prereading or Journal Writing

According to some studies, when men and women talk with one another, the following things happen: Women ask 70 percent of the questions, and men interrupt 96 percent of the time. From your own experience, do you follow these patterns? Do most of the people you talk with follow these patterns? Explain, also, your own responses to people who ask questions or who interrupt while you are having conversations with them.

———

"Women's language" shows up in all levels of the grammar of English. We find differences in the choice and frequency of lexical items; in the situations in which certain syntactic rules are performed; in intonational and other supersegmental patterns. As an example of lexical differences, imagine a man and a woman both looking at the same wall, painted a pinkish shade of purple. The woman may say:

(1)
The wall is mauve,

with no one consequently forming any special impression of her as a result of the words alone; but if the man should say (1), one might well conclude he was imitating a woman sarcastically or was a homosexual or an interior decorator. Women, then, make far more precise discriminations in naming colors than do men; words like *beige, ecru, aquamarine, lavender,* and so on are unremarkable in a woman's active vocabulary, but absent from that of most men. I have seen a man helpless with suppressed laughter at a discussion between two other people as to whether a book jacket was to be described as "lavender" or "mauve." Men find such discussion amusing because they consider such a question trivial, irrelevant to the real world.

We might ask why fine discrimination of color is relevant for women, but not for men. A clue is contained in the way many men in our society view other "unworldly" topics, such as high culture and the Church, as outside the world of men's work, relegated to women and men whose masculinity is not unquestionable. Men tend to relegate to women things that are not of concern to them, or do not involve their egos. Among these are problems of fine color discrimination. We might rephrase this point by saying that since women are not expected to make decisions on important matters, such as what kind of job to hold, they are relegated the noncrucial decisions as a sop. Deciding whether to name a color "lavender" or "mauve" is one such sop.

If it is agreed that this lexical disparity reflects a social inequity in the position of women, one may ask how to remedy it. Obviously, no one could seriously recommend legislating against the use of the terms "mauve" and "lavender" by women, or forcing men to learn to use them. All we can do is give women the opportunity to participate in the real decisions of life.

Aside from specific lexical items like color names, we find differences between the speech of women and that of men in the use of particles that grammarians often describe as "meaningless." There may be no referent for them, but they are far from meaningless:

they define the social context of an utterance, indicate the relationship the speaker feels between himself and his addressee, between himself and what he is talking about.
5
As an experiment, one might present native speakers of standard American English with pairs of sentences, identical syntactically and in terms of referential lexical items, and differing merely in the choice of "meaningless" particles, and ask them which was spoken by a man, which a woman. Consider:

(2)
(a)
Oh dear, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.
(b)
Shit, you've put the peanut butter in the refrigerator again.
It is safe to predict that people would classify the first sentence as part of "women's language," the second as "men's language." It is true that many self-respecting women are becoming able to use sentences like (2)(b) publicly without flinching, but this is a relatively recent development, and while perhaps the majority of Middle America might condone the use of (b) for men, they would still disapprove of its use by women. (It is of interest, by the way, to note that men's language is increasingly being used by women, but women's language is not being adopted by men, apart from those who reject the American masculine image [for example, homosexuals]. This is analogous to the fact that men's jobs are being sought by women, but few men are rushing to become housewives or secretaries. The language of the favored group, the group that holds the power, along with its nonlinguistic behavior, is generally adopted by the other group, not vice versa. In any event, it is a truism to state that the "stronger" expletives are reserved for men, and the "weaker" ones for women.)
Now we may ask what we mean by "stronger" and "weaker" expletives. (If these particles were indeed meaningless, none would be stronger than any other.) The difference between using "shit" (or "damn," or one of many others) as opposed to "oh dear," or "goodness," or "oh fudge" lies in how forcefully one says how one feels—perhaps, one might say, choice of particle is a function of how strongly one allows oneself to feel about something, so that the strength of an emotion conveyed in a sentence corresponds to the strength of the particle. Hence in a really serious situation, the use of "trivializing" (that is, "women's") particles constitutes a joke, or at any rate, is highly inappropriate. (In conformity with current linguistic practice, throughout this work an asterisk [*] will be used to mark a sentence that is inappropriate in some sense, either because it is syntactically deviant or used in the wrong social context.)

(3)
(a)
*Oh fudge, my hair is on fire.

(b)
*Dear me, did he kidnap the baby?
As children, women are encouraged to be "little ladies." Little ladies don't scream as vociferously as little boys, and they are chastised more severely for throwing tantrums or

showing temper: “high spirits” are expected and therefore tolerated in little boys; docility and resignation are the corresponding traits expected of little girls. Now, we tend to excuse a show of temper by a man where we would not excuse an identical tirade from a woman: women are allowed to fuss and complain, but only a man can bellow in rage. It is sometimes claimed that there is a biological basis for this behavior difference, though I don’t believe conclusive evidence exists that the early differences in behavior that have been observed are not the results of very different treatment of babies of the two sexes from the beginning; but surely the use of different particles by men and women is a learned trait, merely mirroring nonlinguistic differences again, and again pointing out an inequity that exists between the treatment of men, and society’s expectations of them, and the treatment of women. Allowing men stronger means of expression than are open to women further reinforces men’s position of strength in the real world: for surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions, and a speaker unable—for whatever reason—to be forceful in stating his views is much less likely to be taken seriously. Ability to use strong particles like “shit” and “hell” is, of course, only incidental to the inequity that exists rather than its cause. But once again, apparently accidental linguistic usage suggests that women are denied equality partially for linguistic reasons, and that an examination of language points up precisely an area in which inequity exists. Further, if someone is allowed to show emotions, and consequently does, others may well be able to view him as a real individual in his own right, as they could not if he never showed emotion. Here again, then, the behavior a woman learns as “correct” prevents her from being taken seriously as an individual, and further is considered “correct” and necessary for a woman precisely because society does *not* consider her seriously as an individual.

Similar sorts of disparities exist elsewhere in the vocabulary. There is, for instance, a group of adjectives which have, besides their specific and literal meanings, another use, that of indicating the speaker’s approbation or admiration for something. Some of these adjectives are neutral as to sex of speaker: either men or women may use them. But another set seems, in its figurative use, to be largely confined to women’s speech. Representative lists of both types are below:

neutral

women only
great
terrific
cool
neat

adorable
charming
sweet
lovely
divine

As with the color words and swear words already discussed, for a man to stray into the "women's" column is apt to be damaging to his reputation, though here a woman may freely use the neutral words. But it should not be inferred from this that a woman's use of the "women's" words is without its risks. Where a woman has a choice between the neutral words and the women's words, as a man has not, she may be suggesting very different things about her own personality and her view of the subject matter by her choice of words of the first set or words of the second.

(4)
(a)
What a terrific idea!

(b)
What a divine idea!

It seems to me that (a) might be used under any appropriate conditions by a female speaker. But (b) is more restricted. Probably it is used appropriately (even by the sort of speaker for whom it was normal) only in case the speaker feels the idea referred to be essentially frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the world at large—only an amusement for the speaker herself. Consider, then, a woman advertising executive at an advertising conference. However feminine an advertising executive she is, she is much more likely to express her approval with (4)(a) than with (b), which might cause raised eyebrows, and the reaction: "That's what we get for putting a woman in charge of this company."

On the other hand, suppose a friend suggests to the same woman that she should dye her French poodles to match her cigarette lighter. In this case, the suggestion really concerns only her, and the impression she will make on people. In this case, she may use (b), from the "women's language." So the choice is not really free: words restricted to "women's language" suggest that concepts to which they are applied are not relevant to the real world of (male) influence and power.

One may ask whether there really are no analogous terms that are available to men—terms that denote approval of the trivial, the personal; that express approbation in terms of one's own personal emotional reaction, rather than by gauging the likely general reaction. There does in fact seem to be one such word: it is the hippie invention "groovy," which seems to have most of the connotations that separate "lovely" and "divine" from "great" and "terrific" excepting only that it does not mark the speaker as feminine or effeminate.

(5)
(a)
What a terrific steel mill!

(b)
*What a lovely steel mill! (male speaking)

(c)
What a groovy steel mill!

I think it is significant that this word was introduced by the hippies, and, when used seriously rather than sarcastically, used principally by people who have accepted the hippies' values. Principal among these is the denial of the Protestant work ethic: to a hippie, something can be worth thinking about even if it isn't influential in the power structure, or moneymaking. Hippies are separated from the activities of the real world just as women are—though in the former case it is due to a decision on their parts, while this is not uncontroversially true in the case of women. For both these groups, it is possible to express approval of things in a personal way—though one does so at the risk of losing one's credibility with members of the power structure. It is also true, according to some speakers, that upper-class British men may use the words listed in the "women's" column, as well as the specific color words and others we have categorized as specifically feminine, without raising doubts as to their masculinity among other speakers of the same dialect. (This is not true for lower-class Britons, however.) The reason may be that commitment to the work ethic need not necessarily be displayed: one may be or appear to be a gentleman of leisure, interested in various pursuits, but not involved in mundane (business or political) affairs, in such a culture, without incurring disgrace. This is rather analogous to the position of a woman in American middle-class society, so we should not be surprised if these special lexical items are usable by both groups. This fact points indeed to a more general conclusion. These words aren't, basically, "feminine"; rather, they signal "uninvolved," or "out of power." Any group in a society to which these labels are applicable may presumably use these words; they are often considered "feminine," "unmasculine," because women are the "uninvolved," "out-of-power" group par excellence.

Another group that has, ostensibly at least, taken itself out of the search for power and money is that of academic men. They are frequently viewed by other groups as analogous in some ways to women—they don't really work, they are supported in their frivolous pursuits by others, what they do doesn't really count in the real world, and so on. The suburban home finds its counterpart in the ivory tower: one is supposedly shielded from harsh realities in both. Therefore it is not too surprising that many academic men (especially those who emulate British norms) may violate many of these sacrosanct rules I have just laid down: they often use "women's language." Among themselves, this does not occasion ridicule. But to a truck driver, a professor saying, "What a lovely hat!" is undoubtedly laughable, all the more so as it reinforces his stereotype of professors as effete snobs.

