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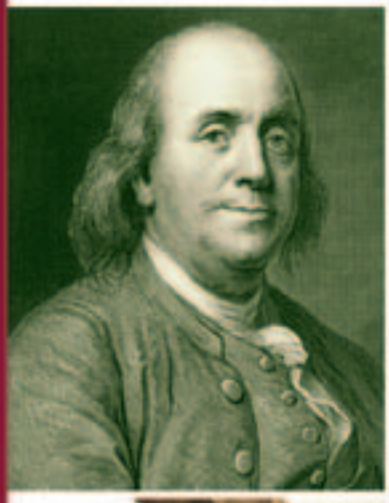

STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

Volume V: 1970 to the Present

STUDENT'S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREAT AMERICAN WRITERS

Volume V: 1970 to the Present

PATRICIA M. GANTT

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Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers, 1970 to the Present

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Contents

List of Writers and Works Included vi
Series Preface xi
Volume Introduction xii

Julia Alvarez 1
Rudolfo Anaya 13
Maya Angelou 22
Jimmy Santiago Baca 35
Toni Cade Bambara 46
Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) 54
Raymond Carver 68
Sandra Cisneros 79
Judith Ortiz Cofer 92
Billy Collins 103
Rita Dove 113
Louise Erdrich 127
Carolyn Forché 141
Nikki Giovanni 151
Joy Harjo 166
Barbara Kingsolver 176
Maxine Hong Kingston 188
Yusef Komunyakaa 201
Chang-rae Lee 214
Cormac McCarthy 225
Larry McMurtry 235
Pat Mora 244
Toni Morrison 253
Joyce Carol Oates 276
Tim O'Brien 285
Mary Oliver 294
Simon J. Ortiz 306
Robert Pinsky 316
Ishmael Reed 326
Adrienne Rich 340
Leslie Marmon Silko 352
Gary Snyder 364
Gary Soto 373
Amy Tan 386
Helena María Viramontes 399
Alice Walker 410
August Wilson 425

Appendix I: Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers* 445
Appendix II: Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*, by Birth Date 448

List of Writers and Works Included

Julia Alvarez (1950–) 1
"How I Learned to Sweep" (1984)
How the García Girls Lost Their Accents (1991)
"Daughter of Invention" (1991)
"Hold the Mayonnaise" (1992)
In the Time of Butterflies (1994)
"Queens, 1963" (1995)

Rudolfo Anaya (1937–) 13
Bless Me, Ultima (1972)
Tortuga (1979)
The Sonny Baca Mysteries (1995–2005)

Maya Angelou (1928–) 22
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969)
"My Brother Bailey and Kay Francis" (1969)
"Woman Work" (1978)
"On the Pulse of Morning" (1993)
"Africa" (1997)

Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952–) 35
Martín and Meditations on the South Valley (1987)
Immigrants in Our Own Land & Selected Early Poems (1990)
Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio (1992)
A Place to Stand (2001)
The Importance of a Piece of Paper (2004)

Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995) 46
Gorilla, My Love (1972)
"Medley" (1977)
The Salt Eaters (1980)

Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) (1934–) 54
"Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" (1961)
"In Memory of Radio" (1961)
"Notes for a Speech" (1961)
"An Agony. As Now." (1964)
"A Poem for Willie Best" (1964)
Dutchman (1964)
"Ka'Ba" (1966)
"Will They Cry When You're Gone, You Bet" (1969)
"AM/TRAK" (1979)
"Wise I" (1990)
"Monday in B-Flat" (1994)

Raymond Carver (1938–1988) 68
"Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" (1976)
"Furious Seasons" (1977)
"What We Talk about When We Talk about Love" (1981)
"Cathedral" (1982)
"Where I'm Calling From" (1989)
"A Small, Good Thing" (1989)

Sandra Cisneros (1954–) 79
My Wicked Wicked Ways (1987)
The House on Mango Street (1984)
"Hairs" (1984)
Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991)
"Bread" (1991)
"My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn" (1991)

Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952–) 92
The Line of the Sun (1989)
Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood (1990)
The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women (1993)
An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio (1995)
The Meaning of Consuelo (2003)

Billy Collins (1941–) 103
"Consolation" (1995)
"Nightclub" (1995)
"Forgetfulness" (2001)
"Marginalia" (2001)
"Osso Buco" (2001)
"Tuesday, June 4, 1991" (2001)
"The Lanyard" (2005)
"Building with Its Face Blown Off" (2005)

Rita Dove (1952–) 113
The Yellow House on the Corner (1980)
"Geometry" (1980)
"Parsley" (1983)
Thomas and Beulah (1986)
Mother Love (1995)
On the Bus with Rosa Parks (1999)

Louise Erdrich (1954–) 127
"The Red Convertible" (1981)
"Jacklight" (1984)
"A Love Medicine" (1984)
"Dear John Wayne" (1984)
Love Medicine (1984)
"Fleur" (1986)
The Beet Queen (1986)
Tracks (1988)

Carolyn Forché (1950–) 141
Gathering the Tribes (1976)
The Country between Us (1982)
The Angel of History (1994)
Blue Hour (2003)
"On Earth" (2003)

Nikki Giovanni (1943–) 151
"Nikki-Rosa" (1968)
"Ego-Tripping" (1970)
"When I Die" (1972)
"Stardate Number 18628.190" (1995)
"Train Rides" (1999)
"Possum Crossing" (2002)
"Have Dinner with Me" (2002)
"Quilts" (2003)

Joy Harjo (1951–) 166
She Had Some Horses (1983)
Reinventing the Enemy's Language (1997)
How We Became Human (2002)

Barbara Kingsolver (1955–) 176
The Bean Trees (1988)
Animal Dreams (1990)
Pigs in Heaven (1993)
The Poisonwood Bible (1998)
Prodigal Summer (2000)

Maxine Hong Kingston (1940–) 188
"No Name Woman" (1976)
The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (1976)
China Men (1980)
Tripmaster Monkey (1989)
"Restaurant" (1981)

Yusef Komunyakaa (1947–) 201
"Tu Do Street" (1988)
"Prisoners" (1988)
"Thanks" (1988)
"Facing It" (1988)
"Blackberries" (1992)
"My Father's Love Letters" (1992)
"Ode to the Maggot" (2000)

Chang-rae Lee (1965–) 214
Native Speaker (1995)
A Gesture Life (1999)
Aloft (2004)

Cormac McCarthy (1933–) 225
Blood Meridian, or the Evening Reduces in the West (1985)
All the Pretty Horses (1992)
The Road (2006)

Larry McMurtry (1936–) 235
The Last Picture Show (1966)
Terms of Endearment (1975)
Lonesome Dove (1985)

Pat Mora (1942–) 244
"Borders" (1986)
"Sonrisas" (1986)
"Immigrants" (1986)
"Gentle Communion" (1991)

Toni Morrison (1931–) 253
The Bluest Eye (1970)
Sula (1973)
Song of Solomon (1977)
Tar Baby (1981)
"Recitatif" (1983)
Beloved (1987)
Jazz (1992)
The Nobel Lecture in Literature (1993)
Paradise (1998)
Love (2003)

Joyce Carol Oates (1938–) 276
"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1970)
You Must Remember This (1987)

Tim O'Brien (1946–) 285
Going after Cacciato (1978)
The Things They Carried (1990)

Mary Oliver (1935–) 294
"The Black Snake" (1978)
"In Blackwater Woods" (1983)
"Wild Geese" (1986)
"Landscape" (1986)
"Goldenrod" (1991)
"Why I Wake Early" (2004)

Simon J. Ortiz (1941–) 306
"Speaking" (1977)
"Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun" (1977)
"Vision Shadows" (1977)
"Poems from the Veterans Hospital" (1977)
"Travelling" (1977)

Robert Pinsky (1940–) 316
"The Figured Wheel" (1984)
"The Street" (1984)
"A Woman" (1984)
"Shirt" (1990)
"At Pleasure Bay" (1990)

Ishmael Reed (1938–) 326
Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969)
"I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" (1970)
Mumbo Jumbo (1972)
The Last Days of Louisiana Red (1974)
Flight to Canada (1976)
"The Reactionary Poet" (1978)
"Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy" (1978)
The Terrible Twos and *The Terrible Threes* (1982, 1989)
Reckless Eyeballing (1986)
Japanese by Spring (1993)

Adrienne Rich (1929–) 340
"Storm Warnings" (1951)
"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (1951)
"Living in Sin" (1955)
"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" (1963)
"I Am in Danger—Sir—" (1966)
"The Observer" (1969)
"When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971)
"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" (From *A Will to Change*, 1971)
"Power" (1974)
"If Not with Others, How?" (1985)
"Transcendental Etude" (1977)

Leslie Marmon Silko (1948–) 352
"The Man to Send Rain Clouds" (1969)
"Lullaby" (1974)
"Yellow Woman" (1974)
Ceremony (1977)
Storyteller (1981)
Almanac of the Dead (1991)

Gary Snyder (1930–) 364
"Milton by Firelight" (1955)
"Riprap" (1959)
"Straight-Creek—Great Burn" (1974)
"The Blue Sky" (1996)

Gary Soto (1952–) 373
"The Elements of San Joaquin" (1977)
"Mexicans Begin Jogging" (1981)
Living up the Street: Narrative Recollections (1985)
"Like Mexicans" (1985)
"Oranges" (1985)
Baseball in April (1990)
"Home Course in Religion" (1991)
"Bodily Responses to High Mass" (1997)
"Teaching English from an Old Composition Book" (1999)
Nerdlandia (1999)

Amy Tan (1952–) 386
The Joy Luck Club (1989)
"Two Kinds" (1989)
"A Pair of Tickets" (1989)
The Kitchen God's Wife (1991)
The Bonesetter's Daughter (2001)

Helena María Viramontes (1954–) 399
"The Moths" (1985)
"Cariboo Cafe" (1985)
"Miss Clairol" (1988)
Under the Feet of Jesus (1995)
Their Dogs Came with Them (2007)

Alice Walker (1944–) 410
"Everyday Use" (1973)
"Expect Nothing" (1973)
"Revolutionary Petunias" (1973)
Meridian (1976)
"Nineteen Fifty-five" (1981)
The Color Purple (1982)
In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983)
"I Said to Poetry" (1984)

August Wilson (1945–2005) 425
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1981, 1985)
Fences (1986)
Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988)
The Piano Lesson (1990)
Two Trains Running (1993)
Seven Guitars (1996)
Jitney (1979, 1982, 2000)
The Ground on Which I Stand (1996, 2001)
King Hedley II (2001)
Gem of the Ocean (2003)
Radio Golf (2004)

Series Preface

The *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers* is a unique reference intended to help high school students meet standards for literature education and prepare themselves for literature study in college. It offers extensive entries on important authors, as well as providing additional interpretive helps for students and their teachers. The set has been designed and written in the context of the national standards for English language arts, created by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, the two professional organizations that have the most at stake in high school language arts education (see http://www.ncte.org/standards).

The volume editors and many of the contributors to this set not only are university scholars but also have experience in secondary school literature education, ranging from working as readers of Advanced Placement examinations, to developing high school literature curricula, to having taught in high school English classrooms. Although the volume editors all have extensive experience as scholars and university professors, they all have strong roots in high school education and have drawn on their experience to ensure that entries are stylistically appealing and contain the necessary content for students.

The set's five volumes are organized chronologically, as many literature textbooks and anthologies are. This system is convenient for students and also facilitates cross-disciplinary study, increasingly common in high schools. For example, a section on the Civil War in history class might be accompanied by the study of Walt Whitman and Stephen Crane in English class. To help students find what they need, each volume contains two lists of all the authors included in the set: one organized chronologically and the other alphabetically.

Within each volume, authors are presented alphabetically. Each author entry contains a biography and then subentries on the author's major works. After each subentry on a work is a set of questions for discussion and/or writing. Another set of broader discussion questions appears near the end of each author entry, followed by a bibliography. The entire five-volume set therefore contains more than 1,000 discussion questions. These questions make up perhaps the most important and useful features of the set, encouraging further creative thought and helping students get started on their own writing. Many of the questions reference not only the subject literary work or author but also related works and authors, thus helping students to make additional literary connections, as emphasized by the literature standards.

The authors and works included in the set were selected primarily from among those most popular in the high school classrooms—that is, those often featured in secondary-school literary anthologies and textbooks; those often appearing on age-appropriate reading lists; and those most often searched for in Facts On File's online literary database Bloom's Literature Online, used primarily in high schools. In addition, we have endeavored to include a range of writers from different backgrounds in all periods, as well as writers who, though not perhaps among the very most popular today, appear to have been unjustly neglected and are gaining in popularity. No selection could be perfect, and those writers favored by scholars and critics are not always as popular in the high school classroom, but the general editor and volumes editors have attempted to make the set's coverage as useful to students as possible.

Above all, we hope that this set serves not only to instruct but also to inspire students with the love of literature shared by all the editors and contributors who worked on this set.

Patricia M. Gantt

Volume Introduction

American literature from 1970 to the present encompasses a multitude of perspectives; it is both inclusive and innovative. In this period more than ever before, writers have come in from the cultural margins to add their voices to the literary discourse. It can truly be said that there is no modern perspective that is not represented in the literature of the last 40 years. No cultural or literary monolith exists; a reader can select a perspective and find it expressed in literature and then stand back and listen for a voice that counters that perspective. No writer can speak with authority about "the" woman's perspective or "the" Native American experience. Each is multifold. As Walt Whitman proclaimed in an earlier time, "There is that lot of me, and all so luscious." Readers are now privy to more ways of looking at life than ever before. Even genres themselves have become shape-shifters, as the current controversy over what constitutes memoir can testify.

The writing of this period reflects the insistent wrangle for truth in a postmodern age marked by ceaseless questioning. For example, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), a father and son trek through an apocalyptic future similar to one Americans might confront should our important questions go unanswered, leaving us unable to understand and feel for one another in a barren world. Other works, such as McCarthy's western fictions, bring readers to rethink history but also make us aware of the precipitous position in which writers and historians find themselves, each reliant upon narrative—some mode of fitting together shards to tell stories and make sense of our existence. Yet we have come to distrust fiction, and history as well, knowing what we do about how selective the process of inclusion and exclusion must be. It is difficult for us to trust stories. We can sense the doubt even in such affirmations as Leslie Marmon Silko's in *Ceremony*: "I will tell you something about stories . . . / They aren't just entertainment. / Don't be fooled. / They are all we have, you see, / all we have to fight off / illness and death. / You don't have anything / if you don't have the stories." We have come to see through an ever-broadening array of media how the globalized world is interconnected, but we have also been forced to confront the unsettling realizations that have dissolved the optimism of the postwar age and left us with a profound and perplexing skepticism. Such crises are both reflected and challenged by postmodern American literature.

Postmodernism is a loaded word, rife with conflict; there are numerous definitions for the term. In essence, postmodern works reflect what all writers seek: an engagement with the world and a desire to communicate. Like all literature, postmodern works—even in their various forms, parodic and ironic stances, understanding of reality, critiques of power structures—are deeply engaged in life and written with care and concern for the world. We see this in the minimalist forms of Raymond Carver, the magical realism of Toni Morrison, the satirical and playful voices of Ishmael Reed, the souls seeking solace through cultural understanding in the fiction of Rudolfo Anaya and Julia Alvarez, the women seeking to come to terms with the world and to love each other in Adrienne Rich's poetry or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the ecologically conscious, nature-turned imaginations of Gary Snyder and Mary Oliver—all attempting to bring readers into dialogue with the postmodern condition.

Our postmodern age brings with it a lack of consensus about codes of ethics, philosophies, and religious systems of belief. Many of us distrust any one point of view, believing reality to be many-sided, while fearing that our inability to see multiple perspectives marginalizes those who may not share the dominant ideology or social back-

ground. We seek to guarantee that everyone has an opportunity to live the American Dream, while being aware that the American Dream, to a great extent, is an artificial construct that often leads to disillusionment and exclusion. Our intellectuals are increasingly preoccupied with our cultural limitations. Modern society is fast, visual, and technological, with increasing linguistic demands. Yet our culture, from many perspectives, has become less literate. The question becomes: What is the nature of language in a postmodern age? To what extent is language—and literature—necessarily political? For deeper understanding, we can turn to a powerful American presence, Toni Morrison, a Nobel laureate deeply engaged not only in exploring the significance of the word but also in the emancipatory potential of artistic expression.

In her *Nobel Lecture,* Morrison tells the story of an old woman who lives on the margins of society, a wise figure appearing before a group of game-playing children. The children ask the old woman to tell them whether the bird they hold is dead or alive. After telling this brief story, Morrison then interprets. She views the bird in hand as language. Morrison laments that language is subject to death and erasure if it is viewed as an abstraction. For her, language is agency or power, a view shared by many of the contemporary novelists, poets, and playwrights discussed in this volume. From Maxine Hong-Kingston and Amy Tan, for example, we have compelling explorations of identity in a contemporary America where the pressure to assimilate endangers cultural heritage. From the prison poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca to the works of Maya Angelou, contemporary literary art is invested with a view of language in which words are liberating, speech-acts affirm our identity, and self-expression is perhaps the most potent mode of resistance left to those who have been marginalized and alienated. Later in her lecture, Morrison outlines the theory of language that her 1992 novel *Jazz* metaphorically depicts. She sees language as a vital thing whose power lies in its ability to render the actual. The act of using language and of making meaning is, according to Morrison, central to our humanity. It is a grave responsibility. Morrison says, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."

At the end of her lecture, Morrison returns to the next part of the story, in which the children demand that the old lady tell them a tale. Morrison presents the children as askers of questions, who come to a writer for answers. This writer supplies images, challenges, and multiple possibilities for interpretation, but she is powerless alone. What forms the creative act is the transaction between the children and the old lady; it is the act of reading that creates art. It is no coincidence that the closing words of the old woman in Morrison's *Nobel Lecture* parallel the closing words of the narrator in her novel *Jazz.* Both describe a similar phenomenon. This phenomenon, whether in music or in text, is a complex transaction that produces meaning. Morrison sees all narrative acts as calls to action and social responsibility. How the listener chooses to be involved in the music has everything to do with the life the listener has or will experience.

Morrison's exploration of narrative perspective enlarges our own sense of it, helping us to cultivate our narrative imaginations. She, like other visionary African-American writers, struggles to make sense of the contemporary African-American experience by facing the horrors of slavery, racism, and bigotry while at the same time recording the triumph of memory. From the incendiary plays and poetry of Amiri Baraka, to the autobiographical narratives and award-winning poetry of Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, and Nikki Giovanni, to the cries for social justice in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), to August Wilson's masterful Pittsburgh cycle of plays, African-American authors since 1970 have offered their readers inspiring literary responses to horrific concrete experiences while giving voice to a culture often elided by history.

In addition to these, authors from many other cultural backgrounds have stepped forward to speak about the complexities of living between cultures. Sandra Cisernos's short stories; Judith Ortiz Cofer's essays, plays, and novels; Gary Soto's poems; and Helena Maria Viramontes's short

stories all provide readers reflections on their experience of American life seen from within Latino culture. Likewise, Native American writers such as Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo, Simon J. Ortiz, and Leslie Marmon Silko examine their own contemporary lives as well as the history of forced cultural assimilation and the annihilation of many Native cultures. Their works capture the need to heal, reconnect, and move on and are aware of the irony of using the colonizer's English to articulate the American Indian experience. These authors, all part of what Kenneth Lincoln calls "The Native American Renaissance," offer fresh perspectives on the complexity of recovering a sense of Native identity. They bear witness, listening to the howling wind, hearing voices in distress, and forging a poetics of liberation.

It would be a mistake to infer, however, that ethnic or racial protest is the dominant theme of American literature since 1970. As important as this impulse is, another force is inherent to the works created within this period—the simple need for story that has driven human beings since they sat around a fire in a cave and whiled away the long, dark hours with tales of exploits, emotions, and the search for answers to the eternal questions. The urge to tell and to hear a good story has been with us since the beginning and will remain when the period covered by this volume is a distant memory. However complex or conflicted the stories these writers create, they are at their core an imaginative response to the desire to share action and thought with other people, to tease out meaning from experience, to laugh, to feel passion, to share ideas, to wonder about our place in the scheme of things, and to explore at the deepest level what it means to be human.

While they may differ in style and outlook, the works examined in this volume often place great demands on the reader. While previous American literature may have imagined that the American experience was somehow universal, postmodern literature deals with the sort of messiness we have to endure when we begin to think about reimagining our society and giving the voiceless a voice. To begin this difficult process is to know the pain of birth, or of literary composition: the daily ritual of confronting, examining, representing, proclaiming, critiquing, and satirizing that describes the creating of literature previously unimagined.

More explicitly than ever before, the literature of this period is wedded to our society. With this close cultural relationship in mind, this volume examines the stunning aesthetic creations of our time and their response to and influence on the American way of life. The works analyzed in these pages attest to our ability to share our stories and to understand that each story cannot be taken in isolation.

Note: Portions of the entry on August Wilson have been adapted from Patricia M. Gantt's essay "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle," published in *College Literature.*

Patricia M. Gantt and Blake Hobby

Julia Alvarez (1950–)

¿Qué es Patria? ¿Sabes acaso lo que preguntas, mi amor? (What is a homeland? Do you know, my love, what you are asking?)

(*In the Name of Salomé*)

Julia Alvarez opens her book of essays, *Something to Declare,* with a series of declarations to her grandfather. She tells him she wants to be a bullfighter, a cowboy, an actress, an astronaut, and an ice-cream vendor, among other professions. Her grandfather chuckles with the knowledge that her dreams will soon settle on something more achievable, and when Alvarez tells him she wants to be a poet, he surprisingly smiles, saying, "A poet, yes. Now you are talking" (11). As a poet, novelist, and young-adult author, Alvarez fulfills her declaration. It is also as a bullfighter, cowboy, and a multitude of other ambitions that she takes on historical, gender, and political borders within her works.

Though she was born in New York City on March 27, 1950, Alvarez spent the first 10 years of her life in the Dominican Republic. However, because her family supported a rebel faction instead of the dictator Rafael Trujillo, they escaped the country in 1960 and Alvarez found herself back in the United States. Trujillo and his police state become the central historical setting for much of Alvarez's work, while her own experience provides vibrant, raw material for her themes of displacement, struggle, and activism. Through her work, she gracefully crosses over boundaries and the ensnaring borders of the politics of expectations.

Her parents, Eduardo and Julia Tavares Alvarez, equally contributed to Alvarez's sense of protest and determination. Earlier her father had been part of an underground student movement to oust the corrupt dictator and was forced to flee to Canada for nine years. Her mother, who had wealth and political connections that are echoed in Alvarez's books, helped her husband and four daughters to safety during these tumultuous times. While living in the Dominican Republic, the Alvarez parents insisted that their daughters learn the English language; it is through the blending of two languages and many cultures that Alvarez draws the meaning of things. In an interview, she explains, "I am a Dominican, hyphen, American. As a fiction writer, I find the most exciting things happen in the realm of that hyphen—the place where two worlds collide or blend together" (quoted in Schafer 1). The series of collisions that Alvarez experienced were both difficult and rewarding. Wading through the discrimination and racism she and her sisters confronted back in New York, she soon became enraptured with the magic she could create through words. She writes that the English language became a "fluid mass that carried me in its great fluent waves, rolling and moving onward, to deposit me on the shores of my new homeland. I was no longer a foreigner with no ground to stand on. I had landed in the English language" (*Something to Declare* 29).

Her infatuation with language and writing soon became her passion. After her family immigrated to New York, she attended boarding school and then

Connecticut College from 1967 to 1969. While in her last year, she was recognized as a poet and participated in the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference at Middlebury College in Vermont. After transferring, she received her B.A. from Middlebury in 1971, graduating summa cum laude, and then attended Syracuse University for graduate school. After receiving her M.F.A. in 1975, she held a Poet in the Schools appointment in several states and taught English at Phillips Andover Academy from 1979 to 1981. She has also taught at the University of Vermont (1981–83), George Washington University (1984–85), and the University of Illinois (1985–88).

It was while she was teaching at the University of Vermont that Alvarez wrote her first book of poetry, *Homecoming* (1984). In the afterword of her second edition, which was published in 1996 when she was "three books braver" (118), Alvarez writes, "In writing *Homecoming,* I can see now how fiercely I was claiming my woman's voice. As I followed my mother cleaning house, washing and ironing clothes, rolling dough, I was using the material of my housebound girl life to claim my woman's legacy" (119). Her early poems emphasize the depth of the feminine and construct/deconstruct gender expectations. Her woman's legacy is the dominant theme in many of her works, works containing empowered women young and old. Yet in her afterword, Alvarez also admits the original collection lacks the political awareness of a woman at 33, the author's age when she began writing the poems. Compared to her later works, her accurate self-criticism punctuates her current social activism. However, in the 41 original sonnets under the section titled "33," she deftly argues for feminine independence and sovereignty from traditional gender roles. "Tell me what is it women want the most?" she asks in one of the sonnets; "Is it what everyone says, a man, / a rich, kind, liberated man / who figures out what we want? Be honest / now, whatever our public politics, is that it?" (68). By the time Alvarez was 29, she had married and divorced twice and felt that she was unable to fulfill the traditional roles prescribed for the female gender and the familial expectations whose pressure she felt. These "knockabout years" (*Something to Declare* 114) are reflected in the meaning and the nontraditional form of the sonnets: free verse and differing slant rhymes. She explains:

> As a writer, I especially found my vocation at odds with my training as a female and as a member of la familia. It was a woman's place to be the guardian of the home and the family secrets, to keep things entre familia, to uphold the family honor. . . . A woman did not have a public voice. She did not have a public life, except through her husband, her brothers, her sons, and her endless stream of male cousins. (122)

In another sonnet, she writes, "Mami asks what I'm up to, that means men / in any declension except sex; it / means do I realize I am thirty- / three without a husband, house, or children / and going on thirty-four?" (59). Although Alvarez laments her lack of political gumption in these earlier poems, she creates notions of tearing down the boundaries that define and confine families and individuals. Her struggles, evident in the altering emotional connections to her domestic subjects, create the skeleton of her future works, works that are more politically charged and daring.

In *Something to Declare* (published in 1999), she provides an autobiographical background to the *Homecoming* poems. In one essay, "I Want to Be Miss América," Alvarez describes that she and her sisters "were being groomed to go from being dutiful daughters to being dutiful wives with hymens intact" (42). Her poetry and essays contribute powerfully and wisely to current Chicana and third-world feminism, as she points out the unique hardships and differences faced by nonwhite women. She places emphasis on the challenges that women of color directly experience, which many white feminists failed to recognize.

In her 1996 collection of poetry, *The Other Side/El Otro Lado,* she focuses on subjects that place cultural splits in the foreground. In her first line of the collection's opening poem, "Bilingual Sestina," she proclaims, "Some things I have to say

aren't getting said / in this snowy, blond, blue-eyed, gum-chewing English" (3). The section that immediately follows is titled "The Gladys Poems" after their Dominican maid, Gladys. Alvarez grapples with class divisions and the thorny recognition of one person's participation in another person's dis/placement. While some readers surmise that Alvarez focuses her work mainly on fictionalizing Trujillo's absolute rule, she writes in such a way that readers, regardless of their gender or culture, identify with friendly and surly truths. Her search for self becomes the reader's search for self. Indeed, she claims that the pretext to her essays is that *"we have something to declare"* (*Something to Declare* xiv). For her, language and writing are essential to exploring and finding places of connective belonging. She argues that writing and "entering into the writing of another" make for better people, adding:

> Writing is a form of vision, and I agree with that proverb that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The artist keeps that vision alive, cleared of the muck and refuse and junk and little dishonesties that always collect and begin to cloud our view of the world around us. (299)

During the years between *Homecoming* and *The Other Side/El Otro Lado,* Alvarez wrote two books, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *In the Time of Butterflies* (1994), and married her husband, Bill Eichner, a doctor from Nebraska, in 1989. In 1997, she published *¡Yo!,* a novel in which the main character, Yolanda García from *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* is reminiscent of Alvarez herself. Not only is *Yo* Spanish for "I," Yo's character is also a successful author who bases her writing on her own experiences and has endured some of Alvarez's personal hardships. In the prologue, Fifi, Yo's sister, details their family's harsh reaction to Yo's first book, which, like Alvarez's, is largely autobiographical. The structure of this book pushes Alvarez's deep convictions of the power of writing even further, as the story is not recorded by Yo, but rather by a multitude of people who all become connected in their involvement through language. In addition to *¡Yo!,* other Alvarez novels—including *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, In the Time of Butterflies,* and *Before We Were Free,* a young-adult book published in 2002—contain strong female characters whose main purpose is to convey multitudes of truths and injustices. Their ability to tell these stories is significant to one of Alvarez's main purposes. In an interview with Salon.com, she explains:

> I come from a culture where women are not encouraged to speak. [Instead, they are encouraged] to keep their mouths shut, to keep things in the family, to be the guardian of the stories and to be very careful who they're released to. It's a way of understanding that stories are powerful. You know, in the world we lived in, people "got disappeared" for saying the wrong thing. What people said mattered. I was raised in that world, and suddenly here I am—a woman with a voice in another language, one that we're supposed to keep things from, you know, the gringos and the Americans. And I have a voice and I'm saying things about women and women's experience which are not nice. That women have mouths and needs and bodies and problems and breakdowns and all of the stuff that is not nice to admit and certainly not to the [Americans]. (Garner)

Along with this gathering of women storytellers, her other works take on interesting storytellers, both male and female, who generate further awarenesses of today's realities. She claims her book *A Cafecito Story,* published in 2001, is a modern "eco-parable" based on a project she and her husband created (juliaalvarez.com). In 1996, she and Bill purchased a 260-acre farm in an impoverished area in the Dominican Republic. Naming the farm after the country's protector, La Altagracia, they hired workers to reharvest coffee plants. Today the successful farm sells organic coffee and houses an educational center where volunteers from the DREAM Project (Dominican Republic Education and Mentoring) help educate local people. On her

personal Web site, Alvarez emphasizes, "Beyond growing coffee, we chose to work for all the social, environmental, spiritual, and political issues that comprise sustainability" (juliaalvarez.com).

The connections between her own experiences and activist pursuits are evident in each of her works, which now include another book of poetry, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*; several young-adult and childrens' books; and novels. In 2006, she published *Saving the World,* a novel divided between two stories, both centering on epidemics. Her vision is again ambitious. In describing the book, she explained, "Where do I get off naming my novel, *Saving the World*! What can I tell you? I'm not feeling very optimistic as to where we are headed as a human family. But as the Seamus Heaney poem says, hope and history can sometimes be made to 'rhyme'" (juliaalvarez.com). Collectively, Alvarez's works all focus on this theme of hope and history, and the power of the storyteller, whose job it is to draw truths to the reader's attention.

"How I Learned to Sweep" (1984)

One of the opening poems of *Homecoming,* "How I Learned to Sweep" is a prime example of Alvarez's weaving of her woman's voice and the layers found within domestic work. This poem is perhaps one of the most political in the collection and relates sweeping to war and peace. Though the time setting is vague, Alvarez, or the narrator of the poem, is watching television when her mother tells her to sweep the room bare. Alvarez writes, "I knew right away what she expected / and went at it. I stepped and swept; / the t.v. blared the news" (7). She watches news coverage of the president of the United States delivering a war speech: "in the Far East our soldiers were landing in their helicopters / into jungles their propellers / swept like weeds seen underwater" (7). As she watches the sweeping destruction of war, she, too, sweeps with new vigor, resweeping again and again as she watches and imagines the soldiers dying "as if their dust fell through the screen / upon the floor I had just cleaned" (7). When her mother inspects the room, she finds it beautiful—"*That's beautiful,* she said, impressed, / she hadn't found a speck of death" (8).

While the war in the poem probably refers to the Vietnam War, Alvarez has constructed the details so that it could be one of several wars, regardless of the poem's date of publication. When the selection of poetry was revised and published again in 1996, the list of possible wars had become longer, including the cold war, the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88, and the Persian Gulf War. The poem's meanings are numerous and varied: death and the swift cleanup, a frustrated nation with an ever-silenced voice for peace, the reactions to a televised war, censorship and the pacifist's angst, immigration and patriotism, and traditional gender roles and war.

While "How I Learned to Sweep" remains a versatile poem, Alvarez's childhood is entrenched in most of her poetry, especially in the *Homecoming* poems. Through "How I Learned to Sweep," Alvarez creates the distinct voice of youth familiar with war, war so common it lies on the floor in the living room. Death and violence accompanied with responsibilities and chores are combined to create the realties of those who are both the victims and the victors.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Some Dominicans view Fidel Castro as a hero who pulled Cuba away from the terrible realities that faced Dominicans under the reign of Trujillo. Think about this poem, the Cuban missile crisis, and how Dominican Americans would have seen Castro—portrayed as villain in the American media. How does Alvarez depict war as a political conflict as well as an individual one?
2. In his Bay of Pigs invasion speech in 1961, President John F. Kennedy declared, "The complacent, the self-indulgent, the soft societies are about to be swept away with the debris of history. Only the strong, only the industrious, only the determined, only the courageous, only the visionary who determine the real nature of our struggle can possibly survive." How would the narrator's family feel upon hearing these words?

How is the poem a reaction to these words specifically?

How the García Girls Lost Their Accents (1991)

Identified as a novel but really a collection of 15 interrelated short stories, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* centers on the experiences of four sisters, Carla, Sandra (Sandi), Yolanda (Yoyo, Yo, or Joe), and Sophía (Fifi), and their exile from Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic. Largely autobiographical, the stories focus on several topics of the sisters' perpetual dislocation, adjustment, and certain influence on the two worlds they maneuver. Yoyo's character mirrors Alvarez: a poet/writer who invents stories and re-creates oral histories, using her experiences as fertilizer for meaning and movement. Her grandfather, like Alvarez's, is connected to the United Nations; her father is involved in an underground movement to overthrow Trujillo; the maid's name is also *Gladys*; the similarities are many, and readers will have a difficult time separating the García girls' realities from Alvarez's. The duality of Yolanda and Alvarez emphasizes her reaction as a writer to being placed outside mainstream American experiences. In an interview with Dwight Garner, she explains her perception as a writer: "I'm that mixed breed. I'm that hybrid. I think of myself very much as someone who is putting together different kinds of worlds and a different understanding of language from having those two worlds. I think that being American, of this hemisphere, is about that encounter." The encounters that the García girls experience are numerous, usual, and unusual.

The book is divided equally into three sections of five stories focusing on the girls as adults, then adolescents, and finally children. The first story of the book takes place back in the Dominican Republic, where Yo (which in Spanish means "I") has returned in search of some sort of union with her dissected self. Her fictional journey equates Alvarez's metaphorical journey of self back into language and storytelling. Yolanda appears to be innately homeless as she departs her family's compound and heads into the hills her cousins and aunts warned were dangerous. The narrator comments, "This is what she has been missing all these years without really knowing that she has been missing it. Standing here in the quiet, she believes she has never felt at home in the states, never" (12). Yet as she contemplates the identity of her mother tongue (English or Spanish?), Yo awkwardly settles into English when she is confronted with tension.

The constantly shifting narrator(s) adds to the book's autobiographical feel as Alvarez seems to struggle through the identities of each of the sisters as they experience mental breakdowns, drugs, sex, defeat, and quiet triumphs. Each sister's experiences combine with the others' to create an entire collection of understanding. In another interview, Alvarez emphasizes the importance of storytelling and truth telling. The structure of her book follows her philosophy precisely. She states, "It is something you get at, that's right there, but the truth is all the points around the truth, around the circle. Each little perspective somehow is what the truth is" (qtd. in Schafer). She further adds:

> A lot of what I have worked through has to do with coming to this country and losing a homeland and a culture, as a way of making sense, and also it has to do with the sisterhood of my sisters and myself. They were the only people I really had as models. We were moving in a circle, because none of us knew any more than the other one but all we had was each other, not feeling part of this world and not really feeling part of the old world either. (qtd. in Schafer)

In one of Yolanda's stories, she recounts the time when she crossed over from being a verbal virgin into the worlds of poetry, metaphorical meaning, and crude, sexual nouns with her college classmate Rudolf Elmenhurst. As she tells the story, she emphasizes, "There's more to the story. There always is to a true story" (102). Her storytelling and talent for invention characterize the García mother, Sofía, or Mami, to the girls. Her stories, working as oral histories for her girls, recreate new

meanings, given the circumstances in which they are told even for the 1,000th time. One chapter ends with her beginning another story and the narrator reminding the reader, "Everyone listens to the mother" (67). Yet the girls also contribute their own stories and their own oral truths.

The chief tools that Alvarez uses to find the truths of her experiences are the same tools the García girls struggle with: words. The subject of language is constant within *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents.* In her adult life, Sandi suffers a minor nervous breakdown and is committed to a mental institution when she becomes a voracious reader who believes she will soon turn into an animal, "turned out of the human race" (54). Sandi's mother tells the doctor that one day Sandi no longer answered to her name and made "awful sounds like she's in a zoo" (55). Alvarez does not share the story of her recovery, because it is not what is important. Later, while the entire family is visiting Fifi and her new baby girl, Sofía makes clucking sounds to the little girl, cooing in her ear. Sandi lashes out, saying, "God! You sound like a goddamn zoo" (66). Her mother scolds her, saying, "Your language," and then "as if the words were an endearment, she coos them at her granddaughter, 'your language'" (66). The double meaning in the phrase is not accidental. Alvarez consistently plays out the struggle with language and its power in constructing/deconstructing identities. Yolanda also experiences a sort of breakdown when she is no longer able to communicate with her husband, John, playing out a current-day tower of Babel. Their relationship wanders from playful rhyming phrases to absolute noncommunication. After she leaves him to live with her parents, she talks compulsively: "She talked in her sleep, she talked when she ate despite twenty-seven years of teaching her to keep her mouth shut when she chewed. She talked in comparisons, she spoke in riddles" (79). But Yolanda seems to be afflicted with an allergy to words. Her obsession with words and her subsequent suffering strongly correlate to the language war that many non-Anglos confront within the United States. The Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa asks "for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard . . . Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language?" (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 55). She adds that these border dwellers must have "[a] language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating with the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *espanol ni ingles,* but both" (55).

What Alvarez creates through the sorting of language, she also creates through her female characters. Just as Anzaldúa suggests the creation of the hybrid, a new reality, each of the García women has her own revolutions that create space for altered realities. Revolution is a theme in this book in many senses. Not only has Carlos, the father, participated in his country's underground revolution, but his daughters and wife also subversively fight against their own dictatorial circumstances. One of the stories, entitled "A Regular Revolution," contains several female uprisings. The daughters rebel against their controlling, conservative surroundings through unique insurgencies: smoking pot, "experimenting with hair removal cream," reading books centered on understanding the female body, hiding love letters, and sneaking out. The narrator relates, "It was a regular revolution: constant skirmishes. Until the time we took open aim and won, and our summers—if not our lives—became our own" (111). Sometimes the sisters share the same side, and at other times they plot against one another to help liberate the sister who is held down by tradition or misogyny. When Fifi, banished back to the Dominican Republic for possession, becomes "brainwashed" (126) and engaged to a machismo cousin, the three sisters stage a coup in a place where another coup took place 10 years earlier. As these women plan, struggle, and conquer, they create a new generation of feminist revolutionaries who are echoed in many of Alvarez's works.

Alvarez has earned several prizes for *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* including the Notable Book award from the American Library Association in 1992 and the Pen Oakland/Josephine Miles Award for the book's multicultural viewpoint. It has also been translated into several languages.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Yo, in another of Alvarez's books (*¡Yo!*), claims that "language is the only homeland. . . . When there is no other ground under your feet, you learn quick." With this idea in mind, discuss the repercussions of the title *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents.* How does language become a landscape of borders and border crossings? How does the title figure into each of the stories? Explain your responses.
2. Alvarez talks about how storytelling arrives at truth. What are the "truths" that each of the García girls tells in her own stories? How do others perceive these truths? What differences do their perceptions make? Explain your answer fully.
3. What does it mean to the novel that the main character wants to be a writer? Explain your answer with references to specific incidents in the book.

"Daughter of Invention" (1991)

"Daughter of Invention," a short story contained within the framework of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* centers around Mami and her daughter, Yolanda. In this story, Alvarez explores multiple levels of feminism and sexism as well as the role of the female minority writer. The autobiographical connections between Yolanda and Alvarez are especially apparent within the events of "Daughter of Invention."

In the United States, Mami becomes a self-proclaimed inventor, busily scribbling ideas on a pad of paper only after she has "settled her house down at night" (134). Though none of her gadgets actually is patented, she unwittingly invents new meanings within her map of language, and language becomes the primary focus for the story. Speaking English as a second language, Mami alters idioms, changing their former meanings and creating new ones: "When in Rome, do unto the Romans"; "It takes two to tangle"; "There is no use trying to drink spilt milk" (135, 140). When Yolanda suffers from writer's block while trying to write her speech for the Teacher's Day address, Mami alters Plato's words from the *Republic,* saying, "Like the Americans say, *Necessity is the daughter of invention.* I'll help you" (142). Her alteration of necessity as the daughter rather than the mother of invention draws attention to the relationship between the two words.

Yolanda's resulting speech reflects her own mother's practice of invention as Yoyo adopts the words of Walt Whitman and writes her own song of herself. While Mami is unabashedly proud, Yolanda's father, Papi, is furious. Within a short space, Alvarez creates an arena where masculinity and tradition snort and stamp with contempt for cultural feminism. Papi tears the speech into pieces, forbidding Yolanda to deliver it. She in turn accuses him of being just like Trujillo. Within the scaffold of language, Yolanda works to confront the suppression she feels as a female from both sides of her biographical border and the insignificance she struggles against as a minority student. Through her speech, she invents a place of power for herself. The Chicana feminist Cherríe Moraga explains the method Chicana feminists use in writing themselves into places of power: "When we write for ourselves, our deepest selves, the work travels into the core of our experience with a cultural groundedness that illuminates a total humanity, one which requires a revolution to make manifest" (*Loving in the War Years* 148). She adds, "Our truest words and images are suppressed by the cultural mainstream" (148). As a result of her father's suppression, necessity does become the daughter of invention as Mami and Yolanda are forced into drafting a more "appropriate" speech. However, Plato's quote reverts to its original by the end of the story, with Yolanda as the victor when Papi presents her a typewriter—a symbol and tool to facilitate her own underground and open revolution in the United States as a female Dominican.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As characters who are forced into positions of "outsiders" from mainstream Americans, how do Sofia and Yolanda subvert and deconstruct their forced categories?

2. In *The Souls of Black Folks,* W. E. B. DuBois discusses the idea of double consciousness: the double self of two cultures and two hierarchies of expectations that African Americans wrestle with on a daily basis, attempting to merge the two halves into a "better and truer self" (11). Analyze the double self of Mami and whether/how she attains or portrays her truer self.

"Hold the Mayonnaise" (1992)

First published in the *New York Times Magazine,* then in the anthology *New Worlds of Literature: Writings from America's Many Cultures,* Alvarez's essay "Hold the Mayonnaise" takes on the complexities of multicultural families and what Alvarez calls the "stepworld" (*New Worlds* 701). As a young girl, Alvarez trembled at the possibility of having an American stepmother, who would force her to eat mayonnaise. The only way this foreign terror would become an actuality would be if her mother died: "We were Catholics, so of course, the only kind of remarriage we could imagine had to involve our mother's death" (699). Mayonnaise became for her a cultural symbol of having had her home culture erased.

Years later, Alvarez finds herself in an ironic twist of her mayonnaise nightmare: Upon marrying her husband, Bill, she herself becomes a "foreign stepmother in a gringa household" (700). Her task of being a stepmother to her "husband's two tall, strapping, blond, mayonnaise-eating daughters" is uniquely informed by her past as an outsider. Her previous fears and experiences give her some insight into her stepdaughters' supposed pains. She explains, "On my side, being the newcomer in someone else's territory is a role I'm used to. I can tap into that struggling English speaker, that skinny, dark-haired, olive-skinned girl in a sixth grade of mostly blond and blue-eyed giants" (700). She admits, however, that in connection to her childhood of displacement, she creates a place outside her own stepfamily. As her stepdaughter wonders why her stepmother will not publicly identify her as a stepdaughter, Alvarez explains that she did not want to presume. The stepworld and the world of the minority share similarities—"It feels as if all the goodies have gone somewhere else," she writes.