When we leave the lexicon and venture into syntax, we find that syntactically too women's speech is peculiar. To my knowledge, there is no syntactic rule in English that only women may use. But there is at least one rule that a woman will use in more conversational situations than a man. (This fact indicates, of course, that the applicability of syntactic rules is governed partly by social context—the positions in society of the speaker and addressee, with respect to each other, and the impression one seeks to make on the other.) This is the rule of tag-question formation.[1]

15

A tag, in its usage as well as its syntactic shape (in English) is midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question: it is less assertive than the former, but more confident than the latter. Therefore it is usable under certain contextual situations: not

those in which a statement would be appropriate, nor those in which a yes-no question is generally used, but in situations intermediate between these.
One makes a statement when one has confidence in his knowledge and is pretty certain that his statement will be believed; one asks a question when one lacks knowledge on some point and has reason to believe that this gap can and will be remedied by an answer by the addressee. A tag question, being intermediate between these, is used when the speaker is stating a claim, but lacks full confidence in the truth of that claim. So if I say:

(6)
Is John here?
I will probably not be surprised if my respondent answers "no"; but if I say

(7)
John is here, isn't he?
instead, chances are I am already biased in favor of a positive answer, wanting only confirmation by the addressee. I still want a response from him, as I do with a yes-no question; but I have enough knowledge (or think I have) to predict that response, much as with a declarative statement. A tag question, then, might be thought of as a declarative statement without the assumption that the statement is to be believed by the addressee: one has an out, as with a question. A tag gives the addressee leeway, not forcing him to go along with the views of the speaker.
There are situations in which a tag is legitimate, in fact the only legitimate sentence form. So, for example, if I have seen something only indistinctly, and have reason to believe my addressee had a better view, I can say:

(8)
I had my glasses off. He was out at third, wasn't he?
Sometimes we find a tag question used in cases in which the speaker knows as well as the addressee what the answer must be, and doesn't need confirmation. One such situation is when the speaker is making "small talk," trying to elicit conversation from the addressee:

(9)
Sure is hot here, isn't it?
In discussing personal feelings or opinions, only the speaker normally has any way of knowing the correct answer. Strictly speaking, questioning one's own opinions is futile. Sentences like (10) are usually ridiculous.

(10)
*I have a headache, don't I?
But similar cases do, apparently, exist, in which it is the speaker's opinions, rather than perceptions, for which corroboration is sought, as in (11):

(11)
The way prices are rising is horrendous, isn't it?

While there are of course other possible interpretations of a sentence like this, one possibility is that the speaker has a particular answer in mind—"yes" or "no"—but is reluctant to state it baldly. It is my impression, though I do not have precise statistical evidence, that this sort of tag question is much more apt to be used by women than by men. If this is indeed true, why is it true? These sentence types provide a means whereby a speaker can avoid committing himself, and thereby avoid coming into conflict with the addressee. The problem is that, by so doing, a speaker may also give the impression of not being really sure of himself, of looking to the addressee for confirmation, even of having no views of his own. This last criticism is, of course, one often leveled at women. One wonders how much of it reflects a use of language that has been imposed on women from their earliest years.

Related to this special use of a syntactic rule is a widespread difference perceptible in women's intonational patterns.[2] There is a peculiar sentence intonation pattern, found in English as far as I know only among women, which has the form of a declarative answer to a question, and is used as such, but has the rising inflection typical of a yes-no question, as well as being especially hesitant. The effect is as though one were seeking confirmation, though at the same time the speaker may be the only one who has the requisite information.

(12)
(a)
When will dinner be ready?

(b)
Oh . . . around six o'clock . . . ?

It is as though (b) were saying, "Six o'clock, if that's OK with you, if you agree." (a) is put in the position of having to provide confirmation, and (b) sounds unsure. Here we find unwillingness to assert an opinion carried to an extreme. One likely consequence is that these sorts of speech patterns are taken to reflect something real about character and play a part in not taking a woman seriously or trusting her with any real responsibilities, since "she can't make up her mind" and "isn't sure of herself." And here again we see that people form judgments about other people on the basis of superficial linguistic behavior that may have nothing to do with inner character, but has been imposed upon the speaker, on pain of worse punishment than not being taken seriously.

Such features are probably part of the general fact that women's speech sounds much more "polite" than men's. One aspect of politeness is as we have just described: leaving a decision open, not imposing your mind, or views, or claims on anyone else. Thus a tag question is a kind of polite statement, in that it does not force agreement or belief on the addressee. A request may be in the same sense a polite command, in that it does not overtly require obedience, but rather suggests something be done as a favor to the speaker. An overt order (as in an imperative) expresses the (often impolite) assumption of the speaker's superior position to the addressee, carrying with it the right to enforce compliance, whereas with a request the decision on the face of it is left up to the addressee. (The same is true of suggestions: here, the implication is not that the addressee is in danger if he does not comply—merely that he will be glad if he does. Once again, the decision is up to the addressee, and a suggestion therefore is politer than an order.)

The more particles in a sentence that reinforce the notion that it is a request, rather than an order, the politer the result. The sentences of (13) illustrate these points: (a) is a direct order, (b) and (c) simple requests, and (d) and (e) compound requests.[3]

(13)
(a)
Close the door.

(b)
Please close the door.

(c)
Will you close the door?

(d)
Will you please close the door?

(e)
Won't you close the door?

Let me first explain why (e) has been classified as a compound request. (A sentence like *Won't you please close the door* would then count as a doubly compound request.) A sentence like (13)(c) is close in sense to "Are you willing to close the door?" According to the normal rules of polite conversation, to agree that you are willing is to agree to do the thing asked of you. Hence this apparent inquiry functions as a request, leaving the decision up to the willingness of the addressee. Phrasing it as a positive question makes the (implicit) assumption that a "yes" answer will be forthcoming. Sentence (13)(d) is more polite than (b) or (c) because it combines them: *please* indicating that to accede will be to do something for the speaker, and *will you,* as noted suggesting that the addressee has the final decision. If, now, the question is phrased with a negative, as in (13)(e), the speaker seems to suggest the stronger likelihood of a negative response from the addressee. Since the assumption is then that the addressee is that much freer to refuse, (13)(e) acts as a more polite request than (13)(c) or (d); (c) and (d) put the burden of refusal on the addressee, as (e) does not.

Given these facts, one can see the connection between tag questions and tag orders and other requests. In all these cases, the speaker is not committed as with a simple declarative or affirmative. And the more one compounds a request, the more characteristic it is of women's speech, the less of men's. A sentence that begins *Won't you please* (without special emphasis on *please*) seems to me at least to have a distinctly unmasculine sound. Little girls are indeed taught to talk like little ladies, in that their speech is in many ways more polite than that of boys or men, and the reason for this is that politeness involves an absence of a strong statement, and women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.

Explain Lakoff's main point regarding the contrast in language between men and women. What is your response to this point?

2.

Throughout this piece, many statements sound as if they are "begging the question" (a statement presented as factual and true, although it still "begs" for supporting evidence). Examine each of the following examples, and determine whether or not the statement needs further evidence in order to be true:

a.

"Men tend to relegate to women things that are not of concern to them, or do not involve their egos."

b.

"As children, women are encouraged to be 'little ladies.'"

c.

"For surely we listen with more attention the more strongly and forcefully someone expresses opinions."

d.

"The suburban home finds its counterpart in the ivory tower: one is supposedly shielded from harsh realities in both."

e.

"One asks a question when one lacks knowledge on some point and has reason to believe that this gap can and will be remedied by an answer by the addressee."

3.

By showing the commonality of language between women and hippies, women and British aristocrats, and women and male academics, what is Lakoff implying?

4.

Although Lakoff doesn't come out and state what she advocates for women, what do you think she might like to see happen as far as women's language is concerned?

5.

Choose just one paragraph from this piece and evaluate it in terms of word choice, tone, sentence structure, and syntax. What can you conclude regarding Lakoff's tone and interaction with the audience in this section? Would you say that this paragraph is reflective of the overall tone of this piece?

6.

What type of audience might be most receptive to this essay? Explain your answer.

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Write an essay in which you argue that instead of women becoming more assertive, society would be better served if men adopted women's patterns in language.

2.

Record several observations of the interactions of men and women in one specific setting: a college classroom, a singles' bar, a library, a supermarket, a sporting match, a restaurant, a living room. After taking careful notes, write an essay in which you draw conclusions about the way each group uses language. Do your findings support Lakoff's work, contradict her main points, or reveal something new?

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GLORIA NAYLOR

A Question of Language

In 1983 Gloria Naylor received her master's degree in Afro-American Studies from Yale University, and her first novel, The Women of Brewster Place *(1982) won the American Book Award for best fiction. Since then, she has been a visiting lecturer at a number of schools, including Princeton University, New York University, the University of Pennsylvania, Boston University, and Brandeis. Naylor has written four more novels:* Linden Hills *(1985),* Mama Day *(1988),* Bailey's Cafe *(1992), and* The Men of Brewster Place *(1998). "A Question of Language" was first published in the* New York Times *in 1986.*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
What do you think has had more influence in your life—the spoken word or the written word? Explain by using specific incidents from your past that support your answer.
2.
In your household, what topics were or are taboo as far as children are concerned? Explain.

———

Language is the subject. It is the written form with which I've managed to keep the wolf away from the door and, in diaries, to keep my sanity. In spite of this, I consider the written word inferior to the spoken, and much of the frustration experienced by novelists is the awareness that whatever we manage to capture in even the most transcendent passages falls far short of the richness of life. Dialogue achieves its power in the dynamics of a fleeting moment of sight, sound, smell, and touch.