The essay's conclusion makes unique connections to assimilationist and antiassimilationist approaches. Indeed, the controversy over whether to accept the dominant culture to the point of erasing one's own (assimilation) or to add aspects of the dominant culture to one's own home culture (acculturation) remains a controversy in cultural studies today. Alvarez makes it clear that while assimilationist traditions and advice are negative for Latinas/os today, they simultaneously become good advice for the stepworld. Continuing with her imagery of food throughout the essay, Alvarez creates a melting-pot metaphor: "Like a potluck supper . . . [y]ou put what you've got together with what everyone else brought and see what comes out of the pot. The luck part is if everyone brings something you like. No potato salad, no deviled eggs, no little party sandwiches with you know what in them" (701). Her version of the melting pot has been transformed from the traditional assimilationist pot of whitewash. By recognizing her own similarities and differences, she acts as an advocate of border crossing and cultural mixing where items still retain their distinctive qualities.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *Something to Declare,* Alvarez discusses the pressure for women to become mothers, stating, "For all our talk of feminism and prochoice, willful childlessness continues to have a bad reputation" (99). She further argues that within Latin culture "being a woman and a mother are practically synonymous. Being childless—by choice—is tantamount to being wicked and selfish" (99). Alvarez combats these fixed beliefs by creating the notion of "imagined motherhood"—being able to grow as a mother through the imagining of being one. Keeping this idea in mind, how does Alvarez create new spaces of experience through the mind? Why are her notions important for her experiences in "Hold the Mayonnaise"?

2. Alvarez uses mayonnaise to symbolize the unfamiliarity of the United States. What other objects do people use to represent or generalize other groups of people? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this practice?
3. Set up a debate in your class, with the following proposition: People entering the United States to live should be acculturated, rather than assimilated. After the conclusion of the debate, write a brief (two-page) response to it, expressing your own opinion and supporting it with specific examples.

In the Time of Butterflies (1994)

In 1986, two years after *Homecoming* was published, a women's press invited Alvarez to write a paragraph about a Dominican heroine for a series of postcards. Immediately she knew she wanted to write about the Mirabal sisters, three women who were murdered by Trujillo's regime on November 25, 1960 (a day now recognized as the International Day against Violence towards Women). After extensive research, Alvarez wrote a fictionalized account of the Mirabal family. Regarding the novel, she wrote, "I wanted to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic that I believe can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination. A novel is not, after all, a historical document, but a way to travel through the human heart" (*In the Time of Butterflies* 324).

The Mirabal sisters were leaders of the same underground movement in which Alvarez's father participated. Three of the four sisters, Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa (Mate), were killed four months after the Alvarez family arrived as exiles in New York. Haunted by their stories, Alvarez set out to write a novel that would introduce English-speaking readers to the sisters' story and courage. In her postscript, she tells Dominicans, "I hope this book deepens North Americans' understanding of the nightmare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered—of which this story tells only a few" (324).

The structure of the book, similar to that of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* is centered on not one narrator but many. Combining journal excerpts, newspaper clippings, letters, and drawings, each of the book's first three sections consists of interwoven stories from the sisters, including the surviving sister, Dedé. Mate, the youngest, gives expression to the power of unified female voices as she writes in her prison journal, "There *is* something deeper. Sometimes I really feel it in here, especially late at night, a current going among us, like an invisible needle stitching us together into the glorious, free nation we are becoming" (239). Alvarez's use of female collective memory resonates with notions of third-world feminism and what Emma Pérez identifies as the "decolonial imaginary": women's experiences that have been negated and usurped by a masculine universalist narrative. Alvarez creates sisters who speak uniquely from different spaces, showing the individual paths they have plowed in their journey of political consciousness and revolution, a subject with few female narrators. She writes, "I wanted to understand the living, breathing women who had faced all the difficult challenges and choices of those terrible years. I believed that only by making them real, alive, could I make them mean anything to the rest of us" (*Something to Declare* 203). All of the sisters, including the surviving Dedé, create and represent unique roles of the revolution as they speak over decades of experience with mother- and sisterhood, love, school, religion, secrecy, prison torture, and bomb making.

In the final section of the book, an epilogue with Dedé speaking in 1994, Alvarez opens the novel's scope of political consciousness further by raising awareness of current world conditions. Dedé questions the notion that the full story has ended and wonders whether the sacrifice of her sisters ends in the conditions of today. By leaving room for future female heroines and revolutionaries, Alvarez creates a novel that unites past and present with difficult, complicated questions that run through the course of her works.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In her postscript to the book, Alvarez argues that as figures are glorified and mythified, they

become inaccessible; this process is also a dangerous method that makes tyrants like Trujillo untouchable. How, then, does fiction counteract this? How is Alvarez successful in recreating the truth of historical events through her fiction?
2. What other texts use multiple authors to recount important events? How do these compare to *In the Time of Butterflies*? What events should be told from multiple perspectives? Justify your answer.

"Queens, 1963" (1995)

Alvarez's collection of poems in *The Other Side/El Otro Lado* differs from her earlier collection, *Homecoming*. As the title indicates, border dualities and the conflicted combining of cultures in the United States are the focus of most of the book's poems, particularly those of the third section, entitled "Making Up the Past." Several of the powerful images within these poems focus attention on immigrant culture and the ways we divide and shape ourselves. In "Exile," Alvarez ends with the image of herself and her father looking at a family of beach-bound mannequins in Macy's window. As they back away, they see both their reflections "superimposed, big-eyed, dressed too formally / with all due respect as visitors to this country" (28). In another poem, "Sound Bites," Alvarez illustrates the pressure she felt to melt and dissolve into the right kind of person: "Give yourself over, girl, / to the blond, blue-eyed possibilities / so that even as a brown-haired, / olive-skinned spic chick, / you can click with the gringas / you can jive, you can swing, *¡Epa!* / like you are here on a personal invite / from the United States of America" (41).

She exposes the myth of the joyful melting pot both personally and on a larger scale in "Queens, 1963," where her 1963 neighborhood makes up the poem's powerful yet practically silent cast. As she painfully remembers life prior to her family's assimilation, when they "melted into the block" (31), she feels empathetic pains for the new black family, who, as the neighborhood's racial target, suffer from not "being the right kind of American" (33). Alvarez, however, does not just create poems exposing the injustice immigrants felt (and still feel) in their own neighborhoods; she also establishes the paradoxical complexities of the melting pot myth. The narrator's global immigrant neighbors talk to one another about one another. Ms. Scott, who believes that "white and black got along / by staying where they belonged" (32), also discriminates against her Jewish neighbor but complains to the narrator's Dominican-American mother, who responds in Spanish. Alvarez illustrates a neighborhood of iron curtains and harmful racial gossip that keeps neighbors talking and threatening. The black family is forced to leave, and the narrator looking out the window wants to offer a wave of welcome but gapes instead, remembering what it felt like before she and her family "melted / into the United States of America" (33). The poem closes with the image of the houses sinking back into the tall grasses, which were there "before the first foreigners owned / any of this free country" (33). The ideas and accompanying images in this poem reflect a nation's conflicted history of expansion, erasure, and the eradication of differences.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do the neighbors both excuse and perpetuate the cultural divisions within their neighborhood? How does this happen locally and globally?
2. In *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity,* David Gutiérrez suggests that those who see immigrants only in terms of their formal lawful status also see immigrants not as valuable members of the American community but only in two categories—either "legal or illegal, a citizen or an alien, an American or a foreigner" (211). How does Alvarez's poem argue for and against this belief?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON ALVAREZ AND HER WORK

1. What does Alvarez mean by the legacy of Trujillo? In what ways do we participate in the

legacy of Trujillo? Find other writings that are based on the legacies of former rulers. How is a novel based on history different from actual historical writing? Explain your answer.

2. After Alvarez wrote the original version of *Homecoming,* she later published a revised version two years after the publication of *In the Time of Butterflies* in 1994. She claims that in writing the second edition of *Homecoming,* she had more political maturity. How do her added poems and ideas coincide with some of the major themes found within *In the Time of Butterflies*?
3. In *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Gloria Anzaldúa argues that as a Chicana feminist she fights multiple battles on cultural, gender, and sexual grounds. Many of these battles happen simultaneously. What simultaneous battles do Alvarez's characters fight? What sort of multiple causes are they fighting for?
4. In *So Far from God,* Ana Castillo, another Latina author, has written a book in which the main characters are four sisters. Compare and contrast the themes of this book and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents.*
5. Alvarez writes as an immigrant in the 1960s and 1970s, yet how is her writing a critique on immigration today? How do authors like Alvarez negate the culture of silence when it comes to contemporary immigration wars? Provide specific examples from her work and that of others.
6. Mothers are often depicted as strong influences in works by what Alvarez calls "hyphenated" Americans. Find three works in which this is so and analyze the role of the mother in each. Include citations to each work in your analysis.

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Megan Inclán

Rudolfo Anaya (1937–)

A novel is not written to explain a culture; it creates its own.

(Rudolfo Anaya, neabigread.org/books/blessmeultima/teachersguide04.php)

While it may be true, as Anaya states, that a novel creates its own culture, his works are deeply autobiographical. As such, they cannot help but reflect the culture in which he was raised. Born to a large family on October 30, 1937, in the small town of Pastura, New Mexico, Anaya was in many ways caught between cultures. There was the obvious struggle between the dominant American culture and his own Hispanic home culture, but even on a family level, Rudolfo faced conflicting allegiances to the wandering ranching culture of his father and to the settled farm life of his mother.

In his autobiography, Anaya recounts an early experience when the differing expectations of his parents became especially apparent: As he was beginning to crawl, his extended family gathered around him. Each person had an item representative of his or her wishes for the baby. Martín Anaya, missing the *llano* (open plain) of his cowboy days and wishing the freedom of a ranch life for his son, put a saddle in front of the child. Rafaelita (Mares) valued education and hoped her son might become a priest. She placed a paper and a pencil in the circle. As if in prophecy, young Rudolfo crawled toward the pencil. Antonio, the young protagonist of *Bless Me, Ultima,* Anaya's debut novel, similarly faces a struggle to choose his own path, despite parents who would choose for him. Anaya comments on the similarities between his life and fiction in an interview with Rubén Martínez:

> I have a very close relationship to the characters I write about because they come out of my life. At the same time you have to remember that fiction somehow transcends that reality, that experience and reality that we use as a basis, as the ground, from which to work. I then let it take off, let it spiral, let it create itself so that it is not a completely historical reflection. I am doing it partially as a reflection of where I come from, the people I came from, the towns I came from, the barrio in Albuquerque here where I grew up, but always allowing the element of the imagination to create fiction and to create art, to create some kind of pattern out of that total experience. (Dick 117)

Anaya's mother encouraged a love for literature through the *cuentos* (folktales) that she told him. Sharing *cuentos* at gatherings is common in Hispanic culture and Anaya acknowledges the role of that oral tradition combined with the Saturday mornings he spent at the library: They surrounded him with "a milieu of words [. . . which are] important to stimulate the writer's imagination; to respond to what is going on around him, to incorporate the materials and then rehash them and make fiction—to start at a point of reference which is close to one's being and then to transcend it, that's important" (Dick 15).

Although Anaya had a love of learning, his early school years were difficult. As was the norm within

the Hispanic community, his parents spoke Spanish in the home. It was only when Anaya entered school at the age of six that he was introduced to the English-speaking world and, with it, the discrimination that separated Anglo and Hispanic cultures.

After World War II, many Mexican-American families moved to larger cities in search of work. Anaya's family was no exception. When he was 15, his family relocated to the barrio in Albuquerque known as Barelas. He did well in school and enjoyed the life of a typical teenager—playing basketball and baseball, riding a bike—until he was injured in a tragic accident that could easily have killed him.

He and his friends were at their favorite swimming spot, a deep irrigation ditch, when Anaya dove in and struck bottom. Two of vertebrae in his neck snapped, and he was instantly paralyzed. He would have drowned had a friend not dragged him to shore. In the months that followed, Anaya lived through a hellish recovery process that transformed him completely. To immobilize his neck, a pulley was strapped around his chin and counterbalanced with weights. When that was unsuccessful, a doctor "bore holes into his skull and placed pins to hold the ropes of the pulley that were attached to the headboard" (Baeza 7). Later he was driven to the Carrie Tingley Hospital, located in the middle of the desert, and placed in a full-body cast. He fought hard to recover, but he says, "The 'Rudy' of my childhood was dead—died in nights of tortured fever while he hung on ropes" (Baeza 7). The Rudolfo Anaya who emerged from the hospital to graduate with his class from Albuquerque High School in 1956 had built "a new faith inside the shell of bones and muscle" (Olmos 5).

Anaya attended business school for two years, then switched his major to English and transferred to the University of New Mexico. Although he found the university to be a primarily Anglo environment, Anaya formed a small clique with several other Chicano students who shared his interest in art and literature. Together, they read and encouraged one another's efforts. Anaya's first attempts at writing were poems, but he soon realized he "probably didn't have the gift that some people are blessed with." He switched to prose and immediately began to write novels, completing two or three while he was an undergraduate. He considered those early novels "exercises in learning to write" and burned them (Dick 14).

Anaya describes the process of learning to write as difficult, in part because of the lack of sufficient role models:

> When I first began to work, I used Anglo American writers as role models. But I couldn't get my act together until I left them behind. They had a lot to teach me and I don't underestimate that—you're learning whether you're reading a comic book or Hemingway or Shakespeare or Cervantes—but I couldn't tell my story in their terms. (Dick 108)

Yet no other "terms" were available. In all his years of schooling, Anaya had not read a single example of Chicano prose. No one had succeeded in publishing a novel that reflected the true Chicano experience.

Upon completion of a B.A. in English and American literature at the University of New Mexico in 1963, Anaya became a teacher, instructing classes at both the junior- and senior-high levels. He continued his education, receiving an M.A. in English in 1968 and another in guidance and counseling in 1972. It was during his time in school that he met Patricia Lawless, a Kansas native also trained in guidance and counseling. They married in 1966 and Anaya felt he had found in her "the one person who believed I could be a writer" (Baeza 17).

With encouragement from his new wife, Anaya spent seven years writing and rewriting a story about Antonio, a young Chicano boy growing up in the Southwest. While the story had autobiographical roots, Anaya found it difficult to "uncover the symbols and patterns of his own culture." The story felt flat and lifeless. It was then that Ultima appeared to him: "That strong old curandera . . . came to me one night and pointed the way. That is, she came to me from my subconscious, a guide and

mentor who was to lead me into the world of my native American experience" (Olmos 7).

For Anaya, the symbol of Ultima became a powerful demonstration of how the myths and symbols of a cultural conscious could be inculcated by literature. Under Ultima's watchful guidance, Anaya grew to realize that to write authentically, he had to write not as a Chicano trying to fit his story into an Anglo framework, but as a Chicano giving birth to his own story, thereby laying claim to his full richness of heritage and language. Through this process of rebirth, the story of Antonio became more than a simple coming-of-age novel about a young boy; Antonio's tale, now titled *Bless Me, Ultima,* represented *la tristeza de la vida* (literally, the sadness of life).

At the same time that Anaya was struggling to write his novel, Chicanos all over the Southwest were rallying behind leaders like César Chávez, Corky Gonzalez, Ramsey Muniz, and Reyes López Tijerina. Chicanos were no longer content to be treated as aliens within the nation of their birth. They demanded more rights and recognition of their worth as individuals and as a culture. The political and social upheavals created a Hispanic community hungry for literature that reflected the truths of their lives.

Publishers in New York were far removed from the political and social ripples of the Southwest. Unacquainted with the innovations Anaya's work represented, they rejected his uniquely Chicano style, which did not fit within their definition of literature. Undaunted by the accumulating pile of rejection letters, Anaya answered a call for submission he had seen in *El Grito,* a literary magazine born of the Chicano movement at Berkeley. His novel was not only accepted by the newly formed Quinto Sol Publications, but also honored with the 1971 Premio Quinto Sol as the best novel written by a Chicano. Thus began Anaya's fame as the father of Chicano literature.

When the book appeared on the market, Chicanos everywhere recognized themselves within its pages. It was incorporated into classrooms as teachers and professors realized its potential. Most rewarding to Anaya was the fact that the "working people" were reading it. The world had proven it was ready for a new kind of literature that reflected the multicultural experience of America.

Still, the reaction to *Bless Me, Ultima* was not all positive. Anaya's use of strong language, praised by many as lending an authenticity to the work, was condemned by some. Others objected to the inclusion of folk belief, which they interpreted as witchcraft, as a central theme. The scene in which the young hero observes his own birth—a wonderful introduction to the technique of magical realism—drew particular critical fire.

Public schools were deeply affected by the controversy, unsure whether to embrace its innovations or to reject them outright. Many chose rejection. In 1981 an administrator at Bloomfield High School in New Mexico burned the book, citing its use of corrupt language and the challenge it presents to sacred values of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Norwood High School banned the book, explaining that it was a double standard to use the book for mandatory assignments when school policy penalizes students for using similar profanity. In response to those who would ban his book, Anaya says, "There are still some very narrow views of what literature is and what literature should be taught in this country. . . . This country is multicultural and the more their children know about other communities not only the better off will they be communicating with those communities, but they will have a better life in terms of future work" (Dick 171).

Anaya's success with *Bless Me, Ultima* led to a position in the English Department at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. By then, Anaya was hard at work on his second novel, a story about a displaced family's struggle to overcome addiction and violence. The story was published in 1976 as *Heart of Aztlan* and received praise for exploring the strong bond between the Chicano people and the mythical Aztlan. Just three years later, *Tortuga* was published, winning the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award and completing what is referred to as Anaya's New Mexico Trilogy.

Anaya's trilogy is linked not only through the use of uniquely Anayan devices such as extended dream sequences, shamanlike characters, and the

infusion of myth, but also more subtly through the carrying over of characters. Jason, whom readers remember from *Bless Me, Ultima* as the boy with an Indian friend, appears as the son of the protagonist in *Heart of Aztlan*. Similarly Crispín, the blind poet of *Heart of Aztlan,* sends his blue guitar as a gift in *Tortuga*. Even the boy known only as Tortuga possibly has his origin in an earlier novel as Benjie Chavéz, who is shot in the left hand and paralyzed when he falls from a water tower (Olmos 74). And where actual characters do not overtly bridge the gap between novels, character traits do in the form of archetypes. There are Antonio, Clemente, and Tortuga, all on spiritual quests for identity; and Ultima, Crispín, and Salomón, the spiritual guides who mentor them. Even the lesser characters have their base in Jungian archetypes: the strong "good mother" figures of María and Adelita, the "feminine principle" (ideal woman) of Cristina and Ismelda, the "shadow" (destructive force) of Tenorio, Sapo, and Danny.

Novels may be Anaya's preferred form, but he has by no means limited himself to long-form prose. Several of his short stories appeared in his collection *The Silence of the Llano* (1982). Anaya turned his attention to children's books when he sat down to read bedtime stories to his grandchildren and realized "[Chicano] children who are pre-school age or in the early grades do not see themselves in stories, and they should. I thought it was really important to develop writing in that area" (Dick 175). To that end, Anaya began to write his own stories based on the *cuentos* of his childhood, publishing *The Legend of La Llorona* in 1984, *Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcóatl* in 1987, and other picture books focusing on Chicano traditions and legends.

Lest Anaya's adult readers feel neglected, in 1992 he returned to the novel with *Alburquerque* [*sic*]. As is evident from the altered spelling of the city's name, *Alburquerque* is more political than his previous works, attacking the infrastructure of the city and raising questions about urban development. Still, in the words of John Nichols, author of *The Milagro Beanfield War,* the novel overcomes politics to reflect "a deep caring for the land and culture and for the spiritual well being of people, environment, landscape" (Baeza 43).

Caring for the land, Anaya claims, is a cultural attribute that stems from an early and long-lasting reliance on the land. He describes the Chicano people as "a communal group that for a long period of time relied on the earth for subsistence, thereby becoming very tied to the cycles of weather, of planting, of nurturing, of watering, of caring. It is easy to see why *la tierra* becomes *la madre tierra* [the earth becomes mother earth]" (Dick 123–124). The theme of the earth as mother is present in all of Anaya's works but becomes especially important in *Alburquerque* as it examines the displacement of peoples and cultures in the Southwest.

The 1990s ushered in a new chapter in Anaya's writing with a shift to the detective novel. Detective fiction, as has most genre fiction, has largely been dismissed by universities as not worthy of literary study. But as Ralph Rodriguez explains, detective fiction is ultimately a quest for identity by an "alienated outsider, the moral man or woman in the corrupt world" (6), and provides a unique framework for exploring the underlying values of a culture. Rodriguez goes on to explain that the role of alienated outsider strikes a cord with many Chicanas/os, who are often portrayed as alien within their own country. It is not surprising then that Chicanas/os should turn to the detective novel as a platform for their own identity stories.

Rudolfo Anaya is not the first writer to cast a Chicano in the role of sleuth. But where other mystery writers use the genre as a form for their Chicano heroes, Anaya redefines it. From the relationship of the villain to the hero, his unique perspective on the nature of history, and the magical realism common in his earlier novels, only Anaya could have written the Sonny Baca detective series.

In 1993 Anaya retired from the University of New Mexico as professor emeritus. Leaving the university afforded him more time for exploring the world and fostering the day-to-day relationships he says grow more important as we age. He travels to discuss his work with others and devotes time to mentoring new writers. Through it all, he has continued to write, experimenting with still another

genre—the play. As Anaya himself has said, "One's autobiography does not end; it simply moves into a new, and, one hopes, exciting plane of living" (González-T. 388).

In her critical companion, the biographer Margarite Fernández Olmos credits Rudolfo Anaya with "inscribing the physical and spiritual landscape of Chicano culture onto the terrain of contemporary U.S. literature" (1). That ability to transcend class and culture, integrating all it means to be Chicano into works with universal appeal, has earned Rudolfo Anaya a lasting place in literature.

Bless Me, Ultima (1972)

Heralded by literary critics as Anaya's "opus of Chicano life and culture" (Baeza 25), *Bless Me, Ultima* was like nothing the literary world had ever seen. Few works by Chicano writers had been published previously; of those, none had the mass appeal of Anaya's story about a seven-year-old boy's search to find his identity within the complex world of the Southwest. It seemed the right book at the right time for Chicanos, who were battling to redefine their status in the United States. Enrique Lamadrid describes the book as "serene in the face of this turmoil, full of conflict, yet non-combative, a portrait of the developing consciousness of the young protagonist, Antonio" (González-T. 464–465). The novel goes beyond Antonio to describe the developing conscious of the nation.

Antonio, the protagonist of *Bless Me, Ultima,* guides readers through the complex terrain of his life. When he is a young child, Antonio's parents speak only Spanish in the home; it is not until he goes to school that he is exposed to English. The narration reflects Antonio's own language, a hybrid of his home/school community. The use of both Spanish and English, at first a barrier to publication, was recognized by Chicanos as an authentic representation of speech and a key literary innovation. Anaya did in his writing what millions of people do every day: He made language personal, functional, and representative of the multicultural nature of American society. This process, called code switching, became a prevalent feature of the Chicano literary movement.

Antonio tells us on the first page that we will "begin at the beginning . . . not the beginning that was in my dreams and the stories they whispered to me about my birth, and the people of my father and mother, and my three brothers—but the beginning that came with Ultima." Ultima is left alone when war scatters her village. While the people appreciate Ultima's abilities as a *curandera,* "a miracle-worker who could heal the sick," they are reluctant to take her in because of rumors that she is a *bruja* (witch). Antonio's parents overcome their concern and invite Ultima to live with their family.

Ultima blends well with the Márez family, becoming an assistant to Maria, a confidant to Gabriel, and a mentor to Antonio. Soon she becomes indispensable: When the murder of the sheriff means trouble for the Márez home, it is Ultima's owl that warns them and Ultima herself who provides comfort to Antonio, a witness of the vigilante justice meted out by the townsmen.

But Ultima represents more to the story of Antonio than the "good mother" of Jungian thought. She becomes a central figure when she is asked to cure Antonio's uncle of a curse placed on him by Tenorio's daughters. Ultima asks Tenorio to have his daughters lift the curse, but they refuse. Ultima uses her own powers to cure the uncle, with Antonio as a spiritual double. One by one, Tenorio's daughters die and Tenorio vows vengeance upon Ultima.

Meanwhile, Antonio has grown old enough to attend school. His mother hopes that the church's teachings will lead him to become a priest, but as Antonio approaches the date of his First Holy Communion, the lessons he learns outside school fuel his doubts regarding the Catholic Church. Ultima's power to heal an illness that God himself could (or would) not cure and the willingness of his family to turn to a *curandera* for help confuse him. To make matters worse, a friend introduces him to the golden carp. The boys believe the golden carp is a god who prophesized that "the sins of the people would weigh so heavy upon the land that in the end the whole town would collapse and be swallowed by water" (123).

The golden carp is only one of the myths incorporated in the heart of the story. Throughout the book, there are references to La Llorona, the wailing woman said to search in the night for the children she herself killed. The story of Antonio and his quest for spiritual truth could not be told without references to the myths that surround him. But religion and myth do not have to be polar. Anaya had this to say about myth:

> We often look at mythology as if it happened in the distant past. We say: "The Greeks had their mythology, and the Toltecs and Aztecs of meso-America had their mythology. Isn't that interesting? It's all in the past; it's gone." We tend to view myth as static. What I am saying is that it is not static. It's working in us even now. Because those same archetypals that were discovered by the ancient people are in us today. And it is the creation of myth and that reference to that collective pool that we all carry inside of us that re-energizes us and makes us more authentic. (González-T. 464–465)

Antonio cannot reconcile what he is learning about power with the teachings of his church. He cannot reconcile the desires of his father that he be of the *llano* with the wishes of his mother that he be of the pasture. He cannot reconcile his own vision of himself with the expectations of friends who require him to be their priest. In his dreams, Antonio begins to face what he cannot consciously understand, and Ultima goes to him there, serving the same purpose as a "conciliatory force . . . guiding Antonio between the extremes of his parents and the myriad other tensions he must attempt to resolve" (Olmos 38). But as much as Antonio needs Ultima, he has learned from her that he must find his own truths. Ultima's death is symbolic of Antonio's readiness to "love life," but even in her passing Ultima promises that Antonio will not be alone, telling him, "If despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills. I shall be with you" (276).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Anaya created the myth of the golden carp. What purpose does the myth serve in the story of Antonio? Why do you suppose Anaya did not use an existing myth?
2. Discuss *Bless Me, Ultima* as a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age story. How does the character of Antonio universally reflect the struggle of any young person to find his or her place within society? In what way is Antonio's struggle unique to Chicanos?
3. Anaya says he looks at his own work through a sense of "the archetypal, about what we once must have known collectively" (Dick 422). Study the major archetypes and their attributes as described in Jungian theory. Create a chart of archetypes and the characters from Anaya's New Mexico Trilogy that correspond with each archetype. How do archetypes affect story? Experiment with archetypes in your own writing.
4. Look up the term *magical realism*. How does the scene in which Antonio views his own birth operate as this form of writing? Support your response.

Tortuga (1979)

Anaya's third novel in his New Mexico Trilogy is based loosely on his own experience as the survivor of a swimming accident. The story begins with an accident victim's being transported to the Crippled Children and Orphans Hospital of Agua Bendita by two colorful ambulance drivers. The drivers, Filomón and Clepo, tell the boy the story of Tortuga, the local mountain. Legend says the mountain is really a sea turtle that traveled north and became trapped beneath the earth's layers when the oceans turned to deserts. Filo proclaims that it is only a matter of time until the oceans return and free Tortuga. Meanwhile the people who live in Agua Bendita benefit from the rivers of "pee" that flow from Tortuga because they believe the minerals in the hot springs possess a healing power.

A doctor orders the boy placed in a full body cast to protect him while he begins physical therapy. The other children nickname him *Tortuga* because of his resemblance to the mountain: The cast surrounds and protects his body much the same as a turtle's shell. The name *Tortuga* is symbolic as well. It represents the boy's own entrapment and the hope that he, too, will one day break free of his cast and therefore his paralysis.

Unlike *Bless Me, Ultima,* in which the main character is revealed to readers by his own narration and dream sequences, it is through the interactions with the other characters in the book that we learn most about Tortuga. He is surrounded by other children who are in the hospital because of their own injuries and maladies. There are Mike, who survived the fire that killed his family, only to be physically and emotionally scarred for life; Danny, who becomes more and more fanatical as his arm withers away from some inexplicable cause; Jerry, the boy who was taken from his grandfather by "the Indian Health people" and waits in never-ending silence for his grandfather to track him down; Franco, whom we never actually meet, but whose songs float through the wards; and Salomón.

Of all the characters, it is Salomón who affects Tortuga most profoundly. Salomón is also paralyzed, but he has learned to turn the pages of books by using his tongue to manipulate a plastic rod. His stories have made him a legend within the hospital, and Tortuga often visits Salomón's room. Salomón is more than just another patient in the hospital. In "Journey into the Heart of Tortuga," Maria Lopez equates him with Aristotle's unmoved mover: "He is the immobile center of the hospital and those who dare must come to him" (González-T. 216). But before Tortuga can go to Salomón, Salomón goes to Tortuga in the form of a prophetic dream. As do Ultima and Crispín, he takes on the role of shaman, guiding Tortuga to his destiny.

It is Salomón who leads Tortuga to the infant ward, a macabre room filled with shriveled babies on iron lungs and feeding tubes. Salomón tells him, "That is why you have come here. . . . You must go to the very roots of sadness before you let out this shout of life that bursts in your lungs" (117). The sight of all the children "more dead than alive" drives Tortuga into a suicidal depression, from which he emerges only when Danny and two others toss him into the hospital's pool in an attempt at assisted suicide. The experience, characteristic of the death and rebirth of mythic heroes, leaves Tortuga free of his shell and transformed into a man capable of fulfilling Salomón's instruction, "Sing a song of love, Tortuga! Oh yes, sing of love" (196).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the role of nicknames in *Tortuga*. Why are Tortuga's true identity and the cause of his accident withheld from readers? Why is it significant that it is Danny, not Mike, who gives Tortuga his nickname? Explain your answer.
2. Salomón tells Tortuga, "When we are not of this time then we encounter absolute freedom" (54). Discuss how a person who is paralyzed may experience freedom. How have others defined freedom? Is freedom absolute or relative? Support your opinion.
3. Mike describes coming to terms with the accident that killed his mother and sisters: "When I finally realized that things just happen, that there's no reason, that there's no big daddy up in the sky watching whether you burn or not . . . much less caring, then it helped" (47). Tortuga admits that he still wonders why things happen. Does it help to have a reason? How might Mike feel comforted by believing there is no God, while others feel comforted by believing in God?
4. In *Tortuga,* the turtle is believed to be godlike, capable of curing maladies with its urine. As a class, create a mural depicting the animals prevalent in Chicano myths and the reasons for each animal's importance.
5. As a class, make a chart of the qualities that cause stories to be defined as character driven or plot driven. Apply your chart to *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Tortuga*. How do these stories fit within the definitions you have created?

The Sonny Baca Mysteries (1995–2005)

Anaya begins his series of detective fiction with *Zia Summer* (1995), in which he revives Sonny Baca, a minor character from *Alburquerque*. Baca's career as a private investigator is launched with the murder of his cousin, a case he resolves (as is typical of the genre) within the pages of the novel: Baca's cousin, it turns out, was sacrificed by Anthony Pájaro, a cult leader intent on destroying the world by detonating a nuclear device in New Mexico. Unlike other detective series, where the hero is constant and the villains change with each successive book, in Anaya's series both the hero and the villain remain constant. Pájaro comes to be known as Raven, a play on the English translation of his name and a more symbolic representation of his purpose in the series. *Zia Summer* is only round one in the ongoing battle between Baca and Raven, which is continued in the successive novels *Rio Grande Fall* (1996), *Shaman Winter* (1999), and *Jemez Spring* (2005).

The battle between Baca and Raven is more than the typical hero-versus-mass-murderer fare. As is often the case in Anaya's novels, the characters represent much more than is apparent on the surface. Baca's concerns go beyond the cases he investigates; he worries about the state of mankind's collective soul, fretting that "the beautiful people of Hollywood . . . [are] caricatures surrounding themselves with luxury, coated with a gold sheen but empty inside . . . all over the city we have the hombres dorados, men of empty promises" (*Zia* 362). Baca and Raven represent the forces of good and evil in their apocalyptic battle for control of humanity. Rodriguez contends that this conflict allows Anaya to examine "how, in the face of a persistent and commodified culture, it is possible to behave as a moral subject and thereby save not only one's own life but also the life of one's community" (108).

Anaya also uses the resurgence of Raven as a vehicle for exploring history as a living presence and influence on Chicano identity. In *Shaman Winter,* readers are told that "history did not happen and then go away for the people of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, it festered and grew into the bones, blood and soul. . . . People here lived and breathed history" (168). This view of history as living lends itself well to Anaya's theme of identity formation. Throughout the series, he doles out details from the history of the Chicano people, details that are not meant to be read and forgotten, but build upon each other to explain the current context of social identity for not only Sonny Baca, but also for Chicanas/os as a people.

Anaya further uses history as a "static context for present dilemmas" (Rodriguez 108). Through extended dream sequences, Baca is transported into the past to confront the forces that have shaped both him and his people. But as in Anaya's other works, dreams are not meaningless wonderings of the unconscious mind; they are bestowed with the magical power to transport Baca into history, beyond his own existence to the times of significant events within the formation of the Chicano culture. Raven appears in this past, and Baca must battle him on that plane as well, as Raven eventually tries to eradicate Baca by eliminating his ancestral bloodline.

The transportation into the past is not the only magical device used by Anaya in the series. As the reader progresses through the cycle, the story shifts more and more toward Baca's quest to become a shaman, the spiritual leader for his people. In that pursuit, Baca becomes an apprentice to the elders, learning the indigenous religious practices so that he may protect the New Mexican identity by saving its collective memories. As Baca moves closer to his goal of shaman, the magical elements within the story increase.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Napoleon Bonaparte is quoted as having said, "History is a set of lies agreed upon." In *Zia Summer,* Elfego Baca makes the following claim: "Chicano heroes have been erased from the white man's history. Forgotten" (299). In *Shaman Winter,* we are repeatedly told that history is written by the victors. Is there such a thing as "white man's history"? How would you construct a more pluralistic history of America?

2. In *Zia Summer,* Akira Morino argues, "All nations are products of colonization. . . . A new migration comes and a new culture is layered on the old" (300). How do these layers affect a culture's identity? An individual's place in society? Does a conquering nation have an obligation to help preserve a preexisting culture?
3. Take a poll within your school: What does the typical American look like? Examine the results. Why do you think people responded the way they did? Do you believe there is such a thing as a "typical American?" Debate what it means to be American.
4. Compare the alienation of Chicanos with the plight of the American Indian. How have the indigenous peoples of North America been represented in history books?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON ANAYA AND HIS WORK

1. Anaya is very interested in dreams. Choose three cultures and make a comparative analysis of the significance of dreams within each culture. Use literature from each culture to support your analysis.
2. Anaya has been called the godfather of Chicano literature. What makes some literature specifically Chicano? What contribution has Anaya made to American literature as a whole?
3. In his book *Stolen Continents,* Ronald Wright has this to say about myth:

> The word myth sometimes has a debased meaning nowadays—as a synonym for lies or fairy stories—but this is not the definition I intend. Most history, when it has been digested by a people, becomes myth. Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest values and aspirations. . . . They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time. (5)

What might Wright consider to be American myths, the maps that guide our present-day culture? What might Anaya?

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Maya Angelou (1928–)

Courage is the most important of all the virtues. Without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistent without courage.

(David Frost, "An Interview with Maya Angelou")

Maya Angelou is legendary. She has achieved acclaim as an author, poet, playwright, professional stage and screen producer, director, performer, college professor, and singer. Add to these gifts those of chef, newspaper editor, community activist, dancer, and linguist fluent in French, Spanish, Italian, and West African Fanti. Her autobiographies are often considered classics, and her poems personal anthems for living.

Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. She was the second child of Bailey Johnson, a naval cook, and Vivian (Baxter) Johnson, a gambler who ran a boarding house. Her parents divorced in 1931, when her brother, Bailey, was four years old and she was three. The children were sent to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas. In describing her home, Angelou wrote: "People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth. Other days he had to be satisfied with chocolate" (*Caged Bird* 47). Her brother, Bailey Johnson, was responsible for naming her Maya. "After Bailey learned definitely that I was his sister, he refused to call me Marguerite, but rather addressed me each time as 'Mya Sister,' and in later more articulate years, after the need for brevity had shortened the appellation to 'My,' it was elaborated into 'Maya'" (*Caged Bird* 66).

While visiting her mother in St. Louis in 1936, Maya was sexually assaulted by Vivian's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, setting off a chain of horrific events that Angelou would later detail in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). In 1940, Maya graduated at the top of her eighth-grade class at Lafayette County Training School in Arkansas. Vivian then took her children to San Francisco, where Maya attended George Washington High School. Artistically talented, she received a scholarship to the California Labor School in San Francisco, where she took classes in drama and dance. The school opened in 1942 and when it closed by 1948, "the remaining students continued to support a reduced number of classes on the cold war, McCarthyism, U.S. history, USSR and socialism, writing, literature and the arts" (California Labor School Collection).

Although a good student, Maya was fraught with adolescent insecurities, especially after she moved in with her father in Los Angeles in 1943. She ran away for a month, living in a junkyard with other homeless children. She then returned to her mother and to school in San Francisco, where, as a gawky six-foot-tall teenager struggling with questions of gender identity, she found difficulty establishing herself. Her relationship with the most popular boy at school resulted in a teenage pregnancy, and her son, Clyde Guy Johnson, was born the same year she graduated from high school, 1944.

Johnson, also an author, has written two books, *Standing at the Scratch Line* (1998) and *Echoes of a Distant Summer* (2002). He has this to say about growing up under his mother's shadow:

> The truth is, my mother scared me as a child . . . there was nobody else like her, anywhere . . . through my elementary and junior high school years, my mother wore her hair natural and regularly wore African dress . . . she would proudly proclaim at public gatherings that she was a "black woman." It was almost more than I could bear. . . . As I look back on those times, I feel a bit embarrassed about my ignorance. She was a pioneer. She stood up to the glares, snide comments, and ridicule generated by our cultural ignorance. My mother says that "Courage is the most important of all the virtues, for without it one cannot practice any of the others with consistency." . . . I am truly blessed by the gods to be Maya Angelou's son. . . . My mother opened doors for me and held them open until I passed through. . . . "Old Moms was and is hot! Love that maternal instinct." (Johnson "A Tribute to Maya" 44)

Even as a young person, Maya exhibited a capacity to do the extraordinary. In 1945, she became the first black woman streetcar conductor in San Francisco. This was a full 10 years before Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr., led the year-long Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott from 1955 to 1956. Angelou also grew up around extraordinary cooks, and she, too, became skillful. In 1946, she cooked for $75 a week at the Creole Café in California, something she would refer to later in *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes* (2004), a volume about the memorable meals and the good times she enjoyed growing up.

The 1940s continued to be a time of personal upheaval for Angelou. In 1947, she worked briefly as a prostitute. She returned to Stamps but was sent back to San Francisco by her grandmother, who feared her outspoken granddaughter would be hurt by the Ku Klux Klan. Back in the city, Angelou worked as a nightclub dancer and continued prostituting herself until her frustrated brother stepped in and convinced her to stop.

Still trying to find herself, she married a sailor, Tosh Angelos, in 1950. She told herself that Tosh was "Greek, not white American; therefore I needn't feel that I had betrayed my race by marrying one of the enemy, nor could white Americans believe that I had so forgiven them the past that I was ready to love a member of their tribe" (Cudjoe 22). Her last name, *Angelou,* is an adaptation of Tosh's surname.

After the marriage failed in 1953, Angelou returned to dancing at the Purple Onion, a popular California club. In 1954, she joined a touring company of the African American folk opera *Porgy and Bess,* sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. After a 22-nation tour of *Porgy,* Angelou became a dance instructor at the Rome Opera House and at Hambina Theatre in Tel Aviv. The following year she appeared in a play, *Calypso Heatwave.*

Also influenced by the burgeoning Civil Rights movement, Angelou decided to express herself in writing, moving to Brooklyn, New York, and joining the Harlem Writers Guild. In 1959 and 1960, she served as northern coordinator of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), in place of Bayard Rustin, who choreographed the 1963 March on Washington.

Angelou was prolific during the Black Arts Movement, or BAM, the artistic arm of the Black Power movement from the 1960s to 1970s. She appeared in one of the most important off-Broadway productions of the era, *The Blacks,* by Jean Genet, and in *Cabaret for Freedom,* both in 1960. In 1962, she moved to Cairo with Vusumzi Make, a South African Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) freedom fighter, and then moved to Ghana when their relationship ended. She worked as associate editor of the *Arab Observer,* an English-language newspaper; became feature editor of *African Review;* and contributed to the Ghanaian Broadcasting Company from 1963 to 1966. She was assistant administrator of the School of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies

at Legon-Accra, teaching dance, when Kwame Nkrumah was president. Her theater credits from this time include *Mother Courage* at the University of Ghana (1964), *Medea* in California (1966), and *The Least of These,* also in California (1966).

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, still Angelou's most famous book, made its first appearance in 1969. In 1970 alone, she was named writer-in-residence at the University of Kansas, received a Yale University fellowship, and saw *Caged Bird* nominated for a National Book Award. A year later, a volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie,* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. With several off-Broadway productions to her credit, Angelou prepared for a Broadway show, *Look Away* (1973), which received a Tony Award nomination. Of her inaugural body of work, James Baldwin said, "You will hear the regal woman, the mischievous street girl; you will hear the price of a black woman's survival and you will hear of her generosity. Black, bitter, and beautiful, she speaks of our survival" ("A Caged Bird She's Not," *Washington Post Magazine*).

Her diverse contributions continued as she published *Gather Together in My Name* (1974); directed the film *All Day Long* (1974); performed in *Ajax,* a classical play by Sophocles; and was named distinguished visiting professor at Wake Forest, Wichita State, and California State Universities. Next she published the poetic *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* and received honorary degrees from Smith College and Mills College—all in 1975. In 1976, she published *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas;* that same year, she directed *And Still I Rise,* which was published in 1978. When Alex Haley's *Roots* changed the face of television forever by introducing the television miniseries, Angelou was a part of that, too, and received a nomination for best supporting actress in the production (1977).

Angelou can make writing appear effortless, but she revealed her stoic creative process in a 1977 interview with the *Black Scholar:*

> Sometimes I will stay up in my room for a day trying to get two sentences that will flow, that will just seem as if they were always there. And many times I come home unable to get it so I go back the next day, 6:30 in the morning, every morning, 6:30 I go to work. I'm there by 7:00; I work till 2:00 alone in this tiny little room, 7 × 10 feet. I have had the room for two years and they have never changed the linen. I've never slept there. There is nothing in the room except a bed, a face basin, and that's it. I write in longhand. (*Black Scholar* 40)

Between 1981 and 1987, Angelou continued her prolific outpouring of writing with the autobiography *The Heart of a Woman,* the poetry collection *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?,* the autobiography *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes,* and the children's book *Mrs. Flowers: A Moment of Friendship,* closing out the decade with *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987). Honors and engagements, too, were as thick as publications. Angelou received a lifetime appointment as Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina (1981), was named one of the Top 100 Most Influential Women by *Ladies' Home Journal* (1983), won the North Carolina Award in Literature (1987), and directed a play written by Errol John, *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl,* in London.

By the 1990s, she had published *I Shall Not Be Moved* (poetry, 1990); *Souls Look Back in Wonder* (children's book, 1993); *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (essays, 1993); *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me* (children's book, 1994); *Phenomenal Women: Four Poems Celebrating Women* (1994); *A Brave and Startling Truth* (poetry, 1995); and *Kofi and His Magic* (children's book, 1996). In 1993, a pop-culture movie based on her poetry, *Poetic Justice,* was created, starring the singer Janet Jackson and the rapper Tupac Shakur. That same year, her writing touched the new administration of President William Jefferson Clinton when she created an inaugural poem, "On the Pulse of Morning" (1993).

The Maya Angelou of the 21st century shows no signs of slowing down. In 2001, Eugene Redmond, poet laureate of East St. Louis, Illinois, and author of *The Eye in the Ceiling,* said of her:

> I've known Maya more than 30 years. What may appear to be a meteoric rise has actually been a measured and powerful one. What hasn't changed is that Maya is always growing. She is constantly studying and she plays games—word games, parlour games and card games, to keep her mind sharp. She's 72 and she's smokin'! (Angaza 32)

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969)

Angelou's first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* has become an American classic, read at almost every level of education. Nominated for a National Book Award, it was also a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection and has been published worldwide in numerous languages.