I'm not going to enter the debate here about whether it is language that shapes reality or vice versa. That battle is doomed to be waged whenever we seek intermittent reprieve from the chicken and egg dispute. I will simply take the position that the spoken word, like the written word, amounts to a nonsensical arrangement of sounds or letters without a consensus that assigns "meaning." And building from the meanings of what we hear, we order reality. Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power.

I remember the first time I heard the word *nigger*. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or a necrophiliac, I couldn't have been more puzzled. I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a "bad" word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable question that every black parent must face—"Mommy, what does 'nigger' mean?"

And what exactly did it mean? Thinking back, I realize that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that

had migrated from the rural South after World War II and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around my maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings they owned in Harlem was a weekend mecca for my immediate family, along with countless aunts, uncles, and cousins who brought along assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bits of gossip, pick up an old quarrel or referee the ongoing checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet after a week of labor in the factories, laundries, and shipyards of New York.

5

Amid the clamor, which could reach deafening proportions—two or three conversations going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby's crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on the street—there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of the living room when it was time to get into the juicy details about "you-know-who" up on the third floor who had gone and gotten herself "p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t!" But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the others out to play. Beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for our young ears. And so among the anecdotes of the triumphs and disappointments in the various workings of their lives, the word *nigger* was used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and inflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else.

In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive:

"Did Johnny really do that?"

"I'm telling you, that nigger pulled in $6,000 of overtime last year. Said he got enough for a down payment on a house."

When used with a possessive adjective by a woman—"my nigger"—it became a term of endearment for husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their mouths it became the pure essence of manhood—a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odds into a victorious statement of being: "Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough—you don't mess with a nigger."

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In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as my family defined it: Parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all "trifling niggers." This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression—they had gone through all of that themselves—but the unforgivable sin was lack of self-respect.

A woman could never be a *nigger* in the singular, with its connotation of confirming worth. The noun *girl* was its closest equivalent in that sense, but only when used in direct address and regardless of the gender doing the addressing. *Girl* was a token of respect for a woman. The one-syllable word was drawn out to sound like three in recognition of the extra ounce of wit, nerve or daring that the woman had shown in the situation under discussion.

"G-i-r-l, stop. You mean you said that to his face?"
But if the word was used in a third-person reference or shortened so that it almost snapped out of the mouth, it always involved some element of communal disapproval. And age became an important factor in these exchanges. It was only between individuals of the same generation, or from an older person to a younger (but never the other way around), that "girl" would be considered a compliment.
I don't agree with the argument that use of the word *nigger* at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite: the people in my grandmother's living room took a word that whites used to signify "worthlessness or degradation" and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed *nigger* to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naïve enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.
15
So there must have been dozens of times that the word *nigger* was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But I didn't "hear" it until it was said by a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained.
Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
Naylor begins this piece by stating, "Language is the subject." What, then, is the major problem that this subject presents? What is Naylor's main point about this subject?
2.
When, according to Naylor, can language be powerfully effective? When can it be powerfully destructive?
3.
In your own words, what are the different connotations of the word *nigger* when Naylor heard it used among her own people, in her own household? Why wasn't she puzzled by the meaning of *nigger* at these times in her life?
4.
Why does Naylor condone black people using the word *nigger* but finds it derogatory when used by people outside of this race? What gives one group a "right" to a word, while the use of it by an outside group is considered "wrong"?
5.
At the end of this piece, when Naylor's mother takes her on her lap to explain what the white boy meant by the term *nigger,* what do you think she says? Consider writing your response in the form of a dialogue between mother and daughter.
Suggestion for Extended Thinking and Writing
Each of the words in the following list contains various levels of meaning. Choose one word from this list and interview fifteen people, asking each for his or her definition of the word. Have those you are interviewing use each word in a sentence to clarify its meaning, and feel free to ask any questions based on the meaning they've assigned to this

word. Take careful notes during each interview, and then write an essay in which you synthesize the various meanings people associate with this word.

Foreign
Dominance
Clever
Ambition
Culture
Feminist
Feminine

Polite
Duty
Politician
Glamorous
Habit
Masculine
Progress

———

ROSE DEL CASTILLO GUILBAULT

Americanization Is Tough on "Macho"

Rose del Castillo Guilbault (born in 1952 in Sonora, Mexico) has worked in both television and print media. Currently, she is editorial and public affairs director for KGO Television in San Francisco and on the board of the Latino Issues Forum of California. This essay is taken from a column she wrote for the San Francisco Chronicle.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
How would you describe, in as much detail as you can, someone who is "macho"?
2.
Freewrite about a stereotype others may have about you or a culture to which you belong.

———

What is *macho?* That depends which side of the border you come from.

Although it's not unusual for words and expressions to lose their subtlety in translation, the negative connotations of *macho* in this country are troublesome to Hispanics.

Take the newspaper descriptions of alleged mass murderer Ramon Salcido. That an insensitive, insanely jealous, hard-drinking, violent Latin male is referred to as *macho* makes Hispanics cringe.

"*Es muy macho,*" the women in my family nod approvingly, describing a man they respect. But in the United States, when women say, "He's so macho," it's with disdain.

5

The Hispanic *macho* is manly, responsible, hardworking, a man in charge, a patriarch. A man who expresses strength through silence. What the Yiddish language would call a *mensch.*

The American *macho* is a chauvinist, a brute, uncouth, selfish, loud, abrasive, capable of inflicting pain, and sexually promiscuous.

Quintessential *macho* models in this country are Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Charles Bronson. In their movies, they exude toughness, independence, masculinity. But a closer look reveals their machismo is really violence masquerading as courage, sullenness disguised as silence and irresponsibility camouflaged as independence.

If the Hispanic ideal of *macho* were translated to American screen roles, they might be Jimmy Stewart, Sean Connery and Laurence Olivier.

In Spanish, *macho* ennobles Latin males. In English it devalues them. This pattern seems consistent with the conflicts ethnic minority males experience in this country. Typically the cultural traits other societies value don't translate as desirable characteristics in America.

10

I watched my own father struggle with these cultural ambiguities. He worked on a farm for twenty years. He laid down miles of irrigation pipe, carefully plowed long, neat rows in fields, hacked away at recalcitrant weeds and drove tractors through whirlpools of dust. He stoically worked twenty-hour days during harvest season, accepting the long hours as part of agricultural work. When the boss complained or upbraided him for minor mistakes, he kept quiet, even when it was obvious the boss had erred.

He handled the most menial tasks with pride. At home he was a good provider, helped out my mother's family in Mexico without complaint, and was indulgent with me. Arguments between my mother and him generally had to do with money, or with his stubborn reluctance to share his troubles. He tried to work them out in his own silence. He didn't want to trouble my mother—a course that backfired, because the imagined is always worse than the reality.

Americans regarded my father as decidedly un-*macho.* His character was interpreted as nonassertive, his loyalty non-ambition, and his quietness, ignorance. I once overheard the boss's son blame him for plowing crooked rows in a field. My father merely smiled at the lie, knowing the boy had done it, but didn't refute it, confident his good work was well known. But the boss instead ridiculed him for being "stupid" and letting a kid get away with a lie. Seeing my embarrassment, my father dismissed the incident, saying "They're the dumb ones. Imagine, me fighting with a kid."

I tried not to look at him with American eyes because sometimes the reflection hurt. Listening to my aunts' clucks of approval, my vision focused on the qualities America overlooked. "He's such a hard worker. So serious, so responsible." My aunts would secretly compliment my mother. The unspoken comparison was that he was not like some of their husbands, who drank and womanized. My uncles represented the darker side of *macho.*

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In a patriarchal society, few challenge their roles. If men drink, it's because it's the manly thing to do. If they gamble, it's because it's how men relax. And if they fool around, well, it's because a man simply can't hold back so much man! My aunts didn't exactly meekly sit back, but they put up with these transgressions because Mexican society dictated this was their lot in life.

In the United States, I believe it was the feminist movement of the early ’70s that changed *macho*’s meaning. Perhaps my generation of Latin women was in part responsible. I recall Chicanas complaining about the chauvinistic nature of Latin men and the notion they wanted their women barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen. The generalization that Latin men embodied chauvinistic traits led to this interesting twist of semantics. Suddenly a word that represented something positive in one culture became a negative prototype in another.

The problem with the use of *macho* today is that it’s become an accepted stereotype of the Latin male. And like all stereotypes, it distorts truth.

The impact of language in our society is undeniable. And the misuse of *macho* hints at a deeper cultural misunderstanding that extends beyond mere word definitions.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
After reading this piece, in what ways does your prereading description match what the author says here?

2.
According to the author, what are the different ways in which people define and understand the term *macho?*

3.
Reflect on the male stars that are listed in paragraphs 7 and 8. What are the main differences between these two groups of men? What does each group imply about the word *macho?*

4.
What is the author’s main point about this term? In what ways can her point be applied to other areas of language?

5.
Would you say that America today is—or is not—still a patriarchal society? Depending on your response, how does this fit into how *macho* is defined today?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Analyze another word or phrase that is often used to characterize a certain group, explaining its connotations both within and outside of the group itself.

2.
Write about how you were affected by a name that someone called you, whether it be an affectionate nickname or a derogatory remark about you. Under what circumstances did you hear this word? What was your reaction at the time? Looking back on it, what is your understanding now?

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CATHY N. DAVIDSON

Laughing in English

Cathy Davidson (born in 1949 in Chicago) taught English for a decade at Elmhurst College, St. Bonaventure University, and Michigan State University–East Lansing. In 1982 she went to Japan as a visiting professor and returned three more times during the

next decade. Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji: On Finding Myself in Japan *(1993) is about her experiences during those years in Japan. She currently teaches at Duke University and is general editor of the* Oxford University Press Early American Women Writers *series, past president of the American Studies Association, and coeditor of* American Literature.

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
What do you think would be the best way to learn another language?
2.
Write about the best teacher you ever had and how this person approached teaching.