The work, an autobiography, is about being black and female in the South during the depression. It addresses powerful universal themes, including rootlessness, abandonment, learning to love one's self, the hurdles of humankind, and the role courage plays in the living of life. As Angelou said in an interview with the television talk-show host David Frost, "Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently" (Frost). This is Angelou's genius: Her writing allows readers to grow philosophically. Through her novels, she imparts wisdom, all through the looking glass of her multitextured experiences. As she herself has noted: "I speak to the black experience but I am always talking about the human condition—about what we can endure, dream, fail at, and still survive" (Gross 90–91).

The characters in the book are Marguerite Johnson (Maya Angelou), the narrator of the story; Bailey, her loyal brother; Annie Henderson, Maya's God-fearing paternal grandmother; Mr. McElroy, the independent neighbor; Vivian Baxter, Maya's beautiful mother; Bailey Johnson, Sr., Maya's insensitive father; Uncle Willie, Maya's disfigured relative; Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a literate neighbor; the Baxter family, which includes Grandmother Baxter and a group of uncles; Mr. Freeman, Vivian's boyfriend, who rapes and threatens Maya; Daddy Clidell, Maya's worldly stepfather; and the white Mrs. Cullinan. To this long and varied list, Angelou adds numerous minor characters, who are in actuality not at all minor, as they memorably impact the book, regardless of how brief their appearances. The geographical settings, of course, mirror those of Angelou's life in Arkansas, California, and Missouri, from the depression-stained 1930s until the time Angelou became a teenage mother.

When the story opens, the reader finds two small children, three-year-old Marguerite and four-year-old Bailey, literally thrown away by their divorced parents. Sent to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, the children feel rejected and only marginally accepted by their adopted southern town. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat," Angelou has said (Yonge 25 May 2002). Threatened, yes, but Marguerite nevertheless manages to find two loves, both with the same name, *William*: her uncle Willie and William Shakespeare. She connects with Uncle Willie, who is crippled—enough to wish he were her real father—because she, too, feels uncomfortable and unpretty in her body. In Shakespeare, she finds a deep attraction to his way with words, a gift she will also acquire. To her surprise, when Maya becomes an adult and is attending Uncle Willie's funeral, she encounters a black man of note, an unlikely someone else who also loved her uncle:

> I had no idea this elegant man way up north in Little Rock had any idea . . . would know Willie. My uncle, he was so ashamed of being crippled that he wouldn't even go to Louisville, Arkansas, which was five miles from Stamps and the County Seat. He said, "You know the State of Arkansas has lost a great man losing Willie." I asked him, Willie Johnson? He said, "The United States has lost a great man in Willie." I said, "W. M. Johnson?" He said, "The world." He said, "You know, I was the only child of a deaf mother, and your Uncle Willie gave me a

> job in your store, paid me ten cents a week in the '20s. And, he taught me to love to learn. And I'm now—I guess you may want to know who I am—he taught me my times tables." I said, "How did he do it?" He said, "He used to grab me by my clothes. . . . Because of him I am who I am. I guess you want to know who I am." And I said, "Yes." He said, "I am the Mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas." (King 30 November 2003)

As in the work of the 1930s novelist Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), the narrator focuses on the general store, owned by the very strict Annie Henderson and kept by Uncle Willie. Owning the store allows Annie and Willie to stand slightly apart from their destitute black neighbors. They *own* something, and the children feel part of a family through the store and the chores involved there. Yet it is also in these early chapters that the reader learns of Marguerite's pain over not being physically beautiful. She is often teased by other children for being so large and gawky, but Bailey always lovingly protects her.

Early on, Angelou examines southern social rituals of the time, especially the habit of walking through town and speaking to everyone—something Maya finds unheard-of in urban settings. Most of the whites depicted in the novel live on the other side of the segregated town, where, Maya discovers, blacks must maintain a subservient and submissive demeanor. Even when blacks are flanked by rude white children who are disrespectful to them and taunt them at every opportunity, white society and law dictate that they must back down. Maya learns that if you are black and want to live a peaceful life, you have to "wear the mask," as Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote in his poem "We Wear the Mask," and must not allow fear to crack your public veneer. Angelou would grow to love this and other poems by Dunbar, reciting his work from memory. Nonetheless, she could never accept the second-class citizenship that was a daily reality for her grandmother and uncle.

Religion, too, plays a central role in the black community of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* Faith is such a systemic part of the landscape that the character of Mr. McElroy, the Hendersons' next-door neighbor, immediately stands in stark contrast with the rest of Maya's world. Although he is always dressed formally in a suit, unlike the rest of the community McElroy never enters a church, a most unusual act for a black man living in the Bible Belt South. Unfortunately, the minister, the Reverend Howard Thomas, is the very representation of a sinner—a taker, glutton, and manipulator. Invited to dinner, Thomas sits at Annie's table and eats everything in sight, never pausing to consider what the children will do for their meal. Because he rejects the behavior Thomas espouses, Maya's kind friend Mr. McElroy becomes a hero for her, a symbol of independence.

As depicted by Angelou, even religion is not safe from the evils of white supremacy. The children see the great contrasts between the lives that white people enjoy and the privations of their own community. Reasoning that since God was the giver of all—a lesson taught repeatedly from the Stamps pulpit—Maya naturally assumes that he must be white also. By his very actions, which leave the white and black communities both separate and unequal, he was intentionally leaving her out. She naturally assumes, "Of course, I knew God was white too" (Bloom 27).

For the black residents of Stamps, fear as a means of control is a mainstay. When a local white woman has supposedly been "messed with," all of the black men in town go into hiding. Even crippled Uncle Willie is hidden in the floor planks of the store, for fear of the vigilantes who hunt down black men without justice or due process. One of the most powerful scenes in the book takes place when Bailey, Maya's brother, encounters the aftermath of a lynching. As a measure of intimidation, the drowned, decomposing body of a black man is placed in a jail cell full of black prisoners. Bailey comes face to face with this dead man and is terrorized beyond belief. As does Maya, Bailey experiences horrors no child should have to face.

The children's relationship to their parents during these years is curious, to say the least. They do not see Bailey, Sr., and Vivian for some time but remain with their grandmother, never even receiving Christmas or birthday presents from their missing parents. One year, the children receive a major shock when their parents send gifts. They have more or less dismissed their mother and father, assuming that either they are dead or they do not love them—until the gifts prove otherwise. However, the gifts only usher in a new time of displacement for Maya and Bailey, who are subsequently tossed from relative to relative, including a spell with their maternal grandparents and their crowd of gamblers and blues singers, always willing to fight.

When Maya is eight years old and staying with Vivian in St. Louis, she is sexually assaulted by her mother's live-in boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. This part of the autobiography is pivotal, just as it was in Angelou's actual life, for the child's essence is stolen, and she spirals out of control for years afterward. Maya finally tells Bailey what has happened, hesitating only because Mr. Freeman has threatened that if she tells anyone, he will kill her brother. She testifies in court, and although Freeman is put in jail, he is freed the next day. Within hours, his body is discovered, kicked and beaten to death. By the manner in which Grandmother Bailey accepts this news—as if she is well aware of what happened and who performed the deed—the reader can surmise that her "mean" and very tough and fighting sons, acting as judge and jury on behalf of their defenseless niece, have taken care of Mr. Freeman. After his death, Marguerite concludes that her words have the power to kill and wills herself to a life of muteness. "Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people . . . I had to stop talking" (Gross 90–91).

The children are then moved back to Stamps and mute Maya is taken under the wing of Mrs. Flowers, a literate and gracious black woman in the neighborhood who introduces her to poetry and makes cookies and lemonade just for her. She absorbs the poetry and recites it well. Finally, she has something of her own! "I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson" (Bloom 35). She emerges from her silence and enters another part of her life with Mrs. Glory, Mrs. Cullinan's cook, who teaches Maya how to be in domestic service to a high-quality white family. Mrs. Glory shows Maya the finer things in life, but Mrs. Cullinan decides that she will call Maya "Mary" because Marguerite/Margaret is too long. No manner of entreaty can change Mrs. Cullinan's symbolic erasing of Maya's identity. However, when Maya takes Bailey's advice—to destroy her employer's favorite pieces of glass and fine china whenever she calls her by the wrong name—she wins both her identity and her dignity.

Central to the book is a scene that denotes black community strength as well as the reality of a de facto American apartheid existing in the 1930s. It occurs when the store is used as a community center to listen to the radio broadcast of the Joe Louis fight. Louis, known as "the brown bomber," knocks out a white boxer, Primo Carnera—something unthinkable to whites at the time. A highly symbolic event to both blacks and whites, the victory becomes a cause for celebration among the community gathered around the radio, with soda, candy bars, and alcohol being passed freely around. These ordinary people, according to Angelou, do not know much of victory. If Louis had lost, she wrote, her Stamps community believed that black people would be "back in slavery and beyond help" (Lupton 59). After the fight, however, little changes. Black families continue to stay off main roads, because they know bands of infuriated whites will be looking for black people to harm in retaliation for Louis's victory. Still, they hold this symbolic victory close to their hearts.

In yet another crucial scene, Maya prepares to graduate from the eighth grade. She feels pretty and successful, but a white visitor to commencement dampens spirits by detailing the improvements that will go to the white school. Ironically, the visitor stereotypes Maya and her classmates as being incapable of intellectual achievement, hinting

that their black school, the home of athletes, may receive a paved playing field. The children, proud of their academic prowess as well as their other talents, are angered, but one boy stands and begins to sing the Negro national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," shaming the condescending visitor and making a collective and powerful response to the speaker's news.

A scene at the dentist's office is also painfully revealing of 1930s southern culture. The one dentist in town, a white man, does not accept black patients. However, he has borrowed money from Annie and still owes her. She and her granddaughter go for treatment but are turned away; he declares he would rather put his "hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (Lupton 58). Maya's toothache is horrendous, so Annie confronts the dentist alone, hectoring him into paying back her 10 dollars so they can take the bus to visit the black dentist. This small victory gives the family a chuckle later that evening, one of the few they get at a white man's expense—and an example of the ways in which Angelou depicts minor acts of courage in the ongoing struggles of life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a work of survival. Discuss this book, which takes place largely in the 1930s, in comparison with Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.* Consider such elements as their historical backgrounds, the depiction of the characters, and themes the two works share.
2. What is the relationship between Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy" and Angelou's autobiography? Analyze the poem, discussing its key metaphor as the central theme of Angelou's work.
3. Although *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is on practically every school and book club reading list, it has its detractors. In September 1999 in *Harper's Magazine,* the novelist Francine Prose cited what she calls "the manipulative melodramas of Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*) and Maya Angelou":

   > One can see why this memoir might appeal to the lazy or uninspired teacher who can conduct the class as if the students were the studio audience for Angelou's guest appearance on *Oprah.* But much more terrifying than the prospect of Angelou's pieties being dissected for their deeper meaning, is the notion of her language being used as a model of "poetic" prose style. . . . Who told students to [place] a dozen mixed metaphors in one paragraph? Where do students learn to write stale, inaccurate similes? (Angaza 32–33)

   Do you agree or disagree with Prose's assessment? Cite specific examples of Angelou's language to support your argument.

4. What is the role of African-American music in *Caged Bird*? Select two of the themes of the book and discuss how African-American music informs the reader with regard to each. Support your answer with specific examples from the text.

"My Brother Bailey and Kay Francis" (1969)

An excerpt from Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* this story focuses on the main character's brother. The custom in their small southern enclave is for people to go into town, walking past the store for gossip and sweets. Maya's grandmother, Annie Henderson, gives money to the children every week. Maya gives her portion to Bailey, who promptly heads to the movie theater in town, afterward purchasing cowboy books for his sister.

One Saturday evening, Bailey does not return home as usual. Dark falls, and his aunt and uncle fear the worst—that he may have been harmed by white thugs. When Bailey finally comes down the dark road, Maya notices he is not the same: He looks "tired and old-mannish. Hands in his pockets and head bent, he walked like a man trudging up

the hill behind a coffin" (*Caged Bird* 112). Because he cannot give an excuse for his tardiness, Uncle Willie beats him. Bailey does not even cry. When he goes to bed that night, he strangely reverts to his early youth and prays, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take" (113). Listening to him recount the childhood prayer, Maya knows Bailey has endured something terrible.

It takes a few days, but he finally talks to her. He did see a movie, but this time he sat through it twice, which is why he was so late getting home. He did so because he could not believe his eyes: "I saw Mother Dear. . . . It wasn't really her. It was a woman named Kay Francis. She's a white movie star who looks just like Mother Dear" (114). "Mother Dear" is Vivian, the children's on-again, off-again mother. The children do not speak of her to Grandma Henderson or Uncle Willie because, as Maya writes, "She was our mother and belonged to us. She was never mentioned to anyone because we simply didn't have enough of her to share" (114). Vivian is like a phantom to the children.

Two months after Bailey's beating, the Kay Francis movie returns to town. This time, both children go. From their segregated seats in the balcony, they watch as the show, a comedy, depicts white people as rich and black people as idiot servants. Maya cannot help thinking that this woman looks just like her mother, except that her mother is prettier. Further, as did her mother, this woman lived in extravagance.

At the end of this show, Bailey, tormented by the loss of his mother, a person they barely know and who by all indication scarcely cares for them, tries to commit suicide on the railroad track. He is thrown into depression by a loss he cannot understand. The absence of his mother is more than he can bear. He no longer wants to live unless he can have his family intact, and that is why he has begun to chant the childlike prayer—something he learned when the entire family was together, when he was two or three years old and his mother was at least within his sight.

Maya's reaction is quite different from Bailey's. She feels that whenever the white theater patrons laugh at the buffoonery of the black actors and revel in Kay Francis's beauty, they are in fact revealing their appreciation of a woman who bears a striking resemblance to her own mother. She understands that somehow, their response gives the Kay Francis/Mother figure the upper hand. Even though the white audience's palpable hatred for black people rises from the first floor to the balcony in the form of sneers and hisses, she feels that the whites are inadvertently validating her mother's beauty in all its blackness, something unheard-of in Stamps or anywhere in the South. Although their fancied representation of their mother tears the children apart because they live in such humble surroundings, they also remember that Vivian lives in sumptuousness, something even the white theater patrons here could never afford to do.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Most movies shown in southern theaters during this era depicted black people only as subservient stereotypes. From your local video store or on the Internet, locate a movie from this period and watch it. Critique the film, making comparisons about the depiction of African Americans in it and in Angelou's story.
2. Compare and contrast the principal women in this story—Mrs. Flowers, Momma (Annie Henderson), and Vivian. Write a well-developed essay discussing what each character represents as a symbol, as a signifier of class, and as an individual.

"Woman Work" (1978)

"Woman Work," from Angelou's third volume of verse, *And Still I Rise* (1978), acknowledges and celebrates the place that women—as home managers, first teachers of a family's children, and leaders of the sisterhood—have in society. She begins the poem with a list of domestic jobs historically associated with womenfolk. The rhythm of the poem is

like that of a marching band, setting to the sound of a drum roll the image of a woman rising early and marching a beat to attend to her duties:

I've got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry. (lines 1–6)

The list is endless. The woman has no time—nor does she take any—to tend to her own needs. There is no time to nurture the relationship with her husband. She is mother and wife, a church sister who visits the sick and afflicted, and a laborer who picks cotton or tobacco in southern fields.

Alas, there is no time for anything—except in the next four stanzas, in which the speaker resolves woman is one with Mother Earth and waits to be blessed by Mother Earth, as a gift from the creator. She embraces the sun—"Shine on me, sunshine"—and asks the dewdrops to "cool my brow again." She asks the storm to blow her from reality to float, in a surreal state, "across the sky" until she "can rest again," with an aura of otherworldliness that suggests going to heaven or being taken to the promised land.

Strangely enough to some readers, the speaker expresses no bitterness over her load of responsibilities or for the isolation forced upon her by this schedule. The central character is simply content to be part of nature, who is her friend. Angelou begins "Woman Work" with a litany of chores but ends it with an affirmation, or possibly a plaintive cry: "Sun, rain, curving sky / Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone / Star shine, moon glow / You're all that I can call my own" (*Cape Verdean News* 6A).

Numerous critics have asserted that were it not for the immense popularity of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Angelou's poetry would hardly be given serious consideration. Her poems are thought by some to be thin in substance, lacking in poetic invention, and lackluster in language. Others, however, argue that her poems belong to a neglected oral tradition, incorporating elements of African-American slave songs and work songs, and can be seen as lyrics that require performance to reveal their depth and riches. As the critic Lyman B. Hagen has observed, "Angelou may rank as a poet of moderate ability, but her poetry is praised for its honesty and for a moving sense of dignity" (133–134).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In "Woman Work," the speaker is a woman enveloped in both domestic life and nature. Is this a demeaning position? Why or why not? Discuss your answer fully.
2. W. E. B. DuBois—sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, and cofounder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—believed that work was noble. Do you think the narrator of "Woman Work" feels the same way? Locate another poem about a working woman or man. Compare the two poems and analyze the tone and attitude toward work in each.

"On the Pulse of Morning" (1993)

It was a windy, sun-filled day, January 20, 1993, when President William Jefferson Clinton and Vice President Albert Gore were sworn into office. Clinton, a native of Arkansas as well as former governor, selected Maya Angelou, a daughter of Arkansas, to create the inaugural poem. Back when Clinton was raised in the town of Hope and Angelou in nearby Stamps, the relationship between blacks and whites was malignant—thus the very act of inviting Angelou was political. In fact, there had been no inaugural poet since the late Robert Frost, who read for John F. Kennedy in 1961.

The over-100-line "On the Pulse of Morning" constitutes a plea for peace and harmony among the world's diverse peoples. It is a chronicle of the evolution of life on earth, beginning with its mention of "The dinosaur, who left dry tokens / Of their sojourn here / On our planet floor." As Angelou names the descendants of this planet, she

enumerates "the African and Native American, the Sioux." She establishes an entitlement for each, saying, "Each of you, descendant of some passed / On traveler, has been paid for." Reprimanding listeners who have not been kind to the land, the speaker indicts the spoilers:

> Each of you a bordered country
> Delicate and strangely made proud
> Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
> Your armed struggles for profit
> Have left collars of waste upon
> My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
> (lines 26–31)

As Mary Jane Lupton has noted in a significant critique of Angelou's poem, "'On the Pulse of Morning'" gives more than a nod to concerns that were subjects of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (18).

When Angelou was growing up, she regularly attended the CME (Colored Methodist Episcopal, later Christian Methodist Episcopal) Church, where her uncle Willie was superintendent of the Sunday school. It is only natural, then, that her poem bears the cadence of black ministers such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; Malcolm X; Jesse L. Jackson; and Louis Farrakhan: "But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully, / Come, you may stand upon my / Back and face your distant destiny, / But seek no haven in my shadow. / I will give you no hiding place down here." In these lines, Angelou also recalls spirituals of determination sung in black churches throughout the South, such as the following, from "Ain't Got Time to Die": "'Cause it takes all of my time to praise my Jesus / All of my time to praise my Lord / If I don't praise Him the rock's gonna cry out / Glory and honor / Glory and honor / Ain't got time to die." As with her other work, religion is a central element.

Angelou also calls for a newly infused dream, a revision of the one originally described by Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1963 in his historic "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington, D.C. In a clear allusion to that speech, Angelou writes, "Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare / Praying for a dream." She adds, "Root yourselves beside me / I am the Tree planted by the River / Which will not be moved"—another clear reference to the Civil Rights movement, with its memories of the old hymn sung by Dr. King and other demonstrators as they were attacked by southern law enforcement: "I shall not be moved / Like a tree planted by the water / I shall not be moved" (Negrospirituals.com).

After his presidency, Clinton reflected on the poem and wrote in his memoir: "Maya's poem, 'On the Pulse of Morning,' riveted the crowd. Built on powerful images of a rock to stand on, a river to rest by, and a tree with roots in all the cultures and kinds that make up the American mosaic, the poem issued a passionate plea in the form of a neighborly invitation" (172). The critic and poet Marjorie Perloff, however, was not so impressed: "Dreadful" was her pronouncement (Lupton 18).

The former poet laureate Rita Dove said only a day after hearing Angelou's inaugural poem, "I wouldn't compare it to a poem I'll read over and over again in silence. That's not the kind of poem it was meant to be. It's a song, really" (Streitfield D11). Bill Eichenberger of the *Columbus Dispatch* confessed that he did not care much for the poem until he heard Angelou sing. Then, he says, his cynicism melted. Eichenberger sums up his feelings about her work: "For Angelou is, above all, an orator in the grand African American tradition. She is its rhythms and cadences, a powerful voice, the embodiment of persuasive fervor and, not least, the agent of humor" (Eichenberger 9H).

Notwithstanding the divergent reactions to her work, "On the Pulse of Morning" reflects Angelou's trademark, to "keep it plain." In this poem, "metaphors predominate . . . spotted with familiar words, terms, and phrases. . . . The use of African American folk idioms emerges as a strength in Angelou's poetry" (West 15). With "On the Pulse of Morning," Maya Angelou offers an encouraging poem to a new administration that was also filled with hope.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In "On the Pulse of Morning," why does the speaker name all of those varied peoples? Who are they? Why is their naming important? How would you feel if your people were named on such an occasion? Explain your answers.
2. What is the significance of an inaugural poem? Of the choice of an inaugural poet? Locate another inaugural poem and discuss its meaning for the occasion, comparing its themes and images to those in Angelou's "On the Pulse of Morning."
3. In what ways does "On the Pulse of Morning" make a political statement? Discuss your response in a well-organized essay, supporting your views with citations from the text.

"Africa" (1997)

Maya Angelou is certainly not the first African-American poet to acknowledge the continent in verse. Africa is motherland to people all over the African diaspora, those people of color who, rooted in Africa, range from African Caribbeans to African Germans and everyone in between. As such, the continent retains a special place in the hearts and pens of poets of the Harlem Renaissance (in the 1920s and 1930s), the Black Arts movement (in the 1960s and 1970s), and even as far back as Phillis Wheatley (1753?–1784), who wrote in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America": "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan Land; / Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there's a God, / that there's a Saviour too" (Gates 219).

African diaspora poets have articulated numerous and varied perceptions of Africa. Countee Cullen's famous poem "Heritage" asks, "What is Africa to me?" (Gates 1347). Langston Hughes, in "Danse Africaine," denotes a continent whose rhythms "stir your blood" (Gates 1292). More recently, Haki Madhubuti wrote about Africa in "The Primitive": "taken from the / shores of Mother Africa: / the savages they thought / we were— / they being the real savages" (Gates 1841).

In "Africa," Angelou essentially incorporates the theme of all these poems: the relationship between Africa and America for African Americans. Her poem begins with an image of Africa as voluptuous and healthy, black *and* comely. This Africa departs from the biblical "black but comely," needing no intervention or interference from anyone. It romanticizes Africa as a sexual temptress:

> Thus she had lain
> sugarcane sweet
> deserts her hair
> golden her feet
> mountains her breasts
> two Niles her tears.
> Thus she has lain
> Black through the years.

This view of Africa, while seductive, only establishes her vulnerability. The second stanza chronicles the inevitable—the arrival of land rapists, those who crossed the seas to kidnap the young and strong, to fill their heads and pacify them with a man-mangled Christianity that suits the purposes of white supremacy, and to hold them in line with guns.

The third stanza is a picture of the new America, now home to legal citizens who are heirs of those kidnapped Africans. It acknowledges changes from a once-brutal life but cautions the reader to "remember her pain / remember the losses / her screams loud and vain / remember her riches / her history slain / now she is striding / although she has lain." In true Angelou form, the poems ends on a hopeful note.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What do you think of Angelou's view of Africa? How does it resemble the images and impressions you have formed on the basis of your readings in social studies or what you have seen from news sources? Discuss your response, citing examples from your readings or viewings.
2. Read Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" and analyze the imagery in his poem. What do "Ozymandias" and "Africa" have in common?

How do they differ? Support your discussion with citations from both texts.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON ANGELOU AND HER WORK

1. Angelou has traveled to Africa, as well as written about it, and says she felt comfortable living there. Select two additional American writers who made their homes abroad for a short time. In a well-developed essay, discuss how each writer's time abroad may have affected his or her work, citing examples from the texts. How does each writer reconcile perceptions of America from within and without?
2. Angelou has written and spoken of her love for the works of William Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe. What do these writers have in common, and why do you think they, more than other writers, captured Angelou's imagination?
3. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been on the American Library Association's list of "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books" as a result of its sexual content, offensive language, and other objections. How would you respond to a censor's effort to suppress Angelou's work? Discuss your response, enlarging the scope of your essay to include the general topic of censorship of works for young adults. Is it justified? If so, under what circumstances? If not, explain why.

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Sandra L. West

Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952–)

In the most difficult of circumstances, after working on a poem I walk out and feel that, whatever wall there is in front of me, I will go right through it like the saxifrage flower that splits the rock.

(Moyers 42)

While many writers acknowledge poetry's power to break down social and political barriers, the walls to which Jimmy Santiago Baca refers are also physical. His poetry cries out in protest of an America that can be "two societies standing in absolute opposition . . . two countries: a country of the poor and deprived, and a country of those who had a chance to make something of their lives" (*Working* 18). In order to understand the deep passion of his poetry, it is necessary to understand the context of the life in which it was written.

Born January 5, 1952, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Baca learned early to fend for himself. Abandoned by his parents when he was very young, Baca and his siblings lived with their paternal grandparents until the death of their grandfather. His grandmother's failing eyesight made it impossible for her to care for them, and he and his older brother, Mieyo, were sent to live at Saint Anthony's Boys' Home in Albuquerque. Being away from his family was hard, and although Mieyo was at the same facility, the brothers were separated except at meals and mass. Baca ran away frequently, always wandering back to where his family had lived, only to be returned to the home by one of his aunts or uncles. Eventually the police intervened, taking him to a detention center.

Life in D-Home, as the residents called it, was very different from the time he had spent in the orphanage. Most of the boys in D-Home were there because of their criminal records. Their hardened attitudes and the small cells in which they slept made the facility feel less like a "home" and more like a jail. Baca was sent to school at a nearby junior high, but his inability to read and write made it impossible for him to succeed academically, and his status as D-Home resident caused him to withdraw socially. He instead found acceptance on the football field, earning the respect of classmates. The coach took an active interest in him, inviting Baca to live with his family. The invitation triggered a deep confusion that Baca found impossible to articulate. His experiences on the street and in D-Home had instilled in him a distrust of Anglos: His mother had abandoned her family to elope with a white man; white men had repressed his people for hundreds of years; they had sent him to live in D-Home. Despite the fact that the coach and his family were sincere in their desire to help him, Baca felt he could not abandon his race by going to live with Anglos. He quit school the next day; later that year when his brother took him out for a day trip, Baca ran away from D-Home.

According to his memoir, *A Place to Stand,* Baca and his brother spent the next three or four years "fighting, drinking, and getting high" (34). They lived with friends, or on the streets, in and out of jail, until Mieyo enlisted in the military, leaving Baca to drift aimlessly around the country. Uneducated

and homeless, Baca found himself at the mercy of other people's generosity, shuffling back and forth among friends and family and dealing drugs, until a home in which he was staying was raided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The resulting shoot-out between the FBI and the drug dealer injured one FBI agent and landed Baca in jail. He was counseled to plead guilty to possession of heroin with intent to distribute or face worse charges. He was sentenced to five to 10 years in prison.

Baca realized he had to turn his life around. Although his father had spent time in jail, Baca was the first person in his family to go to prison. He thought that if he could learn to read and write, possibly earn his general equivalency diploma (GED), then he would have a chance to change his circumstances. He wanted to stay clean, do his time, and get out alive, but prison did not allow the rehabilitation he had planned:

> Cons who went to Nam say it's [prison] worse than jungle warfare. You live with your enemies here. There ain't no going home. You live hour to hour with your enemy standing next to you, eating next to you, walking next to you. The only thing that keeps him from killing you is respect. (*Place* 120)

Life in prison was a contradiction: To earn privileges and keep his time to a minimum, Baca had to follow rules and avoid fights; to earn respect, Baca had to stand up to those who would make him their victim, fighting whenever necessary. He fought to survive and in surviving lost what he was fighting for; the reclassification committee denied him school privileges.

Baca was tired of playing their games. The rules could not be followed, and so he stopped trying. He stayed in his cell, refusing to work or line up for roll call, until the guards grew so exasperated with him, they took him to solitary confinement, and eventually to a place Baca describes as "a dark subterranean sewer" called "the dungeon" (*Place* 176).

It was during his time there that Baca received his first letter. It took him hours to decipher the message, that a Good Samaritan was offering to correspond with him. Baca immediately wrote back, asking for advice in learning to read and write. The man sent him a dictionary and religious pamphlets, written in English and Spanish, and continued to correspond with him until Baca learned to read and write intelligibly. He began to devote most of his time to reading and writing, trading his poetry with other inmates for books. He read everything he could get his hands on but found the most meaning in works by William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman, whose techniques fit best with Baca's developing sense of what a poem could be.

Despite the escape Baca found in poetry, prison life continued to intrude, pushing him until he was forced to take a stand against another inmate who was trying to force him out of his own cell. As Baca stood over the man, shank in hand, he realized his entire life hinged on that moment:

> For a second, every horrible thing that had happened to me in my life exploded to the surface as if it had been building up to this moment. The blade in my hand, my legs spread over his chest, I loomed over him, staring into his eyes and then at his heart. While the desire to murder him was strong, so were the voices of Neruda and Lorca that passed through my mind, praising life as sacred and challenging me: How can you kill and still be a poet? How can you ever write another poem if you disrespect life in this manner? (*Place* 206)

Baca dropped the knife and began to search for deeper meaning. A fellow inmate educated him on the history of the Chicano people. By learning about their legends and folklore, their deep sense of family and connection to the earth, Baca began to understand that American society had redefined his culture, labeled it "inferior and lesser in moral character" (*Place* 225). His writing began to reflect that deepening connection to his people. During this time he wrote the poem "Healing Earthquakes," which reflects the quiet power one man can have to redefine himself. Meanwhile, Baca's poetry was drawing attention. Fellow inmates convinced him to submit his poems to magazines like

Mother Jones, Illuminations, and *Greenfield Review,* where he found editors who liked his work and encouraged him. Both Timberline Press and Rock Bottom Press asked for collections of his poetry for chapbooks.

Baca's vow to live the life worthy of a poet and of his people was continually challenged by a prison system that makes no attempt to recognize individuality. By the time he was released in 1978, he was 26-years old and his father had died of alcohol-related illness. He had lost every sense of how to function in the outside world and emerged from prison alone and afraid, yearning for the well-defined space of prison life. Still, he continued to write and study poetry, and in 1979 he earned his GED.

After a time he returned to Albuquerque and found a steady job working as a night watchman at a house for court-supervised adolescents, where he met a counselor named Beatrice who shared his love of books and poetry. They were married in 1981 and had two sons. Family took a primary role in Baca's life and he reconnected with his brother, Mieyo, and his sister, Martina. When his mother reentered his life, everything seemed to be moving full circle. Although she was still pretending to be Anglo and living affluently with the man who had convinced her to abandon her children, his mother seemed sincere in her desire to be part of Baca's life. She spoke of leaving her husband and telling her white children about their half siblings. Before she could, her husband shot her and himself. Her death deeply impacted Baca's brother Mieyo, who returned to drinking heavily. Within the year, he was found bludgeoned to death in an alley.

In the past, Baca would have reacted to such overwhelming personal tragedies with violence; now he could pour his pain and anger into his poetry. Baca completed his B.A. in English at the University of New Mexico and was later awarded an honorary Ph.D. He has published several volumes of poetry, a memoir, a novel in verse, and a screenplay, *Blood In . . . Blood Out: Bound by Honor,* which was made into a major motion picture.

While his work gives voice to the anguish of the oppressed and the despair of the forgotten, like his own life it also reflects a constant hope for spiritual rebirth. In the anthology *Contemporary American Ethnic Poets,* Linda Cullum claims this sanguinity is primarily what makes his work so distinctive:

> Unlike a growing number of "prison writers" who infuse their work with rage and desolation, Baca writes poems dealing with spiritual birth and triumph over tragedy . . . marked by themes of transformation, self-actualization, and metamorphosis.

His work has been widely recognized for its emotional honesty and passion, earning a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1986), the Pushcart Prize (1988), the American Book Award for Poetry (for *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley,* 1989), and the International Prize (for *A Place to Stand,* 2001).

Despite the critical acclaim, no writer is immune to controversy. The release of *Blood In . . . Blood Out: Bound by Honor* was met with disapproval by some members of the Hispanic community, who claimed the movie portrayed their culture in a negative manner. Baca addresses their criticism in *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio*:

> In this film I have cried out my rage, and nakedly shown the pain and abuse of life behind bars. All of this is an authentic part of our reality, and to deny it is to make us less than what we are.
>
> I write to reveal all the treasures of Chicano experience, all that I have learned about life through our heritage, with nothing left out, of the suffering and the joy, because *all* of it has made us who we are. I believe that we will never overcome our obstacles unless we tell the whole truth, and in everything I write this is what I strive to do. (89)

Although Baca's work has done much to shed light on the cycle of neglect and oppression that has long prevented Hispanic and Native American peoples from being accepted as equally American by their Anglo neighbors, Baca knows sometimes

words are not enough. In 2005, he founded Cedar Tree Inc., a nonprofit foundation that "works to give people of all walks of life the opportunity to become educated and improve their lives" (jimmysantiagobaca.com). Cedar Tree provides individuals with free instruction, books, writing material, and scholarships.

In 2006, Baca was awarded the Cornelius P. Turner Award, which recognizes GED graduates who have made outstanding contributions to society in the field of education, justice, health, public service, or social welfare. Despite everything he has done to illuminate the injustices of American society, Jimmy Santiago Baca feels he can never stop "working in the dark to create for my people our own unique light" (*Working* 21).

Martín & Meditations on the South Valley (1987)

In her introduction to this book of poetry, Denise Levertov likens *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley* to a hero tale:

> Passing through the desert he emerges into a green and fertile valley of love and birth, but he has learned that the valley will be his to keep only if he cherishes it. The vow to never abandon his child . . . extends beyond the child . . . [to include] Martín's self. . . . Thus, the poem is essentially a myth of redemption. (xiv–xv)

The desert through which Martín must pass is similar in many ways to the harsh landscape of Baca's own life. Both experience abandonment and life on the streets. Both struggle to understand the cruel circumstances fate has dealt them. And both eventually become heroes, rescuing themselves from life in prison to find solace and acceptance through creation.

In the second portion of the book, *Meditations on the South Valley,* Martín's home burns down, destroying 10 years' worth of his writing. Martín struggles with the "end of all the cities and peoples I had become" (54). While Martín rebuilds his home, his family is forced to move from the South Valley to the Heights, a place that represents success to some, but loss of self to Martín. Surrounded by walls that are "strangely clean and new," among "the ceramic faces of women" and "buddha-cheeked men / who all wear straw hats / to walk their poodles" (55), Martín strives to understand the difference in cultures, finding that "in the Valley an old truck symbolizes prestige / and in the Heights, poverty. / Worth is determined in the Valley / by age and durability, / and in the Heights, by newness / and impression" (59). The cultural divide leaves Martín feeling lost and he searches for deeper meaning in Aztlán, the land of his forefathers.

Geographically, Aztlán refers to the mythic home of the Aztec people, believed to be the area annexed by the United States after the Mexican-American War—specifically Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. But for Martín and the Chicano people, Aztlán is more than a place. As Robert Franklin Gish explains in *Beyond Bounds,* Aztlán is "*la sagrada tierra,* the mother, the nourisher," and for the writer "also a muse, an inspirer, the means of artistic revelation and epiphany" (139). In seeking out Aztlán, Martín discovers not only his history, but also the pieces of himself that he has lost.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the lines "Then, / the fairytale of my small life / stopped / when mother and father / abandoned me, and . . . I came forth into the dark world of freedom" (5). What does Baca's juxtaposition of the concepts of fairy tale and freedom imply? Do you associate freedom more with childhood or adulthood? Why?
2. Part 6 of *Meditations on the South Valley* discusses the life lived "between breakdowns and break-ups." In what ways might such a life be fuller than "a life with everything perfect"? Discuss your answer fully.
3. Martín describes rebuilding his house as giving birth, yet he says he "became a child of the house" (100). In what ways is childbirth an opportunity for the parents to be reborn? Give specific examples to support your argument.

Immigrants in Our Own Land and Selected Early Poems (1990)

While the publication date on this anthology is 1990, 12 years after Baca's release from prison, most of the poems were written during his incarceration. Reflected within the lines is Baca's deepening sense that America has failed to fulfill its promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness equally for all citizens. Baca tells the interviewer John Keene that while the outward results of such denials are easily witnessed, his poetry is concerned with what lies beneath:

> The other side of life, however, is a bit more complicated and concerns what happens in our souls, what constitutes all the cosmic and spiritual clashes that rearrange the plates of our spiritual landscapes. . . . I don't try to harvest my poetry from what happens in society's institutions as much as I try to reap the poems from what's happening behind the boundaries of society. (Keene)

The poems themselves emerge from behind the boundaries of society, from prison's depths and the ignored alleyways of the barrios, challenging readers to see the people there.

The collection's title poem, "Immigrants in Our Own Land," likens the newly incarcerated to the recent immigrant. Both go to new lands, seeking to "get away from false promises, / from dictators in our neighborhoods, / who wore blue suits and broke our doors down when they felt like, / swinging clubs and shooting guns as they pleased" (12). They hope for a better life in the new world, of "being able to finish school . . . learning an extra good trade." Instead they find "it's no different here. It's all concentrated" (12).

In the poem "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans," Baca tackles political rhetoric head-on, challenging those who complain of immigrants stealing their jobs to show him "just where the hell are these fighters" (24). The poem begins amicably enough; readers smile with the opening lines "O Yes? Do they come on horses / with rifles, and say / Ese gringo, gimmee your job?" and with Baca's tongue-in-cheek portrayal of people being mugged, the thieves demanding not money or jewels, but their jobs. Baca's humor serves dual purposes: to expose the inanity of such claims and to jolly readers into letting down their guard. Once readers are disarmed, nodding along with Baca, he delivers his rebuttal:

> Below that cool green sea of money,
> millions and millions of people fight to live,
> search for pearls in the darkest depths
> of their dreams, hold their breath for years
> trying to cross poverty to just have something.
> (24)

In an interview with John Keene, Baca describes the employment situation for many Chicanos as a "slave system that nobody wants to recognize." When one examines the types of jobs many of these "Mexicans" are taking—receiving as little as five dollars for an entire day's hard physical labor—it is difficult to imagine who would want the job in the first place. Baca contends that many Chicano workers take such low-paying jobs because those jobs are the only ones available; the need to pay their bills and feed their families puts them "completely at the mercy of these employers."

Despite the hardships faced by the people in his poems, Baca writes not about loss of power, but of the healing that results from reclaiming power. In discussing the role of a poet, he says:

> I do believe the poet's job in the real sense of the word is to always be there where the emotional and psychic and spiritual earthquakes are happening, and to be strong enough to be able to sing in those big chasms. . . . We need to get to the epicenters before they happen, so we can participate in that power. Not be the victims of it. (Keene)

"Healing Earthquakes" details the journey of the poet into that chasm of "streets torn and twisted like gnawed bark" to "the crumbled houses of my people, / Through the scorpion-tailed magnums and / carbines / Held at their heads" (59). The poet

lifts his people, not by adding to the violence, but by "splitting its own body and heart," so that "a lesser man by all the law books" may become more.

The seeming incompatibility of the two words in the title adds to the force of the poem, implying that healing cannot occur through gentle persuasion, but must be wrenched from earth's soul and bled from earth's veins. Baca says that is how he determines whether he has written a good poem: "If it feels like I've hit on a jugular . . . if I can feel it in the poem, then the poem's okay" (Keene).

For Discussion or Writing

1. The inmates in "Immigrants in Our Own Land" go to prison "thinking they'll get a chance to change their lives." How do the changes they experience differ from their expectations? Are those changes intended by the penal system? Does the American prison system truly offer the chance for rehabilitation?
2. In "Immigrants in Our Own Land," Baca describes inmates' being "sent to work as dishwashers, / to work in fields for three cents an hour." Examine the role of inmate work programs. Should inmates be forced to work? Who benefits from such programs?
3. Examine the claims addressed by Baca in "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans." How has America's immigration policy determined the jobs available to immigrants?
4. Consider the ways in which the United States defines the value of its citizens. How is "a man awaking to the day with ground to stand upon and defend" ("Healing Earthquakes") both disdained by America and the very definition of America?

Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio (1992)

After the release of his film *Blood In . . . Blood Out,* Baca faced criticism regarding his portrayal of Chicanos. *Working in the Dark* is, in part, his answer to those critics. The autobiographical essays in this volume justify his right as a Chicano to testify to what he has seen. Baca writes about the deep-seated bigotry in an America that outwardly claims equal rights for all citizens while denying many of those rights on the basis of ethnicity. He writes of oppression not to justify the wrongdoing of Chicano individuals, but to explain the circumstances that have reduced a once-proud people to second-class citizens.

Through his earlier works, Baca described the tremendous obstacles placed in his path by poverty and racism. Here Baca further addresses those factors that might hinder minority success, detailing how language and poetry gave him the power to surmount them when so many others cannot. Baca cautions readers that he is "no polite singer, like so many poets of the European tradition. I am myself, Chicano, and I follow the wind-swept trail of my people, and how they convey emotion and song in their rituals" (62). His writing is angry and profane when it should be, using necessary metaphors to describe the horrific treatment he suffered in penal institutions, places he condemns as "America's worst nightmare" (13). In the first section of this book, he takes readers inside this nightmare, to view the beatings and confinement, the isolation and despair, the utter humiliation that defined his life as an inmate. It was his search for escape from self-hatred that led him to books and to writing, guiding him to find in language a freedom that could not be confined by jail walls:

> Writing bridged my divided life of prisoner and free man. I wrote of the emotional butchery of prisons, and of my acute gratitude for poetry. . . . I wrote to sublimate my rage, from a place where all hope is gone, from a madness of having been damaged too much, from a silence of killing rage. I wrote to avenge the betrayals of a lifetime, to purge the bitterness of injustice. (11)

In another essay, Baca returns to San Quentin years later, not as inmate, but as actor and screenwriter, to film the movie *Blood In . . . Blood Out.* The disparity he experienced during this time, spending his days among the stark confinement of the hopeless and forgotten, his evenings walking free among the privileged and forgetful, created in him the feeling

that he was inhabiting two worlds. Such reeling disequilibrium stirred his old hatred and helplessness:

> The urge grew in me to foment a revolt: tear down the walls, herd the guards into the bay, burn down everything until nothing was left but a smoldering heap of blackened bricks and molten iron. And I was filled with a yearning to escape, to go home and live the new life I had fought so hard to make. (17)

Baca left San Quentin realizing that his wounds would never completely heal, but they had helped to form the poet he had become. And that poet felt an obligation to tell the whole truth about what it means to be Chicano.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Baca condemns the prison system as entrenching, rather than reforming, criminality. He writes, "Confinement perverts and destroys every skill a man needs to live productively in society" (*Working* 16). What alternatives might we consider for the rehabilitation of nonviolent criminals? Justify your answer.
2. In "Imagine My Life," Baca describes his early experiences with school. Compare JUDITH ORTIZ COFER's experiences with the educational system to Baca's. How is language, both spoken and written, reserved for the privileged and used as a weapon against the poor?
3. Baca has written, "Government grants and academic security are stultifying for the poet. Government should have no hand in poetry, in saying what poetry is, or validating this poet or that. The poet's work is private and lonely" (*Working* 42). Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Defend your answer.

A Place to Stand (2001)

As a small child, Baca struggled to understand the events around him and the choices made by the adults in his life. As an adult, he began to understand that our choices are influenced by the context in which we live. He has endeavored his whole life to understand the contexts of his parents' lives, but his questions have always been met with reluctance or refusal. After the births of his sons, Baca realized that they would have questions, too, questions about his life and the contexts of the choices that would make him first prisoner, then poet. Although much of his poetry is rooted in his own experience, Baca did not want his children to have to sift fact from fiction. According to the prologue of *A Place to Stand,* he wrote this memoir so that his children would "know their father's story, good parts and bad . . . so that they can make wiser choices where I did not and be invigorated with the courage and honor to live better lives" (6).