———

There was only one course in which Professor Sano, my department head, thought I might have trouble. I was assigned to teach Oral English for Non-English Majors, the B class, and Professor Sano made a point of warning me that these students would be very different from my English majors. Few, if any, would have had any contact with English except through the traditional Japanese educational system. Intelligent young women, they still would have learned English the way my young friend Kenji had—lots of "who" and "whom," virtually nothing resembling practical conversational English. Most never would have heard a native speaker of English, except in Hollywood movies. The "English" taught in their Japanese schoolrooms was actually *katakana,* the Japanese syllabary for foreign words, a way of transliterating all foreign sounds into the forty-six basic Japanese sound patterns: *r* becomes *l, v* becomes *b,* each consonant (except *n*) must be followed by a vowel. *Rocket* is *rokketo* (pronounced "locketo"), *ventilator* is *benchireta,* and, the classic example, *blacklist* is the six-syllable *burakku-risuto.*

Perhaps because I was struggling so hard to learn even the most rudimentary Japanese, I was eager to teach these students English. My dislike of the traditional Japanese way of teaching English also made me feel almost a missionary zeal upon entering my Oral English course at KWU. I'd never taken any courses in the field of TOESL, Teaching of English as a Second Language, but I certainly knew from colleagues that the way English is taught in the Japanese schools is exactly the *wrong* way to encourage people to really communicate in a new language.

I tried a different tack, beginning with the conscious demolition of *sensei* ["teacher"]. Unlike many language teachers who refuse to speak anything but the language being taught, I delighted in speaking to the students in my execrable Japanese. Partly this was selfish; I practiced more Japanese in beginner's Oral English class than anywhere else. But it was also pedagogical. I figured if they realized that *sensei* wasn't ashamed to make mistakes, they certainly didn't have a right to be—a way of using the Japanese proclivity for authoritarianism and punctiliousness against itself. To show what I expected on the first formal presentation, a requirement in all of the Oral English sections, I initially prepared the same assignments—in Japanese. At first I thought I'd intentionally throw in a few mistakes, but quickly realized my Japanese was quite bad enough on its own without my having to invent errors.

I came up with a whopper. It is the kind of mistake often made by native English-speakers, who have a hard time differentiating between repeated consonants. Mine, I found out later, was already a famous mistake; it happened when an American introduced

the oldest and most revered woman in the Japanese parliament on national television. The American meant to say that this legislator was not only "very distinguished" but also "very feminine" (*onna-rashii*). She ended up saying the legislator was both distinguished and *onara shi* (which means, roughly, to cut a fart).

"That double *n* is hard for foreigners," I said when one of my students started to giggle. "We can't really hear the difference between *onna ra* and *onara.*"

The students were now all laughing, but in polite Japanese-girl fashion, a hand covering the mouth.

"Wait!" I shouted in my sternest voice. "This is Oral English class!"

The laughter stopped. They looked ashamed.

"No, no. In this class, you must *laugh* in English. Think about it. You've all seen American movies. How do you laugh in English?"

I could see a gleam in Miss Shimura's eye, and I called on her: "Would an American woman ever put her hand over her mouth when she laughed, Miss Shimura?"

"No, *sensei*—I mean, teacher."

"Show me. Laugh like an American movie star."

Miss Shimura kept her hands plastered at her side. She threw back her head. She opened her mouth as far as it would go. She made a deep, staccato sound at the back of her throat. *Hanh. Hanh. Hanh.*

We all laughed hysterically.

"Hands down!" I shouted again. "This is Oral English!"

They put their hands at their sides and imitated Miss Shimura's American head-back, open mouth plosive laugh.

"What about the body?" I asked.

I parodied a Japanese laugh, pulling my arms in to my sides, bowing my head and shoulders forward, putting a hand coyly to my mouth.

Again they laughed. This time it was American-style.

"Oral English is about bodies too, not just words," I smiled.

Miss Kato raised her hand.

"Hai?" (Yes?)

"Americans also laugh like this." She put her head back, opened her mouth, and rocked her upper body from side to side, her shoulders heaving and dodging, like Santa Claus.

There were gleeful shouts of "Yes! Yes!" and again a roomful of American-style laughter. It would start to die down, then someone would catch her friend doing the funny American laugh, and she'd break into hysterics again, the hand going to her mouth, me pointing, her correcting herself with the Santa Claus laughter. I continued to laugh Japanese-style, which made them laugh even louder, bouncier. We were off and running, laughing in each other's languages.

I'm convinced shame kills language learning faster than anything, even more so in Japan, where shame lurks so close to the surface of every social interaction. The laughing

routine was childish exercise, but then all language learning is childish, inherently infantilizing, a giving up and a giving in, a loss of control. Learning a language means returning to a state of near-idiocy.

And honesty. Language learning is so consuming, there's no energy left over for invention. Ask someone to tell you their height and weight in a beginning foreign language class, and you'll likely get a much more reliable answer than the one on her driver's license.

This quickly became the case in beginners' Oral English, where I learned aspects of Japanese life that the sophisticated, cosmopolitan students in the advanced classes at KWU would not have revealed, under normal circumstances, to a *gaijin.* My beginners talked in English the way they might talk in Japanese, among friends. They didn't know enough about Western culture to anticipate what we might consider strange or exotic, controversial or even reprehensible. Consequently, they spoke without excessive censoring, something I never experienced later on, when I taught an Advanced Oral English class.

My advanced students often dodged my questions with polite evasions. "The Japanese myth of racial homogeneity is as erroneous as the American myth of the melting pot," offered a student who has spent several years in the States. I had thought my opening question, "What is racism?" would provoke a heated debate that would lead us around, by the end of the class period, to addressing each country's particular brand of racism. Typically, Japanese are happy to discuss American racism but blind to the equivalent prejudice in their own country. The student's pointed answer effectively short-circuited the lesson I had hoped to make that day by anticipating what my own point of view might be. The rest of the class period was filled with platitudes and bored and knowing nods. The students in the advanced class knew exactly where to fudge.

After summer break, I require students in beginning Oral English for Non-Majors to give a brief presentation on what they've done over the vacation. It's designed to be simple, to ease them back into the term. They've been in Oral English since April, the beginning of the Japanese school year. They have had six weeks off for the summer, and now must return to classes for three more weeks before the grueling end-of-semester exams in late September.

I call on the first student.

"I was constipated most of the way to Nikko," a lovely young woman in a Kenzo flower-print jumper begins her talk.

I set my face like a Japanese mask, careful to express no emotion, and steal glances around the room. No one seems even remotely surprised at this beginning except me, and I know that it is absolutely mandatory that I act as if this is the most ordinary opening in the world.

"I was with the tennis club, and my *sensei* made sure I ate *konnyaku* for my constipation."

At this point she gets flustered. She is obviously embarrassed.

"It's okay," I jumped in hastily, searching for my most soothing and encouraging Japanese. "You're doing very well. Please go on."

"It's just," she stammers, also in Japanese, "I don't know the English for *konnyaku.* Do you know?"
I assure her that there's no American equivalent. *Konnyaku* is a glutinous substance, made from the root of a plant that seems to grow only in Japan. In America, I tell her, most people eat bran to cure constipation or we take over-the-counter medicines such as Ex-Lax.
"Ecks Racks," she repeats solemnly, then breaks into giggles (American-style). So does everyone.
The word sounds so funny. It becomes the class joke for the next few weeks. If anyone forgets a word in English, someone else inevitably whispers to a friend, loud enough for the rest of us to hear, "Ecks Racks!"

Three or four other speeches that morning give blow-by-blow reports of near gastro-intestinal crises and how they were averted, usually by the wise intervention of some *sensei.*

What surprises me most about the morning is how embarrassed *I* am, although I think I've concealed it pretty well. These students would wilt with shame if they had any inkling that this is not something we would talk about in America, and I find myself in a quandary. They trust me to tell them about Western culture, but I know that if I tell them it's not considered polite to talk about one's bowel movements in Western society, it will destroy the easy camaraderie I've worked so hard to foster this year. But if I don't tell them, I'm violating a trust.
I decide to resolve this by keeping a list of things they bring up that wouldn't be acceptable in the West. All semester I've been working to correct certain Japanese misconceptions and stereotypes, especially their idea that English is a completely logical and direct language, and that Americans always say exactly what they mean, regardless of social status or power relationships. Often my students say things that sound very rude because they've been taught that English lacks the politeness levels of Japanese. These are topics we discuss all the time, so it will work just fine to devote the last week of the semester to lecturing, in my comical Japanese, about misconceptions and cultural differences that I've discovered during my year in Japan. I can tell them about how surprised I was the first time I used a public restroom that turned out to be coed or about bathing Japanese-style with a group of women I barely knew or having a male colleague slip around a corner on the way home from a party. I started to follow, then realized he was taking a quick pee. I know I can act out my own surprise, making my Westerner's prudishness about bodily functions seem funny but also relevant. This is as close as I can come to having my pedagogical cake and eating it too.
From my beginning non-English majors in Oral English, I learn a great deal about Japan, including the rituals and superstitions that have not been effaced by the rampant capitalism of modern, urban Japanese life. They tell of phone numbers one can call for horoscopes, fortunes, curses, cures. Rituals for marriages, pregnancies, births, divorces. A kind of Japanese voodoo that takes place in the forest on a certain kind of night. Number symbolism. Lucky and unlucky days, lucky and unlucky years, lucky and unlucky directions ("Never sleep with your head to the North, the way the dead are buried"). Blood-type match-making. Tengu, the wicked long-nosed trickster goblin. Kappa, the

amphibious river imp. Tanuki, the raccoonlike creature with the money bag and enormous testicles, a symbol of plenty. Dragons, supernatural foxes, thunder gods, long-life noodles, boiled eels for stamina on hot summer days, chewy *mochi* rice cakes for strength and endurance on the New Year, the ashes of a burnt *imori* (salamander) served to someone you want to fall in love with you. They talk seriously about prejudice and injustice toward the *burakumin* (Japan's untouchable caste), the Ainu (the indigenous people, now almost extinct), and Koreans (who must take Japanese names before being allowed citizenship or who are denied citizenship even two or three generations after their family immigrated to Japan and who must carry alien registration papers with their thumbprint, like foreigners). They talk of burial customs, going to the crematorium with the long chopsticks to pick out the vertebra that goes into the urn in the family altar at home.