His memoir is also meant as a model for young Chicano people, who Baca says have been taught as a culture that it is "much better to keep your silence and not try to overreach yourself." He wants them to "break the silence" so that they may see their "feelings are reaffirmed a million times throughout the day by other people who feel the same way" (Keene). In this memoir, Baca has broken the silence about what it means to grow up Chicano in American society.

One of the most important themes of Baca's memoir is the power of childhood experiences to shape the adults we become. As a small child, Baca accompanied his mother to the local jail after his father's arrest for drunk driving. Although his father was dangerous when he drank, Baca had difficulty reconciling the confusion and helplessness he felt at leaving his father behind in such a fearsome place. He writes:

> In time I would become all too familiar with such places, not only with those very same cells down on Garcia Street but with a long string of others as well, on different if equally dusty streets, with different but similar jailers, different but similar men. That initial encounter, however, never left me. It remained a fixed, haunting reference point to which I would return to time and again. Whether I was approaching it or seeking escape from it, jail always defined in some way the measure of my life. (3)

Jail may have defined the measure of his life, but it was Baca who would determine what would happen within the confines of that life. Whereas many inmates turned to violence as an outlet for the rage instilled by the dehumanizing conditions of prison, Baca turned to language. He read whatever he could get his hands on—letters, religious pamphlets, the dictionary—until he finally found a "defense against the madness" in the works of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams (214). In the sensory deprivation of solitary confinement, language gave him vision: "Words electrified me. I could smell and taste and see their images vividly" (185). He poured his soul into journals, letters, and poetry, writing his way through the narrow bars of his cell to a spiritual freedom.

Baca's poetry took many forms in prison. Sometimes he would sell his poetry to other inmates, so they could impress their wives and girlfriends with tender words, but most of the time Baca's poetry reflected the insanity of prison life. He wrote about the institutionalized abuse prisoners suffered, the sharp racial divisions between prisoners, and the daily struggle to remain human.

One of the first poems Baca published, "They Only Came to See the Zoo," was written from his prison cell and is printed in this book. The poem reflects the helplessness an inmate feels when he realizes that the legislators touring the cell block on a fact-finding visit are really only there for their own publicity. He uses imagery of the desert and death to portray the loss of hope and the sacrifice of will suffered by those within the prison system. In an interview with Gabriel Meléndez, Baca admits the poem was also a call to action:

> That was some sort of voice in me talking to another voice in me, saying, "you've lived this: Did you tell them? Did you tell them?" It was almost the voice of guilt saying, "your obligation is to write!"

The hardest component of any memoir is to portray through a snapshot into the writer's life a universal lesson or truth. The truth in Baca's memoir is evident in the final chapter. Emerging from prison, Baca works hard to earn his GED and to build a home for his new family. With his poetry gaining popularity, this could easily be the happily-ever-after of fairy tales. But Baca takes his story to an honest ending: His life is not perfect upon his release; his parents and brother all die in separate, tragic incidents; and he is left trying "to understand how so much injustice could happen to such good people" (263). There is no answer to that question, but Baca finds a sense of peace when he is finally able to forgive:

> I began to forgive them [his parents] for what they had done or not done. I forgave myself for all my mistakes and for all I had done to hurt others. I forgave the world for how it had treated us. (264)

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the title "They Only Came to See the Zoo" provide context for the poem? Does the title support or undermine the underlying message?
2. Discuss the lines "Our muscles warped and scarr'd / wrap around our skeletons / like hot winds / That sweep the desert floor / In search of shade, / Sleeping each night / In the hollow of petrified / Skulls." How might these lines describe more than the physical condition of the inmates?
3. *A Place to Stand* ends with a multitude of images: Church bells are ringing, it is raining, a baby is being baptized, the church is conducting a special service to apologize for sins against indigenous peoples. How do these images, both individually and collectively, contribute to the resolution of Baca's memoir?

The Importance of a Piece of Paper (2004)

In his first collection of short stories, Baca delves into the complexities faced when traditional and modern attitudes collide. He shows readers the heart and soul of characters who struggle to maintain a sense of self while searching for their places

in a society that would ignore them. These stories, as does his poetry, spring from Baca's own passions and experiences.

In the title story, "The Importance of a Piece of Paper," readers meet Marisol and her two brothers, Pancho and Adan. They are a family bound to the land by their parents' farm and the land grant that connects the entire community. Adan, despite protest from his siblings, sells his share of the land to Jaylen, an outsider, inadvertently causing personal disaster for Pancho and endangering the entire community's way of life.

Within the larger frame is a love story: Marisol falls in love with the outsider. Baca uses Pancho's disapproval of their relationship to illustrate further the trauma of Adan's selling his land to a white man:

> The two cultures seldom mixed. Whether anyone admitted or talked about it openly, the ill feelings between Hispanics and gringos were real and present. The differences went deeper than mere cultural customs; there was long-standing, deep resentment toward Anglos for what they had done to Chicanos in the past. (71)

However, it is not cultural differences or racial tension that come between Marisol and Jaylen; they are divided over a legal issue. Jaylen does not understand the community's reliance on an old land grant. He finds its rules a nuisance. When he sues to dissolve the land grant, Marisol must choose sides.

The impetus for this story originated in part in Baca's concern that the Chicano people have "been disenfranchised from our culture, from our language, from our political base, from our land" (Gish 138). Baca has done more than write about the issue: Through his involvement with the Atrisco Land Rights Council in Albuquerque, he works actively to preserve a century-old agreement that granted 49,000 acres on the West Mesa of Albuquerque to the Chicano community there (Gish 138).

"Runaway" is perhaps the most heart-wrenching story in the collection. Through the character of Juanito (called Runaway because of his propensity for flight), readers gain insight into the hardship of life in an orphanage. Runaway, as is Baca, is taken from his grandmother at a young age and placed in an orphanage. Runaway continually escapes from Saint Anthony's Boys' Home, returning each time to his grandmother, whose failing eyesight concerns him. As part of his punishment for his truancy, Runaway is ordered by Sister Anna Louise to buff the tiles in the chapel. While he is there, Father O'Neil, known for his "transgressive behavior with some of the kids" (187), rapes a newcomer in a confessional. Runaway takes the victim, a mute Indian boy, to the infirmary.

The Indian runs away and when he returns he is "caked in grime" (209). Sister Anna Louise orders Runaway to clean the boy, who is unresponsive. Runaway is disgusted and resentful of the chore until he notices "red liquid mixing with the brown water in the drain. He followed the red liquid up the boy's legs to the buttocks and realized where the blood was coming from" (214). Runaway takes the boy, whom he nicknames "Bullet," under his wing, telling his friends, "He's been through a lot—treat him straight up" (216).

Baca tells the interviewer John Keene that the shower scene between the two boys in this story is symbolic of what the Chicano people must do in order to reclaim their Chicanismo, which he describes as "a state of being, which has to do with compassion and humility and patience and love." In washing the Indian child's body, the Chicano boy is representative of the act of contrition that Baca suggests is necessary to grieve fully the loss suffered by his people.

For Discussion or Writing

1. As so many literary couples before them do, Marisol and Jaylen, in "The Importance of a Piece of Paper," face social disapproval. Find and compare other examples of forbidden love. How does society's censure limit the choices available to each couple? Why does the theme of forbidden love hold such universal appeal?
2. What is the significance of Jaylen's profession to the story entitled "The Importance of a Piece of Paper"? How does each character's occupation

(Marisol as a student of Chicano studies, Pancho as a racehorse trainer, Adan as lawyer, and Jaylen as archaeologist) add layers to the story?

3. In Baca's original version of "Runaway," the shower scene entailed Runaway's kneeling to wash Bullet's feet (Keene). What significance does each version carry? What are some possible reasons that Baca may have made the change?
4. After a particularly bad beating, Runaway takes his bruises as a sign that he is turning black: "He was tired of being himself and having the same life everyday. He fully believed that a deserving person could be transformed, if the divine powers willed it so" (202). What are the roots of Runaway's belief that he can be beaten into something better than he is? Does society share that belief?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON BACA AND HIS WORK

1. Baca writes that he was tempted to become "as blue-eyed and blond-haired an American as anyone." Compare this sentiment with the feelings experienced by CHANG-RAE LEE's Henry Park in *Native Speaker*. How does the desire to assimilate into an oppressive culture affect minorities within that culture? Discuss America's racial makeup as "melting pot" versus "tossed salad." What does each metaphor imply about the process of assimilation? Which metaphor is more accurate?
2. In an interview with John Keene in 1994, Baca claims that many poets who have done prison time are lauded as heroes, "except in America, where those hailed as poets usually have never walked within a planet's distance of prison." Is the United States reluctant to herald people who have been in prison as poets? Why?
3. Rebirth and metamorphosis are common themes in Baca's work. He even uses them to describe his role as a poet: "I am born through the coupling of words and my birth-cry is the poem" (*Working* 64). Find examples of rebirth and metamorphosis through his work. Why are these themes so vital to his writing?
4. In *Working in the Dark,* Baca writes about the effects society's expectations had on him:

> They told me I was violent and I became violent, they told me I was ignorant and I feigned ignorance. It was taken for granted that I would work for slave rations at the most foul and filthy jobs, and I did. It was taken for granted that I could not resolve my own problems, and I relinquished control of my life to society's masters. (35)

Who are "society's masters"? How is each of us benefited or hindered by their expectations?

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Toni Cade Bambara (1939–1995)

Revolution begins with the self, in the self.

("The Scattered Sopranos")

Miltona Mirkin Cade was born on March 25, 1939. She spent her childhood in Harlem observing and "adopting people" (*Deep Sightings* 208–209). For the rest of her life, she would hold Harlem as her ideal community in terms of diversity, freedom of political discussion, and shared culture. As a "truth-seeker," she enjoyed comparing different opinions and perspectives. She cared as much about the questions being asked as the many different responses and found it necessary to understand them all. Perhaps this is why her voice speaks to audiences so strongly.

She began her writing as the neighborhood scribe, drawing up contracts for car sales and letters of complaint (219). Her keen ability to ask questions was matched by her gift of simply listening. Her mother gave her space; she "had great respect for the life of the mind," Bambara wrote (212). In kindergarten, Miltona shortened her name to *Toni*. She came upon *Bambara* later in life, when she was pregnant with her daughter, and took it as her last name. Fittingly, as a writer, artist, teacher, activist, mother, and filmmaker, Bambara was constantly evolving.

Toni Cade Bambara attended the Modern School and in 1959 graduated from Queen's College (*Deep Sightings* 222). To fulfill a creative need and to maintain her connection with the arts, she often volunteered to model for art classes. She worked numerous odd jobs in the Village—at Montmartre's Spaghetti House, for instance, she offered to wash dishes so that she could listen to the George Wallington Quartet while out back with her huge soapy pot. Another job, at the exotic dance club Mona's, required keeping a cab at the curb for the dancers and angry patrons. At the Open Door, she often had the opportunity to hear Miles Davis, whose jazz later influenced her writing. While working on her master's degree, Bambara served as program director at Colony Settlement House.

From an early age, she was surrounded by those who raised critical questions and issues—especially her mother and others who expounded their views at speakers' corners in Harlem. Her short stories in particular reflect a political voice that began early on. While teaching and serving as the director of the SEEK program (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) at City College of New York from 1965 to 1969, Bambara became involved in community organizations and with sociopolitical issues. Her membership in this community of ideas was critical to her. The sense of community she developed in Harlem recurs as a regular theme in her short-story collections *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive;* a novel, *The Salt Eaters;* and *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions,* a posthumously published collection of fiction, essays, and interviews.

Before her own writing was independently published, she edited many anthologies. The first,

The Black Woman (1970), occurred at the height of the Civil Rights and women's movements. She contributed three essays to the collection, which also featured the writings of NIKKI GIOVANNI, ALICE WALKER, and others whose works were just becoming well known. Bambara felt the anthology would "open the door and prove that there was a market" for black women's work (*Deep Sightings* 230). Her instincts to keep the price as well as the size of the book small helped make the collection a success. As a result, Bambara's popularity soared. The literary world began to look to her as a spokesperson for women's issues. Answering calls to give lectures and workshops helped her to solidify a network of women who would continue to influence and guide her.

Her second anthology, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks,* was published in 1971. Bambara describes the collection as stories she "wished [she] had read growing up" (Schirack). These stories reflect the African-American family, heritage, and oral tradition. What Bambara loves most about the book is that its reflections of a positive black family were something her students could identify with, allowing them to experience and share in a work based on their cultural traditions. Bambara put her students' writings into the text, giving them much more than a grade—even if it was nothing more than the knowledge that everyone on campus owned a copy.

Gorilla, My Love, a collection of short stories with overlapping themes and characters, was published in 1972. In the preface, Bambara claims not to have based her stories on actual experience—neither people nor events—in any way. Regardless, she created a wide range of believable characters—dealing with ageism, loss of control, love, power, education, family, identity—with whom her readers could identify. Bambara also struck a nerve with readers through her use of humor, as when one of her characters responds to her first surgery: "Jewel awakened . . . overwhelmed with . . . an irretrievable loss, till she remembered it was only her tonsils after all" (*Gorilla, My Love* 99). With this collection as well as the rest of her work, Bambara made use of an unmistakable vernacular that established identity, characterization, and, at times, setting. *Gorilla, My Love* reads as an oral tradition in which something is to be learned and treasured in each of the stories.

The Sea Birds Are Still Alive, a second collection of short stories, was published in 1977. Between the two publications, Bambara traveled extensively. In Cuba, she saw women actively participating in the resolution of class and color conflicts. Her return from Cuba made her realize how her writing could become a "weapon in a [political] struggle" (*Deep Sightings* 219). Similarly, in Vietnam, she was "struck by the women's ability to break through traditional roles, traditional expectations" (Schirack). While traveling, she raised critical questions and took needed materials like penicillin, building materials, mops, diaphragms, and blood plasma to various locales; all the while, her own perceptions and writerly abilities were developing (*Deep Sightings* 233). After a second trip to North Vietnam became unfeasible, Bambara moved with her daughter to Atlanta and turned seriously to compiling the stories that would become *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*. "Most of those stories," she said, "had not been published; been hanging around the house, and they were completed during that spring and summer" (234). Bambara's focus turned once again to her writing.

Her first novel, *The Salt Eaters,* written in 1978 and published in 1980, came about somewhat by accident. The novel began as entries in her journal. Raising yet another critical question, Bambara wondered why spiritual and political people were so separate and in her writing tried to work out the puzzle. She had hoped that the two worlds would merge in a short story, whose main character, Velma, would contribute to the synthesis of spiritual and political. However, Bambara says that the work grew on her, soon becoming too large for her favorite genre. As the novel developed in length and complexity, Bambara found, "I was writing quite beyond myself in a number of ways" (235). Unfortunately, reaction to the novel was mixed, with reviewers finding that Bambara's strength lay in short fiction rather than in the novel form.

The power of the spoken word was not lost on Bambara, who began to look at her work in theatrical terms. The presentation of *The Sea Birds* was shaped by a short story written in seven sections. Between acts, she envisioned having music played, greeting cards from children in Vietnam being read, and artwork shown. Despite growing requests for public appearances, Bambara preferred to stay focused on her writing. "I am frequently asked to give a paper at a conference and I refuse," she has said of this time. "I don't do papers unless I am being paid to write an essay that is going to be published somewhere. . . . But I'm not going to do a talk and a paper. People then ask me to give a talk" (216). And so her writing took precedence over a more public existence.

Yet all of these impulses to pursue various media made up Bambara's aesthetic—intersecting, dividing, and reforming. Soon Bambara began to see filmmaking as a place to make her own rules and access African-American culture on her own terms. This took her to the founder-director of the Scribe Video Center, Louis Massiah. Preferring to learn editing, she learned that many films are actually structured and given substance in the editing room. Already experienced in creating work that spoke visually to readers, she believed she could extend this strong visual sense to the screen. In "Gorilla, My Love," for example, she had created a vivid image in this scene: "Mississippi Ham Rider brought his guitar and his granddaughter. He had on a white shirt and left the greatcoat at home. He mumbled his greetings and straddled a chair, dislocating my leg in the process. . . . Teddy heaved big bowls of things onto the table. There were collard greens and black-eye peas and ham hocks and a long pan of cornbread" (55). Surely enough, "Gorilla, My Love," "Medley," and "Witchbird" were easily translated into film.

Bambara held a blatant distaste for Hollywood's version of blacks and felt an urgency to change the industry. Her first documentary, *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986), won the Academy Award for Best Documentary. Using her "truth-seeking" philosophy, she relied on interviews and eyewitness accounts. In this 90-minute gun battle of an emerging black organization, the MOVE headquarters in Philadelphia and Cobb's Creek community were affected; ultimately, a bomb was dropped on the headquarters and 61 surrounding homes, killing 11 (Schirack).

Diagnosed with colon cancer in 1993, Bambara refused to be beaten. She continued working, determined to "kick cancer's ass" (4). Just before her death on December 9, 1995, her documentary *W. E. B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices,* which she worked on with Massiah, was released. Two additional works, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* (1996) and *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), a novel, were posthumously published, a tribute to a fighting spirit that worked up to the very end.

Toni Cade Bambara understood her purpose in any of her selected media. The many and diverse roles she played are reflected in each of her works. In an interview with Kay Bonetti of the American Audio Prose Library, Bambara said, "When I look back at my work with any little distance, the two characteristics that jump out at me is one, the tremendous capacity for laughter, but also a tremendous capacity for rage" (Bonetti 1). It is these twin impulses that are operative in so many of her creative works.

Gorilla, My Love (1972)

The title story in this collection, "Gorilla, My Love," questions adults' treatment of children. Bambara introduces the reader to the character Hazel, variously nicknamed *Scout, Blackbird, Miss Muffin, Peaches,* and probably many others, depending on the situation and to whom she is talking. The narrator, a ball of emotion by the close of this story, "with grownups playin change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad," blames Hunca Bubba for the turmoil in her life and her uncertain sense of identity (20). "Grownups figure they can treat you just anyhow," Hazel asserts (15). She finds an ally in her brother as he cries beside her. Only another child can understand how she is feeling.

The story "My Man Bovanne" has the audacity to look at parents from their own perspective rather than as the people who continually embarrass us. We see Hazel admittedly, perhaps intentionally, enjoying herself at a party to the dismay of her children. Each one takes a turn at reprimanding his or her Mama. But at 62, Hazel is dancing for herself. She knows the consequences even as she is choosing to partner with Bovanne. She understands that he is no longer someone desirable to the neighborhood, although at one time this blind man fixed children's skates and whatnot. She recognizes and has sympathy for his blindness and awkwardness. She narrates the negative responses from onlookers as she dances, but it makes her enjoy the dance all the more. From Joe Lee's frown to Task's embarrassment over her "makin a spectacle of [herself]," the tone of the party has changed in a few swings of her hips. The argument transforms, as we learn that her children are not so much upset about her dancing as by her disregard of Mr. Trent that evening. Her Man, Bovanne, and their dance have become a political statement, and his blindness a symbol.

In "Raymond's Run," the dynamic of Hazel's family is present from the very first paragraph. The layering of characters in this short story allows the reader to learn about the narrator, whose responsibility for her brother, Raymond, exists in each word. In Hazel's interactions with neighborhood peers and adults, it becomes clear what Hazel values in herself and what she appreciates—and does not—in others. She has created a space for herself through running: "I run. That's what I'm all about" (28). Her family, too, appears to share this talent. By the close of the story, we see that Hazel's running has transformed her as well as her relationship with her brother.

Bambara constantly reminds us of the way that one life leans on another. Such is the case with the story "Playin with Punjab." That moment of being off-balance and accounting for and adjusting to the weight before regaining balance is one of Bambara's many storytelling talents. It is in these moments when one character's story changes another's. Through the politics in this particular story, it seems that the neighborhood's voice is lost.

"The Lesson" teaches its characters about cultural and economic differences. Miss Moore, "the only woman on the block with no first name," feels the need to take care of the children of the neighborhood, seeking to teach them what she deems important during the summer months (87). Her students, however, resist her efforts, submitting only at their parents' demand. Miss Moore has the power to see beyond the here and now for her students' lives and attempts to create lessons by imparting her knowledge to them. They respond with sarcastic comments and wisecracks; only in retrospect do they recognize Miss Moore's wisdom.

At Miss Moore's suggestion, the students go to New York to window-shop at the toy store F. A. O. Schwarz. As children are known to do, they claim the toys they see as their own. When they begin their usual teasing of one another, Miss Moore is ready to challenge one student whose wish list starts with a microscope, asking him to explain its use, while another simultaneously laughs at and is awed by a paperweight. Miss Moore prods the children to think about what their homes are like. "It's important to have a work area all your own," she says (91). Soon the students are caught up in looking at the incredible toys and comparing price tags, vying to find the most expensive and intriguing item. The sailboat that Flyboy finds wins.

Then the comparisons begin. It starts with the world with which they are familiar already, the one in which sailboats cost a quarter, rather than the "one thousand one hundred ninety-five dollars" of the boat in the window. At Miss Moore's prompting, they are forced to admit that their boats do not sail and are eventually lost. This symbol in the story deepens as the narrator asks Miss Moore why someone would pay that much for a toy when he could have a real one. This is a question she cannot or does not answer.

Anger wells in the students as they line up in front of the mailboxes at Miss Moore's request. She asks them what they think of F. A. O. Schwarz. Bambara creates a struggle between Miss Moore and the narrator over Sugar's response about "this not being much of a democracy" (95). Through

the irony of this statement and the narrator's final reflection, the reader is able to discern who the actual winner and loser are.

In Bambara's story "The Survivor," marriage is both negated and romanticized. The journey that Jewel takes in her mind is paralleled by a bus ride to the sweetness of Miss Candy's. As in many of Bambara's works, strong women are exercising their power and control. But it is difficult to separate Jewel's acting from real life, leading the reader to ponder which is fact and fiction. This blurred line creates a more complete picture of Jewel. Meanwhile, the confidence Miss Candy exhibits defines a survivor as the person who blames herself for mishaps. And Jewel has much to feel guilty about.

In "Sweet Town," a mother-daughter relationship is sliced by love. Bambara takes the reader through a summer romance that ends all too suddenly for Kit. As is often the case with first loves, Kit's innocence is shattered and she is left fantasizing about reuniting.

"Basement" is as difficult to read as any story in the collection. Bambara explores the lengths we go to protect ourselves and to gain and keep friends. She delves into what we allow others, especially our parents, to know about us, and how their expectations of us shape who we are and how much we tell them.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Mark Twain's preface to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Bambara's "A Sort of Preface" to *Gorilla, My Love*. In what ways are the two similar? Consider the literary devices each author uses, as well as the narrator's stance. Explain the differences and similarities you find, supporting your response with references to both texts.
2. In her writing, Bambara often addresses the importance of names and naming. Why is this focus such an important one for her? Compare the first chapter of *Gorilla, My Love* to the first chapter of Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*. What does each say about the importance of a name? Cite from both texts to support your answer.
3. A frequent theme for Bambara is the relative merit of innocence and experience. Now that you have observed this theme in *Gorilla, My Love*, read five or six poems from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. Which do you feel contributes more to life, innocence or experience? Why? Support your response with citations from both Bambara's and Blake's texts.

"Medley" (1977)

A section of *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, "Medley" is one of the short stories that Bambara has translated into film. The first line of the story drops us into the middle of the action. We are immediately within the consciousness of Sweet Pea, the main character, glimpsing her identity through what she is not. Bambara's uses of repetition and alliteration welcome us into the aptly titled "Medley."

The mix of emotion is immediately evident in the first few pages. Sweet Pea draws comparisons of her work as mother and as manicurist. She knows she is good at giving manicures and feels she is making connections with each of her clients. Sweet Pea identifies each character by what it is he or she does and what he or she is good at: "Stories are not Hector's long suit. But he is an absolute artist on windows" (110). The way she describes each character's passion turns stereotypes upside down. Suddenly, window washing becomes an art form, a skill to be envied and desired.

Nor does Sweet Pea neglect anyone's hands, which she sees as extentions of our identities. As she considers each person's hands and his or her gifts, Sweet Pea reflects on her own, struggling to put her life in order. From all of the disparate compartments in which she lives, there are pieces of her own identity to be gleaned. The final scene shows the character's transformation and her ability to leave the apartment and step boldly out on her own.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Bambara often depicts her characters in terms of a microcosm, or small world, which she builds

from the pieces of their ordinary lives. In so doing, she appears to see her literary characters as having heroic dimension. How does Bambara's evidentiary theory of heroism differ from traditional ones—say, Aristotle's view of a hero as a great man upon whom the fate of many people depends? Is it possible to have heroes today? Why or why not? Justify your answer with references to specific experiences and observations in the story.

2. According to Sweet Pea, "Music and water [are] the healthiest things in the world." What do you think she means? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer in global terms.

The Salt Eaters (1980)

Bambara opens her first novel with the revelation that her main character, Velma, has just attempted suicide. The book is divided into chapters emerging from Velma's consciousness, as she floats from memory to memory. Each chapter includes characters significant to Velma, all with their own parallel stories. Each character depicts Velma in terms of her status as wife, friend, godchild, and political activist. It is difficult for the others to think of Velma as suicidal, since each recollection is of a time when she displayed great strength, despite facing significant hardships. In the ramblings of a spiritual healer, Minnie Ransom, the reader begins to see the justification for Velma's suicide attempt and to question whether she really wants to die. Reading about the "difference between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent" not only explains the title, but also provides insight into why Velma does attempt to take her life (8).

The character Minnie Ransom holds power symbolically through her name and spiritually as a healer. Bambara casts Minnie as the essence of traditional African culture, with an ability to transport herself mentally to Africa, where she can consult Ole Wife, a healer of consequence. Minnie questions why she must deal with Mrs. Velma Henry, who, unlike most of the others she attempts to help, is extremely difficult to reach. Her struggle with Velma has caused Minnie to reflect on the changes in the new generation. The reader learns bits and pieces about Minnie's mentor, someone she knew among the living in her youth.

It is not long before the reader encounters Velma's friends on the bus, traveling to visit her. However, rather than focus on these friends, Bambara draws attention to the unrelated bus driver, Fred Holt. Fred considers the lives of all those he meets as personal reminders of what he does not have. The passengers on the bus become an extension of Fred: The musicians remind him of what he once wished he could be; the women gossiping make him reflect on just who his friends are; even an overheard conversation between a couple make him reflect on his lonely life and home. Fred seems to have come up missing in every aspect of his life, but the reader develops empathy for him despite his jealousy, envy, and even self-loathing.

James "Obie" Lee, Velma's husband, finds hope in Velma's suicide attempt. He sees his wife in a way that he has been unable to before her attempt. Their daily activities seem to have lost the spark that they once had, early in their marriage. A civil rights activist, in dangerous ways, he has a strong desire for progress. Obie is synonymous for yearning in the novel.

Morals are tested through the character of the journalist Buster. Although he has attempted to follow leads in the political underground workings of African Americans, when he reaches a dead end in a potential story, he is more concerned about meeting deadlines than in writing the truth. The political factions he encounters in the community point to an inability of African Americans to unite. Bambara's obvious statement made through Buster is one readers will see in many of her other works, as she often points out the differences between the generations.

Palma, the stereotypical big sister, is not sure just what to feel upon hearing the news about Velma. Her perspective takes Velma out of the victim's role. For the first time, the reader feels Velma's strength as more than the undercurrent it has previously been. Palma sums it up in a way that gives order to the previous chapters: "Velma was

always all right, it was the people around her that were kept in a spin" (144). Fred actually closes this chapter, as his feelings of worthlessness overwhelm the pages. He finally begins asking questions that may be read as his—and by extension Velma's—first glimmering of hope.

The change in Velma begins in chapter 7. Within each character, salt references become more numerous and significant. Bambara reminds the reader of the ways in which salt can be a double-edged tool for harm or healing. The most obvious symbol is suggested by Obie's tears. Bambara uses this human-manufactured salt as tangible evidence of the pain these characters feel. She explains Velma's suicide attempt by the events leading up to the main act, as she portrays how Velma's pet causes have led to her degradation. The "radioactive waves" that she puts out are felt in the people surrounding her. Or is it that they are sending the waves to her and causing her to feel ill? Despite this questioning, Bambara reiterates that the power to heal is within Velma. She must choose her wellness.

Bambara intertwines religion and African spirituality to make Velma's baptism and rebirth inevitable. So strongly visual is Bamara's depiction of the events of Velma's life, the reader senses the drama of it all, watching along with the characters as Minnie directs the documentary of Velma's breakdown, reenacting and critiquing each facet of her life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Velma plays multiple roles—as wife, friend, goddaughter, and so on. Have these roles taken her to the edge of reason? How might Velma view the most significant role of a woman? Use examples from the text to support your answer.
2. Bambara often intertwines music—ranging from classical to pop in origin—into her work. How does this use of music add to *The Salt Eaters*? Be specific in your response, including citations from the text.
3. Read Langston Hughes's "Jukebox Love Song" and "In Explanation of Our Times." Write a well-developed essay on how Hughes's poems and Bambara's novel complement one another in terms of theme and tone.
4. The carnival that takes place in the novel is represented as something both carnal and symbolic. Most of Bambara's characters are touched by it in some way. Choose several characters, explaining what the festival signifies for each. Cite specific examples from the novel.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON BAMBARA AND HER WORK

1. Read *The Bluest Eye,* by Toni Morrison. Explain the contempt held for the Shirley Temple doll in this early Morrison novel. Compare and contrast this symbol with one of your choice from Toni Cade Bambara's work. Discuss in particular how the superimposition of an ideal can affect one's sense of worth.
2. Bambara believed that writing could serve as a "weapon in a struggle." Select three incidents from American history in which this statement has proven to be true, discussing how each contributed to a particular struggle.

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Carrie Morton

Amiri Baraka
(Leroi Jones) (1934–)

Art is political by its very nature. It has an ideology and reflects its creator's value system.

("Talk with Leroi Jones," *New York Times* 27 June 1971)

In July 1967, Amiri Baraka was arrested for illegally carrying a weapon during a time of riots in Newark, New Jersey, also known as the Newark rebellion. At the trial, the judge read Baraka's poem "Black People" (1967) to the all-white jury. "I'm being sentenced for the poem. Is that what you are saying?" responded Baraka (Hudson 51). Though not published until *after* the riots, "Black People" seemed a call to violence: "We must make our own World, man, our own world, and we cannot do this unless the white man is dead. Let's get together and kill him my man . . . let's make a world we want black children to grow and learn in" (*The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader,* Harris 224). The poem was admitted as evidence of a plot to ignite violence, and on January 4, 1968, Baraka was sentenced to three years in New Jersey's state penitentiary and fined $1,000; the conviction was overturned on appeal.

This incident illustrates the relationship between politics and art that is at the center of Baraka's work—a body of work that encompasses, at the time of this writing, 14 books of poetry, 24 plays, five books of essays, four anthologies, and a novel. As he explained in a recent interview: "All art is political. It takes a stand, it wants to convince you one way or another. Those who claim 'art should not be political' are making a political statement." No literature exists in a vacuum, he added, and any suggestion to the contrary is meant "only to have us look away from the real world so that 'the pleasure of the text' is a titillation of empty sensuality. All's well in the big house while the great majority—slaves, serfs, the generally exploited—suffer out of sight" (Trodd 375).

In part because of this insistence upon the political nature of art, Baraka is a controversial figure in American literature. Even more controversial, however, is his use of art to advocate violence. As with "Black People," his poems often call for violent action. For example, in "A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand" (1969), he writes: "We have awaited the coming of a natural / phenomenon. . . . But none has come. . . . Will the machinegunners please step forward?" (Harris 210). Not only using art to advocate violence, he also imagines art *as* violent: In numerous poems he demands that writers be warriors, describes language as a weapon, and fashions poems themselves as daggers, fists, and poison gas. Following this lead in the late 1960s, the Black Students Union at San Francisco State College began to use as their symbol an image of a black man holding a gun and a book, and in 1970 the Black Panther Party member Emory Douglas told artists to "take up their paints and brushes in one hand and their gun in the other." Douglas added: "all of the Fascist American empire must be blown up in our pictures" (Douglas 12). The pen had become a sword.

These calls to violence echo the rhetoric of the black militant leader Malcolm X, as do Baraka's

repeated critiques of nonviolence: As Malcolm X does, Baraka notes that nonviolence as a "theory of social and political demeanor" simply means "a continuation of the status quo" (*Home* 144). In fact, Malcolm's influence on Baraka was profound. Malcolm was killed while speaking in Harlem on February 21, 1965, and in response to the assassination, Baraka wrote "A Poem for Black Hearts" (1965). Here he celebrates and mourns "Malcolm's / heart, raising us above our filthy cities . . . Malcolm's / pleas for your dignity, black men, for your life." Again, the poem imagines words as weapons—"fire darts" (Harris 218). Also in response to the assassination, Baraka left his white wife, moved uptown to Harlem from his Greenwich Village home, and embraced black nationalism.

This was the first of Baraka's two major transformations. Born Leroi Jones on October 7, 1934, in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey, he attended predominantly white public schools, then Rutgers University and Howard University, before beginning military service in the U.S. Air Force in 1954. After his release from the military in 1957, he attended graduate school and moved to New York City's Greenwich Village, where he quickly met and married a white woman, Hettie Cohen. The couple went on to have two daughters. Baraka lived in the Village from 1957 to 1965, working as an editor, poet, dramatist, and jazz critic. He befriended numerous Beat writers, including Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara, and established a magazine called *Yugen,* which published Beat literature. As part of the Village's bohemian, avant-garde crowd, he published his first major collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), which has a stream-of-consciousness Beat aesthetic.

By 1962, however, he was pulling away from Ginsberg and rejecting the otherworldly poetics of Beat writers: "The one huge difference between myself and say, Allen G," he told a friend, is that "I have a program . . . based on realizable human endeavour. . . . I want to put together a body of work that will at least provide some text that can be referred to in the event of the desired explosion" (*Poetry and Poetics* 99). Then, in his poem "Western Front," later published in the collection *Black Magic* (1969), he finally severed the link: "Poems are made / by fools like Allen Ginsberg, who loves God, and went to India / only to see God, finding him walking barefoot in the street, / blood sickness and hysteria" (Harris 216). Ginsberg responded with his own poem, observing in *Ankor Wat* (1968): "Nothing but a false Buddha afraid of / my own annihilation . . . Leroi I been done you wrong / I'm just an old Uncle Tom in disguise all along / Afraid of physical tanks" (32).

Instead of his Beat friends, Baraka began to seek out black nationalists, including Stokely Carmichael. Moving to Harlem in the wake of Malcolm's death, he also married a black poet, Sylvia Robinson, in 1967, and the same year converted to Islam. To express this transformation, he changed his name: from *Leroi Jones* to *Imamu* (spiritual leader) *Amiri* (warrior) *Baraka* (sacrifice). He later explained of this name change: "[it] seemed fitting to me . . . and not just the meaning of the name, but the idea that I was now literally being changed into a blacker being" (Watts 310). In turn, Robinson changed her name to *Amina Baraka*. Becoming more and more engaged with black nationalist politics, Baraka assumed leadership of his own black Muslim organization, Kawaida. From 1968 to 1975, he chaired the Committee for Unified Newark, a Black United Front organization, and was also a prominent figure in the National Black Political Convention, which convened in 1972.

The Beat poet had become a black nationalist. Emphasizing his transformation still further, Baraka published a series of black nationalist poems. One, "leroy" (1969), observes: "When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to / black people. May they pick me apart and take the / useful parts, the sweet meat of my feelings. And leave / the bitter bullshit rotten white parts / alone" (Harris 224). His hostility toward all white people appears in numerous other poems from this period, and his rejection of cross-racial collaboration was even more evident during an infamous encounter with a white woman. She stated her desire to help solve

racial tensions, and Baraka replied: "You can help by dying. You are a cancer. You can help the world's people with your death" (Harris xxv).

Advocating black revolution, Baraka argued, that "Black People are a race, a culture, a Nation" (Harris 167). He believed that art could create this black "Nation" and challenged black artists to create a "Black Poem" and a "Black World" in his 1966 poem "Black Art" (Harris 220). Later explaining that he "wanted to go 'beyond' poetry" and achieve "action literature" (*Autobiography* 275), he called for poetry that both described the situation of black people and showed how to change it. He also founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BART/S) in Harlem, to assist the creation of a black culture. Focused on community art, BART/S produced "plays that shattered the illusions of the American body politic, and awakened Black people to the meaning of their lives," as Larry Neal described it in 1968 (34). Baraka then founded the Spirit House Players, which produced two of his plays about police brutality: *Arm Yrself or Harm Yrself* (1967) and *Police* (1968).

This attempt to make art *act* in the world fueled the Black Arts movement, which boasted Baraka and Neal among its figures, along with Addison Gayle, Jr., Hoyt Fuller, Ishmael Reed, and James Stewart. The Black Arts Movement stressed cultural heritage, the beauty of blackness, and a "Black Aesthetic"—it was, Neal noted, "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (29). Equally important to the Black Arts Movement was a belief that political action would emerge through artistic expression. Art had to be social and political in nature: Neal observed that the artist and the political activist were one, and Stewart added that white Western aesthetics were "predicated on the idea of separating . . . a man's art from his actions" (*Black Fire* 9).

One new aesthetic that Baraka explored instead was the jazz avant garde. He believed that music articulated an authentic black expression, explaining in 1966 that "Negro music alone, because it drew its strengths and beauties out of the depth of the black man's soul, and because to a large extent its traditions could be carried on by the lowest classes of Negroes, has been able to survive the constant and wilful dilutions of the black middle class" (Mitchell 165). Musical freedom as social activism continued the work of Harlem Renaissance poets Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson, and in a recent interview Baraka observed that the Black Arts Movement was on a continuum with the Harlem Renaissance (Trodd 375). Alongside this interest in music, the movement's poets stressed the orality of poetry.

Baraka noted in the same interview, however, that the Black Arts Movement was "a version of Mao's Cultural Revolution, a form of the Indigisme of Haiti, the Negrissmo of Latin America, literally a sorting out and repositioning of cultural meanings, symbols, history." It was "an attempt to capture the minds of the people, to influence and direct them," he added, and explained that this was important because culture is one of the main tools of political organization by the rulers of any society. "We can tell what side you're on, what you celebrate, what you condemn . . . by your art," he concluded. "Art sez Mao is the ideological reflection of the world" (Trodd 375).

Baraka's references to Mao are in fact representative of his worldview after a second major transformation: from black nationalist to third-world Marxist, in 1974. A trip to Cuba in 1960 had begun to radicalize his thinking about oppression in the third world, and in the mid-1970s he proclaimed a complete identification with the artists he had met on his trip. Dissatisfied with Kenneth Gibson's black bourgeois leadership of their Newark organization, and newly impassioned by theories of African socialism, he refashioned the Congress of African People as the Revolutionary Communist League.

He still insisted that "poetry should be a weapon of revolutionary struggle," as he put it in 1979 (adding that otherwise poetry was "an ornament the imperialists wear to make a gesture toward humanity") (*Selected Poetry* 237, 239), but now proclaimed that this "struggle" was against the capitalist state. And while he continued to aim his art at the black community, he explained in 1974 that not all whites were enemies: "It is a narrow nationalism that says the white man is the enemy. . . . National-

ism, so-called, when it says 'all non-blacks are our enemies,' is sickness or criminality, in fact, a form of fascism" (Harris xxviii). The enemy was simply first-world oppressors. Marking this second shift in his political and cultural identity, Baraka changed his name again, dropping *Imamu* to be known as simply *Amiri Baraka*.

In recent years, Baraka has continued to court controversy and has faced accusations of anti-Semitism. He was selected poet laureate of New Jersey in 2002, a position he was forced to resign in the wake of the scandal over his poem "Someone Blew Up America," about the 9/11/2001 disaster.

Though Baraka's life and art falls into these three periods—Beat generation, black nationalism, third-world Marxism—the thread that runs throughout is his stated belief that "ethics and aesthetics are one" (Trodd 375). Pointing in a recent interview to Bertolt Brecht's description of a "Theater of Education or Theater of Instruction," as opposed to "Psychological Theater," Baraka summed up his central philosophy: "If poetry is not to tell us something . . . then it serves what purpose?" (Trodd 375).

"Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note" (1961)

In 1961, Baraka published his first book of poetry. Titled *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, it earned him critical acclaim. Throughout the poems, Baraka draws upon the styles of the Beat poets, the Black Mountain poets, and the poet William Carlos Williams to combine stream of consciousness, projective free verse, and dialect. The collection is introspective and melancholy, as evidenced in the title poem: "Nobody sings anymore," writes Baraka, wistfully.

This title poem, "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note," is also significant for its contrast between the imaginative and the mundane. The poet is "accustomed" to the mundane: running for the bus, walking the dog. Even the stars hold no magic: "each night I get the same number." Baraka emphasizes the repetitive nature of his days by beginning three lines in a row with *And*: "And now . . . And each . . . And when. . . ." It is only when we reach the end of the poem that it offers a break from this pattern of meaninglessness. The poet encounters his daughter, to whom the poem is dedicated, engrossed in prayer. It seems as though she is "talking to someone," and yet there is no one in the room—she speaks into "her own clasped hands." This act of childhood imagination contrasts with the poet's own sense of the mundane. When certain stars are not visible, he sees this absence as a sign that "nobody sings anymore," while his daughter responds to the apparent absence of God by praying into the silence.

The moment expresses Baraka's search for a responsive God. Over the following years, he would decide that the term *Black ideals* described the kind of God he wanted to believe in, explaining in 1965 that he sought a "righteous sanctity out of which worlds are built" (Harris 165). He went on in later poems to criticize the Western world's tendency to "peek" into its "clasped hands" (as he describes his daughter's prayer in "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note"). For example, in the poem "When We'll Worship Jesus" (1975), he attacks capitalist America's tradition of Christianity as "the oppression of the human mind" and observes: "We aint gonna worship jesus cause jesus dont exist / xcept in song and story . . . in / slum stained tears" (Harris 253).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read some Beat poetry, especially that of Allen Ginsberg. What features of this poetry can you find in Baraka's "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note"? How would you describe the tone of these poems, both for the Beats and for Baraka? Explain your answer.
2. Consider the long history of imagining the moon and stars as symbols of constancy—for example, Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To the Moon," John Keats's "Bright Star," Walt Whitman's "A Clear Midnight," and W. H. Auden's "As I Walked Out One Night." Why might it be significant that for Baraka, the stars are *inconstant*? Cite examples from the texts of the poems to justify your answer.

"In Memory of Radio" (1961)

As does his "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note," Baraka's poem "In Memory of Radio" appears to contrast the innocence of the childish imagination and the experience of the adult mind. Though the poem is written in free verse and has a conversational tone with direct addresses to the reader ("The rest of you . . . see what I mean?"), it seems to be an elegy nonetheless—mourning a loss of innocence. Baraka remembers with nostalgia the radio shows of his childhood and examines himself now: in a world that cannot enjoy that fantasy world of radio. The world cannot even understand the word *love*—instead, he explains, the word *love* has been inverted to become *evol.*

Yet far from seeking a return to that world of innocence and make-believe, Baraka is in fact criticizing the creation of false realities by the mass media. The poem's central figure is a superhero of the 1930s and 1940s called "The Shadow," who destroys evil while wearing a cloak of invisibility. Baraka quotes the superhero's catchphrase: "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows." The Shadow's alter ego is Lamont Cranston, a millionaire playboy, and Baraka uses the image of a double self to examine the dividing line between reality and appearance. His poem asks the reader to question the media's world of make-believe—that world of "Let's Pretend."

One danger of the media's make-believe world is its assistance of a consumerist culture: The media tell Americans how to "get saved & rich!" Instead, the poem references and aligns itself with the Beat writer Jack Kerouac, who, as does Baraka, critiques the consumerism of postwar American culture. Of that consumerism, Baraka asks bitterly: "It is better to have loved and lost / Than to put linoleum in your living rooms?" As well, Baraka protests the creation of a commodified religious culture, which means that the process of being "saved" can be marketed and sold and is as important as getting "rich."

This combination of consumerism and religion means that the Shadow might as well be divine: "Who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lamont Cranston?" asks Baraka. Examining the *real* "evol," whereby mainstream America worships millionaires, linoleum, and religious propagandists such as "F. J. Sheen" (priest and author of 1950s books like *Life Is Worth Living, The Way to Happiness,* and *Thinking Life Through*), Baraka is one of the poem's "unbelievers." And unlike those unbelievers, he is a critic who *does* choose to "throw stones."

For Discussion or Writing

Read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). What similarities can you find between the tones and styles of Kerouac and Baraka in this poem?

"Notes for a Speech" (1961)

In his early poetry, Baraka expresses "the emotional history of the black man in this country as its victim and chronicler" (Benston 110). "Notes for a Speech," as one of those early poems, is a meditation on the black man's loneliness: Excluded from white America, he is also disconnected from black Africa. It lays out the poet's isolation, exposing his racial identity. Echoing W. E. B. DuBois's famous comment in 1903 that the black American exists in a state of "twoness . . . an American, a Negro" (3), Baraka notes that white culture tends to "shy away," and yet Africans are only his "so called people."

Here Baraka positions himself within what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., refers to as the "wild zone of the hyphen between African and American" (47). He imagines the social space occupied by African Americans as a no-man's-land: a seemingly abandoned place where newspapers are "blown down pavements / of the world." The gaps in Baraka's poem, created by its structure as a series of shorthand "notes" ("Who / you" instead of "Who are you"), further develop the theme of a no-man's-land—as though the true expression of black identity is hidden somewhere in the poem's gaps. This strategy of imagining a no-man's-land was a trope in numerous poems, novels, and stories by black writers of the 20th century. For example, in his story "The Man Who Went to Chicago" (1945), Richard Wright describes black workers who are "separated by a vast psychological distance from the significant processes of the rest of the hospital—just as America had kept [them]

locked in the dark underworld of American life for three hundred years" (250).

Baraka's focus on the existential isolation of African Americans would soon translate into the solution of black nationalism—a nation within a nation, and so a home for black people in white America. By 1965, he was celebrating the African heritage of African Americans. Africa is no longer the "foreign place" of "Notes for a Speech," but rather, as in "Ka'Ba" (1966), black Americans have "African imaginations." No longer the "ugly man" of "Notes for a Speech," instead Baraka is the "beautiful" man of "Ka'Ba," with a belief that the "Black Man must aspire to Blackness," as he stated it in a 1966 essay (*Home* 248). This shift from dislocated black American to proud African American is visibly on the horizon in "Notes for a Speech" through the capitalization of *Africa* but not *american*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Setting "Notes for a Speech" in the context of Baraka's later poetry (including "Ka'Ba" and "Wise I"), what transformations do you see in his approach to the question of "blackness" and national identity? How does Baraka take up the *problem* of his marginalized "Americanness" and cultivate isolation as a *solution* instead?
2. The poem uses the word *own* three times, once to refer to land, and twice to refer to death ("deaths apart / from my own" and "My own / dead souls"). Twice, Baraka calls attention to the word by positioning it at the end of a line. What connection is Baraka making between land (or lack of it) and death? Is being nationless, without a "people," a form of social death for Baraka? If so, how else does the poem communicate this idea of homelessness or dislocation as a form of death?

"An Agony. As Now." (1964)

The first-person speaker in Baraka's "An Agony. As Now." is trapped "inside someone who hates me." Exploring this idea of self-alienation, Baraka is taking up W. E. B. DuBois's famous formulation of "double consciousness" and applying it to this later moment in time ("as now"). In 1903, DuBois explained the "peculiar sensation" for a black person in America of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." This meant, DuBois added, existing "within a world which yields [the black man] no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (3).

Now Baraka, who has frequently referred in interviews to the work of earlier black writers, including DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Frederick Douglass, echoes DuBois's concept. He imagines the difference between his unacknowledged inner self and his despised outer self—an outer self defined by white America's gaze and perspective. Constricted by the views of others, he can only see through "slits in the metal." Baraka confirms that the poem is a revision of DuBois's 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* by emphasizing that the division between outer and inner selves is a division between "flesh" and *"soul."*

The form of the poem further expresses the sensation of being trapped. Baraka repeats the phrase "or pain" in the fourth stanza, as though he is unable to escape an ever-recurring hurt and must experience it over and over again. As well, on three occasions in the third stanza Baraka opens a parenthesis without closing it. The two sets of parentheses in the fourth stanza, and the one parenthesis in the fifth stanza, are therefore still three layers deep when they create a *fourth* layer. One of his initial sets of parentheses opened in the third stanza is eventually closed at the end of the fifth stanza, but this still leaves the rest of the poem embedded two layers deep. By building these containing layers, Baraka is echoing the theme, as he expresses it in the poem, of "enclosure."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the first chapter of W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Does DuBois see anything potentially positive about "double consciousness"? If so, does Baraka take a less optimistic view than DuBois of the ultimate result of double consciousness?
2. How far has Baraka internalized white racism to imagine blackness itself as a limitation in this

poem? Is it in fact the black body that is responsible for imprisoning the self, rather than the world's perception of the black body?

"A Poem for Willie Best" (1964)

Baraka's long verse ode focuses on the black actor Willie Best, who played a stereotyped black buffoon in films of the early and mid-20th century. "A Poem for Willie Best" takes up the same theme as "Notes for a Speech" and "An Agony. As Now."—a theme that Baraka later referred to as "the whole question of how [one relates] realistically to one's environment if one feels estranged from one's environment and especially a black person in a white situation" (Watts 104). Hidden behind his minstrel performances, Best is disconnected from himself and so might as well be disembodied—a face singing "alone / at the top / of the body."

The poem also fashions Best as a sacrificial lamb to white America—a Christ figure, "nailed stiff" on a "cross." Here Baraka echoes a long tradition in African-American literature of imagining the black man as white America's Christ, building on poems like Langston Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" (1931) and Countee Cullen's "Christ Recrucified" (1922) and "The Black Christ" (1929), as well as stories like W. E. B. DuBois's "Jesus Christ in Texas" (1920) and drama like Georgia Douglass Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925).

Yet, in the case of Best, Baraka offers an end to the dynamic of estrangement, dislocation, victimhood, and sacrifice. He crafts a clear turning point: While trapped behind a mask like the speaker in "An Agony. As Now." and experiencing a divided self like the speaker in "Notes for a Speech," Best is reaching the point of escape. He is about to break from his performance and thus from the white stereotypes of African Americans: "He said, I'm tired / of losing. / 'I got to cut 'cha,'" writes Baraka toward the end of the poem, exposing the "renegade / behind the mask."

Noting in an interview about "A Poem for Willie Best" that the problem of environmental estrangement was even more pronounced for "a person who is growing more and more political" (Watts 104), Baraka signaled in this poem his own ongoing politicization, and his own imminent shift to racial radicalism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Baraka uses numerous parentheses in this poem. What is the effect of this device? Why are some of the parentheses left open?
2. Read the poem aloud. What is the effect of the poem's line breaks? Do they alter the pace from beginning to end? How do these breaks add to or detract from the theme of the poem? What is its theme?

Dutchman (1964)

In March 1964, Baraka's one-act play *Dutchman* opened in New York. The story of a deadly encounter between a white woman and a black college student, it was what Baraka himself referred to the following year as the "theatre of assault." Going on to lay out his manifesto for a new kind of theater, Baraka explained: "The Revolutionary Theatre should force change . . . must EXPOSE! . . . must Accuse and Attack anything that can be accused and attacked . . . it is a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dimwitted fat-bellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on" ("The Revolutionary Theatre" 4–6). To its shocked audiences and dazzled critics, *Dutchman* seemed just that kind of revolutionary theater. It went on to win an Obie Award, was proclaimed "the best play in America" by Norman Mailer (Harris xx), and in 2007 was controversially revived in New York.

While making him famous, *Dutchman* also signaled the explosion of Baraka's long-building anger toward white America. The two characters, Lula and Clay, meet on a New York subway car. They flirt, and eventually Lula provokes Clay into anger, then stabs him to death and throws him off the train. Other white passengers are impassive. The play ends with Lula's sizing up another black male victim; the cycle will continue.

This message of the seemingly unstoppable race war between black and white Americans is reinforced by the play's setting: The train car rushes ever onward in one direction, toward an unavoidable end. Baraka provides further reinforcement for this warning through the play's title, which refers to Richard Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman* (1843)—an opera based on the myth of a legendary ghost ship that can never go home, thus is doomed to sail the seas forever. Again, Baraka implies that *his* Dutchman, the subway car's confined space of white oppression, will sail on until the judgement day of black revolution.

Baraka's decision to end the play with the cycle continuing, and the message that Clay might as well be *any* black man, is echoed by his construction throughout of entirely allegorical characters. Lula enters the subway car eating an apple and proceeds to tempt Clay, her black Adam, as a 20th-century Eve. And in tempting and then destroying Clay, Lula is not only Eve but also a symbol of white America's seeming acceptance, then cruel denial, of black Americans. The characters are larger than they are, their story more significant than that of two individuals: Confirming that the play goes beyond realism, the stage directions insist that the subway is "heaped in modern myth."

Yet Baraka also questions the origins of racial myths, symbols, and stereotypes. Lula, and by implication white America, seems responsible for most of those constructions. She tells Clay that he is "a well-known type" and goes on to reference a series of racial stereotypes, from the fugitive slave ("escaped nigger") to an "Uncle Tom" to what she calls a "middle-class fake white man." In part, Clay has lost his individuality *not* because the play seeks to make him a symbol of the black man, but because white Americans like Lula—and black Americans such as the jacketed, polite Clay himself—have made the black man inauthentic. As well, Clay seems buried beneath the weight of history: The fleeting presence of a conductor who dances a minstrel-style shuffle step is the embodiment of slavery's racial legacy.

Baraka's solution to these constraints of racial stereotypes is either art or violence. On the one hand, when Clay finally reaches a state of real emotion, he argues that Bessie Smith's music communicates the message: "Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass." On the other hand, Clay also argues that Charlie Parker "would have played not a note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw." Here Baraka offers two choices: to rebel through music or to abandon music and rebel. And while Clay seems to settle upon the solution of action rather than art, telling Lula in anger that they "will cut your throats, and drag you out to the edge of your cities so the flesh can fall away from your bones," this remains only a rhetorical gesture. It is Lula who moves beyond rhetoric and commits murder. Failing to act, Clay pays the price.

In a sense, the respectable, middle-class Clay is Baraka himself—struggling between artistry and activism, and on the brink of a transformation whereby he would collapse the distinction and embrace art as a radical tool of violent activism. When the play appeared in 1964, John F. Kennedy and Medgar Evers had been murdered, along with four little black girls in the Birmingham church bombings. Malcolm X's message of black power was gaining supporters, and he was about to be killed himself. The following year, Baraka would kill off his old self, like Clay. He would leave his white wife, move to Harlem, change his name, convert to Islam, and begin a new, revolutionary phase.

Dutchman, then, is in part Baraka's search for his own inner militant, the "renegade / behind the mask," as he states in "A Poem for Willie Best" (1964). Briefly, Clay had found that self behind the facade, telling Lula that she does not see beyond it to the "pumping black heart." And though this discovery occurs in vain for Clay, Baraka would take it to Harlem, and beyond, through his advocacy of black power, black revolution, and black art.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the opening pages of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). What resonances are there between these pages and Lula's advice to Clay that he "pretend the people cannot see you . . . that you are free of your own history"? In what way does Clay take the advice given by the

Invisible Man's grandfather to "live in the lion's mouth"? Explain.
2. Consider the setting of the play—the New York subway, or what the stage directions call the "underbelly of the city." Bearing in mind the long history in African-American literature of imagining underground spaces (for example, in Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground," from 1942; Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man,* from 1952; and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo,* from 1972), what might be the significance of this setting?

"Ka'Ba" (1966)

After his embrace of black nationalism in 1965, Baraka set about transforming the very notion of blackness. Returning to W. E. B. DuBois's famous description of "double consciousness" (3)—a theme in earlier poems like "Notes for a Speech" (1961) and "An Agony. As Now." (1964)—Baraka now asked that blacks no longer see through white eyes. He declared a hatred for the black middle class, equating its values with Euro-American values, and instead used his experimental poetry to subvert traditional forms and accepted values. If "white" and "black" were signifiers for "good" and "bad," then Baraka would use the terms differently, celebrating what he often called "black magic"—or what James Brown expressed when he sang, "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud."

Baraka's poem "Ka'Ba" calls for that "magic," for "spells" and "sacred words." It announces that the world of black Americans is "more lovely than anyone's." We are "beautiful people," he adds. Here his poem echoes the rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s "Black Is Beautiful" movement. For Baraka, however, that beauty is specifically an African beauty: From the idea in "Notes for a Speech" that Africans are only his "so called people," Baraka has shifted to celebrating the "African imaginations" of black people in America. He is expressing one of the tenets of black nationalism: the assertion of black Americans' identity as a people of African ancestry. One of the ways to invert negative symbols and stereotypes, he proposes, is to redefine the African-American past—a past otherwise evoked by the images of slavery in his poem ("gray chains . . . We have been captured, / and we labor to make our getaway").

Others would echo Baraka's pan-African pride: For example, the Black Panther Party member Stokely Carmichael called for pan-African political organization, explaining in *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (1971) that the only way forward for black power was a socialist pan-African revolution. Baraka, too, would later define his poem as calling for revolution: In a recent interview, he explained that the poem's "sacred word" is "revolution, not only in a spiritual context, but in a context of class struggle." The poem was, he added, part of his attempt to solve "the whole question of the unification of Black people" (Banks 2).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which tells the story of a black girl's internalization of white standards of beauty and her wish for blue eyes. How does Morrison apply the message of "Ka'Ba" specifically to women? Explain.
2. Consider the poem's opening image, in which black people defy physics and "call across or scream across or walk across" a space that divides them. How does Baraka embed this possibility of conquering space in the *poem's* space? In your analysis of this question, consider such aspects of the poem as line breaks, stanza breaks, pauses, and white space.

"Will They Cry When You're Gone, You Bet" (1969)

In 1969, Baraka was at the height of his passion for black unity. After 1965 and his embrace of black nationalism, he had shifted from introspective, semiautobiographical poetry to forge a collective voice in his work. This transformation has been described by Paul Vangelisti as a reinvention of "the figure of the poet," and a movement from lyric self-

consciousness to "lyrical communism" (xix). "Will They Cry When You're Gone, You Bet," however, mourns the failure of some black people to join the collective struggle for revolution and separatism: He attacks those who seek to integrate with whites in America, describing it as a desertion by friends who follow a mirage of attentive "white women" that isn't "really there."

Baraka imagines the process of separating from whites as "going off from them," away from "the white heat." It is better, he explains, to accept the "bitter water" of black life than believe the promises of "white drifting fairies" and devious "white women." Here Baraka repeats one of his common strategies: symbolizing white America as a woman. In several poems, and most famously in his 1964 play *Dutchman,* he offers white women as the embodiment of white America's false temptations, fickle warmth, and deathly allure.

This has drawn the anger of both black and white feminists, who protest the implied misogyny of such symbolism. In fact, Baraka's symbolism in this poem is part of his broader gender politics, which again has been attacked by feminist critics. In 1970, for example, he explained that the recovery of "healthy African identities" depended on distinct gender roles and a submissive femininity: "We do not believe in 'equality' of men and women . . . nature has not provided thus" ("Black Women" 148–52).

As well, several of his poems discuss raping white women as a way to counterbalance the oppression of black men. This rhetoric of violence was echoed by the black activist Eldridge Cleaver, who famously described his rape of white women as "an insurrectionary act" (33). The black feminist bell hooks has criticized such rhetoric, noting that Cleaver and Baraka were the embodiment of a Black Power movement that had discarded "chivalrous codes of manhood" and lionized "the rapist, the macho man, the brute who uses force to get his demands met" (106).

Along with Baraka and Cleaver, other Black Power advocates stressed masculine regeneration at the cost of female empowerment. This even encompassed women's roles within the movement: The Black Power activist Elaine Brown later observed that a woman in the movement was considered "at best, irrelevant"; a woman asserting herself, "a pariah." Brown explained: "If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people" (357).

For Discussion or Writing

1. The Black Power movement often seemed a cult of masculinity. In response, Michele Wallace denounced it as a "vehicle for black macho," explaining in 1979 that "black males who stressed a traditionally patriarchal responsibility to their women and children, to their communities—to black people—were to be considered almost sissified. The black man's sexuality and the physical fact of his penis were the major evidence of his manhood and the purpose of it." She added: "Male black power activists [seemed] spurred to action by their genitals, which pointed unfailingly at white women" (62). Take at look at Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968). How accurately does Wallace's description match *Soul on Ice* and Baraka's poem?
2. Read Baraka's poem "Black Dada Nihilismus" (1964). Written while he was still married to a white woman, the poem is shocking for its call to rape white women. But while he issues an instruction to "rape the white girls," he also instructs, "choke my friends." He makes a similar connection to that in "Will They Cry When You're Gone, You Bet," which describes the betrayal of friends and the temptations of white women. What is the significance of that connection?

"AM/TRAK" (1979)

"AM/TRAK" showcases Baraka's belief in poetry as a musical performance. It is one of several poems in which he attempts to translate poetry into music: From the late 1960s onward, he became increasingly interested in poetry as a process of performance and revision, rather than

as a static and finished product. He adopted the improvisatory aesthetic of jazz—embodying the cadences and movements of free jazz and bebop in particular. As he explained in an interview: "Poetry since the sixties [is] much more orally conceived rather than manuscript conceived . . . more intended to be read aloud. . . . To me [the text] is a score. . . . I'm much more interested in the spoken word" ("An Interview with Amiri Baraka" 20).

The poem "AM/TRAK" is therefore at once a poetic biography of John Coltrane and an imitation of Coltrane's jazz style. Baraka chants phrases and words at varied intervals, imitating the jazz technique of repetition and riffs. Words are often repeated for their sound rather than their sense—as though they are notes in a piece of music. And these word repetitions, a form of jazz riff, suggest that Baraka is repeatedly redefining a word's meaning, as though that meaning can evolve during the poem's performance.

In the fourth section of the poem, he also imitates Thelonious Monk, who collaborated with Coltrane: Repeating *duh* (sometimes hyphenated as *duh-duh*), Baraka evokes Monk's accented tunes. Then, echoing Monk's style of letting notes ring after the piano's keys have been struck, Baraka's last repetition of *duh* is extended: "Duuuuuuuuuhhhhhhh." Though seemingly nonsense, these parts of the poem are aurally conceived. They are political, too. As one scholar notes, Baraka "blackens the white avant-garde poem with scatting—a jazz singing technique that substitutes nonsense syllables for traditional lyrics" (*Poetry and Poetics* 107). Baraka's moments of nonsense in "AM/TRAK" are a protest against the apolitical stance of the white avant garde.

In fact, as did other Black Arts Movement poets of the late 1960s and 1970s, Baraka understood performance as a political strategy for reaching mass audiences. He noted that poetry "must be a musical form," that it is "speech musicked," and explained that his ideal poetry "is oral by tradition, mass aimed as its fundamental functional motive" (*The Music* 243). Poetry as music would reach that "mass," he added, because it went beyond the purely intellectual and so was a form of "socio-aesthetic activism": "There are areas of the brain that can only be stimulated by new feelings, feelings not expressed by the formally intellectual (though they may be pointed to!)" (*The Music* 265–266).

But Baraka's embrace of poetry as a musical medium was based on his understanding of cultural aesthetics as well as activist efficacy. In his autobiography of 1984, Baraka noted that "the fact of music was the black poet's basis for creation. And those of us in the Black Arts Movement were drenched in black music and wanted our poetry to be black music. . . . Its rhythms, its language, its history and struggle. It was meant to be a poetry we copped from the people and gave them right back, open and direct and moving" (237). Baraka believed that jazz, in particular, was a direct expression of the African-American experience, adding in his book *The Music* (1987) that its "sound, its total art face, carries the lives, history, tradition, pain, and hope, in the main, of the African American people" (319–320).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Watch an online video of Baraka reading his own poetry (www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/main_video.html). How different is the experience of seeing/hearing the poem from that of reading it on the page? Does Baraka succeed in performing his poem as music?
2. Baraka ends the poem with a mention of his own arrest in the wake of the Newark rebellion of 1967. He notes that he heard of Coltrane's death while in jail. What might be the significance of this connection between Baraka's imprisonment and Coltrane's death?

"Wise I" (1990)

"Wise I" is part of Baraka's epic poem in progress, "Why's/Wise," which lays out in several parts the history of African Americans from the days of

slavery to the present. As in some earlier poems (including "AM/TRAK"), Baraka makes this poem distinctly musical. For example, he creates the effect of a key shift in a musical riff by repeating the phrase "oom boom ba boom" as a variation on "omm bomm ba boom." But Baraka is in fact less interested in imitating the jazz aesthetic of African-American musicians than he is in adopting the style of the West African griots.

These artists were, he has explained, "African Singer-Poet-Historians who carried word from bird, mouth to ear, and who are the root of our own African American oral tradition" (Harris 493). In fact, Baraka has had a long-standing interest in the impact of African art and music on American styles. As early as 1963, in his book *Blues People,* he analyzed the impact of African musical traditions on the development of jazz as "an American sound." Here he explains that after emancipation, former slaves encountered a hostile and dominant white culture and so chose "to fashion something out of that culture for [themselves], girded by the strength of the still evident African culture." That "something" that they fashioned, he explains, was "indigenous to a certain kind of cultural existence in this country" and was "jazz" (79).

"Wise I" is also notable for its showcasing of Baraka's humor. While his early poems, from the late 1950s and early 1960s, focus on the themes of death and despair, of moral and social corruption, and of self-hatred, and his black nationalist poems of 1965–75 are militant in tone, racially aware, and celebrate what he calls "black magic," his later poems frequently exhibit a comic sensibility. As he explained in an interview in 1998, he was intrigued by a "sense of the wonderful, the bizarre, and the comic." Though continuing to portray the struggles of the oppressed, Baraka had now found "the smile at the bottom of the world," adding that, after all, in the "masks of drama, one smiles, one frowns" (Salaam 10). "Wise I," therefore, acknowledges the long history of slavery in America but does so in a tragic-comic tone: "Probably take you several hundred years / to get / out!"

For Discussion or Writing

1. The Native American writer Sherman Alexie is known for his trademark aesthetic of biting wit. He explained in 1998 that "humor is the most effective political tool out there, because people will listen to anything if they're laughing. . . . I never want to be earnest. I always want to be on the edge of offending somebody, of challenging one notion or another. . . . Humor is . . . about questioning the status quo" (West 28). In 2003, Alexie then wrote an article full of sardonic laughter: "Ha, ha! The United States is the freedom-loving country where Americans fought each other over the right to own slaves! Ha, ha, ha, ha! The United States is the democratic country that didn't allow women to vote until 1920! Ha, ha, ha, ha! The United States is the moral country that accepted Jim Crow laws until 1964. Ha, ha, ha, ha!" (Alexie B3). Do you see any of this sardonic laughter in Baraka's other pieces of work, aside from "Wise I"? And if Alexie's sarcasm is an attempt to protest the image of the noble, tragic Indian, what might be the purpose of Baraka's dark humor? Is it just to celebrate the "the wonderful, the bizarre, and the comic," or does it seem designed to insult and provoke readers in any way?
2. In his epigraph to the poem, Baraka mentions the traditional hymn "Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen." Read the lyrics to this hymn and listen to a recording at www.indiana.edu/~jah/teaching/2004_03/sources/ex2_trouble.shtml. How has Baraka incorporated the rhythms and message of this hymn into his poem?

"Monday in B-Flat" (1994)

This seemingly simple poem takes up several of Baraka's common themes. The title, "Monday in B-Flat," makes one of his many references to jazz music: He imagines the sound of police sirens are in a musical key (B-flat). He also embeds the musical rhythms of jazz in the poem: Playfully, he

offers a line-break pause after "Be here," so that the reader approaches the poem as two four-line stanzas, with an extra line that reads "in a minute!" While not pausing for a whole minute, the reader is asked to imagine that pause as the time it takes for "The Devil" to arrive in response to a 911 call.

It also expresses his long-standing equation of white America as a hell for black people, the country's officials all devils: Here the police force is "The Devil." He expanded on this idea in 1998, explaining in an interview that black people "have to deal with the beast everyday." He was, he added, "talking biblically . . . [about] our everyday struggles with 666" (Salaam 10).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the poem aloud. The first stanza has the singsong rhythm of iambic pentameter and includes a rhyme. The second stanza has the natural rhythms of speech. Why does Baraka choose to write each stanza with a different rhythm, and how does that help his distinction between praying and calling 911, or the spiritual and the physical worlds?
2. Take a look at Langston Hughes's short poems, especially "Youth" (1924); "Sea Calm" (1926); "A Little Lyric (Of Great Importance)" (1943), which is only seven words long; and "Dream Deferred" (1951). What points are Hughes and Baraka making with these short poems? Hughes's short poems in particular have often been dismissed as simplistic and infantile, but is there any rhetorical power inherent to poems of this length?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON BARAKA AND HIS WORK

1. Baraka's work is controversial because it often calls for violence. Who exactly does he imagine is the audience for these calls to take violent action, and does that imagined audience seem to shift over the course of his career?
2. Baraka believes that art is a form of activism. What action is his reader expected to take after reading Baraka's work? What is the process by which Baraka imagines his words might change the world?
3. In her article "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Toni Morrison argues that for writing to be considered African American, it has to include the presence of the ancestor. How important is this idea of "roots" to Baraka, and who are the "ancestors" in his work—slaves? abolitionists? earlier black writers?
4. Baraka is often criticized for "essentializing" blackness—for overdefining *black* as *x, y,* and *z*. How in fact *does* his work define *blackness,* and how does that definition evolve over time?
5. Although the Black Arts Movement is over, today there are still artists who believe in black separatism. How did Baraka influence later artists? Can you identify any lines of continuity between his poetry and 21st-century rap, hip-hop, or film, for example?
6. Baraka's autobiography, *The Autobiography of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (1984), details his childhood. How does he describe the transition from innocence to experience in this autobiographical account? How might this transition have affected his poetry?

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Zoe Trodd

Raymond Carver (1938–1988)

"Cathedrals," the blind man said. He sat up and rolled his head back and forth. "If you want the truth, bub, that's about all I know. What I just said. What I heard him say. But maybe you could describe one to me? I wish you'd do it. I'd like that. If you want to know, I really don't have a good idea."

I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else.

(Raymond Carver, "Cathedral")

Raymond Carver, a writer known for his short stories and poetry, is often hailed as one of the great literary minds of the 20th century. Active primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, Carver had a substantial impact on prose writing. The critic Ewing Campbell has said, "Not since Ernest Hemingway has there been a more imitated American author" (ix–x). Published during his lifetime in *Western Humanities Review, December, Harper's Bazaar, Esquire,* and the *New Yorker,* Carver took the world of periodical fiction by storm. His stories have appeared in dozens of anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories* series, *The Pushcart Prize Anthology,* and the *O. Henry Awards* series, on multiple occasions. His short-story collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976) garnered a National Book Award nomination.

Often categorized as a literary minimalist, Carver wrote with precision and a seemingly muted style. He resisted the label, however, considering it a pejorative classification. According to the writer Jay McInerney, "Ray wrote the way that he wrote and he thought it was a belittling term. He didn't believe his work was any more minimalist than anyone else's" (Halpert 49). As did many of his contemporaries, he questioned the usefulness of these types of terms. William Kittredge, one of his contemporaries, commented that Carver consistently wrote about difficult emotional questions. "I don't think of Ray in terms of being minimalist. I don't think he was an emotional minimalist at all. He was dealing with what was, at least for me, major emotions" (Halpert 34). Most critics agree that Carver revolutionized American prose writing. Randolph Paul Runyon remarks, "The problem here may be that Carver has been the most influential minimalist . . . while at the same time the least representative" (4).

Born in Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938 and raised in Yakima, Washington, the author had humble beginnings. His mother, Ella Casey Carver, worked as a waitress, retail clerk, and stay-at-home mother, while his father, Clevie Raymond Carver, worked at a sawmill. At age 18, Carver married Maryann Burke, who gave birth to their first child six months later. Their daughter, Christine LaRae, was followed a year later by a son, Vance Lindsay. That same year, Carver enrolled at Chico State College, where he met the writing teacher John Gardner, who later went on to become a world-renowned novelist. Of Gardner, Carver stated, "Until I met John Gardner, I had no sense of serious literature. . . . Everything was more or less of equal merit, or value, until I met Gardner" (Gentry and Stull 234). Carver described Gardner, who was only in his twenties at the time, as a busy

man and a chronic reviser. But Gardner famously provided Carver with a key to his office so Carver could have a place to work. "He had a lot of correspondence from other writers in his office," Carver said once in an interview, "which I naturally read. Anyway, I learned a good deal about this and that from all my snooping" (Gentry and Stull 4). Carver later transferred to Humboldt State College. That same year, 1963, one of his earliest published short stories, "Pastoral," appeared in *Western Humanities Review* and his poem "The Brass Ring" appeared in a now-defunct magazine called *Targets*. (Depending on what they count as an officially "published" short story, some critics list "Pastoral" as his first published work. He had published several pieces in student magazines previously.)

Carver left Humboldt with a B.A. that spring and, in fall 1963, attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he remained for less than a year. Carver often explained his decision to drop out as a financially motivated one: "[A $500 scholarship] wasn't much money for a year's worth of study, even with the $2 an hour I earned working in the university library and the money my wife earned working in a restaurant. There was no way we could make it through a second year in Iowa" (Gentry and Stull 74). Moving back to California, Carver took a job as a janitor for the next two years. Switching to the night shift in 1965, he was able to enroll in a poetry workshop at Sacramento State College. In 1986, Carver reflected on his teacher at Sacramento, Dennis Schmitz: "He was for many years—and still is—an inspiration to me, even though our poetry is very different" (Gentry and Stull 180). In 1967, the short story "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" was included in *Best American Short Stories,* but in the same year, financial troubles forced the Carvers to file for bankruptcy. Carver's father passed away that summer. A few weeks later, Carver took a job at Science Research Associates, editing textbooks, and moved to Palo Alto, California. Some time during that summer, he also met Gordon Lish, who had published some of Carver's work at *Esquire*. Lish later took a position at Knopf and became Carver's book editor. "He was always a great advocate of my stories," said Carver, "at all times championing my work, even during the period when I was not writing, when I was out in California devoting myself to drinking, Gordon read my work on radio and at writers conferences and so forth" (Gentry and Stull 234–235). In recent years, Lish's role in editing and shaping Carver's early stories has become controversial. In 2009, the Library of America published a collection entitled *Raymond Carver: Selected Stories*, which included "Beginners," an early draft of a story that became, after much editing and compressing, the famous story "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love."

In 1968, Carver's wife received a scholarship to attend Tel Aviv University. Carver took a one-year leave of absence from Science Research Associates to travel with Maryann to Israel. They arrived in June, and in Maryann's words, "Ray and my daughter both became very disgruntled" (Halpert 93). An explosion at a bus depot, which the Carver children often passed through on their way to school, was the last straw for Carver. He delivered an ultimatum to Maryann, pledging to take his children back to the United States with or without her. She left with him, however, and the entire family returned via cruise ship.

Throughout the early 1970s, Carver began to experience substantial success as a writer and a writing instructor. He lectured at U.C. Santa Cruz, U.C. Berkeley, U.C. Santa Barbara, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He was awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University in 1971 and, according to Maryann, earned two nicknames: *Running Dog* and *Feather in the Wind*. "He kept his job teaching at Santa Cruz while teaching in Iowa and flew back and forth without either school knowing about it" (Halpert 94). In 1973, while lecturing at the Iowa Writers' Worskhop, Carver resided at the Iowa House Hotel one floor below John Cheever. "The entire time we were there," said Carver, "I don't think either of us ever took the cover off our typewriters. We made trips to a liquor store twice a week in my car" (Gentry and Stull 40). While Cheever famously spent a month

at Smithers, an alcoholic rehabilitation center in New York City, Carver's drinking habits became more pronounced.

Alcoholism and mounting family problems forced Carver to resign in December 1974 from a one-year position at U.C. Santa Barbara. The Carvers filed for bankruptcy for the second time and returned to Cupertino, California. In 1976, Carver was hospitalized four times for alcohol-related incidents. He and his wife separated and sold their house. Of the failed marriage, Maryann said, "I was so deep in that relationship—and he was too—that past clichés don't cut it. . . . We'd been in it forever. I met the love of my life when I was fourteen years old, for God's sake" (Halpert 100). Maryann and Carver tried to reconcile briefly but parted ways permanently in summer 1977. During that same year, Carver published one of the great works of his career, *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?,* a book of short stories. The collection earned Carver a National Book Award nomination.

In 1977, Carver quit drinking and met the poet Tess Gallagher, whom he later married. He earned a Guggenheim Fellowship and published another book of short stories, *Furious Seasons.* Within two years, Carver and Gallagher were living together in El Paso, Texas. He also won a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1979, but Gallagher recalled this period as a time of tension: "I remember feeling afraid when I was first with Ray that living with him might turn out to be like stepping into one of his stories. It seemed that a very thin membrane might separate the world of chaos and order when Ray's perceptions came into play" (*Carver Country* 16). Carver struggled to write and, according to Gallagher, distrusted the work he did when sober. But over time the author was able to return to a period of profound achievement, writing what some consider his best and most richly textured stories. "As the years of sobriety and literary accomplishment accumulated," said Gallagher, "Ray's face lost an almost bloated vagueness it had carried when I'd first met him. The jawline firmed up and the muscled places, where humor and a sense of confident well being had come together, seemed to restore a youthful mischief to his looks" (*Carver Country* 18). The 1981 collection *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* preceded the 1983 collection *Cathedral,* often regarded as Carver's best work. During this period, Carver and Gallagher lived and taught at Syracuse University in New York and traveled extensively throughout Europe. Destinations included Switzerland, France, and Italy. In 1982, Carver's mentor John Gardner was killed in a motorcycle accident.

In spring 1987, Gallagher and Carver traveled to several European cities, but that fall, Carver became ill. Doctors removed two thirds of his cancerous left lung in October. This surgery provided a short reprieve from the illness, but in March 1988, the cancer returned, this time appearing in his brain. He went through a seven-week course of radiation treatment in April and May. A collection of short stories, *Where I'm Calling From,* was released in May. But in early June, doctors discovered a resurgence of cancer in Carver's lung. Amid mounting health problems, Carver and Tess decided to marry. The ceremony was held in Reno, Nevada, on June 17. He died of lung cancer on August 2, 1988, at the age of 50. Reacting to Carver's death, Tess wrote: "Besides the plain fact of Ray's genius being gone from the world, part of this outpouring was no doubt due to the fact that Ray was so young—barely fifty. We had all expected and hoped for many more years of his writing and company. It was a life cut short, and we suffered the loss as it was—an aberration, a blow, a chastisement to us all in our faulty assumptions about the future" (*Carver Country* 19). The following summer, Carver's final book of poetry, *A New Path to the Waterfall,* was published.

Authors and critics have commented on Carver's significance as a writer. Tobias Wolff, who first became friends with Carver in the late 1970s, theorized that Carver will continue to be an important writer long into the future: "I have a strong suspicion that Ray will be one of those writers who will be read with care and love as long as people read our language. He has penetrated a secret about us and brought it to the light, and he does it again

and again. You have to go to the water and drink. There's something pure and cool and honest in his vision of life, and the beauty of his language, its exactness, its cadences, and its music. People will go back to it again and again and again" (quoted in Halpert 11).

Several major works analyzing Carver's writings have appeared since his death. While the majority of reaction to Carver's work during his lifetime described him as a minimalist, several critics of late have attempted to delve beneath the label that Carver so openly deplored. Adam Meyer's 1989 essay "Now You See Him, Now You Do Again: The Evolution of Raymond Carver's Minimalism," published in *Critique* magazine (reprinted in part in Campbell), exemplifies the standard narrative that Carver began as a minimalist and matured with *Cathedral*. The 1995 collection *Narrative Turns in Minor Genres in Postmodernism* includes an essay by W. M. Verhoeven entitled "What We Talk about When We Talk about Raymond Carver: Or, Much Ado about Minimalism." G. P. Lainsbury, in his introduction to *The Carver Chronotope* (2004), discusses the critical context of Carver's minimalism. In Halpert's book, several of Carver's contemporaries respond to the term. Most notably, Geoffrey Wolff uses the expletive *bulls—t* as a response to the term (112). Saltzman entertains an extended discussion on the "controversy" surrounding Carver's minimalism, analyzing as well the claim that Carver ought to be categorized as a postmodern writer (5; for more information, see Saltzman 1–20). Randolph Runyon also weighs in on the minimalist debate in the introduction to *Reading Raymond Carver*.

Even though Carver has for the most part escaped labels as a regionalist, recent work has attempted to establish a geographical or social aesthetic throughout his work. Lainsbury discusses his wilderness aesthetic, while Saltzman notices Carver's attention to the working classes of the United States. "Carver stays faithful to the gross tokens of American culture—the stuff of waitresses, fishermen, salesmen, mail carriers" (17). Likewise, scholars have begun to look at the politics of legacy and influence in his work. Carver listed Anton Chekhov as one of his most direct influences. During his lifetime, he had interactions with Robert Altman, John Cheever, Richard Ford, John Gardner, Jay McInerney, William Kittredge, and Tobias Wolff. Lainsbury writes about connections between Carver and Hemingway, as well as Carver and Kafka.

In 2009, Carol Sklenicka published the first full-length biography of Carver, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life*. There other several other important biographical sources. Carver's own works, of course, can be seen as partially autobiographical, while the 1990 collection *Carver Country* attempts to juxtapose autobiography and fiction in an attempt to paint a more textured portrait of Carver and his work. Tess Gallagher's *Soul Barnacles* (2000) attempts to consolidate several documents pertaining to Carver's life. Gallagher's travel journal from the couple's 1987 trip through Europe is included, as is Gallagher's eulogy of Carver from *Granta* (Autumn 1988). Interviews, reprinted essays, and letters make up the remainder of the collection. Halpert's . . . *When We Talk about Raymond Carver* collects interviews from 10 people who knew the author, including his first wife, Maryann, and several writers. A memoir by Maryann titled *What It Used to Be Like: A Portrait of My Marriage to Raymond Carver* was published in 2006. *Conversations with Raymond Carver* collects more than 20 pieces of journalism pertinent to Carver's life. Some of these articles quote Carver in narrative form, while others reprint interviews with him in question/answer form. Several articles are regionally based and provide unique perspectives into Carver's legacy. *Remembering Ray: A Composite Biography of Raymond Carver* (1993) also provides reminiscences about Carver, reprinting some previously published essays.

Although Carver never wrote a novel, several critics have attempted to construct a Carver worldview across the broad range of his fiction and poetry. Lainsbury argues, "Thinking of Carver's output as one large novel . . . is not as strange as it might at first seem," adding later that "the Carver chronotope makes artistically visible a discrete historical moment in the ongoing project that the world

knows as America" (8). *Carver Country* (1990) reprints poems and selected short stories of Carver's alongside photographs by Bob Adelman, who was a friend of his. These photographs add insight into the places that inspired Carver, as well as the people who touched his life. The work also includes several unpublished letters and photographs of Carver's notebooks and drafts. Tess Gallagher wrote the introduction to *Carver Country,* saying the collection "became a story, both of Ray's life as a writer and a man, and also of our lives together as writers, lovers, and helpmates" (8).

"Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" (1976)

The last piece in the 1976 short-story collection of the same title, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" is one of Carver's great achievements. Carver's subdued prose represents effectively a sense of moral ambiguity. Arthur Saltzman explains, "On the whole, things remain lukewarm; arid marriages and formulated phrases are the norm. Desires, doubts, and all manner of considerations flow sluggishly through the narrowest of verbal channels" (73). Ralph Wyman, the main character, feels purposeless as a young college student, until he comes under the influence of a teacher named Dr. Maxwell: "He had been educated at Vanderbilt, had studied in Europe, and had later had something to do with one or two literary magazines back East. Almost overnight, Ralph would later say, he decided on teaching as a career" (226). This tale mirrors Carver's own experience in college, approximating his relationship with John Gardner. Also reflecting an autobiographical voice is the author's decision to name Ralph wife's, whom he meets in a Chaucer class as a college senior, Marian.

Most of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" takes place years later, when Ralph discovers his wife's infidelity. Confronting her about an incident two or three years past, he finally hears the extent of her indiscretion and flees his home. The central conflict of the story, however, is not the indiscretion itself but rather the main character's reaction to it. Ralph, as do many of Carver's characters, occupies a zone of moral ambiguity, a space of indecision. "He thought how Dr. Maxwell would handle a thing like this," states Carver, deciding "Dr. Maxwell would sit handsomely at the water's edge" (245). Wyman's idealized decision to contemplate his situation by the pier is interrupted when he accidentally bumps into a street thug, who takes offense and beats him into unconsciousness. Returning home perhaps even more defeated than when he left, Ralph must decide what to do about his wife and family. As his wife knocks on the locked bathroom door and his children cry in the background, Ralph speaks the title phrase, "Will you please be quiet, please?" which reflects his desire to avoid the conflict rather than address it. In Ewing Campbell's words, "The crisis resolves itself finally to his amazement and with his apparent acceptance of the old Marian and the new Ralph Wyman, for the old one died somewhere in the night" (30).

The final passage of the story reflects this sense of acceptance or, perhaps more appropriately, the decision to let go, as well as the powerful sexuality that dominates the story. Marian sits on the bed where her husband intends to sleep and begins stroking his lower back. "He tensed at her fingers, and then he let go a little. It was easier to let go a little. Her hand moved over his hip and over his stomach and she was pressing her body over his now and moving over him and back and forth over him. He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep, and he was still turning, marveling at the impossible changes he felt moving over him" (249).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Carver address questions of morality in this short story? To what degree can actions be categorized in terms of right and wrong? How does Carver address mainstream ideas about forgiveness?

2. Ralph, in an effort to make sense of his wife's infidelity, attempts to sit by the docks and watch the sunrise, primarily because he imagines this to be what his mentor would do in his place. What does the disruption of Ralph's plan indicate about Carver's sense of aesthetics?

"Furious Seasons" (1977)

"Furious Seasons," published in the short-story collection of the same title, has been pointed out as something of an oddity when placed in the Carver oeuvre. While many of Carver's critics skip this collection when analyzing Carver's work, Saltzman includes an entire chapter on the collection, noting, "Apart from the title story, in which Carver makes surprising use of stream-of-consciousness techniques, the fictions in this collection are generally faithful to such conventions as narrative framing and definitive closure" (76).

The title story, however, is nonlinear, surrealistic, and abstract to the point of obfuscation. The main character, Lew Farrell, jumps between several locations, including a bedroom where he confronts his sister about her pregnancy and a goose-hunting trip with his friend Frank. Long passages describing the landscape and the weather interrupt these interior scenes. The story closes with this focus in mind: "The gutter water rushed over his feet, swirled frothing into a great whirlpool at the drain on the corner and rushed down to the center of the earth" (110). Shifts in verb tense complicate the narrative even further. The implication at the end of the story is that Farrell was responsible for impregnating his sister and has somehow caused her death. "Her carries her out to the porch, turns her face to the wall, and covers her up. He goes back into the bathroom, washes his hands, and stuffs the heavy, blood-soaked towel into the clothes hamper" (109). Halpert appropriately describes the ambiguity of the story's conclusion: "Whether or not Farrell is guilty of incest and murder is obscured by his subjective meanderings and lapses of focus; he shifts back and forth between robot-like desensitization and surreal images of suffocation and violence" (96). The style of this work is often compared with that of William Faulkner.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Describe Carver's stylistic choices in this short story. How does his sense of surrealism compare with other writers'? What makes his voice distinct?
2. What can be said about the literary importance of Carver's landscapes and his sense of place? How does the weather contribute to the impact of this work?

"What We Talk about When We Talk about Love" (1981)

Perhaps one of Carver's most thoughtful works, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Love" is essentially the story of a predinner conversation revolving around concepts of love. "My friend Mel McGinnis was talking," opens the story. "Mel McGinnis is a cardiologist, and sometimes that gives him the right" (170). While a discussion about love creates the crux for this work, Carver does not abandon his patented realism in favor of an abstract, intellectual debate. Four friends in Albuquerque, "all from somewhere else," drink from a cheap bottle of gin while discussing this topic (170). Mel, driven partly by his experiences as a doctor, insists that love is an absolute, while Terri, his wife, recalls her previous partner, Ed, who threatened Terri and Mel's life in the name of love and ultimately killed himself for the same stated reason. "He did love me though, Mel. Grant me that," Terri pleads, but Mel remains unconvinced. "I'm not interested in that kind of love," he says. "If that's love, you can have it" (174).

While the narrator, Nick, and his wife, Laura, avoid center stage for most of the story, the conversation eventually turns to the recently married couple. "Well, Nick and I know what love is," Laura says, but her idealism cannot last, not in this setting. "Stop that now. You're making me sick.