When they talk of *omiai* and arranged marriage, one woman starts to cry. Her friends comfort her. It's the only time I've ever seen someone express personal sorrow in a Japanese classroom. Several students insist that they will never marry an eldest son, because they do not want to be responsible for taking care of his aged parents. Two say they will never have children because they do not want their children to hate them the way they hated their mothers all through school. One young woman says if she marries, it will be to a foreigner because she knows from the movies that foreign husbands help around the house. Another protests that she wouldn't want to marry a *gaijin,* because she doesn't want a *gokiburi teishu* (a cockroach husband), some man scurrying around underfoot in her kitchen. Funny or serious, they talk with candor. And, mostly, they talk. In English.

45

"There was so much laughing going on in the next room this semester, I checked the schedule," sniffs one of the part-time teachers. "It's your Oral English class. My students are getting jealous. All we hear from your room is laughter. Is anyone learning anything at all in there?"

I've had conversations before with this woman, none of them pleasant. She teaches at one of the more conventional Japanese universities and comes to Kansai Women's University only one day a week. I've heard her say more than once that she's been here so long that now "she's more Japanese than the Japanese."

We're sitting and talking together over our *bento* boxes, eating our lunch in the faculty room. I tell her, proudly, that my students are learning to speak English very well, and, maybe more importantly, they are learning to speak freely and confidently.

"And you think that's a good thing?" she asks rhetorically. "They graduate and get to be OLs [office ladies] for a while. Then they're married off to some jerk of a *sarariiman.* But it's okay, you've taught them how to 'speak freely.'"

I am not liking this woman. I am not liking the insinuation in her voice or the smirk on her face. But I can't ignore her comment. I've thought about it myself, many times, especially on the train to and from the university, as I watch the faces of older Japanese women and think about where and how my students will fit in.

50

Most of these KWU students will graduate and they will, indeed, work as OLs for a few years before marriage, smiling politely and serving tea for busy male executives in

Japanese firms. The closest they will come to real "business" might be working the Xerox machine or the paper shredder. Since only about a quarter of the population at four-year colleges in Japan is female (compared to well over half in the United States), there are lots of women available to work after the completion of secondary schools. OLs are perpetually replenishable, an eternally young group of women. Most quit—or are fired—once they are married or after they become pregnant.

The KWU women are the *crème de la crème* of Japanese female students. Some might advance further in corporate life than the OLs. A few might even achieve their dreams. One of my students wants to be a composer. Another wants to be an international news correspondent. Still others want to be doctors, lawyers. The odds are stacked against them, but the very fact that they are here shows that they are good at overcoming odds.

"My dream is be a housewife and a mother," one of my Oral English students said in class one day. "But when I am a mother, I will give my children a *choice* of whether or not they want to go to *juku.* I will help to improve Japanese society by allowing my children to be free."

To be free. It's a phrase I've heard a lot this year, and I suspect some of this is just student grandstanding to please the *gaijin* teacher. Some of it is probably wishful thinking. Many of these smart, polished young women will become thoroughly conventional upper-middle-class housewives and mothers. It's hard for me to understand the point of all their study, all their years of deprivation, all those hours in *juku* cramming for "examination hell," just so one day they, too, can become "education moms," sending their young sons and daughters off under the falling cherry blossoms, the whole cycle beginning again with a new generation.

"We are told Japanese workers are better than American," one of my students says in an assignment about the work ethic. "We are told this so that we keep working—hard, harder, and hardest. Even as children, we're told to work hard. We Japanese work ourselves to death."

She is as startled as the rest of us by the burning quality of her speech. Her accent isn't perfect and her vocabulary has its limits but her eloquence is unmistakable. We have heard her. She returns to her seat, flushed with attention.

When I take the train home to my apartment in Nigawa that afternoon, I can't help noticing that the only men on the train are elderly, retired. The train is filled with mothers coming home from shopping and with schoolchildren in uniform, finished with one more day of regular school and now on their way to *juku.*

I find myself asking the big question, the dangerous question. What am I really doing here? My students are having fun, they're learning English, but what is my role here? I have learned a lot teaching at Kansai Women's University, and I know my students have learned things too. I don't think it's romanticizing to say we've touched one another, shown each other glimpses of one another's culture. Is that enough?

I can tell sometimes, as I look out over the classroom, that something like love is happening in there. It scares me. My students are convinced I look like a Western movie star. If I wear my shoulder-length hair up in a twist on a hot day, I can predict that at least a dozen of them will have their hair in a twist the next week. If I roll my jacket sleeves, they will roll theirs. My Oral English class has fun imitating my American slang,

especially my habit of saying "Oh wow!" They have fun telling me their culture's secrets. They have fun making jokes and laughing and speaking English, hair in a twist, jacket sleeves rolled.

Maybe that's my function. Not very consequential but perhaps necessary. "Visiting Foreign Teacher" is the official title on my visa. The students call me "*sensei*," but I'm not like other *sensei* in the Japanese scheme of things. I am exotic and I am temporary. My embittered colleague might be right. In the sum total of their existence, it doesn't matter greatly that their English has improved. At my most cynical, I think of myself as a diversion, a respite from frenetic Japanese life, the pedagogical equivalent of the *sarariiman's* whiskey.

But I don't think you can be a teacher unless you believe in the possibility of change. When I'm feeling optimistic, I like to think I give my Japanese students the same thing I try to give my American students back home: a space in which to speak and be heard.

60

Sometimes I look at middle-aged women in Japan and I'm filled with awe. Often they *look* middle-aged—not engaged in the frantic and self-defeating American quest to look forever young—and often they look happy. Their children grown, many become adventurous. For some, it's ballroom dancing or traditional Japanese *koto*, hobbies given up during the busy child-rearing years. For others, it's running for local government or working for school reform or in the peace or environmental movements. KWU recently started accepting "returning women"—older women, including mothers whose children are grown—into its graduate program, and the success rate, both in school and for subsequent employment, has been impressive.

That's what I think about when I teach the brilliant young women of Kansai Women's University. I think about their future, and hope that someday, soon or late, they will stop and hear the sound of their voices and remember their young fire.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
If the author was going to write a piece about the type of person she is, what would she say?

2.
This piece has many memorable scenes that show the author's struggles and rewards in teaching. Which one affected you the most? Explain.

3.
Compare the two teachers in this piece and their attitudes toward teaching. Which one do you think would be most effective in getting their students to learn?

4.
Looking at the two teachers again, what is at the heart of their philosophical conflict as far as teaching goes?

5.
Davidson writes that anyone who wants to be a teacher has to "believe in the possibility of change" (paragraph 59). What does she mean by this quote? In addition, what else does someone who wants to be a teacher need to believe in? Explain.

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Write about a teacher who changed you in some way. In order to capture your audience of readers, aim to show scenes that will make this teacher and the classroom come alive through details, dialogue, and description.
2.
Imagine you have to explain an American custom to a group of students who are not from America. Write a piece in which you explain to them this custom in such a way that they, too, will understand it.
3.
Research one Japanese ritual, custom, or belief, and compare and contrast it to an American ritual.

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AMY TAN
Mother Tongue
In this essay about the different Englishes in her life, novelist Amy Tan writes, "Language is the tool of my trade." Even before Tan began writing fiction, language was the tool of other trades she tried. After earning a master's degree in linguistics at San Jose State University, she worked as a language specialist with developmentally disabled children and then, at the age of thirty, changed careers to become a freelance technical writer. She started writing fiction in the mid-eighties as therapy and by 1989 had published her first novel, The Joy Luck Club. *This selection originally appeared in* The Threepenny Review *(1990) and was selected by Joyce Carol Oates for* The Best American Essays 1991.
Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
In what area do you think you are strongest: math and sciences or language and reading? Explain.
2.
With what groups of people do you feel most comfortable speaking? With what groups do you not feel so at ease? Explain.

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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.

5

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. I 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.

10

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.

15

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, IQ 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.

20

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."

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
What are the most significant lessons found in this piece about language and writing?

2.
What, ultimately, would Tan say the primary function of language is? Who would she say matters most: the speaker or the audience? Explain.

3.
Even if language is not perfectly correct, Tan claims, one can understand if one listens closely enough. Rewrite paragraph 8 so that it is "correct" English. What has been gained in your version? What has been lost?

4.
How would you describe the relationship between the mother and the daughter in this piece? Offer examples as your support.

5.
What are the differences between learning math and learning a language? Why does Tan include her experiences with math here?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.

Become aware of your own language habits and patterns by analyzing the way your language differs, depending on the audience you have.
2.
Write a summary of this piece for your peers. Then write one for a group of fifth graders. Analyze the differences in the language you used: the word choices, the sentence structures, the general tone.
3.
Write an essay that explains how a misunderstanding occurred in your own life because of a problem with communication.

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LUCY HONIG
English as a Second Language
Lucy Honig (born in 1948) has been a farmer in the Maine woods, taught English as a second language to immigrants in Brooklyn, and directed a county human rights commission in upstate New York. Since 1995 she has taught in the graduate program in International Health at Boston University's School of Public Health. She has also written a novel, Picking Up *(1986), and numerous short stories, some of which have appeared in O. Henry Prize story collections and in* Best American Short Stories. *In 1999 nine of her stories, including the one here, were published as* The Truly Needy and Other Stories.
Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
Write about how it might feel if you were a parent and your children knew more of the native language than you did.
2.
Write about all the possible sacrifices your family and ancestors might have made so that you could be living in this country, receiving an education.