You're still on your honeymoon, for God's sake," Terri reminds them (175). Nick almost escapes the entire story without making a stand, but his final comment seems to carry some interpretive meaning: "Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on into the sunset" (185). When questioned about the comment, which Laura sees as perhaps a kind of depressed resignation, Nick replies, "It means I could just keep going. That's all it means" (185). Perhaps the meaning of the story resides somewhere between Nick's desire to keep going and his implied resignation.

As the story progresses, Carver gives the impression that even though Mel may have "the right" to make claims about the absolute nature of love, his version of the emotion simplifies a deeply complicated philosophical question. Mel admits, "But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too. But I did, I know I did" (176). Mel does not insist on his own authority, instead concluding, "It seems to me we're just beginners at love" (176). But drunkenness provides the only closure available in this short story. The characters, slipping into stupor, never go out to dinner, and their debate trails off into a rant about Mel's former wife. According to Geoffrey Wolff: "'What We Talk about When We Talk about Love' I admire so much because, first of all, I don't think there has ever been anything even approximately as good written about drinking. I've done enough drinking in my life to know how it feels, what happens to syntax, what happens to diction, as the light begins to come down in the room and the stuff goes further down in the bottle" (115).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Some critics have suggested that Carver's dinner conversation approximates and updates the viewpoints of several classical thinkers. What philosophers' writings, historical or contemporary, could Carver be in conversation with? How would his views compare with the ideas of these thinkers? Why do you think so?
2. Carver seems to provide arguments in favor of two systems of love: one based on actions and the other grounded primarily in sentiment. Which version is more applicable to your own life? Why is this the case? Explain your answer.

"Cathedral" (1982)

"Cathedral" has often been pointed to as one of Carver's most surprisingly textured works. In the words of Carver's former student Jay McInerney, "Something remarkable happens in that story that usually doesn't happen in a Carver story. It has a different kind of ending. The ending of a usual Carver story leaves you on the brink of an abyss, and you look down into it. In 'Cathedral' it's more like you're looking up to the sky and the sun is coming out" (Halpert 48). Noted for its optimism as well as its depth, "Cathedral" has a simple plot, on the literal level. The first-person narrator is jealous of his wife's relationship with Robert, a blind man for whom she used to work. After Robert's wife, Beulah, dies, he plans to visit the narrator's wife. "I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit," says the narrator. "He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me" (356). The narrator's awkwardness intrudes as he attempts to make small talk. He thinks about the scenic train ride along the Hudson River that Robert has taken and even asks him which side of the train he sat on. Of course, the scenery is of no consequence to Robert, but he undercuts the narrator's assumption that the ride held no meaning for him. "I hadn't been on a train in nearly forty years. Not since I was a kid. With my folks. That's been a long time. I'd nearly forgotten the sensation," he says (362). This response asserts Robert's connection to the experience in two ways. He can feel the train, of course, and has a nostalgic relationship with it. Similarly, the narrator assumes that Robert does not smoke because he "couldn't see the smoke [he] inhaled" (363). Once again, the assumption proves false: "This blind man smoked his cigarette down to the nubbin and then lit another one" (363).

Unlike that in many Carver stories, the theme in "Cathedral" is growth and change, not stasis. The blind man's disability allows Carver to medi-

tate on seeing and knowing in several ways, but the conclusion makes this metaphor overt as Robert and the narrator work together to draw a cathedral. (A television documentary on cathedrals triggers the realization that Robert does not know what a cathedral is and that the narrator is unable to explain it.) "His fingers rode my fingers as my hand went over the paper. It was like nothing else in my life up to now" (374). The narrator closes his eyes at the conclusion of the tale, entering Robert's universe. When Robert asks what the cathedral looks like, he replies without looking, "It's really something" (375). While Carver denies his readers an outright epiphany, a sense of conversion can still be observed. Campbell suggests the narrator "will view from now on his wife's experience in a manner different from his initial attitude, that his attitude toward Robert will be wholly different also" (66). In this manner, "Cathedral" stands as an articulation of Carver's optimism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. See whether you can trace the narrator's use of common expressions that rely on his sense of sight. To what degree does Carver use wordplay in "Cathedral"? As the character's attitude toward his blind acquaintance changes, does his language? Why do you think that is so? What does this change contribute to the work as a whole?
2. Why does Carver use a cathedral as the central metaphor for this piece? What does it represent? How does it relate to the theme of vision and seeing? What would be the consequences of a completely different metaphor?

"Where I'm Calling From" (1989)

As in many of his stories, Carver's personal vulnerability becomes a focal point in "Where I'm Calling From." The story is set in an alcohol treatment center called Frank Martin's and reflects Carver's "trying to navigate through the mirrorings of his own disease" (147). The story is based upon Carver's own experience at Duffy's, "a treatment center in northern California within sight of Jack London's house" (*Carver Country* 12). For the majority of the story, the narrator listens to his acquaintance J. P. talk about his own life. J. P. explains that he fell down a well at a young age. His fear can be seen as a roundabout way for Carver to discuss his own apprehensions about quitting alcohol: "He suffered all kinds of terror in that well, hollering for help, waiting, and then hollering some more" (281). Carver relates that J. P. wet his pants in the well and that "being at the bottom of that well had made a lasting impression" (281). Years later, says J. P., he became a chimney sweep, but the story of J. P.'s career turns out more appropriately to be the story of his marriage. He meets a female chimney sweep named Roxy, learns the trade from her, and eventually marries her. When she becomes pregnant, she stops working, but he continues with the career she helped him build. J. P's story, presumably like the narrator's, is then marred by alcoholism.

Interspersed with J. P's story are realistic scenes of the narrator at Frank Martin's drying-out facility. Another resident, Tiny, falls to the floor one day and goes into convulsions, which are caused by his withdrawal. According to Douglas Unger, Carver adapted an experience of his own to create this scene: "Ray hit the floor several times, like the character Tiny in ['Where I'm Calling From']. That's where the detail is from. Ray was the one who was on the floor with his heels clicking. He was then terrified to quit drinking" (Halpert 59). Once again, fear becomes a central element in this short story. "But what happened to Tiny is something I won't ever forget," says the narrator, adding later: "So every time this little flitter starts up anywhere, I draw some breath and wait to find myself on my back, looking up, somebody's fingers in my mouth" (280). Not coincidentally, the main character's stay at Martin's coincides with the winter holidays. As New Year's Eve passes, the absence of alcohol becomes palpable: "'I don't want any f—ing cake,' says the guy who goes to Europe and places. 'Where's the champagne?' he says, and laughs" (291). The main character's discomfort, the reader discovers, is enhanced by apprehension about his girlfriend, who was waiting for the results of a follow-up from a doctor after a disturbing Pap smear

result. The narrator reveals that his girlfriend's bad news triggered his alcohol relapse and his return for a second stay at Martin's. While apprehension and terror remain central motifs, Carver provides a glimmer of hope. Upon meeting J. P.'s wife, Roxy, he asks her for a kiss, with the explanation "I need some luck" (294). His mannerism recalls J. P.'s story about kissing Roxy for the first time, but his hope that the kiss will give him luck seems to be the narrator's own conclusion. Roxy grants him his request and wishes him luck. As the story moves to a close, he contemplates calling his girlfriend and his wife, who had asked him to move out some months before. "She'll ask me where I'm calling from, and I'll have to tell her. I won't say anything about New Year's resolutions. There's no way to make a joke out of this" (296). At the conclusion of the story, Carver emphasizes the ongoing difficulty of a task like quitting alcohol. He provides some hope but does not gloss over the reality of the narrator's situation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. A feminist critique of Carver's story might focus on how the narrator addresses spousal abuse, spending more time sympathizing with the abuser/addict than the victim. How does gender relate to the abuse/victim matrix Carver explores? Does it deserve to be criticized? Are there other elements of Carver's gender relationships that deserve to be scrutinized? Justify your answers.
2. Carver's story has been hailed as a powerful depiction of addiction and the difficulties of overcoming it. What kinds of rituals, customs, and emotional needs are associated with alcohol? How successful is Carver at depicting addiction, and why?

"A Small, Good Thing" (1989)

Expanded from an earlier story titled "The Bath," Carver's "A Small, Good Thing" has often been analyzed in terms of revision and maturation. Saltzman notices that the expansion decreases "the distances that separate Carver's characters from one another and Carver's narrator from the story he relates" (144). The story relates the death of eight-year-old Scotty Weiss, the son of Ann and Howard Weiss. Injured in a hit-and-run car accident at the opening of the story, Scotty remains in a coma for the majority of the tale. Ann and Howard rush to the hospital to be by his side, and, in the process, Ann forgets about a cake she ordered for Scotty's eighth birthday. Ann and Howard, devastated by the accident, are forced to face genuine tragedy for the first time. "Until now," Carver states, "[Howard's] life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction—college, marriage, another year of college for the advanced degree in business, a junior partnership in an investment firm. Fatherhood" (379). Likewise, Ann is forced to reach out for a long-forsaken sense of faith: "I almost thought I'd forgotten how, but it came back to me. All I had to do was close my eyes and say, 'Please God, help us—help Scotty'" (384). While Scotty is expected to survive, a rare condition called a hidden occlusion results in his death. The doctor apologizes profusely, but it is all but impossible to get past the event itself.

The original story, "The Bath," ends shortly after Scotty's death, as the doctor attempts to console the bereaved parents. In the expanded version, Carver pursues a plot thread that originally was undeveloped. After forgetting to pick up the birthday cake at the bakery, the Weisses receive several increasingly aggressive phone calls from the baker. He cannot understand why the cake has been forgotten, and his calls border on harassment by the time Scotty dies. Ann suddenly realizes who must be calling, however, and she and her husband travel to the bakery to confront the baker. Upon realizing what he has done, the baker begs forgiveness. "I'm not an evil man, I don't think," he says. "Not evil, like you said on the phone. You got to understand what it comes down to is I don't know how to act any more, it would seem" (404). The Weisses do not verbalize their forgiveness, but they allow the baker to make partial reparations by accepting warm cinnamon rolls from his oven. The baker insists that "eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," but the

couple does not respond (404). Instead, they listen to the baker's story. "Though they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say. . . . They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving" (405).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Critics have often discussed the differences between "The Bath" and the longer version reprinted as "A Small, Good Thing." Try to imagine this story as ending when the Weisses leave the hospital. How would the piece differ? How would its statement about life be affected? Why?
2. What is your appraisal of the baker? Is he an "evil man," as he fears? To what extent do you think he deserves forgiveness? To what degree, if any, do you think the Weisses actually grant him forgiveness? Explain your answers fully.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON CARVER AND HIS WORK

1. As you read several of Carver's stories, think about the idea of a Carver chronotope or worldview. How successfully does he articulate a fairly consistent vision of the world? What are the rules governing this reality? What kind of place is it? What kinds of people are we meant to admire?
2. Minimalism has been called the central controversy of Carver's writing. Do you think his works should be read as minimalist? What aspects of his work most consistently reinforce this label? What is the benefit of the term? Why do you think Carver found it so offensive?
3. Some have criticized Carver for relying too heavily on the biographical events in his own life. Do some research on Carver's life, specifically looking for aspects most closely paralleled in his writings. Do you think this criticism is fair? Do you think it should be a criticism?
4. Read some of the poetry of Tess Gallagher (Carver's wife). How does it compare with her husband's writing? Can you find parallel events or experiences discussed in both their works? Stylistically, how do their approaches to these events differ? Can you see evidence of Gallagher's influence on works like "Cathedral"?
5. Read some of Carver's poems. How do they differ from his short stories in style and subject matter? Do they participate in the same chronotope as Carver's fiction?
6. Carver's depictions of alcoholism are often described as incredibly accurate and powerful. How does his treatment of alcoholism compare to treatment of similar subject matter by other writers? Can he be compared to his contemporary John Cheever? What about comparisons to F. Scott Fitzgerald or Ernest Hemingway? Why or why not?
7. Discuss how Carver's short stories often focus on working-class Americans. What is the significance of Carver's socioeconomic aesthetic? Who, according to Carver, deserves to be written about? Why is this the case? Discuss your answer.
8. Carver's landscapes are often seen as being as central to his work as any of his characters. Do you agree or disagree? Read Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native,* noting how landscape figures in this novel. Does the setting in Hardy's work play a more or less important role than in Carver's literary world? Why or why not?

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Matthew Lavin

Sandra Cisneros (1954–)

I am a writer. It is my job to think. I live my life facing backwards.

("Ghosts and Voices" 71)

Sandra Cisneros was born on December 20, 1954, the only daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican-American mother. Alfredo Cisneros had fled Mexico for the southern part of the United States years earlier, too ashamed to face his father after failing his first year of college. From there, he traveled north into the barrios of Chicago, where he met Cisneros's mother, Elvira Cordero Anguiano. At the time, Elvira was just 17 and living with her parents. Cisneros's maternal grandfather was a large, generous man, who would freely share his food and home with anyone because he "knew what living without meant" ("Never" 70). But Elvira's family never had much, and when Alfredo would visit, she was embarrassed by the poverty of her home. From the start, Elvira had been impressed by his fancy clothes and air of importance. Despite the meager living he was making in the United States, he was from a home in Mexico City "that was neither rich nor poor, but thought itself better than both" ("Never" 71). After they married, Elvira gave birth to seven boys and two girls, but Cisneros's sister died young, leaving the future author to fend for herself in a world of young men.

Lost amid her brothers, who would not stoop to play with a mere girl, Cisneros lived a lonely childhood. This loneliness was only heightened by her family's seasonal migration between Chicago and Mexico City to satisfy her father's nostalgia. Without a sister as an ally against her brothers and the constancy that results from living in a permanent home where friendships could flourish, Cisneros turned to books for companionship. As undesirable as this solitude was at the time, Cisneros reflects on it as "a perfect beginning for a writer in training" ("Only Daughter" 256). In the absence of companionship, Cisneros found plenty of time to write and read—activities that made her imagination swell and created a voice in her head for narrating, even embellishing, life's experiences with omniscient asides. Routinely, when her mother gave her simple instructions for buying bread and milk at the grocery store, she would replay the instructions like a novella:

> "I want you to go to the store and get me a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk. Bring back all the change and don't let them gyp you like they did last time." In my head my narrator would add: *. . . she said in a voice that was neither reproachful nor tender. Thus clutching the coins in her pocket, our hero was off under a sky so blue and a wind so sweet she wondered it didn't make her dizzy.* This is how I glamorized my days living in the third floor flats and shabby neighborhoods where the best friend I was always waiting for never materialized. ("Ghosts and Voices" 70)

But Cisneros was not the only woman suffering from this transience: Alfredo's family, disapproving

of his choice in marriage, made visits to Mexico equally difficult for Elvira. In her story "Never Marry a Mexican," Cisneros writes of her mother's efforts to dissuade her from marrying a Mexican—or any Latin man, for that matter—because of her own hardships in marriage. Whether in Mexico City or Chicago, her mother had to "put up with all the grief a Mexican family can put on a girl because she was from *el otro lado,* the other side, and my father had married down by marrying her. If he had married a white woman from *el otro lado,* that would've been different. That would've been marrying up. . . . But what could be more ridiculous than a Mexican girl who couldn't even speak Spanish?" (69).

Elvira's regret in marrying so young is given voice in "A Smart Cookie," in *The House on Mango Street* (90). With a heavy sigh, she tells the fictional Esperanza that she "could've been somebody" had she not let her shame in being poor stop her from reaching for any of her many dreams. Determined to give her daughter what she herself did not have, she sternly tells Esperanza to study hard and stay in school. Cisneros's mother, wanting to spare her daughter the unhappiness she had experienced as a woman financially dependent on her husband, went to great effort to instill in her a belief that education was her right and privilege. She ensured that Cisneros had her own library card and excused her from the domestic chores traditionally expected of an only daughter so that Cisneros might have more time to read and study. Such concessions gave Cisneros what she would later figuratively name "a room of her own," a reference to Virginia Woolf's theory that all women writers should have a space in which their imaginations could freely flourish and be freed from domestic concerns. When Cisneros reflects on why her mother did it, she supposes it was "because she didn't want me to inherit her sadness and her rolling pin" ("Notes" 75).

During their seasons in Chicago, Cisneros's family scraped by in apartments in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Although he always regretted his failed education, Alfredo found ways to support his family, usually through upholstery—a skill taught him by his uncle. Years of dreaming of a house of their own were finally realized when Cisneros was 11 years old. Barely finding the down payment, the family purchased a house in the Puerto Rican neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago. This is the house that inspires the vignettes of Cisneros's acclaimed *House on Mango Street.* As she describes in her book, the house was a far cry from the one her parents had built in her imagination, dilapidated on the outside and overcrowded on the inside. In her writing, Cisneros complains about its lack of space in which to find one's self:

> In my home private space was practically impossible; aside from the doors that opened to the street, the only room with a lock was the bathroom, and how could anyone who shared a bathroom with eight other people stay in there for more than a few minutes? Before college, no one in my family had a room of their own except me, a narrow closet just big enough for my twin bed and an oversized blond dresser we'd bought in the bargain basement of el Sears. The dresser was as long as a coffin and blocked the door from shutting completely. I had my own room, but I never had the luxury of shutting the door. ("Guadalupe" 46–47)

This worn-down house becomes the literal and figurative place from which, as a writer, she escapes in search of new ways to see herself as a Mexican American, a woman, and a daughter.

Although Cisneros would not begin to call herself a writer until her junior year in college, a poetry project on the Vietnam War gave her acclaim as a poet among her high-school peers, who acknowledged the talent she showed in her sophomore year. This reputation and interest in writing got her the position of editor of the school's literary magazine. Still, she confesses that at the time she was "more a reader than a writer . . . I was reading and reading, nurturing myself with books like vitamins, only I didn't know it then" ("Notes" 74).

When it was time to apply to college, Cisneros's parents were in full support. Her mother wanted her daughter to be educated and self-sufficient, and her father wanted her to surround herself with eli-

gible husbands. Where else could she meet a nice professional to sweep her off her feet? She enrolled at Chicago's Loyola University, where in 1976 she earned a B.A. in English. She claims that because her father expected her to marry instead of getting a job after graduation, she never had to justify her decision to study "something silly like English," a major that promised the same kind of poverty in which she had grown up ("Only" 11). This gave her the "liberty to putter about embroidering [her] little poems and stories without [her] father interrupting with so much as a 'What's that you're writing?'" (11). With the help of a creative writing instructor during her junior year of college, Cisneros applied and was accepted into the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop.

Her experience there fell short of her expectations; she was dissatisfied with the instruction she was receiving. As the only Hispanic in her group, Cisneros felt she was learning and discussing other people's experiences. These sentiments boiled over in a seminar called Memory and the Imagination. As Cisneros tells the story, the class was discussing *The Poetics of Space,* by the French theorist Gaston Bachelard, and his postulation that the structure of a house offers a language for the human experience. Cisneros felt more out of place than ever in this discussion. She was not familiar with the academic language they were using; nor had she experienced the upper-class homes after which they were modeling their discussion. As she reports of her fellow classmates, "They had been bred as fine hot-house flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city's cracks" ("Ghosts and Voices" 64). As a child, she had read of such houses in her books, and her parents had promised her such a house, but the best they could offer was their dilapidated bungalow in an impoverished inner-city neighborhood. Sitting in that classroom, she began to wonder what she could possibly offer such a discussion. Suddenly it occurred to her that it was her uniqueness in the group that would make her a writer. Of this epiphany she writes:

> You know, you always grow up thinking something's different or something's wrong, but you don't know what it is. If you're raised in a multi-ethnic neighborhood, you think that the whole world is multi-ethnic like that. According to what you see in the media, you think that that's the norm; you don't ever question that you're different or that you're strange. It wasn't until I was twenty-two that it first hit me how different I really was. It wasn't as if I didn't know who I was. I knew I was a Mexican woman. But, I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it. My race, my gender, and my class! (Rodríguez Aranda 65)

It was at that moment that Cisneros decided to write about something she knew no one else in her class could write about—her own childhood. Thus originated the childlike voice that would speak in her poetry for so many years and would map identity in her first publication, *The House on Mango Street* (1984). Armed with this new outlook, Cisneros received an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1978.

Cisneros has published a number of works that deal with her struggle for identity. In 1980, her first collection of poetry, *Bad Boys,* was published by Mango Press; these poems were reprinted in a second collection, *My Wicked Wicked Ways.* In 1984, she published the writings about her house that started on that fateful day in Iowa, *The House on Mango Street.* Although she clarifies that these stories are not all as her family would tell them, she claims they are all true because "every piece of fiction is based on something that really happened" (Rodríguez Aranda 64). This book, as was the first, was released by Arte Público Press in Houston, a publisher famous for its dedication to documenting the Hispanic experience in the United States. Originally only 500 copies were printed, but, as readership grew, Random House took over the publication rights and has been the primary publisher of Cisneros's works ever since.

Since earning national acclaim for *The House on Mango Street,* Cisneros has written numerous works. *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) has won many awards, including the PEN Center Award for Best Fiction of the West, the Anisfield-Wolf

Book Award, and the Lannan Foundation Literary Award. Subsequent publications include *Loose Woman* (1994) and *Caramelo* (2002), which was nominated for the Orange Prize for Fiction, one of the most prestigious awards granted in the United Kingdom for a single work of fiction and the only one judged solely by women.

In her adult years, Cisneros has learned to detach herself from the patriarchal grip of traditional Mexican culture and has grown to appreciate the men in her life, especially her father. Despite his reluctance to acknowledge the professional value of writing while Cisneros was in school, he took great pride in her work when reading her first publication. To Cisneros, her father represents the majority of the country uninterested in reading, but for whom she insistently writes. In 2000, Cisneros set up the Alfredo Cisneros del Moral Foundation, in honor of her father, to benefit promising writers. In explanation, she writes of her father: "A meticulous craftsman, he would sooner rip the seams of a cushion apart and do it over, than put his name on an item that wasn't up to his high standards. I especially wanted to honor his memory by an award showcasing writers who are equally proud of their own craft" (Rice). This fidelity to high quality, a lesson learned from her father, is something Cisneros has often expressed a wish to abide by in her writing.

Also acknowledging the legacy of her father's Mexican roots, Cisneros's writing often reflects on the injustices to her ancestors because of their language and mourns the "essential wisdom" lost as those ancestors sacrificed their language for the safety and prosperity of their children. As a result of this loss, Cisneros writes, she and other second- and third-generation Mexicans "live like captives, lost from our culture, undergrounded, forever wandering like ghosts with a thorn in the heart" ("Offering" 1010). In an effort to reconcile her language with those of her ancestors and to reconfigure perceptions of identity for the Mexican-American woman, Cisneros incorporates Spanglish into her writings. Joining Spanish and English—or, for her, the old and the new—"gives [her] a way of looking at [her]self and at the world in a new way" ("Offering" 1011).

My Wicked Wicked Ways (1987)

In her poetic preface to this collection of poems, Cisneros tells readers these are her "wicked poems from when. / . . . I sinned" (x). She then explains that the sin of which she is speaking is not debauchery, but choosing a path different from what her Mexican-American *cultura* would have her follow. As a whole, these poems chronicle her attempts to renegotiate her ideas of a female *self* within the barrio, her family, her culture, and the world. The collection is divided into four parts, which can be read as the progression from childhood into female autonomy and empowerment.

In the first two sections, "1200 South / 2100 West" and "My Wicked Wicked Ways," Cisneros draws a picture of the restrictions set up for women in barrio life and within the family. "1200 South" returns readers to a Chicago barrio not unlike that in *The House on Mango Street,* where poverty and violent male domination create a condition of female dependency and objectification. These first 20 pages are filled with images of the dysfunctional female body, ranging from the betrayals of puberty to the ultimate submission of death. Consequently, this section presents the barrio, as Adriana Estill suggests, as "a restrictive, masculine, space that threatens the well-being of the girls that inhabit it" (28). In "Wicked Ways," this female dysfunctionality mutates from a physical one to a communal one. The stories told in this section are of women unable to perform as the submissive wives expected by their culture; their celebration of manlike behavior—such as "chug[ging] one bottle of Pabst," being "rowdy," and living alone—sets them apart as "wicked." Cisneros, unable to "[keep] the master plan, / the lovely motion of tradition," as her brothers have, reconciles herself to her birth "under a crooked star" and begins to align herself positively with her female predecessors and their "unlucky fate" (26, 38–39).

In the two final sections of the collection, Cisneros abandons the barrio and home to begin using foreign lands and space as an arena in which to negotiate her identity. In "Other Countries,"

Cisneros charts a literal and figurative exile into foreign lands where she can experiment with male-reserved roles of sexuality and independence. She finds liberation not only in her ability to take a lover, but also in her equal ability to reject one. As she asks of a male companion whom she deserted in Venice, "Isn't freedom what you believe in? / Even the freedom to say no?" (50). As if freed from the restrictions of home, Cisneros looks for traces of identity within "her own body and consciousness" (Estill 35). This sexual liberation gives a jump-start to the more generalized self-liberation poeticized in the final section, "The Rodrigo Poems." For the first time, the speaker is no longer dependent on the defining terms of a literal place such as the barrio, the home, or even the foreign lands in which she can pretend to be someone else. Instead, she transcends the idea of a spatially constructed identity, her own body becoming a map she uses to explain her ever-shifting sense of self.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the poem "For All Tuesday Travelers," in *My Wicked Wicked Ways,* and the short story "Never Marry a Mexican," in *Woman Hollering Creek,* Cisneros writes as the lover of married men. Compare and contrast the two works to explore the differences you can identify between the speakers' tones. How does the difference in genre influence your attitude toward each speaker? Discuss your responses fully.
2. In "By Way of Explanation," the speaker describes herself with allusions to numerous places and artistic references. Research these places and works of art; then discuss how their inclusion shapes our understanding of the speaker.

The House on Mango Street (1984)

The House on Mango Street is a collection of 44 vignettes set in and around the only house Cisneros knew as a child. Although each vignette can be read as an isolated narrative, when combined, these literary sketches create a novel that maps the way the narrator, a young girl named Esperanza, begins to know and understand the world around her. The book is dedicated in both Spanish and English to "the Women," presumably those of whom she writes—women who outside the novel live silently and without autonomy, but through our young narrator find a voice.

Sharing Cisneros's regret over her family's move into their one and only permanent residence, Esperanza is embarrassed by her family's house, which in no way compares to her imaginative construct of *home.* Instead of the white house she has seen on television, with a picket fence and bathrooms to spare and trees around the perimeter, this house is decrepit, with "bricks . . . crumbling in places," and has only one bathroom for the family to share (4). The space deficiency on the inside is personified in the house's outward appearance, by windows "so small you'd think they were holding their breath . . . and the front door . . . so swollen, you have to push hard to get in" (4). Unable to see her house as the equivalent to her friend Alicia's remembered *home* in Guadalajara, Esperanza looks forward to the home she can only dream of and swears against Alicia's urgings that when she leaves Mango Street she will never return.

The things that disappoint Esperanza about her family's house are largely structural and aesthetic. Her complaints might lead us to believe that her dream home would be the new and improved version of all her dislikes. On the contrary, Esperanza describes her dream home by the presence or absence of things on the inside rather than by the façade of the outside. Not only will her home be made up of all her favorite things, but it will also include her stories, void of the figures that she has perceived as the source of restrictions in her life. She wants "not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own" (108). Her wish to remove the male, especially the father, figure from the dynamics of a house reveals her desire to alter the restrictive male-dominated paradigm that prevails within her Mexican-American culture. For Cisneros, storytelling is the best way to "reinvent" the

Mexican-American woman's sense of self without "reject[ing] the entire culture" (Rodríguez Aranda 66).

Everywhere Esperanza looks, she is surrounded by women who live a quiet existence while locked away in the houses of the men closest to them. Most disturbing to Esperanza is the story of her great-grandmother, who was quite literally *taken* as a wife by Esperanza's great-grandfather. She laments being forced to share a name with her great-grandmother, a once wild, then broken "wild horse" whose fate was never more than "sadness" and "waiting" (10). Cisneros resents their connection:

> She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza, I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window. (11)

Esperanza can easily find similarly fated women in her neighborhood. Rafaela, whose husband worries she will leave him, sits locked away in his house. From the window she can hear the music of the dance hall, representative of the youth she has been denied. Instead of dancing, she is doomed to "lean on her elbows," stare out the window, and dream of a Rapunzel-like rescue while waiting for her husband to return (79). Destined for a similar lifestyle, Mamacita, "the big mamma of the man across the street," went to live with her son after he worked for years around the clock to save money to bring her to the United States. Now "she sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (77).

Given the malcontent of these homebound women, it is surprising to find that so many of Esperanza's peers who manage to escape from their fathers' controlling hand seem to choose to reimprison themselves in the same restrictive structure. The limits to their dreaming may be explained by the limits of their experience: As "prisoners in houses ruled by their fathers, they seek escape in the only way they know how: by acquiring their own household to rule over—a house in which they might rule themselves" (Sugiyama 17). Marin, who is older than Esperanza and sells Avon products out of the aunt's home where she lives, looks forward to the day she can leave the house to take on a "real job downtown," where she "can meet someone in the subway who might marry [her] and take [her] to live in a big house far away" (26). Sally makes the same backward move when, after years of her father's trying to beat the sex appeal out of her, she marries a traveling salesman who hits her and forbids her to talk on the phone. More unfortunate than the rest, she is even denied the luxury of looking out her husband's window.

But the house, or apartment, is only one symbol of the oppressive conditions in which these women live. While the house provides an image of male-enforced imprisonment, the physical restrictions that define male perceptions of beauty appear just as frequently. In her study of foot binding, Michelle Scalise Sugiyama looks into the physical and symbolic "crippling" effect of the practice of foot binding on women, as it "requires, ultimately, submission and dependence" (18). Inside and outside the houses around Mango Street, we see these references to foot binding, most often masked as beautifying. The fact that Mamacita is noticeably large emphasizes her noticeably small feet, which are "soft as a rabbit's ear" and fit into a "tiny pink shoe" that mesmerizes Esperanza (76). The threat of this crippling effect reaches its climax in "The Family of Little Feet," when Esperanza and her friends receive cast-off shoes from a family that is described as small. The grandmother's willingness to submit herself to "velvety high heels that made her walk with a wobble" simply because "they were pretty" explains the women's disturbing compliance to reduce themselves to objects in the landscape of male perception (39). When Esperanza and her friends put on the shoes, they, too, transform into images of sexuality to the men who see them on the streets. Children's legs, "skinny and spotted with satin scars where scabs were picked," turn into long women's legs that frighten Esperanza by their foreignness (40).

Significantly, this transformation into sexual beings happens on the streets and ends on the porch of Lucy's house, where the girls leave the shoes for her mother eventually to throw away. This shows what is true throughout the novel: Although life inside a house is tainted by what cannot be experienced, life outside promises the dangerous threat of sexual objectification. Esperanza explains the terms by which women must abide on the male-dominated streets of her neighborhood when she complains: "The boys and girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (8).

This disregard for women on the streets heightens into a dangerous threat in "Red Clowns," when a group of unknown boys rape Esperanza. Just as devastating as the violation is the incongruity between the experience and the myth she has been taught about sexual experiences: "Sally, you lied. It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?" (99). Despite Esperanza's growing determination not to end up like the women sadly framed inside their husbands' and fathers' windows, the world beyond the construct of house proves to be just as undesirable, as women are reduced to sexual objectification.

The opposition between house and street speaks to the dichotomy Cisneros sometimes describes in traditional Mexican culture. Traditionally, Mexican women have had two prominent role models: la Virgin de Guadalupe, the angelic mother figure, or la Malinche, the mistress of Cortez who was a traitor to her people. In "And Some More," the girls' argument over the possibility of multiple names for snow comes off as nonsense because, as Lucy asserts, their belief system only allows for "two kinds. The clean kind and the dirty kind" (35). The same is so of Mexican women: They can aspire to be good women who marry, have children, and live docile amid a patriarchal hierarchy; or they can fall from that aspiration to become one-dimensional objects of men's sexual desires. Because there is no in-between, in the myth or in the lives of the women who make up Mango Street, it is no surprise, as Leslie Petty observes, that Esperanza's search for an acceptable role model leads to frustration and the desire to turn her back on the neighborhood altogether.

Limiting the women in her stories to these extreme opposites, Cisneros shows how artificial and confining such cultural stereotypes can be, and through her creation of Esperanza, she imagines a protagonist who can embody both the violation associated with la Malinche and the nurturing associated with la Virgen de Guadalupe, all the while rejecting the feminist passivity that is promoted by both role models. Therefore, Esperanza transcends the good/bad dichotomy associated with these archetypes and becomes a new model for Chicano womanhood (Petty 123). By the close of the novel, Esperanza has retracted her decision to turn her back on her community, learning that regardless of *where* she is, she "will always be Esperanza. [She] will always be Mango Street" (105).

For Discussion or Writing

1. At the end of the novel, Esperanza tells readers that the reason she is leaving Mango Street is so that she can go back. What does she hope to accomplish while she is away? What might be her purpose in returning? Explain your answer.
2. Sally resembles the women in the movies Esperanza admires in "Beautiful and Cruel." Where does Sally's power lead her? How has Sally's story influenced who and where Esperanza wants to be? In what ways? Support your answer with citations from the text.
3. Read Emily Dickinson's poem "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" Comparing this poem to *The House on Mango Street,* how does each writer go about identifying herself within her community? Do you see similarities in their strategies? If so, what are they? Discuss your answer.

"Hairs" (1984)

As one of the shortest chapters in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), "Hairs," which is frequently

excerpted and anthologized, succinctly exemplifies Esperanza's efforts to negotiate ideas about herself in context of the *otherness* that surrounds her. As if aware of the more threatening danger that will accompany perceived differences between ethnicities and social classes in "Those Who Don't," this young Esperanza cautiously limits the perimeter of her inventory to the nuclear family, where similarities are abundant and differences are inconsequential to an individual's sense of belonging. Keeping her observations within the family allows this rudimentary exercise in comparing and contrasting to act as safe practice for future distinctions of *self* and *other*—a vital step in the coming-of-age process that runs through *The House on Mango Street.*

Less like a story and more like a poetic character sketch, this vignette is packed with vivid images of the different types of hair sported by those in Esperanza's family. Her father's hair is "like a broom, all up in the air"; Esperanza's hair is "lazy" for "it never obeys barrettes or bands"; Carlos's hair is "thick and straight" and never needs a comb; Nenny's hair is "slippery—slides out of your hands"; and Kiki "has hair like fur" (6). In each case, Esperanza's metaphor is as descriptive of the individual's personality as it is of his or her physical appearance. This seems to be especially true of Esperanza's adoring portrayal of her mother's hair, which begins as a description and evolves into a memory:

> But my mother's hair, my mother's hair, like little rosettes, like little candy circles, all curly and pretty because she pinned it in pincurls all day, sweet to put your nose into when she is holding you, holding you and you feel safe, is the warm smell of bread before you bake it, is the smell when she makes room for you on her side of the bed, still warm with her skin, and you sleep near her, the rain outside falling and Papa snoring. The snoring the rain, and Mama's hair that smells like bread. (6–7)

Typical of Cisneros's attempts to challenge sensory association, Esperanza begins to know her mother's hair as a smell, a place, and a feeling of comfortable safety, rather than just a visual object.

In the context of the novel, "Hairs" foreshadows Esperanza's progressively confident decision to be unlike the women in her neighborhood, who remain caged in houses not their own and restricted by the expectations of womanhood. Underlying Esperanza's affectionate description of her mother's hair are the one-dimensional role her mother plays and the metaphorical pin curls that describe her mother's identity, wrapped up in her husband and children. But Esperanza does not have hair like her mother's and will later realize the significance of this difference.

Ten years after its publication in *The House on Mango Street,* Random House published this chapter as a book in its own right, calling it *Hairs/Pelitos* (1994). In this publication, Cisneros's comparisons are accompanied by colorful illustrations by the artist Terry Ybáñez. In her hand, distinctions among family members are made not only by hair type, but also by skin colors that resemble *Sesame Street* characters and icons of each person's interests, which frame the page. Papa is surrounded by images of shoes, dice, coffee, and a nightlife that Esperanza apparently associates with him; Esperanza has flowers, high-heeled shoes, and a monkey framing her world; Carlos is busy with sandwiches, baseball, cars, and birds; Nenny is accompanied by her mother and enjoys herself on a playground; Kiki is riding his bike while faces of clowns border his pages; and her mother sits among candy, flowers, laundry, and their house. Accentuating and elaborating on the differences between family members limit the interpretation of the vignettes to merely an act of comparing and contrasting and creates a rich concept book for children. However, reading "Hairs" out of the context of *The House on Mango Street* stymies a fuller understanding of the part this chapter plays in Esperanza's progression toward self-awareness.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When restored to its context in *The House on Mango Street,* "Hairs" "heralds [Esperanza's] final decision not to accept the imposition of certain conventions regarding her person" (Hernandez 1). Review the stories following "Hairs"

in the collection, looking for other foreshadowing of Esperanza's eventual act of independence. Do you see a steady progression toward deciding who she wants to be? Why or why not? Explain.
2. A concept book is one that is "designed to teach very young children concepts and behaviors; their intention is didactic: the conveying of information" (Russell 67). Read Arnold Adoff's *Black Is Brown Is Tan* (1973) and Norma Simon's *All Kinds of Families* (1976). Consider how each book uses pictures to teach the words on the page, compared to the ways in which Cisneros's "Hairs" does so. Comment on your observations, making specific references to each text.

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories (1991)

This collection of 22 stories and character sketches chronicles the various experiences through which women learn to know what the critic Mary Pat Brady refers to as "shifting terrains of power" (118). Although the collection uses childhood topography and much of the same playground politics found in *The House on Mango Street* to negotiate power, it also includes the grittier voice of *My Wicked Wicked Ways.* While some sketches offer models of blatant defiance of patriarchal authority—such as the pickup truck–driving, husbandless Felicia, who "holler[s] like Tarzan" and uses profanity reserved for men in "Women Hollering Creek"—in the majority of these pieces it is merely the rationale behind myths of gender and authority that is put in question.

Often, the constructs of hierarchy Cisneros chooses to critique are unremarkable relationships and occurrences of everyday life, such as birthdays, girl talk, eating, and trips to the movie theater. In "Eleven," Rachel is upset that on her 11th birthday, she has no more of a voice to assert herself against classroom authority and majority opinion than she had when she was three or in the subsequent years since. "What they don't understand about birthdays," she explains, "what they never tell you is that . . . when you wake up on your eleventh birthday, you expect to feel eleven, but you don't" (6). The authoritative "they" she describes here represents the weightiness of Rachel's belief system. For her, the empowerment that should be her earned right is as elusive as a "runaway balloon" (9). Still, unachievable empowerment becomes an issue of gender in "There Was a Man, There Was a Woman." Here the only evident difference between the man and the woman is that the woman stares at the moon and cries, while the man "swallows" its eternalness. Carefully constructed, the only tangible reason for this difference is his male-engendered sense of empowerment.

Beyond the stories, there is much to be read in the telling of them—Cisneros's technique itself is a structure of authority. In many of the sketches, attempts to loosen patriarchal holds on women and their own sense of self are subversively made in the narrative structure. Woven within a plot or character sketch are "seemingly unsystematic asides and digressions" that "shrewdly exploit complex relationships between reader, narrative voice, text, and spatial gestures" (Brady 120). In stories like "Salvador Late or Early" and "Mexican Movies," we see challenges to conventions of a story, such as the avoidance of a formal plot. In "The Marlboro Man" and "La Fabulosa: A Texas Operetta," gossips circumscribe absolute truths with their versions of the story. The power of storytelling is perhaps most evident in "Eyes of Zapata," in which Emilio Zapata's first wife, Inés, retells his story from her point of view. Recreating his life through her storytelling generates a sense of power in her voice and even creates a dependency he feels upon her. As she tells him, "I am a story that never ends. Pull one string and the whole cloth unravels" (100).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the images of deformity in "Barbie Q" to those in Denise Chávez's *The Last of the Menu Girls.* What similarities do you see in the images created by the two writers? What differences do you see in the effects of these images within the larger contexts of the poem or short story? Discuss your answer fully, citing from each text.

2. In "Mericans," what are the implications of the nationality these children are claiming? Discuss the issues to which dual nationality gives rise. How does Cisneros treat them in this collection of stories? What conclusions do you draw? Explain.

"Bread" (1991)

This story, published in *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), is typical of Cisneros's sensory-laden narratives that rely on simple, daily occurrences to expose deeper, more complicated landscapes of the mind. Recalling a memory, the speaker tells of a moment in a past affair with a now married man, in which the two lightheartedly enjoyed an afternoon of cruising the city, eating bread, and listening to music. As a memory, seemingly unnecessary details—such as the type of bread, the street they bought it on, the color of the car, and the musical instruments performing the tango to which they are listening—are as significant as, if not more important than, the larger elements of the story, such as plot and character development. Never do we learn the lovers' names, the expectations of their relationship, or the terms that begin and end their affair. Instead, the focus is on the sensory experience of simply eating bread.

What better way to communicate the ephemeral pulse of an affair than to speak of the immediate satisfaction of hunger? Much of what we are told of their feast speaks equally of their relationship. Like "the whole car smell[ing] of bread," the affair is all-encompassing, intoxicating, but fleeting (84). The presence of physical allure in their relationship is drawn into the lived metaphor as the speaker describes the look of the bread as like a "fat ass" as they "ripped big chunks with our hands and ate" (84). In retrospect, the act of eating bread provides a moment *by* which to remember the relationship instead of the relationship's providing a moment *in* which to remember the eating of bread.

Even in this short glimpse of their affair, there is indication of the eventual separation. Despite the lovers' momentary *connectedness* in the story—they listen to their music so loud because they are "the only ones who could stand it like that"—there is a world of difference in the way they are perceiving the city and, we can assume, all that exists in it. When her lover shares how "charming" he finds all the city buildings, the speaker is not able to see what he sees. As if viewing a different landscape, the speaker tells us that all she could see in the buildings was a memory in which "a cousin's baby . . . died from swallowing rat poison in a building like these" (84). These disparate interpretations reveal disparate experiences within the same socioeconomic landscape. Where the lover sees "charm," he neglects to see the poverty and struggle of so many of those who occupy this building and others like it. The speaker's refusal to romanticize the landscape, as her lover does, affirms her resistance to ignoring the wholeness of the lived city experience.

This determined resistance can best be understood when considering the role a cityscape plays in social constructions of identity. Monika Kaup emphasizes the significance of our attitudes toward city structures as a way of validating or rejecting our history. She says:

> Architecture is a master code for the construction of identity. Buildings and cities express social aspirations and values; they function as barometers of social permanence and change. By reading the built environment we can decipher attitudes toward history. Both nostalgia and amnesia, the sense of the past and the dream of modernity, are expressed in architectural structures. (361)

From the standpoint of this reading, the speaker's "sense of the past" prohibits her from forgetting the injustices of these buildings to her community, just as her lover's "dream of modernity" prevents him from seeing those injustices. In the end, the speaker seems content with agreeing to disagree: "That's just how it is. And that's how we drove. With all his new city memories and all my old. Him kissing me between big bites of bread" (84).

As in many of the other stories in *Woman Hollering Creek,* Cisneros chooses to reveal larger

social criticism not as the obvious subject of the story, but, as Mary Pat Brady observes, "masked as asides" to the less threatening subject (121). Focusing on the feast of bread, rather than the different perspectives on civic injustice, then, can be seen as a "strategy for making dangerous revelations" (Brady 121). Although this gap in their experiences and perspectives seems to have no immediate effect on the afternoon—perhaps because the speaker chooses to live the smaller, more ephemerally satisfying moment rather then the larger, socially responsible one—it does seem to hint at the pain that the speaker lets slip has passed between them.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read "Eyes of Zapata," looking for the "asides" that are given outside the main plot of the story. What similarities do you see between the speaker of "Bread" and Inés of "Eyes of Zapata"? What do your conclusions tell us about the women of this collection, to whom Cisneros is giving a voice? Explain your answer.
2. Why do you suppose the speaker uses bread to explain their relationship? How would using another metaphor change our understanding of their relationship?

"My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn" (1991)

As the first vignette in the *Women Hollering Creek* collection, "My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn" carries considerable weight in the book's emphasis on female rejection of patriarchal, even colonial restrictions on women. Longing to be a part of Lucy's family, the speaker, who sounds much like Esperanza of *The House on Mango Street,* develops a fetishlike admiration for her friend. She believes she and Lucy are alike enough to pass as sisters, with their "arms gummy from an orange Popsicle [they] split" and their simultaneous loss of their teeth (5). And, if passable as a sister, then the speaker could live in Lucy's house, where "there ain't no boys" and she could "sleep with sisters you could yell at one at a time or all together" instead of sleeping "alone on the fold-out chair in [her] living room" where she is surrounded by brothers (4).

The speaker attempts to live this dream by modifying her physical appearance to match Lucy's. Persistently, she sits in the blazing sun waiting for her skin to darken until "it's blue where it bends like Lucy's" and for the heat to bake into her head "the dust and weed grass and sweat" until it is "all steamy and smelling like sweet corn" (3, 4). As the title of the vignette indicates, it is the smell of Lucy's hair that is most charming to the speaker. But she seems only able to explain her affection for it and what it represents in a string of compounded associations and metaphors familiar to child's play: "Lucy Anguiano, Texas girl who smells like corn, like Frito Bandito chips, like tortillas, something like that warm smell of *nixtamal* or bread the way her hair smells when she's leaning close to you over a paper cut-out doll or on the porch when we are squatting over marbles" (3). In this description, Lucy's hair is like other warm, comfortable smells present in both Texan and Mesoamerican cultures. Because her friendly encounters with Lucy, involving such things as marbles and paper dolls, trigger these associations, Lucy then becomes an everyday bridge between modern-day America and ancient Mesoamerica.

Significantly, this is not the only appearance of Lucy's hair in Cisneros's work. Lucy enters into many of Esperanza's adventures in *The House on Mango Street;* her hair, warm and smelling of corn, serves as a sharp contrast to the coldness of the living room that surrounds Lucy's dead sister's wake in "Velorio" of *My Wicked Wicked Ways.* Discussing the meaning of these recurring references to Lucy's hair, Adriana Estill points to Gloria Anzaldúa's comparison of Mexican women and corn, or *maize,* as crossbreeds intended for preservation. Estill customizes this comparison to speak directly to the smell of Lucy's hair in Cisneros's writing:

> In our culture, which is preoccupied by the visual, any sensuality not based on sight destabilizes the drive towards meaning. . . . By metaphorically opening up the children's world, the smell of corn, potentially refers us to maize, to an indigenous history, to a female subjectivity

> that cannot be colonized by the oppressive material or social conditions that surround her. (29)

In the context of this reading, the speaker's affection for Lucy's corn-infused hair begins to represent her desire to live in a time before women's estimation of themselves was limited by the patriarchal restrictions imposed upon them.

In terms of her own immediate world, the speaker wants to be surrounded by women while her female consciousness is developing, thus prohibiting thoughts of patriarchal injustice from forming her ideas of *self*. Her desire to be a part of Lucy's amazonesque home life presupposes her desire to live beyond the reach of male-derived restrictions for women. Lucy's is a house of all women "and one father who is never home hardly" and who holds only a ghostlike presence in his work shirts that hang from the clothesline (4). The father's absence is not an afterthought; nor is the fact that in Lucy's house "some of the windows [are] painted blue, some pink, because her daddy got tired that day or forgot" (4). Whether or not they are transitioning from blue to pink or pink to blue is ambiguous and does not seem to matter to the occupants of the house. What does matter is that readers recognize these traces of a former male hierarchy that has been usurped, opening the house to an environment of flourishing womanhood.

The King William District near San Antonio, Texas, is a historically protected neighborhood known for its proximity to the Alamo, German settlers, pecan trees, and the restoration and conservation initiative of the 1950s. But perhaps its most recent history-making moment was in a courtroom, in which Sandra Cisneros was reprimanded for painting her historic Victorian home periwinkle—a color that all agreed could not have been around 200 years ago. Unable to prove her case, Cisneros agreed to repaint her house a more traditional "Tejano" color scheme: pink with red trim. Such dogged nonconformity has become a trademark of Cisneros not only to the residents of King William District, but also to her readers, who have gleaned much from the way her literary wrestling with individualism and culture has paralleled that in her life.

For Discussion or Writing

Examine the theme of developing female consciousness in this work. How is it deepened by wider historical and cultural references?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON CISNEROS AND HER WORK

1. The search for identity is a common theme in modern literature. Read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Compare the Invisible Man's search for identity with that of one of Cisneros's characters, such as Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*. Compare and contrast the two heroic journeys in terms of the cultural backgrounds of the main characters, the influences on each of them, and their ultimate conclusions. Support your assertions with references to each text.
2. Research the topic of colonialism, especially as it pertains to Latin America. What similarities do you see between colonialism and patriarchal societies? What similarities do you see between revolutions of independence and revolutions of feminism? How are these apparent in Cisneros's work?

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Carey Emmons Crockett

Judith Ortiz Cofer (1952–)

> Early on, I instinctively knew storytelling was a form of empowerment, that the women in my family were passing on power from one generation to another through fables and stories. They were teaching each other how to cope with life in a world where women led restricted lives. . . . I took what they gave me and made it into a weapon for myself.
>
> (*Silent Dancing*)

Judith Ortiz Cofer begins her memoir *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* with this line from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own:* "A woman writing thinks back through her mothers." These words form the perfect epigraph, not only for the memoir, but also for Cofer's entire collection of work. She is a woman who writes by thinking back through her mothers; the *cuentos,* or stories, that she weaves are rich with the tapestry of family. "I feel that there is this invisible umbilical cord connecting us and in my case, it became a literary umbilical cord. I feel that the life of my imagination began with the women of my family" (Acosta-Belén).

Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, on February 24, 1952, to Jesús Ortiz Lugo and Fanny Morot Ortiz, Judith Ortiz Cofer is descended from a history of storytelling. The primary narrator in Cofer's life was her maternal grandmother, most of whose stories carried a lesson, her grandmother's way of imparting important values. Mamá (as everyone in the family called her) would gather everyone around a giant mango tree that sported a natural ledge, the perfect throne for a storyteller, and describe the exploits of archetypal characters, such as María La Loca (literally, Crazy María), who lost everything pursuing love, and María Sabida (Smart María), who became the embodiment of the prevailing woman, using cleverness and inner strength to solve problems. These same characters became the basis for Cofer's first stories, told to herself during the quiet siestas of rainy afternoons.

Not all of Cofer's childhood was spent in Mamá's house in Puerto Rico. Economic pressures caused her father to enlist in the military prior to her birth. When he returned after her second birthday, it was not to rejoin his family on the island but to move them to Paterson, New Jersey, the site of his new naval commission. While Cofer's father viewed the move as the only way to ensure his children a high-quality education, her mother wanted the family to remain on the island, where they could grow up surrounded by their island heritage. Ironically, part of that heritage dictated that it was a wife's duty to follow her husband.

The move to Paterson led to a split in Cofer's world. When her father was home on leave, the family lived in a neighborhood of mostly Puerto Ricans, described by Cofer as "a microcosm of Island life" where residents recreated the sights and sounds of Puerto Rico. Frequently, however, her father was stationed on ships that were gone for months at a time; then her mother would travel back to Puerto Rico with the children. This dual lifestyle presented Cofer and her younger brother with what she refers to as "conflictive expectations: the pressures from my father to become very well versed in the English language and the Anglo customs, and from my mother not to forget where we came from."

The transient lifestyle also made it difficult for her to fit in among her peers. Continually trying to reconcile the expectations of two very different cultures caused Cofer to feel she was "a composite of two worlds . . . I saw myself as different. Never quite belonging because after all, I speak English with a Spanish accent and Spanish with an American accent" (Acosta-Belén).

As if trying to reconcile two worlds was not enough, when Cofer was in high school, her father retired from the navy and moved the family to Augusta, Georgia. Relatives had convinced him it was a better place to raise teenagers, although for his daughter, suddenly the only Puerto Rican in a school of nearly two 2,000 students, it was "like moving from one planet to another" (Day 158). Still, she managed to excel in her studies and was awarded a scholarship to Augusta College in Georgia.

It was during her freshman year that she began to date John Cofer, a fellow student. They were married in 1971 at the age of 19; their daughter, Tanya, was born 18 months later. Despite the difficulty of attending college while raising a young child, both graduated from Augusta College, Cofer with a B.A. in English in 1974. The couple then took their young daughter to Florida so that Cofer could pursue her master's degree at Florida Atlantic University. During her time in Florida, Cofer lost her father in an automobile accident. With no husband to keep her in the States, Cofer's mother returned to Puerto Rico.

Although Cofer began her master's program with the intention of teaching, she started composing poems and stories as a way to fulfill needs that writing a thesis could not. Compared to the poetry she was reading in her classes, she considered her own work unpublishable. Then one day over lunch, her first department chair, Betty Owen, suggested that Cofer write down some of the stories she had been sharing. Cofer admitted that she had been doing just that. After much coaxing by Owen, Cofer sent out a few poems to potential publishers. "Latin Women Pray" was her first poem to be published; it appeared in 1981 in *New Mexico Humanities Review.* That was all it took for her finally to consider herself a writer.

Finding time to write was another matter. With a husband, a child, and a job, Cofer could have easily written only when it fit conveniently into her life. Instead, she decided to become serious. She describes her decision in an interview with Stephanie Gordon:

> When I needed to write and had a strong urge, I had a child, a husband, and a job. I didn't want any of it to disappear; I just wanted to find an opening in my busy life to write. I realized that window had to be constructed out of time no one else wanted, and I was out of energy by the time I got home at night. My solution was to get up two hours before my child. My first book of poetry and my novel *The Line of the Sun* were both written between the hours of five and seven A.M. My point is that writers must make difficult choices sometimes, in order to create.

At that time, most writers of Puerto Rican descent were publishing in journals geared toward a Puerto Rican audience. Cofer had been surrounded by literary and university journals throughout her higher education, so it was natural for her to submit her poems to more mainstream publications, such as the *New Mexico Humanities Review,* the *Southern Humanities Review, Kenyon Review,* and the *Georgia Review,* all of which readily accepted them. Her first chapbook, *Latin Women Pray,* was published in 1980, followed by two more in 1981: *Among the Ancestors* and *The Native Dancer.* In 1985, Cofer was honored with the poetry award in the Riverstone International Chapbook Competition for her chapbook *Peregrina* (meaning pilgrim). In 1987, she published two more collections of poetry, *Terms of Survival* and *Reaching for the Mainland.*

Despite her love for poetry, Cofer felt she "had a long story to tell and needed . . . freedom to tell it without the constraints of language that poetry imposes" (Ocasio). To meet that need, she began to

work on a novel based on stories she had heard as a child about her uncle Guzmán. While her poetry had gained widespread recognition, her first novel was met with resistance by the publishing community. "I was told that Puerto Ricans don't read. I thought that was a foolish thing for the publisher to assume. But also, I didn't write it for just Puerto Ricans to read. If the publisher had been wise he would have known that people write out of their experiences, to share mainly with people who need to know what it's like to be different" (Gordon). After several rejections from New York publishers, *The Line of the Sun* was chosen in 1989 by the University of Georgia Press as the first original novel it would publish. It was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1990.

That same year, *Silent Dancing: A Partial Memoir of a Puerto Rican Childhood* was accepted by a small but important publisher, Arte Público Press in Houston—the preeminent publisher of Latino literature and critical studies. *Silent Dancing* received the 1991 PEN/Martha Albrand Special Citation in Nonfiction and was selected for the Pushcart Prize.

Silent Dancing is autobiographical, but Cofer cautions readers that all people have different versions of events: "Only the camera could have recorded it [her childhood]. I didn't write *Silent Dancing* as a camera, I wrote it as a poet" (Kevane). Pulling family and friends into the limelight can have a negative effect on those relationships, but Cofer was ready:

> I took care, first of all, to write a foreword in which I discussed Virginia Woolf's theory that the past really belongs to the teller [who is] basically a witness and a participant and not liable for getting everyone else's version of the past right. I wanted to express that this is how I absorbed the events around me. I did it in the form of creative non-fiction, which means I put at the core of each of the pieces real events in real time. I was accurate in my historical time, but I felt free to dramatize conversations that I remembered or recalled without claiming that they were word for word accurate. . . . I was after a poetic truth. (Lopez)

While *Silent Dancing* is openly autobiographical, other works fuse parts of the author's own life with the lives of fictitious characters. This is the case in *The Line of the Sun* and *The Meaning of Consuelo.* Both novels are told from the perspective of young Puerto Rican girls who live in the United States. Marisol is especially reminiscent of a young Cofer, with her navy father and her mother always yearning for the island. Cofer believes it should not be surprising when authors use their own lives as material for their books. In regard to her own work, she states:

> Autobiography plays a large part, but it's really a logical process. It's not that it's boring, but most everybody knows what it's like to be professional in middle-class America. Not many people know what it's like to be a Puerto Rican woman growing up in the 1960s. Why should I reach out and invent something, when my own life provides me with interesting material that is not readily available to the public? I thought to use my life first, because it was there. (Ocasio)

Blending fact with fiction can cause critics to circle, but Cofer fends them off with a quote from Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." She says she feels at liberty to cross over boundaries because

> literature has a truth that has nothing to do with the dictionary definition of truth. I think there's factuality and there's truth. I can say to you, "My father was in the Cuban missile crisis," and tell you the dates, but that is not as meaningful as the fact that we lost contact with him for six months and thought he was dead. The truth is what I felt about my father disappearing, not that he was actually on a ship in Cuba at that time. Truth is what I can make people feel. (Ocasio)

In an interview, Cofer described the limits of poetic truth by saying that the writer "has a pact with the reader and that is, your job [as a writer] is not to fool the reader or irritate the reader. It's not

necessarily to please the reader. You have a deal to make with the reader to tell the story as honestly as possible."

After her success at tackling the boundary governing objective truth, Cofer decided to challenge another boundary, that of genre. She had been writing poems, essays, and fiction about the central issues of growing up as a Latina in America for many years when she decided to lay out all the pieces she had been working on and "saw that they could be put together like a collage" (Gordon). That collage became *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women*. Through its use of multiple genres, it finally merges in a single work what she had inherited from her ancestors: her grandfather's love of poetry and her grandmother's art for storytelling.

Again publishers shied away, this time because the book could not readily be classified for a particular bookstore shelf. Although *Silent Dancing* had also combined poetry and creative nonfiction, it had done so under the genre of "memoir," giving publishers an overarching classification. Cofer turned to her old ally, the University of Georgia Press, which published *The Latin Deli* in 1993. Early the next year, it received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, in recognition of its contribution toward the understanding of racism and the appreciation of the diversity of cultures. Out of curiosity, Cofer has looked for *The Latin Deli* in bookstores and found it in a variety of places, including, to her amusement, among the cookbooks.

The issues Cofer has chosen to address in her work have made her the target of critics, some of whom call her openly ideological. While she admits much of her work revolves around political issues, she states:

> I am not a political writer in that I never take an issue and write a story about it. The people in my stories deal with political issues but only in accordance with the needs of their personal lives. My politics are imbedded in my work as part of the human experience. (Gordon)

One example she gives is her story "American History," which appears in *The Latin Deli*. It takes place on the day Kennedy was shot and describes a young girl's inability to feel "the right way about the president's death" because she is excited about her first date. When the boy's mother rejects her because she is Puerto Rican, the girl is faced with a political situation. Cofer says,

> The story doesn't end with a speech on prejudice but with the heartbreak of a girl still unable to comprehend that it all comes together and affects her life: the death of a president, life in America, prejudice, the plight of the immigrant. (Gordon)

Cofer has also been criticized for intermingling Spanish and English within her work. Critics have long debated the validity of bilingual texts; Rafael Cancel Ortiz has gone so far as to criticize Puerto Rican writers for presenting "the Puerto Rican as a stuttering, ambivalent individual, incapable of expressing himself/herself coherently in either Spanish or English" (110). Responding to an interview question from Carmen Hernández regarding whether her inclusion of Spanish words was "a kind of code-switching," Cofer suggests that code switching refers more to the style of Nuyorican writers (Hernández 101). Celia Genishi has defined code-switching as "the alteration of languages or dialects to convey social meaning" (133) and John Christie refers to it as a "sort of cultural hybridity," giving the example of *la marketa,* a word derived from the Spanish *la bodega* and the English *market*. He states that by combining the two words into one, the writer calls to mind a "distinctly separate chain of connotations and emotional meanings that may or may not have anything to do with either 'bodega' or 'market'" (2006).

Cofer, however, does not employ hybrid words, nor does she change the language to convey meaning. Instead, she describes her work as "interlingual writing" and uses Spanish words and phrases to remind readers that what they are reading "comes from the minds and thoughts of Spanish-speaking people" (Hernández 101). She further states that in her case,

> the two languages are necessary to re-create or recall a particular image since bilingualism is an intrinsic part of my personal experience. English is the main language of my education; Spanish—of my imagination and creativity. . . . I use Spanish words and phrases almost as an incantation to lead me back to the images I need. . . . My native language and my Puerto Rican heritage are the "stuff of life" in my work. English is the vehicle for my artistic expression. (Acosta-Belén)

Christie supports that position, writing, "Spanish is the language that communicates precisely the Latino's emotional memory." There are some words that have such heavy connotations within a language that translation falls short. That one word must be used, untranslated, in order to convey just the right meaning. One example would be Cofer's poem "El Olvido" from *Terms of Survival.* The poem's title, directly translated, means "omission" or "forgetfulness"—words unable to reflect accurately the images rendered in the mind of a young Latina who heard her mother describing a child who had forgotten his mother as falling into *el olvido* (Hernández 101).

Despite the critics, Judith Ortiz Cofer has continued to defy definition. Realizing the appeal of Cofer's work to young adults, an editor suggested that she try specifically to target that population. The result was *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio,* Cofer's first book published by a mainstream press. It was heralded by *Publishers Weekly* as "twelve consistently sparkling, sharp stories [that] recreate the atmosphere of a Puerto Rican barrio" and received multiple awards, including the Americas Award for Children and Young Adult Literature (Honor Book, 1995), the American Library Association's Reforma Pura Belpré Medal (1995), and the *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year List.

Cofer has since published several books of poetry and fiction, as well as two books that focus on what it is like to be a woman writer. She lives on a farm in Georgia with her husband, John Cofer, a high school algebra teacher, and continues to teach at the University of Georgia, where in 2006 she served as the Regents' and Franklin Professor of English and Creative Writing.

The Line of the Sun (1989)

Although told through the eyes of Marisol, a young girl born in the United States to Puerto Rican immigrants, this novel is really the story of Marisol's uncle Guzmán, who has acquired mythic proportions through the stories his family passes on about him. As a young boy he is full of mischief, causing even his own mother, Mamá Cielo, to refer to him as her "niño del diablo" (demon child). Matters only get worse as Guzmán matures, until finally Mamá Cielo is persuaded by a close friend to take Guzmán to see a spiritist, a local woman referred to by the villagers as La Cabra (she-goat). Against her better judgment, Mamá Cielo leaves Guzmán with La Cabra in the hope that he will be cured of his evil ways, but La Cabra—or Rosa, as Guzmán comes to know her—seduces him. The townspeople drive La Cabra away, leaving Guzmán devastated.

Guzmán travels to America, where he eventually meets Marisol, the niece for whom he has become such a hero. But to Marisol he is a disappointment. On the run from a migrant camp where he was held against his will and forced to work, Guzmán stays with Marisol's family but soon wears out his welcome as he tries to convince his sister to leave El Building, the only place she feels safe.

Like most first novels, *The Line of the Sun* is highly autobiographical. Marisol is reminiscent of the author as a child and faces many of the same issues: a navy father, a mother who longs for the island paradise of her homeland, the child as cultural bridge between family and society. The character of Guzmán is based on stories Cofer heard as a child about her uncle Guzmán. She began to ask herself "What if?" questions, inventing scenarios and imagining how he would react.

Through the characters of her novel, Cofer explores the ways in which cultural forces, both in Puerto Rico and in the United States, influence the

choices available to individuals. Guzmán's first love, Rosa, is particularly affected by those forces. The townspeople are blatantly hypocritical in their treatment of Rosa, publicly branding her "La Cabra" (which literally translated means she-goat, but on a deeper, connotative level implies whore). Privately, however, they seek out her services as medium and spiritual adviser. When her affair with Guzmán comes to light, Rosa is shunned and ridiculed and eventually run out of town, while Guzmán is seen as the victim. Characters such as Rosario, Marisol, and Melinda further illuminate the implied threat of social ostracism that keeps women within culturally defined boundaries.

As a child, Cofer was well aware of her mother's desire to return to Puerto Rico. The character of Marisol's mother, Ramona, shares that ache for her homeland. She finds solace in El Building, described as "an ethnic beehive" where adults "conducted their lives in two worlds in blithe acceptance of cultural schizophrenia" (170–171). The inhabitants of El Building recreate the sights and sounds of their homeland, engendering in Ramona a "garrison mentality" (172) causing her to resist her husband's desire for a single-family dwelling and, eventually, Guzmán's insistence that she move her children out of El Building to avoid impending trouble. Through characters such as Marisol and Ramona, readers see the struggle of immigrants to define themselves within a new culture, and their endless journey toward answering the question, Where is home?

For Discussion or Writing

1. Although the reader is told on the first page that Guzmán's sister is the narrator's mother, Cofer does not reveal the name of the person telling the story until well into the book, on page 177. Why does she wait so long? Why does Cofer choose to tell this story from the perspective of Marisol? Is Marisol an effective narrator? Why or why not?
2. What do you think Marisol means when she says, "I learned about waiting at that time, a woman's primary occupation" (179)? Discuss your answer fully.
3. At the end of the book, Marisol admits, "This broken man . . . had little to do with the wild boy I had created in my imagination" but describes her uncle as "a good man and brave, even if finally not the hero of my myth" (282). What has led her to this conclusion? Do you agree or disagree with her assessment? Explain.

Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood (1990)

After the publication of *The Line of the Sun,* people began to ask Judith Ortiz Cofer how much of it was based on actual events and people. Those questions were partly responsible for her second book, a collection of autobiographical essays. In the preface, Cofer describes her purpose and process for writing about her childhood experiences: "I wanted the essays to be, not just family history, but also creative explorations of known territory. . . . I wanted to try to connect myself to the threads of lives that had touched mine and at some point converged into the tapestry that is my memory of my childhood." Cofer cautions readers that in writing these essays, she "faced the possibility that the past is mainly a creation of the imagination also."

To illustrate her point that many factors influence how one remembers an event further, she includes in her memoir the *ensayos* (she says the Spanish word for essay, meaning "practice," better defines her style) "The Black Virgin" and "The Last Word." In "The Black Virgin," Cofer describes her first memory, her father's homecoming when she was only two years old. That memory is challenged by her mother's version of the incident in "The Last Word." These two stories act as bookends, framing the rest of Cofer's childhood for the reader in terms of how events are remembered and presenting a context for understanding the true meaning of *memoir.*

The stories and poems in *Silent Dancing* give insight into the issues that have helped to shape the writer Cofer has become, themes that continue to surface in her later works. One such issue is that of language as power. "One More Lesson"

illustrates how early in her schooling one of Cofer's teachers taught her a valuable, although unintentional, lesson. The teacher had written something on the board and then left the classroom. Because she could not read the language, one of Cofer's classmates was able to convince her that in order to use the bathroom, she had only to write her name beneath the teacher's message. The teacher returned and, seeing her out of her seat, threw a book at the back of Cofer's head. The lesson? "Language is the only weapon a child has against the absolute power of adults" (66).

For Discussion or Writing

Discuss the controversy regarding James Frey's 2003 "memoir," *A Million Little Pieces*. How does Cofer's view regarding the formation of memory affect the definition of memoir? Explain.

The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women (1993)

The Latin Deli has been described by Ed Hall of *Atlanta Magazine* as "a marvelous patchwork memoir of a woman's growth away from one tradition and toward another." Despite that description, *The Latin Deli* is not strictly memoir; it blends fiction, poetry, and essays to tell the stories of women who have lived their lives in El Barrio, the Latino community of Paterson, New Jersey. Cofer addresses the hardships faced by the Latino people who have immigrated to the United States: women who feel displaced and yearn for their island paradise, men who struggle to maintain strong cultural morals within their transplanted families, and the teenagers who are caught between cultures, forced to follow the discipline of Puerto Rican fathers while living among American peers.

In order to cope with their feelings of isolation in an essentially foreign culture, the families stick together, creating in El Barrio a miniaturized version of their homeland. The title poem, "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica," describes one feature of El Barrio, which the Latinos visit "all wanting the comfort of spoken Spanish" and the experience of having the owner conjure up "products from places that now exist only in their hearts."

The Latin Deli contains one of Judith Ortiz Cofer's most anthologized short stories, "American History." It is a story that has intergenerational appeal, telling the tale of Elena, a teenager described by her mother as acting *enamorada* (like a girl stupidly infatuated). Elena *is* enamorada, for she has fallen in love with Eugene, a boy who recently moved into the only house on the block with a yard and trees. Elena watches him from her reading perch on the fire escape of El Building (the tenement in which her family lives), until she finally has the nerve to approach him on the way home from school. They become friends, and Elena is delighted when Eugene invites her to his house to study for a test.

On the day that she is to meet Eugene for their study date, the gym teacher dismisses class early, telling the students, "The president is dead, you idiots" (12). Elena knows she should be as upset as the rest of the nation over Kennedy's death, but she cannot help feeling excited over her date with Eugene. Her mother chastises her for going out on such a tragic day, telling her that she is "heading for nothing but humiliation and pain" (13). Elena goes anyway.

Eugene does not answer the door. Instead, Elena is met by his mother, who informs her that Eugene will be moving soon and does not need the pain of making friends, only to leave them behind. The rebuke seems to be thinly veiled prejudice and sends Elena back to her empty apartment, where she tries to feel grief for the loss of the president but can only mourn her own loss.

"The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named María" explores another type of prejudice faced by Latinas in the United States, that of stereotyping. In this essay, Cofer describes her experiences as a Puerto Rican girl trying to fit in, only to be singled out and stereotyped because of her Hispanic appearance. She discusses how "mixed cultural signals" perpetuate stereotypes and promote misunderstandings. One example she gives is differing cultural signals sent by clothing styles. As Cofer writes, "When a Puerto Rican girl dressed

in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place" (151).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Research the meaning of *Ars Poetica*. Why does Cofer choose to include it in the title of her poem "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica"?
2. When describing the relationship between El Building and Eugene's house in the story "American History," Cofer writes that El Building "blocked most of the sun" (10). In what way is that symbolic of El Building's effect on Elena?
3. What made President Kennedy such a hero to the American people? Why would he be considered a saint by the Puerto Rican community (in the story "American History")? Justify your answer.
4. What causes stereotypes to evolve? How do the media perpetuate the stereotyping of ethnic groups? In what ways are those ethnic groups impacted by such stereotypes? Explain your answer.

An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio (1995)

As easily as she crosses the borders of genre, Cofer traverses the limitations of audience. Many of the pieces Cofer has written for adults appeal to young adults, addressing universal themes that speak to all readers, regardless of age. *An Island Like You* resulted from a request by an editor that she write specifically for younger readers.

Cofer sets the tone for her book in the last stanza of a poem entitled "Day in the Barrio":

> . . . At days end,
> you scale the seven flights to an oasis on the roof,
> high above the city noise, where you can think
> to the rhythms of your own band. Discordant notes rise
> with the traffic at five, mellow to a bolero at sundown.
> Keeping company with the pigeons, you watch the people below,
> flowing in currents on the street where you live, each one alone in a crowd,
> each one an island like you.

While the book is organized as a series of short stories revolving around the lives of barrio teenagers, it is actually a novel depicting the universal lessons of love and loss, peer pressure and parental expectations, social and ethnic discrimination, and the constant struggle for one generation to gain its independence from another. All these themes are addressed through the quests of individuals to become part of the larger community—in essence, for each island to be recognized as important to the world in which it exists.

Many of the stories are interconnected, as is the case with the story of Doris. Introduced to readers in "The One Who Watches," Doris is Yolanda's invisible friend and later becomes a heroine by organizing a birthday party for a social outcast in "White Balloons." Doris starts out content to follow Yolanda, but as Yolanda takes more and more risks, she realizes that she needs to follow her own heart. In "White Balloons," Doris befriends Rick Sanchez. Ostracized because of his sexual preference, Rick returns home to the barrio a successful actor. He wants to make a difference in the barrio by starting a juvenile theater group, but the adults forbid it.

Doris feels a connection to Rick when she thinks about his childhood: "I know from experience that you basically have two choices once you're made to feel unwanted here: to leave home or to try to become invisible like me" (147). She vows to help Rick achieve his dream, organizing and planning an original production. But Rick passes away before the play is performed and Doris shrugs off her invisibility to throw him the birthday party he never had as a child of the barrio.

Arturo also identifies with Rick, but for different reasons. Introduced to readers in the story "Arturo's Flight," Arturo feels like he does not

belong. He is interested in poetry, which in the barrio "makes you suspicious as to your sexual preference" (32), and after being asked to recite a poem in class one day, he is harassed relentlessly by other students. In order to shock them into seeing him differently, Arturo dyes his hair purple, a plan that backfires and causes him to lose his job. Arturo appears again in "An Hour with Abuelo," where he learns that the elderly are not as boring as he thought, and again when he helps Doris with the theater group and the party.

As Arturo and Doris struggle along with the other characters of *An Island Like You* to define their own place in a society that is in itself marginalized, they learn that they are not alone. Through their interactions with others, they find they are surrounded by other people who feel like isolated islands, everyone simultaneously searching for acceptance.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Doris never says why she was "made to feel unwanted." Does it matter to the story? Most people have felt rejected at one time or another. Why does acceptance by society mean so much to us that it was designated by Abraham Maslow as one of humanity's basic needs?
2. Cofer portrays the society of the barrio as very unforgiving. How does this compare to your opinion of high school society? American society in general?
3. The main characters in *An Island Like You* are teenagers who feel invisible, yet they act as if the elderly are invisible. What causes one person to marginalize another? What groups have been historically marginalized by mainstream America? Are there any groups that remain so?

The Meaning of Consuelo (2003)

Regarding the common themes in her writing, Cofer said in an interview, "I have three or four obsessions and whether I want them to or not, they peek through." As do many of her earlier works, the novel *The Meaning of Consuelo* explores Cofer's obsession with language. Set in the 1950s, the story takes place in San Juan, the capital city of Puerto Rico, where Consuelo lives with her family in a well-kept modern subdivision. Consuelo learns early on that words define the world in which she lives and even who she is expected to be: "I was expected to live up to my name, Consuelo, from the word meaning comfort and consolation; Mili, from the word *milagros,* a miracle, was supposed to bring the light into our lives. I was to console, care for, and watch over her" (13).

Later, as she watches the people around her label one another, Consuelo learns that words carry weight beyond their dictionary definitions. There is the cross-dresser, María Sereno, referred to as *la fulana* (the outsider; he or she is never called by name) and publicly ridiculed. The people on the island separate themselves into groups based on class: *la gente decente* and *la polilla,* the gentle people and the common urbanized peasants, "who, like termites were to be found wherever they could build their messy nests and procreate" (101). Even Consuelo's closest cousin, Patricio, is not safe from the label of *maldito y perdido* (damned and lost), put on him by his family because they suspect him of being homosexual. When Patricio begins to pull away from Consuelo, she is hurt but realizes he pushes her away because he "had been afraid of saying the words that would define him, in any language" (74).

Language rules Consuelo's life, defining not only the people and the social circumstances under which they live, but also the events that befall them. When the *tragedia* that is later revealed to be schizophrenia begins to take over Mili, Consuelo learns that her "family had words for every occasion, even pain and sorrow" (154), but while language can imprison, words can be the "keys to power and freedom" (155). She begins to "see language as a weapon of destruction, as well as of self-defense" (50) and finally learns how to wield it in order to define for herself the meaning of Consuelo.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the ways in which language is used as a weapon in American culture. Discuss two or

three of them, comparing them to Consuelo's experiences.
2. Consuelo defines *la familia* as "a crown of thorns and roses" (100). What has led to this view of family? Do you agree or disagree with her view? How does the author create such a view? Explain your answer, citing from the text for support.
3. Consuelo's idea of the role of women in Puerto Rican society is explored through phrases like "Another rule for a *mujer decente:* If one gets in trouble, we all pay" (35) and "It was a woman's burden and her privilege to sacrifice her own needs and desires in order to one day reach that pinnacle of praise: *Se sacrificó por su familia*" (59). What effects do social definitions have on individuals? How do such definitions serve the community? What social definitions exist in mainstream American culture?
4. Compare the relationship of Consuelo and Mili to that of Kate and Anna in Jodi Picoult's novel *My Sister's Keeper*. In what ways are family members responsible for one another? How does this differ from culture to culture?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON COFER AND HER WORK

1. A common character in Cofer's writing is that of the *Espiritista,* the spiritualist whom other characters go to in order to seek help through the divine or magical. Examine the role of the spiritualist in Puerto Rican culture, using examples from Cofer's work and your own research.
2. In *The Meaning of Consuelo,* the term *la fulana* is defined as a term used to refer to the outsider (3). Examine Cofer's works for characters who fit that definition. Compare and discuss the way they are treated by their communities. What characteristics cause people in mainstream American society to be classified as outsiders?
3. Many of the characters in Cofer's works seem to view the United States as a form of salvation. Yet many Americans live below the poverty level. Examine the concept of the "American dream." Discuss how it functions in works by Cofer and earlier American works, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. How has the American dream changed since the 1950s? How easy is it to achieve today?

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Billy Collins (1941–)

We are all so foolish, / . . . / so damn foolish / we have become beautiful without even knowing it.

("Nightclub")

Billy Collins ends each poetry reading with the preceding lines from his poem "Nightclub." He says he is "totemistic" about the habit, but the words also serve as a summary of his poetry and his philosophy of life. These lines are also key to understanding his immense popularity, even among those who have previously disliked poetry, because they hint at an acceptance of and contentment with the lives each of us has been given. In an age that hungers for spirituality and relief from hectic lives, Collins points out that we are each beautiful and can find solace, and even humor, in our little corners of the world.

Collins's career has in his words "gone from 0 to 60" in a short time. From his first book of poems, *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (1988), which he had great problems having published, to his latest, *Ballistics* (2008), published by Random House, Collins has become the most sought after poet in the country. His readings are attended not only by literati, but also by those who have never written a poem. Collins has achieved what most poets only dream of—financial success. His appeal is in his common themes, often discussed with underlying humor, and in his disregard for the accoutrements of poetry: rhyme, meter, and standard poetic form. This is not to say his poetry lacks form, but dialogue with the reader, not literary gymnastics, is always Collins's goal. He says form is only a "box for the poem to live in," which should be tidy, but subordinate to the clarity of the message.

The easiest way to understand Billy Collins's ideas about poetry is to go back to a poem he wrote early on but still adheres to, entitled "Introduction to Poetry":

> I ask them to take a poem
> and hold it up to the light
>
> . . .
>
> I say drop a mouse into a poem
> and watch him probe his way out,
>
> . . .
>
> But all they want to do
> is tie the poem to a chair with rope
> and torture a confession out of it.
>
> . . .

The "torture" is what Collins believes has turned students away from poetry. Searching for metaphors and parsing for meter take the poem away from the student. The same turning away from traditional forms that makes his poems popular also makes them difficult to analyze. If teachers cannot teach deconstruction, how are they to teach poetry? Collins discusses this question in his introduction to *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry.* He says opacity

has become so connected with modern poetry that readers have taken to novels and short stories instead, but that the goal of the poet is clarity. "Too often the hunt for Meaning becomes the only approach; literary devices form a field of barbed wire that students must crawl under to get to 'what the poet is trying to say.'" To clarify, he practices what he calls "ironic deflation" against the loftiness of the literary traditions. He even advocates taking poetry away from the classroom.

When he teaches poetry classes he does not ask, "What does the poem mean?" but "How does the poem operate?" In other words, how does it move from one point to another (Weich 4)? Again, in "Introduction to Poetry," he says the reader should "probe," "feel the walls," "waterski across the surface" to see how the poem gets from the beginning to the middle to the end. These three parts are the only poetic form to which Collins sticks. Most importantly, students should read the poem out loud so that they use their own voice and breathing to make the poem theirs. That immediate injection of the personal is what makes his poetry live—and what fills his poetry readings.

The importance of hearing poetry was perhaps indicated to him by his mother, whom Collins remembers as often singing in the kitchen and quoting poetry to her son. He was born in New York City on March 22, 1941. His mother, Katherine, was a nurse who had been born in Canada, and his father, William, was an electrician. Because he was an only child and a late-in-life child, he referred to himself as "their baby Jesus." Collins was a bright child and an avid reader, and his father hoped that he would go to the Harvard School of Business. Occasionally his father would take home a copy of *Poetry* magazine, an act that the poet later said he probably regretted. Collins was educated in Catholic schools and became enamored of the Beat poets while in high school. He recalls taking the train into New York City in the late 1950s to hang out around the wannabe Beat crowd, then going home to his snug bed in the suburbs. He wrote for his high school newspaper but had no poetry published until he submitted "The Discovery of Scat" to *Rolling Stone,* for which he was paid $30. He graduated from the College of the Holy Cross in 1963. Collins only became interested in poetry again after being admitted for graduate work at the University of California, Riverside, where he says, "I spent the first year reading" (Howard).

In 1968, Collins was hired at Hunter College in New York; shortly afterward, it became Lehman College of the City University of New York. He is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College, a visiting writer at Sarah Lawrence College, and an adjunct professor at Columbia University. He lives with his wife, Diane, an architect, in northern Westchester County in New York. Collins's poems have now appeared in every major poetry magazine and journal, as well as mainstream publications such as the *New Yorker, Paris Review, Harper's,* the *American Scholar,* and the *Atlantic Monthly.* He has received many fellowships, including one from the National Endowment for the Arts. His career gained steam when he read his work and was interviewed by Terry Gross on National Public Radio (NPR). Garrison Keillor has also been intrigued by Collins's work, leading to an appearance on NPR's *A Prairie Home Companion.* This exposure, combined with publication of three more books in the 1990s—*Questions about Angels, The Art of Drowning,* and *Picnic, Lightning*—cemented Collins's popularity.

When he received the June 2001 call from Dr. James Billington of the Library of Congress saying that he had been selected as the United States poet laureate, Collins had never met another poet laureate. So successful was he as poet laureate, he was appointed to another term in 2002. His progressive idea was to take poetry out of its ivory tower and to put it in the subways and buses instead. He even convinced Delta Air Lines to include a poetry selection in its entertainment options. Much of his acclaim was due to Poetry 180, a Web site for high school students. He hoped to begin each high school day with a poem—mostly modern ones—to be read along with the sports schedules and events. Every day of the school year, a single poem was to be read to all students for enjoyment, but not analysis. The Web site received over 1 million hits in the first year, from users in not only the United States, but also Algeria, Bhutan, and Norway. The

site resulted in two books, *Poetry 180* and *180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day.*

Poetry 180 reflects Collins's belief that poetry should be taught in reverse chronology. Instead of beginning with *Beowulf* or *The Canterbury Tales,* he believes in starting with a poem like Theodore Roethke's "My Father's Waltz" to intrigue students, eventually working backward to the classics. The collection and its sequel, *180 More Extraordinary Poems for Every Day,* feature poets such as Carol Ann Duffy, Mary Oliver, Sharon Olds, May Sarton, Robert Bly, Jane Kenyon, Gary Soto, Donald Justice, James Tate, and William Stafford. The poems constitute what Garrison Keillor calls simply "good poems," those pieces that somehow touch your heart and make you stop a minute and think, "That's a good poem." The collections also include the occasional work by Hardy, Coleridge, and Anne Bradstreet. In short, Collins has selected poems much like his own, which, although not meant to be analyzed formally, are nevertheless easily understood and invite the reader to make a personal connection.

Collins's poems are often called "accessible," according to Collins a "modifier so overused that it has begun to have the aural effect of fingernails on a blackboard." He substitutes "easy to enter," feeling that reading a poem should be like a welcoming homecoming: "Poems that are hospitable toward their readers, poems in which a human voice is clearly sounded—poems with the front door left open" is a description of both the poems he loves and the poems he writes (*180 More Extraordinary Poems* xvi). Another way Collins describes poetry is "imaginative travel." He says, "If a poem has no clear starting place, how can it go anywhere? If a poem does not begin in lucidity, how can it advance into the mysterious?"

His poems are first firmly grounded in setting, the where and when, to orient the reader. From there, they usually advance to the mysterious, a sort of fanciful disorientation. For instance, "I Chop Parsley While Listening to Art Blakey's Version of 'Three Blind Mice'" starts in the kitchen, where the poet is chopping vegetables, but goes on to delve into the animals' thoughts. Collins calls this mental progression "beginning in terra firma and progressing to terra incognita." He says he hopes to lead the reader in the same way Virgil led Dante in *The Divine Comedy.* His meanderings, his imaginative travels, always have a plan, a beginning, a middle, and an end. He explains the three stages thoroughly in his poem "Aristotle." The poet credits the rhetoric training in his Jesuit high school for his Aristotelian form.

Collins sidesteps the question of which poets have influenced him. He talks often about the conversational poems of Coleridge, and many critics also argue that Robert Frost or Walt Whitman has influenced his conversational style. His movement from specific to general or mysterious is the form Emily Dickinson often used. While Dickinson often borrowed the meter of her poems from the hymns that she could hear from the nearby Congregationalist church in Amherst, Collins uses the cadences of human conversation, often a conversation between the poet and the reader. More important, Dickinson's view of the world from her upstairs window, where she wrote of birds coming down the walk and snakes darting through the grass, is akin to Collins's fascination with household objects, such as salt shakers and oranges on the kitchen table. Collins seems to poke fun at this stance in "Monday": "The birds are in their trees, / the toast is in the toaster, / and the poets are at their windows." He continues, "the poets are at their windows / because it is their job for which / they are paid nothing every Friday afternoon" (*The Trouble with Poetry* 7). However, he is dead serious in saying that it is the job of the poet to observe common things and to weave them into the vast fabric of our lives. One of Collins's earlier poems was "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes," a poem not about seducing Emily but revealing her poetic starting point: "You will want to know / that she was standing / by an open window in an upstairs bedroom, / motionless, a little wide-eyed / looking out on the orchard below" (*Sailing Alone around the Room* 119). The wide-eyed poet standing at a window, often holding a cup of tea or listening to jazz, is seen many times in Collins's own poems.

More admiration for Dickinson is seen in Collins's introduction to *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson,* published by the Modern Library. He

says of her and other poets, "All poets must close the doors on the world to think and compose." Dickinson writes from her bedroom, while Collins often writes from the solitude of his kitchen. In "Design," he pours salt on the kitchen table and makes a circle with his finger. This design becomes more than a doodle in grains of salt but the design of life, fate, and the universe. In "Tuesday, June 4, 1991," he calls himself the "secretary to the morning whose only responsibility is to take down its bright, airy dictation" (*Sailing Alone* 58). Both poets see their roles as amanuenses of the world.

An example of a more direct comparison is in "Breathless." As does Dickinson, who loved to imagine life after death, Collins writes about his own burial. He says, "let me rest here / in my earthy little bedroom, / my lashes glazed with ice, / the roots of trees inching nearer, / and no dreams to frighten me anymore." Compare this with Dickinson's "Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers" and "I Died for Beauty," two of her many poems about the architecture and furniture of death. In another poem, he pictures his mother and father buried under a slab of granite (a favorite Dickinson word), and when the father sits up to admonish his son, who has been speeding past the cemetery, the mother quietly tells her husband to "just lie back down." This is reminiscent of the post-death conversation in Dickinson's "I Died for Beauty."

As does Dickinson, Collins avoids "metronomic rhythms and end rhyme" (Howard). He loves to make fun of traditional poetic forms. In "Sonnet," he says: "All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now, / and after this one just a dozen." He goes on, saying that sometimes the "iambic bongos must be played / and rhymes positioned at the end of lines" (*Sailing Alone* 146). In "Paradelle for Susan," he makes up a form, saying in a note that the paradelle is "one of the more demanding French fixed forms appearing in the *langue d'oc* love poetry of the eleventh century" (116). This was his affectionate joke on his fellow poets, who frantically searched their dictionaries for the paradelle, only to find that Collins had created it. In "American Sonnet," he suggests that the current sonnet is the postcard in which writers "do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser / and it is not fourteen lines," but in this age, postcards are the true "compression of what we feel" (26).

Close readers of Collins will find very little of his personal life in his poetry. He dislikes confessional poems and remarks that people read his poetry to find out not about him, but about themselves. There is something in him of the polite gentleman, one who would never think of talking about his personal life. While most of us write when we are either sad or happy and have the need to express this emotion to the world, Collins says his best time to write is when he has nothing to say. He approaches human emotion "like a bankshot," approaching obliquely. He also ridicules poetry workshops, which people attend to learn to put their emotions on paper. "Workshop" is a poem about the inane comments that are heard in poetry workshops, and of this poem he says that it is his attempt to "bite the hand that feeds him," as much of his life's work includes conducting poetry workshops (*Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes* 78).