———

Inside room 824, Maria parked the vacuum cleaner, fastened all the locks and the safety chain and kicked off her shoes. Carefully she lay a stack of fluffy towels on the bathroom vanity. She turned the air conditioning up high and the lights down low. Then she hoisted up the skirt of her uniform and settled all the way back on the king-sized bed with her legs straight out in front of her. Her feet and ankles were swollen. She wriggled her toes. She threw her arms out in each direction and still her hands did not come near the edges of the bed. From here she could see, out the picture window, the puffs of green treetops in Central Park, the tiny people circling along the paths below. She tore open a small foil bag of cocktail peanuts and ate them very slowly, turning each one over separately with her tongue until the salt dissolved. She snapped on the TV with the remote control and flipped channels.
The big mouth game show host was kissing and hugging a woman playing on the left-hand team. Her husband and children were right there with her, and *still* he encircled her with his arms. Then he sidled up to the daughter, a girl younger than her own Giuliette, and *hugged* her and kept *holding* her, asking questions. None of his business, if this girl had a boyfriend back in Saginaw!

“Mama, you just don’t understand.” That’s what Jorge always said when she watched TV at home. He and his teenaged friends would sit around in their torn bluejeans dropping potato chips between the cushions of her couch and laughing, writhing with laughter while she sat like a stone.
Now the team on the right were hugging each other, squealing, jumping up and down. They’d just won a whole new kitchen—refrigerator, dishwasher, clothes washer, microwave, *everything!* Maria could win a whole new kitchen too, someday. You just spun a wheel, picked some words. She could do that.
5
She saw herself on TV with Carmen and Giuliette and Jorge. Her handsome children were so quick to press the buzzers the other team never had a chance to answer first. And they got every single answer right. Her children shrieked and clapped and jumped up and down each time the board lit up. They kissed and hugged that man whenever they won a prize. That man put his hands on her beautiful young daughters. That man pinched and kissed *her,* an old woman, in front of the whole world! Imagine seeing *this* back home!
Maria frowned, chewing on the foil wrapper. There was nobody left at home in Guatemala, nobody to care if a strange man squeezed her wrinkled flesh on the TV.
“Forget it, Mama. They don’t let poor people on these programs,” Jorge said one day.
“But poor people need the money, they can win it here!”
Jorge sighed impatiently. “They don’t give it away because you *need* it!”
It was true, she had never seen a woman with her kids say on a show: My husband’s dead. Jorge knew. They made sure before they invited you that you were the right kind of people and you said the right things. Where would she put a new kitchen in her cramped apartment anyway? No hookups for a washer, no space for a two-door refrigerator . . .
10
She slid sideways off the bed, carefully smoothed out the quilted spread, and squeezed her feet into her shoes. Back out in the hall she counted the bath towels in her cart to see if there were enough for the next wing. Then she wheeled the cart down the long corridor, silent on the deep blue rug.

Maria pulled the new pink dress on over her head, eased her arms into the sleeves, then let the skirt slide into place. In the mirror she saw a small dark protrusion from a large pink flower. She struggled to zip up in back, then she fixed the neck, attaching the white collar she had crocheted. She pinned the rhinestone brooch on next. Shaking the pantyhose out of the package, she remembered the phrase: the cow before the horse, wasn’t that it? She should have put these on first. Well, so what. She rolled down the left leg of the nylons, stuck her big toe in, and drew the sheer fabric around her foot, unrolling it up past her knee. Then she did the right foot, careful not to catch the hose on the small flap of scar.

The right foot bled badly when she ran over the broken glass, over what had been the only window of the house. It had shattered from gunshots across the dirt yard. The chickens dashed around frantically, squawking, trying to fly, spraying brown feathers into the air. When she had seen Pedro’s head turn to blood and the two oldest boys dragged away, she swallowed every word, every cry, and ran with the two girls. The fragments of glass stayed in her foot for all the days of hiding. They ran and ran and ran and somehow

Jorge caught up and they were found by their own side and smuggled out. And still she was silent, until the nurse at the border went after the glass and drained the mess inside her foot. Then she had sobbed and screamed, "Aaiiiee!"

"Mama, stop thinking and get ready," said Carmen.
"It is too short, your skirt," Maria said in Spanish. "What will they say?"
15
Carmen laughed. "It's what they all wear, except for you old ladies."
"Not to work! Not to school!"
"Yes, to work, to school! And Mama, you are going for an award for your English, for all you've learned, so please speak English!"
Maria squeezed into the pink high heels and held each foot out, one by one, so she could admire the beautiful slim arch of her own instep, like the feet of the American ladies on Fifth Avenue. Carmen laughed when she saw her mother take the first faltering steps, and Maria laughed too. How much she had already practiced in secret, and still it was so hard! She teetered on them back and forth from the kitchen to the bedroom, trying to feel steady, until Carmen finally sighed and said, "Mama, quick now or you'll be late!"

She didn't know if it was a good omen or a bad one, the two Indian women on the subway. They could have been sitting on the dusty ground at the market in San ——, selling corn or clay pots, with the bright-colored striped shawls and full skirts, the black hair pulled into two braids down each back, the deeply furrowed square faces set in those impassive expressions, seeing everything, seeing nothing. They were exactly as they must have been back home, but she was seeing them *here*, on the downtown IRT from the Bronx, surrounded by businessmen in suits, kids with big radio boxes, girls in skin-tight jeans and dark purple lipstick. Above them, advertisements for family planning and TWA. They were like stone-age men sitting on the train in loincloths made from animal skins, so out of place, out of time. Yet timeless, Maria thought, they are timeless guardian spirits, here to accompany me to my honors. Did anyone else see them? As strange as they were, nobody looked. Maria's heart pounded faster. The boys with the radios were standing right over them and never saw them. They were invisible to everyone but her: Maria was utterly convinced of it. The spirit world had come back to life, here on the number 4 train! It was a miracle!
20
"Mama, look, you see the grandmothers?" said Carmen.
"Of course I see them," Maria replied, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice. So Carmen saw them too. They were not invisible. Carmen rolled her eyes and smirked derisively as she nodded in their direction, but before she could put her derision into words, Maria became stern. "Have respect," she said. "They are the same as your father's people." Carmen's face sobered at once.

She panicked when they got to the big school by the river. "Like the United Nations," she said, seeing so much glass and brick, an endless esplanade of concrete.
"It's only a college, Mama. People learn English here, too. And more, like nursing, electronics. This is where Anna's brother came for computers."

"Las Naciones Unidas," Maria repeated, and when the guard stopped them to ask where they were going, she answered in Spanish: to the literacy award ceremony.

"*English,* Mama!" whispered Carmen.

But the guard also spoke in Spanish: take the escalator to the third floor.

"See, he knows," Maria retorted.

"That's not the point," murmured Carmen, taking her mother by the hand.

Every inch of the enormous room was packed with people. She clung to Carmen and stood by the door paralyzed until Cheryl, her teacher, pushed her way to them and greeted Maria with a kiss. Then she led Maria back through the press of people to the small group of award winners from other programs. Maria smiled shakily and nodded hello.

"They're all here now!" Cheryl called out. A photographer rushed over and began to move the students closer together for a picture.

"Hey, Bernie, wait for the Mayor!" someone shouted to him. He spun around, called out some words Maria did not understand, and without even turning back to them, he disappeared. But they stayed there, huddled close, not knowing if they could move. The Chinese man kept smiling, the tall black man stayed slightly crouched, the Vietnamese woman squinted, confused, her glasses still hidden in her fist. Maria saw all the cameras along the sides of the crowd, and the lights, and the people from television with video machines, and more lights. Her stomach began to jump up and down. Would she be on television, in the newspapers? Still smiling, holding his pose, the Chinese man next to her asked, "Are you nervous?"

"Oh yes," she said. She tried to remember the expression Cheryl had taught them. "I have worms in my stomach," she said.

He was a much bigger man than she had imagined from seeing him on TV. His face was bright red as they ushered him into the room and quickly through the crowd, just as it was his turn to take the podium. He said hello to the other speakers and called them by their first names. The crowd drew closer to the little stage, the people standing farthest in the back pushed in. Maria tried hard to listen to the Mayor's words. "Great occasion . . . pride of our city . . . ever since I created the program . . . people who have worked so hard . . . overcoming hardship . . . come so far." Was that them? Was he talking about them already? Why were the people out there all starting to laugh? She strained to understand, but still caught only fragments of his words. "My mother used to say . . . and I said, Look, Mama . . ." He was talking about *his* mother now; he called her Mama, just like Maria's kids called *her*. But everyone laughed so hard. At his mother? She forced herself to smile; up front, near the podium, everyone could see her. She should seem to pay attention and understand. Looking out into the crowd she felt dizzy. She tried to find Carmen among all the pretty young women with big eyes and dark hair. There she was! Carmen's eyes met Maria's; Carmen waved. Maria beamed out at her. For a moment she felt like she belonged there, in this crowd. Everyone was smiling, everyone was so happy while the Mayor of New York stood at the podium telling jokes. How happy Maria felt too!

“Maria Perez grew up in the countryside of Guatemala, the oldest daughter in a family of 19 children,” read the Mayor as Maria stood quaking by his side. She noticed he made a slight wheezing noise when he breathed between words. She saw the hairs in his nostrils, black and white and wiry. He paused. “Nineteen children!” he exclaimed, looking at the audience. A small gasp was passed along through the crowd. Then the Mayor looked back at the sheet of paper before him. “Maria never had a chance to learn to read and write, and she was already the mother of five children of her own when she fled Guatemala in 1980 and made her way to New York for a new start.”
35
It was her own story, but Maria had a hard time following. She had to stand next to him while he read it, and her feet had started to hurt, crammed into the new shoes. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.
“At the age of 45, while working as a chambermaid and sending her children through school, Maria herself started school for the first time. In night courses she learned to read and write in her native Spanish. Later, as she was pursuing her G.E.D. in Spanish, she began studying English as a Second Language. This meant Maria was going to school five nights a week! Still she worked as many as 60 hours cleaning rooms at the Plaza Hotel.
“Maria’s ESL teacher, Cheryl Sands, says—and I quote—‘Maria works harder than any student I have ever had. She is an inspiration to her classmates. Not only has she learned to read and write in her new language, but she initiated an oral history project in which she taped and transcribed interviews with other students, who have told their stories from around the world.’ Maria was also one of the first in New York to apply for amnesty under the 1986 Immigration Act. Meanwhile, she has passed her enthusiasm for education to her children: her son is now a junior in high school, her youngest daughter attends the State University, and her oldest daughter, who we are proud to have with us today, is in her second year of law school on a scholarship.”

Two older sons were dragged through the dirt, chickens squawking in mad confusion, feathers flying. She heard more gunshots in the distance, screams, chickens squawking. She heard, she ran. Maria looked down at her bleeding feet. Wedged tightly into the pink high heels, they throbbed.

The Mayor turned toward her. “Maria, I think it’s wonderful that you have taken the trouble to preserve the folklore of students from so many countries.” He paused. Was she supposed to say something? Her heart stopped beating. What was folklore? What was preserved? She smiled up at him, hoping that was all she needed to do.
40
“Maria, tell us now, if you can, what was one of the stories you collected in your project?”
This was definitely a question, meant to be answered. Maria tried to smile again. She strained on tiptoes to reach the microphone, pinching her toes even more tightly in her shoes. “Okay,” she said, setting off a high-pitched ringing from the microphone.
The Mayor said, “Stand back,” and tugged at her collar. She quickly stepped away from the microphone.

“Okay,” she said again, and this time there was no shrill sound. “One of my stories, from Guatemala. You want to hear?”
The Mayor put his arm around her shoulder and squeezed hard. Her first impulse was to wriggle away, but he held tight. “Isn’t she wonderful?” he asked the audience. There was a low ripple of applause. “Yes, we want to hear!”
45
She turned and looked up at his face. Perspiration was shining on his forehead and she could see by the bright red bulge of his neck that his collar was too tight. “In my village in Guatemala,” she began, “the mayor did not go along—get along—with the government so good.”
“Hey, Maria,” said the Mayor, “I know exactly how he felt!” The people in the audience laughed. Maria waited until they were quiet again.
“One day our mayor met with the people in the village. Like you meet people here. A big crowd in the square.”
“The people liked him, your mayor?”
“Oh, yes,” said Maria. “Very much. He was very good. He tried for more roads, more doctors, new farms. He cared very much about his people.”
50
The Mayor shook his head up and down. “Of course,” he said, and again the audience laughed.
Maria said, “The next day after the meeting, the meeting in the square with all the people, soldiers come and shoot him dead.”
For a second there was total silence. Maria realized she had not used the past tense and felt a deep, horrible stab of shame for herself, shame for her teacher. She was a disgrace! But she did not have more than a second of this horror before the whole audience began to laugh. What was happening? They couldn’t be laughing at her bad verbs? They couldn’t be laughing at her dead mayor! They laughed louder and louder and suddenly flashbulbs were going off around her, the TV cameras swung in close, too close, and the Mayor was grabbing her by the shoulders again, holding her tight, posing for one camera after another as the audience burst into wild applause. But she hadn’t even finished! Why were they laughing?
“What timing, huh?” said the Mayor over the uproar. “What d’ya think, the Republicans put her here, or maybe the Board of Estimate?” Everyone laughed even louder and he still clung to her and cameras still moved in close, lights kept going off in her face and she could see nothing but the sharp white poof! of light over and over again. She looked for Carmen and Cheryl, but the white poof! poof! poof! blinded her. She closed her eyes and listened to the uproar, now beginning to subside, and in her mind’s eye saw chickens trying to fly, chickens fluttering around the yard littered with broken glass.
He squeezed her shoulders again and leaned into the microphone. “There are ways to get rid of mayors, and ways to get rid of mayors, huh Maria?”
55
The surge of laughter rose once more, reached a crescendo, and then began to subside again. “But wait,” said the Mayor. The cameramen stepped back a bit, poising themselves for something new.
“I want to know just one more thing, Maria,” said the Mayor, turning to face her directly again. The crowd quieted. He waited a few seconds more, then asked his question. “It

says here 19 children. What was it like growing up in a house with 19 children? How many *bathrooms* did you have?"
Her stomach dropped and twisted as the mayor put his hand firmly on the back of her neck and pushed her toward the microphone again. It was absolutely quiet now in the huge room. Everyone was waiting for her to speak. She cleared her throat and made the microphone do the shrill hum. Startled, she jumped back. Then there was silence. She took a big, trembling breath.
"We had no bathrooms there, Mister Mayor," she said. "Only the outdoors."
The clapping started immediately, then the flashbulbs burning up in her face. The Mayor turned to her, put a hand on each of her shoulders, bent lower and kissed her! Kissed her on the cheek!
60
"Isn't she terrific?" he asked the audience, his hand on the back of her neck again, drawing her closer to him. The audience clapped louder, faster. "Isn't she just the greatest?"
She tried to smile and open her eyes, but the lights were still going off—poof! poof!—and the noise was deafening.

"Mama, look, your eyes were closed *there*, too," chided Jorge, sitting on the floor in front of the television set.
Maria had watched the camera move from the announcer at the studio desk to her own stout form in bright pink, standing by the Mayor.
"In my village in Guatemala," she heard herself say, and the camera showed her wrinkled face close up, eyes open now but looking nowhere. Then the mayor's face filled the screen, his forehead glistening, and then suddenly all the people in the audience, looking ahead, enrapt, took his place. Then there was her wrinkled face again, talking without a smile. ". . . soldiers come and shoot him dead." Maria winced, hearing the wrong tense of her verbs. The camera shifted from her face to the Mayor. In the brief moment of shamed silence after she'd uttered those words, the Mayor drew his finger like a knife across his throat. And the audience began to laugh.
65
"Turn it off!" she yelled to Jorge. "Off! This minute!"

Late that night she sat alone in the unlighted room, soaking her feet in Epsom salts. The glow of the television threw shadows across the wall, but the sound was off. The man called Johnny was on the screen, talking. The people in the audience and the men in the band and the movie stars sitting on the couch all had their mouths wide open in what she knew were screams of laughter while Johnny wagged his tongue. Maria heard nothing except brakes squealing below on the street and the lonely clanging of garbage cans in the alley.
She thought about her English class and remembered the pretty woman, Ling, who often fell asleep in the middle of a lesson. The other Chinese students all teased her. Everyone knew that she sewed coats in a sweatshop all day. After the night class she took the subway to the Staten Island Ferry, and after the ferry crossing she had to take a bus home. Her parents were old and sick and she did all their cooking and cleaning late at night. She struggled to keep awake in class; it seemed to take all her energy simply to smile and

listen. She said very little and the teacher never forced her, but she fell further and further behind. They called her the Quiet One.
One day just before the course came to an end the Quiet One asked to speak. There was no reason, no provocation—they'd been talking informally about their summer plans—but Ling spoke with a sudden urgency. Her English was very slow. Seeing what a terrible effort it was for her, the classmates all tried to help when she searched for words.
"In my China village there was a teacher," Ling began. "Man teacher." She paused. "All children love him. He teach mathematic. He very—" She stopped and looked up toward the ceiling. Then she gestured with her fingers around her face.
70
"Handsome!" said Charlene, the oldest of the three Haitian sisters in the class.
Ling smiled broadly. "Handsome! Yes, he very handsome. Family very rich before. He have sister go to Hong Kong who have many, many money."
"*Much* money," said Maria.
"Much, much money," repeated Ling thoughtfully. "Teacher live in big house."
"In China? Near you?"
75
"Yes. Big house with much old picture." She stopped and furrowed her forehead, as if to gather words inside of it.
"Art? Paint? Pictures like that?" asked Xavier.
Ling nodded eagerly. "Yes. In big house. Most big house in village."
"But big house, money, rich like that, bad in China," said Fu Wu. "Those year, Government bad to you. How they let him do?"
"In *my* country," said Carlos, "government bad to you if you got *small* house, *no* money."
80
"Me too," said Maria.
"Me too," said Charlene.
The Chinese students laughed.
Ling shrugged and shook her head. "Don't know. He have big house. Money gone, but keep big house. Then I am little girl." She held her hand low to the floor.
"I *was* a little girl," Charlene said gently.
85
"I *was,*" said Ling. "Was, was." She giggled for a moment, then seemed to spend some time in thought. "We love him. All children love—all children did loved him. He giving tea in house. He was—was—so handsome!" She giggled. All the women in the class giggled. "He very nice. He learn music, he go . . . he went to school far away."
"America?"
Ling shook her head. "Oh no, no. You know, another . . . west."
"Europa!" exclaimed Maria proudly. "Espain!"
"No, no, another."
90
"France!" said Patricia, Charlene's sister. "He went to school in France?"
"Yes, France," said Ling. Then she stopped again, this time for a whole minute. The others waited patiently. No one said a word. Finally she continued. "But big boys in more old school not like him. He too handsome."
"Oooh!" sang out a chorus of women. "Too handsome!"

“The boys were jealous,” said Carlos.
Ling seized the word. “Jealous! Jealous! They very jealous. He handsome, he study France, he very nice to children, he give tea and cake in big house, he show picture on wall.” Her torrent of words came to an end and she began to think again, visibly, her brow furrowing. “Big school boys, they . . .” She stopped.
“Jealous!” sang out the others.
“Yes,” she said, shaking her head “no.” “But more. More bad. Hate. They hate him.”
“That’s bad,” said Patricia.
“Yes, very bad.” Ling paused, looking at the floor. “And they heat.”
“Hate.”
“No, they heat.”
All the class looked puzzled. Heat? Heat? They turned to Cheryl.
The teacher spoke for the first time. “Hit? Ling, do you mean hit? They hit him?” Cheryl slapped the air with her hand.
Ling nodded, her face somehow serious and smiling at the same time. “Hit many time. And also so.” She scooted her feet back and forth along the floor.
“Oooh,” exclaimed Charlene, frowning. “They kicked him with the feet.”
“Yes,” said Ling. “They kicked him with the feet and hit him with the hands, many many time they hit, they kick.”
“Where this happened?” asked Xavier.
“In the school. In classroom like . . .” She gestured to mean their room.
“In the school?” asked Xavier. “But other people were they there? They say stop, no?”
“No. Little children in room. They cry, they . . .” She covered her eyes with her hand, then uncovered them. “Big boys kick and hit. No one stop. No one help.”
Everyone in class fell silent. Maria remembered: they could not look at one another then. They could not look at their teacher.
Ling continued. “They break him, very hurt much place.” She stopped. They all fixed their stares on Ling, they could bear looking only at her. “Many place,” she said. Her face had not changed, it was still half smiling. But now there were drops coming from her eyes, a single tear down each side of her nose. Maria would never forget it. Ling’s face did not move or wrinkle or frown. Her body was absolutely still. Her shoulders did not quake. Nothing in the shape or motion of her eyes or mouth changed. None of the things that Maria had always known happen when you cry happened when Ling shed tears. Just two drops rolled slowly down her two pale cheeks as she smiled.
“He very hurt. He *was* very hurt. He blood many place. Boys go away. Children cry. Teacher break and hurt. Later he in hospital. I go there visit him.” She stopped, looking thoughtful. “I went there.” One continuous line of wetness glistened down each cheek. “My mother, my father say don’t go, but I see him. I say, ‘You be better?’ But he hurt. Doctors no did helped. He alone. No doctor. No nurse. No medicine. No family.” She stopped. They all stared in silence for several moments.
Finally Carlos said, “Did he went home?”

Ling shook her head. “He go home but no walk.” She stopped. Maria could not help watching those single lines of tears moving down the pale round face. “A year, more, no walk. Then go.”
115
“Go where?”
“End.”
Again there was a deep silence. Ling looked down, away from them, her head bent low.
“Oh, no,” murmured Charlene. “He died.”
Maria felt the catch in her throat, the sudden wetness of tears on her own two cheeks, and when she looked up she saw that all the other students, men and women both, were crying too.
120
Maria wiped her eyes. Suddenly all her limbs ached, her bones felt stiff and old. She took her feet from the basin and dried them with a towel. Then she turned off the television and went to bed.

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
Respond to the two scenes that made the greatest impact on you. Go back to these scenes and analyze how the descriptions and language in these two places might have contributed to your reaction.
2.
What purpose do the flashbacks serve in this piece? What would the reader be missing without this information?
3.
What, even more than language, creates barriers between people?
4.
What does the mayor fail to realize about Maria? What does Maria fail to realize about the mayor?
5.
Explain how the students in the language class can feel such a deep understanding of one another and such compassion for one another when they don’t speak the same language. To what could you compare this group?
6.
What role does television play in this piece, and what, perhaps, does it symbolize?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Interview someone you know who has struggled to learn another language. Aim to discover the process this person went through, the successes as well as the failures, and most important, how this person felt during this ordeal.
2.
Write about a time when you felt embarrassed, angry, or humiliated because you were misunderstood by someone else. In what ways does your experience connect with Maria’s in this story?
3.

Using this piece as your basis, as well as your own experiences and observations, argue that it is not language that keeps people apart, but their prejudices.

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JOHN HEAVISIDE

A Gathering of Deafs

John Heaviside wrote the following poem about the deaf when he was a student at Hunter College of the City University of New York; the poem was published in the student literary journal Olivetree Review. *American Sign Language (ASL), the language being used by the people in this poem, is more than finger spelling. It is a gestural language that expresses meaning with not only the location, configuration, and action of the hands but also with eyebrow motion, lip and mouth movements, tilt of the head, and shifts of the body. Fluent ASL speakers, such as those in this poem, can vary their meanings with slight variations in the way they make signs. For example, events in the past are signed further back in the signing space, and events in the future are signed further forward, perhaps like the signs of the two lovers in the poem.*

Suggestions for Prereading or Journal Writing

1.
Imagine that for one day, you have lost your ability to hear. Write about what this day would be like for you.

2.
What kind of a person are you, in general: one who is more comfortable in a room with noise, or one who is more comfortable sitting in silence? Explain.

———

By the turnstiles
in the station
where the L train greets
the downtown six
a congregation of deafs

passes forth
jive wild
and purely physical
in a world dislocated
from the subway howling

hard sole shoe stampede
punk rock blasted radio
screaming, pounding, honking
they gather in community
engaging

in a dexterous conversation
An Old Woman
of her dead husband tells

caressing the air
wrinkled fingers

tell the story
delicate, mellifluous motion
she places gentle configurations
before the faces of the group
A young Puerto Rican

describes a fight with his mother
emphasizing each word
abrupt, staccato movements
jerking his elbows
and twisting his wrists

teeth clenched
lips pressed
the story concluded
a fist into his palm
By the news stand

two lovers
stroke the air
syllables
graceful and slow
their joining

the flow
of fingertips

Suggestions for Writing and Discussion

1.
Read the first stanza out loud. What do you notice about the arrangement of the words? Why are the words arranged in this order, do you think?
2.
Read stanza two out loud. What discoveries do you make by hearing this stanza?
3.
Explain the differences in "speaking" between the Puerto Rican man and the lovers. Why do you think the poet presented these two opposite "speakers"?
4.
The poet has chosen not to include any punctuation in this piece. What might be his reasons for this?
5.
According to this poem, what are all the ways in which people can communicate without using words? How effective do you find these ways to be compared to verbal language?

Suggestions for Extended Thinking and Writing

1.
Write a research report in which you explain the historical struggles and successes of the deaf culture in America.
2.
Go somewhere that usually is filled with people—a restaurant, a shopping mall, a nightclub, even a library. Record all the sounds you hear in a fifteen-minute period. Then go somewhere you can be in complete silence for that same amount of time. Record all the sounds you hear in this place as well. Then write an essay in which you explain the sounds and the effects the two different experiences had on you. Which one would you like to repeat again? Explain why.
3.
What is it like to live in a deaf world? Find an article written by a member of the deaf community in order to find out.

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TOPICS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS: QUESTIONS OF LANGUAGE

1.Write an essay in which you argue that language should belong to the people who speak it. Use the experiences and insights you find in at least three sources in this chapter for your support. You may, of course, use other outside sources as well.

2.Write an essay in which you argue for or against the following proposition: "The rules of standard American English ought to be followed by all writers and speakers in our society." Again, use as many sources as you can from this chapter, as well as pertinent outside sources you find on your own.

3.In what ways can the language of one dominating culture affect the mental, physical, and psychological health of subordinate cultures? In order to answer this question, use three to five sources from this chapter. Feel free to use your own experiences with language as well.

4.Write an essay in which you analyze the ways people communicate with one another nonverbally. What is it, besides oral and written language, that connects different people to one another? Aim to answer this question through your exploration of three different pieces in this chapter as well as experiences in your own life.

5.Write an essay on sexism or racism in the language of advertising. Use examples from current ads and commercials, and point out the dangers of this language as several authors in this chapter would see it.

6.Compare the language in three different types of popular music today: perhaps a white country-western female singer, an urban black rapper, and a white rock idol. How do the lyrics, messages, and syntax relate to what the authors in this chapter have told us?

7.Evaluate one piece in this chapter from a rhetorical standpoint. What appeals does the writer use? What type of language does the writer use? What evidence is used? Does the writer address the opposing argument? Is the organization effective? Is the writer fair-minded or biased to a certain degree? As a critic, what is your overall judgment of this piece from a rhetorical standpoint? Is the argument convincing? Explain.

8.Write an extended metaphor for how sexist or racist language affects those subjected to it. You may choose the format of an essay or a poem for this topic.

9.Choose a racial, national, sexist, or religious insult and analyze the possible implications of this slur. See if you can discover where the term originated and how the term has changed in meaning today.
10.Can people from one culture ever really understand a person from a different culture? Rely on your own experience as well as the information in this chapter in order to answer this question.
11.Does what we say really reflect what we think? Write an essay in which you explore this question in terms of your own life and the lives of the authors you have met in this chapter.
12.Using the selections in this chapter, write an essay in which you synthesize what you have learned about language and prejudice.

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[1]Within the lexicon itself, there seems to be a parallel phenomenon to tag-question usage, which I refrain from discussing in the body of the text because the facts are controversial and I do not understand them fully. The intensive *so*, used where purists would insist upon an absolute superlative, heavily stressed, seems more characteristic of women's language than of men's, though it is found in the latter, particularly in the speech of male academics. Consider, for instance, the following sentences:
(a) I feel *so* unhappy!
(b) That movie made me *so* sick!
Men seem to have the least difficulty using this construction when the sentence is unemotional, or nonsubjective—without reference to the speaker himself:
(c) That sunset is *so* beautiful!
(d) Fred is *so* dumb!
Substituting an equative like *so* for absolute superlatives (like *very, really, utterly*) seems to be a way of backing out of committing oneself strongly to an opinion, rather like tag questions (cf. discussion below, in the text). One might hedge in this way with perfect right in making aesthetic judgments, as in (c), or intellectual judgments, as in (d). But it is somewhat odd to hedge in describing one's own mental or emotional state: who, after all, is qualified to contradict one on this? To hedge in this situation is to seek to avoid making any strong statement: a characteristic, as we have noted already and shall note further, of women's speech.

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[2]For analogues outside of English to these uses of tag questions and special intonation patterns, cf. my discussion of Japanese particles in "Language in Context," *Language*, 48 (1972), pp. 907–927. It is to be expected that similar cases will be found in many other languages as well. See, for example, M. R. Haas's very interesting discussion of differences between men's and women's speech mostly involving lexical dissimilarities in many languages, in D. Hymes, ed., *Language in Culture and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

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[3]For more detailed discussion of these problems, see Lakoff, "Language in Context."

Choose either of these photos and explain how you think the image depicted suggests issues related to communication in today's society.