Collins is a poet of simple things. Readers find in his poems mice, cows, bowls of oranges, hats, musical instruments, and books, but these common objects are paths into complex and human thoughts. For instance, in "The Death of the Hat," a man's felt hat is the entry into a poem about the death of his hardworking father. In "The Best Cigarette," he tells of living in the moment. "The Lanyard" is a poem of a young boy weaving a plastic neck strap, but the real topic is the impossibility of ever paying back your mother for what she has done for you. He writes often about art, especially still life. "I usually find myself in front of the still lifes," he says in "Metropolis," as the careful examiner of the connection between things. He continues, "I can float suspended in the air around the glittering things / whose shadows will never lengthen / and whose weight no hand will ever feel" (*The Art of Drowning* 24). In other words, he declares himself to be an artist with words.

The topic of many of Collins's recent poems is the reader. "You, Reader" compares the poet and the reader to the salt and pepper shakers on the kitchen table: "I wondered . . . if they were still strangers to one another / like you and I / who manage to be

known and unknown to each other at the same time" (*The Trouble with Poetry* 4). His four latest books begin with a poem to the reader, a sort of welcome mat to the collection. He calls this his attempt to form a "temporary companionship with the reader, without being presumptuous" (Weich 1). He talks to the reader as if the two were face to face, quietly sharing the surprising ending of the conversation.

Like Whitman and Dickinson, Collins is a distinctly American poet. He became aware of this fact while giving poetry readings in England. He noticed that the audience there did not follow him when he used phrases like "eggs over easy" but realized that he needed to use American idioms in order to maintain his conversational tone. He points to Whitman as the progenitor of distinctly American poems. Whitman's veering away from convention, the "freedom from the box of the stanza and the harness of the iambic," eventually led to the Beat poets, such as Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti ("What's American about American Poetry?" 2). Although Collins is well traveled, he rarely writes poems about his travels. For instance, in "Shoveling Snow with Buddha," Buddha shovels not in Asia, but in a New York driveway. In "Lines Written Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey," he pokes fun at Wordsworth and the English romantics and their idealization of the past: "Nothing will be like it was / a few hours ago, back in the glorious past."

Unconventional but successful, Billy Collins just might be the poet who influences American poetry of the future, just as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman have influenced it in the past. Certainly his approach to poetry is quintessentially modern American.

"Consolation" (1995)

This poem was written after Collins and his wife had to cancel travel plans to Italy, ones that had been in place for a long time. At first feeling cheated out of the trip, he concludes that staying home is more pleasurable than traipsing around Italy. The poem legitimizes American language as well as common American experiences, like eating ham and eggs at a local restaurant. Americans seem to believe that Europe, with its long history and monarchies, is somehow better than their own country. Collins disagrees.

As travelers know, dealing with a foreign language is challenging. Collins mentions the confusion of foreign road signs, billboards, phrase books, and maps but then says that in his own country "all language barriers [are] down, / rivers of idiom running freely." He illustrates with an American idiom, "eggs over easy." The relationship of language to the American experience depends on its unique idioms, for they are a form of secret code that binds us together. The waitress is Dot, a name never found in a foreign country. After his cafe breakfast, Collins climbs back into his car "as if it were the great car of English itself / and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off / down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even to Bologna." The poem relies on *no, not,* and *never* several times to compare the easy life around home with the tiring days touring castles, cathedrals, and tombs. Do we really have a good time traveling? As in "American Sonnet," tourists "express the wish that you were here / and hide the wish that we were where you are / walking back from the mailbox."

This poet's view is that we cannot truly understand or appreciate being American until we travel to a foreign country. Collins says that he has tried extensive travel but now he wants to stay home.

For Discussion or Writing

1. List the words and lines that emphasize the negative or challenging aspects of foreign travel. What is Collins's point? Why do you think so? Discuss.
2. On one level, "Consolation" is a poem of language. Which words and phrases are about American speech? What are the speaker's conclusions? Do you agree? Why or why not? Discuss your answer.

"Nightclub" (1995)

This is one of Collins's many poems about jazz. It begins with the theme of many songs: "You are so

beautiful and I am a fool / to be in love with you." Collins jokes about love, saying no one wants to admit that he is a fool about it. "You are so beautiful, too bad you are a fool / is another one you don't hear." As often happens, the humor occurs in the beginning, before the poem veers off in a serious direction. Because he is listening to the songs of Johnny Hartman, "whose dark voice can curl around / the concepts of love, beauty, and foolishness," the poet is reminded of a scene in a bar at three o'clock in the morning. At this point the air and the poem become hazy—smoky, really—as those "beautiful fools" left in the bar are intoxicated by either the liquor or the music, or both. They are "slipping by degrees into a rhythmic dream," led by a large man playing the saxophone. Then a curious thing happens: The saxophonist hands the instrument over to Collins, who goes into a long bebop solo about the theme not only of this poem, but of all his poems: "We are all so foolish, / . . . / so damn foolish / we have become beautiful without even knowing it."

Here is a poem that starts out naturally, as if the speaker is having an intimate conversation with the reader. Because the two are such close friends, the speaker can offer an important piece of advice: Time is fleeting, and we should each take time to slow down and acknowledge the beauty that each of us has.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Nightclub" is an early Collins poem. What similarities in theme do you find between this poem and some of his later work? Select one or two of his later poems and discuss how they adhere to or differ from his earlier thematic explorations.
2. Read two or three Collins poems that contain references to music. What does his grounding in music—especially jazz—add to the poems? Explain your answer.

"Forgetfulness" (2001)

Of all the poems Collins reads (especially to a literate, middle-aged audience), none is more popular than "Forgetfulness." The poem attacks the familiar problem of not being able to recall facts that in a youth were readily accessible. The poem begins in a Mexican fishing village that the reader might have encountered on vacation but moves on to mythology—the River Lethe, to be exact, which the reader may or may not remember from college. By Collins's not mentioning the river except to say, "whose name begins with an L, as far as you can recall," the reader is forced into a sort of audience participation, in order to fill in the correct name. When Collins then mentions the nine muses, literate readers will be able to recall at least one or two of them. To this point, the poem is humorous.

Collins then alludes to the common fear that if we cannot remember the little things now, will we eventually forget how to "swim or even ride a bicycle" in the future? He also alludes to the brevity of life, the wistfulness we all feel when youth and love are but a memory: "No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted / out of a love poem that you used to know by heart."

The poem includes many of Collins's hallmarks, such as the view from a window and the moon. It also includes the reader, who is the "you" in the poem. It is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," in which the speaker stands at a window on the beach, watching the light on the straits and talking with a companion about the human condition.

"Forgetfulness" never fails to get a chuckle at the beginning, but as the poem progresses, the reaction of the audience turns to pensive musing. As he so often does, Collins begins on terra firma and ends on terra incognita.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." What similarities do you find between it and "Forgetfulness"? Why is Collins's poem more humorous than Arnold's? Discuss such elements as imagery and tone.
2. Where does Collins make the tonal changes in this poem? What do they contribute to its overall effect? What is that effect? Justify your answer with citations from the text.

"Marginalia" (2001)

As "Forgetfulness" does, this poem appeals specifically to those familiar with literature, but even more to English majors. After all, it helps to have at least heard of Conor Cruise O'Brien and to understand what Collins is talking about when he mentions Irish monks in cold scriptoria. The poem is about a common experience all readers have had: finding notes in the margins from previous readers.

These are comments we have all mumbled to ourselves—"Nonsense," "Please," "HA!!"—when we have read the notes of others. Educated readers can relate when Collins says, "And if you have managed to graduate from college / without ever having written 'Man vs. Nature' / in a margin, perhaps now / is the time to take one step forward." The first eight stanzas of the poem serve as the beginning, grounding the reader in the here and now.

At the ninth stanza, the poem reaches the middle, for now it is not about "you" but about "I," a personal vignette about Collins's reading *The Catcher in the Rye* in high school. We can see him, a bored, lonely ninth grader in the summer, lying on his stomach on the family couch and reading to pass the time. Most of us can still recall those confused times of puberty, and the scene is made even more poignant because he is reading *Catcher,* a coming-of-age story of a New York boy. Then the poem reaches the third part, the end, with "how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed / when I found on one page / a few greasy smears." A "beautiful girl, I could tell," has written in the margin. Young Collins is in love, and it does not matter that there is little connection between egg salad stains in the margin and love. We can understand that this is what the boy has been looking for, and the enigmatic girl becomes fascinating to the reader as well. With this poem, Collins has also "pressed a thought into the wayside, / planted an impression along the verge," and his thought is that no matter how well read and scholarly we become, nothing can compare with the joy of young love.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Characterize the main speaker in "Marginalia." What techniques does Collins use to make this character accessible to his reading audience? How do these techniques contribute to the success of the poem as a whole? Explain.
2. How is the main speaker in "Marginalia" similar to Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*? Would it be helpful to discuss the two works together? Why or why not?

"Osso Buco" (2001)

Collins has said, "My poetry is suburban, it's domestic, it's middle class, and it's sort of unashamedly that" (Weich 1). No poem shows this reality more than "Osso Buco." Here is the contented householder after a delicious meal, a little tipsy while sipping a second glass of wine, watching the candlelight play on the table, confident that his agreeable wife will join him in bed later. This is as good as life gets. And this is not just any meal, but a meal of osso buco, a dish that includes not only a portion of lamb, but also the bone and marrow. Bone forms the crux of the meal and the poem; it not only is a solid image, but also contains the marrow. Collins scoops out and eats the essence of the animal's life. He likes "the sound of the bone against the plate" because it is solid and real, but he also likes the "secret marrow, / the invaded privacy of the animal."

The poem compares "hunger and deprivation," the topic of most poems, with "hunger and pleasure," the topic of many of Collins's poems. He knows that many in the world lack food, but that does not prevent him from enjoying his meal. In the final part of the poem in the last 10 lines, he and his wife go to bed and to sleep, where they drift down into "the dark, soundless bottom . . . into the broken bones of earth itself, / into the marrow of the only place we know." "Osso Buco" is emblematic of Collins's work because it begins with a hospitable, congenial welcome into his warm kitchen, then travels to the imaginative realm, in which he makes the reader equally comfortable.

For Discussion or Writing

1. One of the words Collins emphasizes in the poem is *marrow*. What are the various meanings of the word? Why do you think Collins emphasizes this particular word in his poem?
2. Which images point to the comfort that Collins feels after a good meal? How do they add to the tone of the piece?

"Tuesday, June 4, 1991" (2001)

His wife is off to take her botany final, the painter is working on the front porch, and the speaker is inside his house reveling in being a poet. He is recording his day, living in the moment, doing what stenographers do in courtrooms, and "when there is a silence, they sit still as I do." His fingers hover over the keyboard ready to record. He likens himself to Samuel Pepys, the 17th-century diarist, but London is not burning, and Collins records only the simple things: the clematis climbing over the window, the woodpile, and the small garden of herbs. "Yes, this is the kind of job I could succeed in, / an unpaid, the contented amanuensis of suburban life."

Sound, or lack of it, is important. Music is playing, he can hear the rumble of traffic on the highway, and his fingers drum softly on the keys, but at the heart of the home are silence and contentment. It's a "sun-riddled Tuesday," and sunlight splashes through the leaves in the garden. We are reminded of Emily Dickinson's poem about a certain slant of light on a winter's afternoon.

From the idyllic June morning in a small New England town, the poem moves into mythology. He imagines Aurora as his companion, not his student wife ("who would leave her sleeping husband in bed"): "But tomorrow, dawn will come the way I picture her, / barefoot, disheveled, standing outside my window." Collins enjoys his life so much he determines to get up even earlier tomorrow, so as to prolong the day. "So convinced am I that I have found my vocation / tomorrow I will begin chronicling earlier at dawn." Aurora will offer him "a handful of birdsong and a small cup of light." Here is a man who finds contentment in his corner of the world and invites us to do the same.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the importance of the title? How does the title emphasize the theme of this poem? Discuss your answer fully.
2. What symbolic elements does Collins choose to depict the day, especially at dawn? What do they contribute to the speaker's point of view?

"The Lanyard" (2005)

The unifying image of this poem is a woven plastic cord, worn around the neck, to which a key can be attached. Lanyard making is a common craft experience for children at camp, and Collins made one for his mother at an early age. However, he forgot about it until adulthood, when he saw the word *lanyard* in his dictionary. Then he was sent "suddenly into the past," a time when he thought a plastic cord was an even trade for all his mother had given him: her own milk, hours of nursing him when he was sick, thousands of meals, clothing, and a good education. As a child, we do not see or understand these sacrifices; we believe that a small gift is enough. As an adult, we know that there are no gifts great enough to repay a mother.

Again, the poem has a defined beginning, middle, and end, but this time it goes from the present to the past and then back to the present. We are in Collins's study, where he happens to see a familiar word in the dictionary. He remembers crossing red and white plastic strands over and over. Then we see the poet as a child and the many acts of kindness by his mother, unappreciated at the time. The poem finishes with Collins as an adult, with a wish that he could give his mother a second gift, "the rueful admission that when she took / the two-toned lanyard from my hands, I was as sure as a boy could be / that this useless, worthless thing that I wove / out of boredom would be enough to make us even." The gift he would give her is a thank you, for letting him be a foolish child, and an affirmation that he grew up to cherish her.

The poem works because the reader can also recall childish gifts made for parents that, at the time, were believed to be works of art. We might also remember our innocent sincerity, during a time when most of us are unaware that nothing we can do for our parents will "make us even."

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does it affect the poem that the speaker is an adult, looking back? Which lines capture the innocence of the child? Explain your answer.
2. Which lines capture the worthlessness of the gift? How do they contribute to the tone of the poem?

"Building with Its Face Blown Off" (2005)

Americans are constantly bombarded with media images of destruction in other countries. We are on the comfortable other side of the world, and we feel guilty that we can go on with our lives, even go on picnics, when the lives of others are shattered. This poem contrasts with "Osso Buco"; rather than suggesting contentment, domestic tranquility has been destroyed.

Here we "suddenly" see a life-stopping scene: A home has been bombed. Soldiers are poking around the rubble. Lives are exposed when the side of the building is demolished: "The bathroom looks almost embarrassed," "the sink sinking to its knees," and the shower curtain flaps in the wind. Collins compares the house to an open-sided dollhouse, but here the furniture cannot be set right, and the picture of the grandfather cannot be straightened.

From this haunting scene, the camera backs up, showing a wider view. Life goes on and people cross the one remaining bridge. Crows settles back onto the charred trees. The third part of the poem is in a far-off country, probably the United States, where a couple shares a picnic. The civilities of life go on. He pours wine; she unpacks a wicker hamper with "bread, cheese and several types of olives." This is a scene of plenty. The reader must wonder whether the selection of olives might not have been grown in a Middle Eastern country, an area with many buildings with their faces blown off. From the specific references to ripped blue and white wallpaper and goldfish on a shower curtain to the oblivious picnickers, "Building with Its Face Blown Off" is a cheerless verbal still life of a home.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Billy Collins's poem "The Names." Compare the attitudes of the speakers in the two poems. Which do you think is more convincing in supporting the theme of each poem? Why?
2. This poem and "Osso Buco" offer contrasting views of a communal gathering at a meal. Discuss which one is more successful as a poem, according to your definition of what a poem should accomplish.

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON COLLINS AND HIS WORK

1. Read several of Emily Dickinson's "Death" poems. Look especially for similarities to Collins's poetic form and word choice. Find specific words or ideas that also appear in the poems of Billy Collins. Discuss what the two poets' work has in common in its exploration of death, citing examples from each to support your answer.
2. Why do you think Billy Collins is known as an quintessentially "American" poet? Which of his poems poke fun at the idealization of Europe? Discuss two poems that do so.

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Rita Dove (1952–)

My intention has never been to make the beautiful object on paper, although I think that beauty beguiles us so well that no matter how horrific the topic, if the poem is beautiful, it convinces.

(quoted in Moyers)

When Rita Dove was asked to read at the first state dinner of President Bill Clinton, she chose what is perhaps her most politically provocative piece to date, "Parsley." The poem recounts the 1937 slaughter of 20,000 Haitian farmworkers. Dove chose that particular poem because she "wanted to talk about the uses to which power has been put . . . [and] how necessary it is in all avenues of life to be able to imagine the other person" (Moyers 127). The willingness to tell the truth, even when it is inconvenient or uncomfortable, and the desire to use poetry to express the "many different aspects of human joy and triumph and tragedy" define Rita Dove, a poet who earned the Pulitzer Prize and served as poet laureate of the United States, both well before most contemporary writers attain the pinnacle of their careers.

Born into a middle-class home in Akron, Ohio, on August 28, 1952, Rita Frances Dove was raised to believe that education and effort were vital to a well-lived life. Her father, Ray Dove, was the only one in a family of 10 children to graduate from high school and go on to college. During World War II, he mastered Italian and German "to know the language of the enemy" (Steffen 13). At the time that Ray earned his master's degree in chemistry, racial discrimination permeated the tire and rubber industry of Akron. While the rest of his classmates were employed as chemists, Ray was hired to operate the elevator. Despite the frustration this must have caused, Ray concealed his struggle from his family and was a model of the belief in hard work and pride in a job well done. It was only through the persistence of a former professor that Ray eventually broke through the racial barrier to become the first black chemist in the industry.

Rita Dove's mother, Elvira Elizabeth Hord Dove, also placed a high value on education. Elvira graduated from high school at the age of 16, after skipping two grades. Although Elvira was awarded a scholarship to Howard University, her parents were fearful of sending their young daughter off to Washington, D.C., and declined the offer. Dove credits her mother with helping to cultivate her deep love of literature.

As a child, Dove read everything she could get her hands on, from the backs of cereal boxes to volumes of Shakespeare. She states that she had an advantage over other children because no one ever suggested to her that a piece of literature might be too difficult. Her parents encouraged a love for books by allowing free access to their ample collection, supplemented with frequent trips to the local library. Dove was allowed to borrow any book in which she was interested, with the only requirement that she finish reading what she had taken out before going back for more. An intense desire to conquer the language of her father's books led Dove to begin to learn German in the seventh grade.

When she was not reading, Dove liked to "eavesdrop" on the adults as they told stories in kitchens

and at family gatherings. She says her own desire to tell stories stems in part from "listening to these stories being told and how they would affect their listeners" (Carroll 83). The emphasis on story in the Dove household caused Rita and her siblings to turn to reading and writing as a pleasurable way to fill the long summer months. It became a ritual of sorts for Rita and her older brother, Tom, to create a summer newspaper. Dove confesses that as each summer wore on, she would eventually quit and form her own magazine, entitled *Poet's Delight,* but never got further than designing the cover (Ratiner 205). As early as third grade, Dove began her first novel. Entitled *Chaos,* the story was about "robots taking over the earth." Each week she wrote a 20-line chapter based on the spelling words her teacher assigned (*Selected* xx).

Despite her love of writing, Dove thought of it as "some game that [she] would one day have to put away in order to become an adult." It was only when a high school English teacher invited her to a book signing by John Ciardi that Dove realized writing "was really something adults did and were respected for" (Carroll 84). Dove's hard work in high school earned her national recognition as one of 100 students across the United States to be invited to the White House as presidential scholars.

Yet, when it was time to declare a college major, Dove chose prelaw. Dove says she believed her parents expected her to be a doctor or a lawyer. Although she tried to live up to those expectations, she found herself constantly rearranging her schedule to fit in creative writing courses. In her junior year, she finally found the courage to tell her parents that she had switched her major to English. Dove graduated with a B.A. from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in 1973. Her outstanding academic achievements earned her summa cum laude and national achievement scholar status.

In 1974, Dove traveled to Europe on a Fulbright Scholarship. Being abroad had a profound impact on Dove, both politically and as a writer:

> I began to stop taking for granted that what I heard about our foreign policies was necessarily the truth. . . . Being in Germany for a year and intimately in contact with another language sharpened my appreciation for my own language—what it could do, and what I hadn't asked it to do for me. (Moyers 115)

Dove cites her knowledge of the German language as the greatest influence on her work: "Put the verb on the end of a sentence and you've got to suspend everything until then and then revelation comes in a rush." She began to experiment with whether an English sentence could be "stretched to sustain suspense like that" (Steffen 14).

Dove's poetry was not the only part of her life to be heavily impacted by her fluency in German. While working on her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, she accepted an invitation to serve as translator for a fellow student, Fred Viebahn, a German writer. Dove received her M.F.A. in 1977 and turned down an offer of a tenure-track position in Florida to join Viebahn at Oberlin College in Ohio. The two were married in 1979.

The Yellow House on the Corner, Dove's first published book of poetry, was released in 1980. Through the seemingly disconnected issues of family history, slavery, and budding sexuality, Dove explores one's ability to rise beyond the expectations of others. While critics responded favorably, citing Dove's "storyteller instincts" and her "determination to reveal what is magical in our contemporary lives" (McDowell), the volume was largely overlooked by academia.

After her marriage to Viebahn, the couple lived in Berlin and Israel, hoping to support themselves through freelance writing. Dove began working on her second book of poems during that time but worried that she was losing her English. To manage the damage, she switched her concentration to prose, which she felt did not require the "precise tone of a phrase" that poetry demanded (Steffen 15). When asked in an interview whether crossing the fence between poetry and fiction was difficult, Dove responded, "Just as it's tragic to pigeonhole individuals according to stereotypes, there's no reason to subscribe authors to particular genres, either.

I'm a writer, and I write in the form that most suits what I want to say" (http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/poets/bio/dove_r.htm). That form has more often than not been poetry, but Dove's forays into other genres have included a collection of short stories (*Fifth Sunday,* 1985), a novel (*Through the Ivory Gate,* 1992), drama (*The Darker Face of the Earth,* 1994), and the lyrics for a number of musical arrangements.

It is possible that Dove's aversion to stereotypes stems in part from the incredible pressure placed upon "any member of a minority who 'makes it.'" Dove describes success for a black woman as a double-edged sword:

> As a model he or she must be perfect; no slip-ups or "you've let us down." As a special case, he or she is envied, even reviled. Move away from home court and you're accused of being "dicty": return and you're a prodigal. Write about home and you blaspheme; choose other topics and you're a traitor. (Steffen 21)

Dove refuses to view her genetic composition as an encumbrance. She accepts that any individual views topics from his or her unique perspective, filtered through a lens tinted by race and/or gender. Dove claims it is part of her "political/personal mandate" to represent life in all of its complexities:

> That means that if I am writing a poem in which I notice a flower, if I felt it was important to talk about this flower, I would be dishonest not to do it just because I thought it wasn't directly about being black and a woman. Besides, how do I know it ISN'T about being black or a woman? (Steffen 17)

Dove herself is certainly not to be typecast. She began her career as a writer at the end of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), an artistic branch of the Black Power movement that began in the 1960s. Although she understood the reasons for the common topic and tone undertaken by that group, Dove felt that the "blighted urban world inhabited by the poems of the Black Arts Movement" did not reflect her own experiences. Timing is everything in life, and Dove admits that writers like Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) and Haki Madhubuti (formerly known as Don E. Lee) laid the groundwork for a new generation of black artists to "walk up to the door they [BAM] had been battering at and squeeze through the breech" (Rowell, part 2). Although some have interpreted Dove's "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, in a Dream" as an attack on BAM, Dove states that it was never meant as a rejection of the poet or BAM, but instead was written as an "allegorical rendering of what happens when two artistic generations collide" (Rowell, part 2).

One should not infer from the lack of raw anger in Dove's poetry that she has never had cause to feel frustrated about race relations or political issues. She states that as a partner in an interracial marriage, she has her share of things to be "plenty angry about," but that "it is very hard to think when you are angry." Instead of letting emotion rule her response, Dove prefers to "find a way around the anger so you can do something about it." For her, that way is being "as clear as possible" in her poetry (Ratiner 214).

Dove's desire to avoid stereotypes and be as clear as possible is best reflected in the effort she puts into crafting characters who cannot be easily dismissed. These personae are especially well rendered in her 1986 poetic tribute to her maternal grandparents, *Thomas and Beulah.* According to the critic Pat Righelato, the book "began as a poem" and "grew poem by poem" (Righelato 68) into a two-part reflection on the lives of those who lived during the great migration of the early 20th century. Although Dove modeled the characters after her grandparents, she cast the mold loose enough to allow the story to "reinforce a larger sense of truth that is not, strictly speaking, reality" (Righelato 72). To effect that "larger sense of truth," it was necessary for the characters to be reflective of more than isolated individuals and at the same time avoid "stock characterization." In Dove's words, it became her mission to "restore individual human fates to the oeuvre." To accomplish this, she begins with the most basic building block of a story, the characters: "I don't

want you to think of a particular character simply as 'this black angry person.' . . . If you can see this man as an individual, then he cannot be lumped into a group and dismissed" (Ratiner 215).

Thomas and Beulah was immediately recognized as a literary triumph in which Dove "planed away unnecessary matter: pure shapes, her poems exhibit the thrift that Yeats called the sign of a perfected manner" (Helen Vendler, writing for the *New York Review of Books*). Selecting poetry as the form for biography allowed Dove to focus on defining moments in the lives of the protagonists through linking vignettes. Her stated goal for the volume was to "call my grandparents in to show how grand historical events can be happening around us but we remember them only in relation to what was happening to us as individuals at that particular moment" (Moyers 124). The volume was awarded the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

With the publication of *Grace Notes* in 1989, the public was allowed a glimpse into another facet of Dove's life, her love of music. The title is taken from the role grace notes serve in a musical composition: Each poem within the collection "testifies to those moments added to the basic melody of life that 'break with the ordinary' but make all the difference" (Steffen 28). Music permeates Dove's life. She describes her childhood home as being filled with music as diverse as Bessie Smith and Fauré. Her maternal grandparents played the mandolin and guitar and Dove learned early on to sing and play the cello, later adding the viola de gamba and modern dance and ballet to her repertoire. The musicality of Dove's writings results from her deep understanding of the inherent power of music to create epiphany: It has given her the experience "of something clicking into place, so that understanding went beyond, deeper than rational sense" (Ratiner 210). Dove describes poetry as a "sung language" capable of helping us "to *relive* the intensity of a moment" (Ratiner 211).

Her fellow poet Steven Ratiner praised Dove's debut novel, *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992), for the "sheer musicality of her language . . . which, by turns, wails like a jazz riff, soars like a gospel choir, and simmers with a classical elegance." The story, which grows out of several of the pieces included in *Fifth Sunday,* follows Virginia King as she struggles to define her own personal identity within mainstream America.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed Dove United States poet laureate and consultant on poetry. Barely in her forties, Dove was the youngest person ever to attain this prestigious position. In her acceptance speech, she stated, "If only the sun-drenched celebrities are being noticed and worshiped, then our children are going to have a tough time seeing value in the shadows, where the thinkers, probers and scientists are who are keeping society together" (Molotsky). During her two terms as poet laureate, Dove consistently shone a light into those shadows, championing the work of those often overlooked by mainstream America. She introduced a poetry and jazz program to the literary series, provided an audience for young Crow writers, and organized a two-day conference entitled Oil on the Waters: The Black Diaspora (Molotsky).

While the post of poet laureate is often viewed as a career capstone, it has been just one more jewel in Dove's literary crown. Since leaving the post, she has served as poet laureate of Virginia, earned the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP's) Great American Award, been named one of *Glamour* magazine's "Outstanding Women of the Year," and received 22 honorary doctorates, among innumerable other honors. Far from the reclusive writer, Dove has accepted her role as spokesperson for poetry with multiple television appearances on shows as diverse as the *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour* and *Sesame Street* and in 1994 hosted and produced a national program for children entitled *Shine Up Your Words.* Despite the demands on her time, she still manages to carve out time for writing. Her most recent works include three volumes of poetry, *Mother Love* (1995), *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (1999), and *American Smooth* (2004); the play *The Darker Face of the Earth* (theatrical premiere, 1996); several musical arrangements; and her newest venture, *Sonata Mulattica* (2009). Dove continues to share her passion for writing with her students and cur-

rently serves as Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, a position she has held since 1989.

No matter the subject or the genre, the writings of Rita Dove serve as a bridge—between individuals, cultures, countries. In the poet's own words:

> I write a poem and offer it to you, the reader; and if, on the other end, you can look up from the page and say: "I know what you mean, I've felt that, too"—then both of us are a little less alone on this planet. (Ratiner 218)

The Yellow House on the Corner (1980)

According to Therese Steffen, Dove's first published volume of poetry, which contains such important poems as "Geometry," sets the tone for her entire body of work by demanding "the liberty to move unfettered across boundaries and all facets of world culture" (164). Pat Righelato credits Dove's "antiphonal mode of expressing contrasting voices" to an "openness to history" and her "intimate sense of the contemporary" (6, 34).

The volume opens with "This Life," in which "the idea of charmed romance is tested by the actualities of travel" (Righelato 9). The female speaker of the poem is a traveler, "a stranger in this desert." She leaves her traveling companion and ventures out, where she encounters a man. Although the man tells her "the same thing / as that one, / asleep, upstairs," she is drawn to him.

Righelato ascribes such temptation to the "feminine susceptibility to the idea of romance as charmed destiny" (9), which is common in the fairy tales read to youngsters. Dove uses the image of this new man in whom "the possibilities / are golden dresses in a nutshell" to introduce the realm of fantasy: In the Grimm Brothers' story of Allerlierauh, a princess hides fine dresses in a nutshell in order to escape from the incestuous intentions of her father. The notion of charmed destiny is furthered by the speaker's allusion to a Japanese woodcut she loved as a child, in which a young girl gazed at the moon while awaiting her lover. Although the girl in the woodcut waits eternally, in the speaker's fantasies the lover arrives in "white breeches and sandals." The speaker's belief in charmed destiny allows her to realize the lover in the woodcut had this man's face, "though [she] didn't know it."

Despite the speaker's yearning to be the heroine of her own fairy tale, she allows herself to be grounded by reality. The man before her is not the perfect prince, but just the craggy nutshell that represents the fantasy. Thus, she resolves "our lives will be the same" as those of the people captured in the woodcut—who, although destined to be together, are eternally apart.

The female speaker in Dove's trilogy of adolescence also yearns. The three poems address the stages of sexual maturation, in which young girls struggle to understand their changing feelings and integrate their newly acquired knowledge of sex into what they have always known about the world. It is in "Adolescence—I" that the speaker is introduced to the notion that boys might be the source of some future pleasure. There is an air of secrecy as the friends gather "in water-heavy nights behind grandmother's porch." Linda shares her newly acquired information that "a boy's lips are soft," and the speaker's universe is widened by that knowledge.

"Adolescence—II" portrays the same girl now "sit[ting] in the bathroom, waiting." Although she does not divulge why she waits in the night and for whom or what she waits, one can infer from the sensations she describes—"sweat prickles behind my knees, the baby-breasts are alert"—that she is anxious, perhaps even conflicted about its arrival. The girl is not surprised at the arrival of "three seal men" and in fact the line "I don't know what to say again" implies that she has seen these creatures before. They leave her clutching at "ragged holes . . . at the edge of darkness." Righelato postulates that the girl is awaiting the onset of puberty, her anxiety reflective of the "fears and pleasures of sexuality" (25).

In the final installment of the trilogy, the girl acknowledges her ripening body, which has begun to grow "orange and softer, swelling out," and dreams of the fairy-tale arrival of her true love. She envisions that they will meet "by the blue spruce,"

where he will confess that he has loved her in his dreams. The poem contrasts the "scarred knees" of a young girl with earlobes "baptized . . . with rosewater" and "lipstick stubs [that] glittered in their steel shells." But even in fantasy, her maturation has a price: She sees her father over the shoulder of her lover, carrying "his tears in a bowl, / And blood hangs in the pine-soaked air." Righelato describes this vision as "Freudian displacement" (25), whereby the girl's fear of the unknown is transferred to her father.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Address Righelato's claim that women are susceptible to the "idea of romance as charmed destiny." What effect does such a belief have, if any, on society? If fairy tales instill a belief in "charmed destiny," what might we expect from the messages of contemporary culture?
2. Examine the use of the carnation in "Geometry" and "Adolescence—III." Where else does the carnation appear in Dove's work? What does the flower symbolize in each poem? Why do you suppose Dove chooses that particular flower?

"Geometry" (1980)

This poem is in Dove's collection *The Yellow House on the Corner*. Unlike the female speaker in other poems in the volume, the young girl in Dove's "Geometry" is not preoccupied with her impending adolescence, but with proving a theorem. She tells us with confidence, "I prove a theorem and the house expands." The girl's mathematical proficiency results in "windows jerk[ing] free to hover near the ceiling," but the violence implied in the verb *jerk* is tempered by the sigh of the ceiling as it floats away. Steffen suggests that the poem reflects a female speaker's "decisive step from the past into her own future" as "the old structures called home break up or are outgrown" (79). The girl is not afraid when the disintegration of her house leaves her "out in the open" because she realizes that it is her own independence that has caused the boundaries to disappear. While she may harbor some of the same self-doubt that plagues other young adults, she trusts that she, as the butterfly-windows, is "going to some point true and unproven."

It is also possible to examine the poem in light of the cultural and academic repression endured by African Americans within the United States. Dove began her career at a time when African Americans were demanding not only equal rights but also recognition for their artistic contributions to American society. More and more black artists, actors, and musicians were weaving themselves into the fabric of America, causing a shift in preconceived notions of culturalism. According to Steffen, "Cultural space, as distinguished from place and location, is a space that has been seized upon and transmuted by imagination, knowledge, or experience" (44). In this context, the expansion of the house in "Geometry" represents the widening of the speaker's cultural space. Dove has admitted in multiple interviews to an early fear that she would be "pulled into the whole net of whether this [her work] was black enough, or whether I was denigrating my own people" (Pereira 173). This dread prevented her from seeking publication as early as she could have. The speaker in "Geometry" might also reflect Dove's own internal conflicts over the consequences of her poetic skills: freedom from preconceived cultural confines and simultaneous exposure to public censure.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Pat Righelato suggests that "Geometry" is a counterpart to Wallace Stevens's poem "Not Ideas about the Thing, but the Thing Itself" (16). Analyze the similarities between the two poems and discuss the validity of Righelato's claim.
2. Analyze Dove's works in relation to "Geometry." Which poems align themselves with Therese Steffen's suggested theme of the process of individualization?
3. Helen Vendler has suggested that "Geometry" serves as a comparison between mathematics and poetic form, especially in the hands of Dove, who "avoids proof by propositions in favor of the cunning arrangement of successive

images, which themselves enact, by their succession, an implicit argument" (4). Discuss the ways in which Dove's poetry accomplishes this.

"Parsley" (1983)

This poem is in the Dove's second collection, *Museum,* which the critic Malin Pereira describes as containing "poems of unofficial history" (Ingersoll 152), a description the poet happily embraces:

> I suppose what I was trying to do in *Museum* was to deal with certain artifacts we have in life, not the ordinary artifacts, the ones that you'd expect to find in a museum, but anything that becomes frozen by memory, or by circumstance, or by history. . . . The other thing was to get to the underside of the story, not to tell the big historical events, but in fact to talk about things which no one will remember but which are just as important in shaping our concept of ourselves and the world we live in as the biggies, so to speak. (Ingersoll 6)

Dove began many of the poems that were to be included in *Museum* while she was in Europe, which afforded her the distance she needed to see history and the world from a new perspective. Most notable of these poems is "Parsley," in which Dove explores the underside of an event that occurred in the Dominican Republic. In 1937, the dictator Rafael Trujillo ordered the executions of 20,000 Haitian blacks. What struck Dove about this atrocity was not just the magnitude of the massacre, but the "very bizarre and ultimately creative manner" in which it was carried out (Moyers 127): In order to segregate the Haitians from the Dominicans, the general demanded that each of the cane-field workers be forced to say the Spanish word for parsley. The difference in the two dialects would cause the Haitians to pronounce the word as *pelejil,* while the Dominicans would roll the *r* to say *perejil.*

The poem originally began as a villanelle told entirely from the perspective of the Haitians, but Dove felt that there was much more to be said. Her second attempt involved a sestina, chosen for its ability to convey obsessiveness through repetition, but she found the form "too playful" for this purpose (Vendler 6) and settled instead on multiple forms within the same piece. The result is a songlike refrain from the Haitians, in which their attempted praise of the general's deceased mother ("Katalina, mi madle, mi amol en muelte") is answered by the compounding fury of the general at their inability to pronounce even her name correctly.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How would the overall effectiveness of "Parsley" differ had Dove remained true to her intention that the story be told entirely from the perspective of the Haitians? Justify your answer.
2. "Parsley" required Dove to combine multiple forms within one poem. Locate another work by Dove in which multiple perspectives are portrayed through differing techniques. Discuss the effectiveness of the piece. Support your analysis with citations from the text.

Thomas and Beulah (1986)

Although Dove's poetry had already begun to attract critical recognition, it was with the release of her third volume, *Thomas and Beulah,* that she was propelled to the rank of Pulitzer Prize winner. The volume explores the underside of the Great Migration and the March on Washington through the viewpoints of two people whose lives are caught up in its aftermath. Dove states that she based the characters of Thomas and Beulah on her ancestors:

> I call my grandparents in to show how historical events can be happening around us but we remember them only in relation to what was happening to us as individuals at that particular moment. (Moyer 24)

Dove roots the story in historical fact, infusing the poetry with the riches of her research into the Akron of the 1900s, the experiences of African Americans, and her own family. Yet through

her choice of form, she manages to avoid the tendency of narrative to get "bog[ged] down in the prosier transitional moments." Dove describes her process as "trying to string moments as beads on a necklace" so that her lyric poems "when placed one after the other, reconstruct the sweep of time" (Righelato 72). Pat Righelato credits the success of the volume to Dove's combined poetic techniques, which create "tension between temporal continuity and disjunct episodes taken out of time" (72).

Despite the great amount of research Dove puts into her work, she does not allow herself to become constrained by fact. Instead, she allows for the needs of the story, creatively filling in the gaps left by "History" to reflect "history" best. In this way she is able to breathe life into these ancestors-turned-characters. Her ear for the musicality of language and the need to fit everything into the prescribed package of poetry can also sometimes affect the strict adherence to fact. For example, Dove changed the name of her grandmother from Georgianna to *Beulah* because she needed a name that would portray femininity without overpowering the line in which it appeared (Steffen 105).

The story of *Thomas and Beulah* begins with Thomas. Originally Dove's plan for the volume was to tell the entire story from his point of view, but as she wrote, the voice of Beulah kept popping up, wanting to tell her side of the story:

> "Dusting" was my grandmother's way of stepping into the work and kind of throttling me, saying, "Wake up Girl! I'm here, too! I wanna Talk!" So that poem became the bridge from one book to the next; it proclaimed, "This is an ongoing story." "Dusting" led me to write the Beulah section in what turned out to be an entire book, yet it was also the linchpin, opening the door from room to room. (Dungy 1033)

The kernel for "The Event" was from Dove's own family history. While traveling north as part of a song-and-dance team, Thomas's best friend was killed in a drowning accident. Dove says she wrote many of the poems in the volume out of a desire to understand how the "sweet, wonderful, quiet man" whom she knew as her grandfather had come to terms with his guilt over the death of his friend (Moyers 124). Dove's grandfather never spoke to her of the drowning; all the details were told by his wife, who had not been present at the event.

"The Event" is the opening poem because the death of Thomas's best friend becomes a lens for viewing the rest of Thomas's life. His guilt over having uttered a dare, which caused Lem to leap to his death, colors everything else. The placement of the poem also provides the reader with an entry point into the story. In that first poem, Dove firmly grounds the reader in time and space: It is the time of Negroes and riverboats, and we join Thomas as he sings along the trail of the Great Migration. The image of "Thomas, dry / on deck," with all that is left of Lem "a stinking circle of rags, / the half-shell mandolin" at his feet, gives readers all the information they need to comprehend that events in the future will be tainted with the odor of this tragedy.

After Lem's death, Thomas takes on some aspects of his lost friend: He learns to play the mandolin and affects Lem's carefree attitude, but as the long lines of "Straw Hat" reflect, Thomas eventually resigns himself to a life in the work barracks. The heaviness of a solitary life has settled Thomas into "a narrow grief." He gives up his jaunty attitude, content just to "sleep third shift" on a mattress he shares with two other men whom he has never met. Music has lost its ability to comfort or entertain; it has become "like a woman / reaching into his chest / to spread [the pain] around." However, the tip of his straw hat in honor of a woman hints that Thomas still harbors some playful gallantry and a hope for the future.

Righelato asserts that more than serving as a transition between Thomas's carefree bachelor days and his married life, "Straw Hat" also "expresses the anonymity and degrading conditions of labor that young male migrants found in the North" (77). It is the specificity of Dove's poetry that makes it so arresting. Through details such as mattress ticking that "smells / from the sweat of two other men," she draws readers into the underside of the great migration, helping them to see for themselves the unspoken truths.

Thomas finds work in "The Zeppelin Factory." At the time of its building, the Goodyear Zeppelin Air-Dock was heralded as a symbol of innovation and success for Akron, Ohio. The emotion captured in Dove's poem, however, reflects Thomas's trepidation at the magnitude of the factory, which devours him and his fellow workers into its "whale's belly." True to Thomas's intuition, the Zeppelin does not gain acclaim for Akron. Its launch is marred by the death of one of Thomas's coworkers when high winds reveal the blimp's inability to function properly in inclement weather. Thomas is deeply affected by this tragedy, questioning the worth of his own life in the lines; "Here I am, intact / and faint-hearted."

The remainder of the poems in Thomas's cycle reflect increasing loss of confidence as he sacrifices his free spirit to become family man and provider. He grows to resent Beulah and his own frailty, which prevents him from going to fight in World War II. His frustration is magnified by his relegation to assembly-line labor while "women with fingers no smaller than his / dabble in the gnarled intelligence of an engine" ("Aircraft").

"The Satisfaction Coal Company" is the center of Thomas's trilogy of decline. The poem serves as a bridge between "The Stroke," which signals Thomas's impending death, and "Thomas at the Wheel," in which he dies. "The Satisfaction Coal Company" gives Thomas a chance to reflect on his life through the lens of his retirement. While it is a comfort that the "gas heater takes care of itself," it is also a symbol that Thomas has become obsolete. His ability to provide for his family and their need to be provided for have ended; now his major problem is "What to do with a day." Thomas's empty hours leave him ample time to look back on the past. He thinks almost longingly of a time when the need to keep his family warm had necessitated the second job of sweeping the floor at a coal company to earn scraps of coal for the family's furnace.

Despite Dove's tendency to "pull back from using overt blues idiom," Pereira claims that a blues motif runs throughout the volume. She suggests that Thomas and Beulah are "blues artists who sing the pain of brutal experience with lyrical expression" (103). As if the dual themes of loss and pain were not enough to support Pereira's assertion, Thomas articulates the irony inherent to the blues when he is able to see his own death as a joke.

Beulah's life is no less difficult. Although Dove denies that the poem "Taking in the Wash" was "ever on a conscious level . . . about incest," Pereira interprets the relationship between Beulah and her father as incestuous, citing as proof the mother's righteous anger in the lines "Touch that child / and I'll cut you down / just like the cedar of Lebanon" (Pereira 179). In "Dusting," Beulah takes stock of her life and its dreams deferred. In the doldrums of her most domestic chore, she thinks back upon her youth, when she met a "silly boy at the fair" whose name at first eludes her. She does remember his kiss and the "rippling wound" of the fish she won from him. As "her gray cloth brings / dark wood to life," the details become clearer: a time when she returns home to find the water in the fish's bowl frozen and resuscitates the fish by defrosting the ice that has encased him. It is only when Beulah resigns herself to the fact that "that was years before" that the name of the boy occurs to her: Maurice.

Throughout Beulah's poetic cycle, she is defined in respect to what she means to others: She is her father's "pearl"; then her name grows to mean "promise" and, finally, "desert-in-peace." In "Dusting," readers get a sense of the toll this has taken on Beulah. In discussing "Beulah's martyrdom in the solarium," Righelato assures readers that Beulah's role as homemaker insulates her from the harsh realities that Thomas must face in the wider world (95). Beulah can immerse herself in thoughts, in memories of what was and wistfulness for things that might have been, and find not only disappointment, but comfort.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the circular components of *Thomas and Beulah,* focusing on the volume as a whole, the images of circles within the poems themselves, and the intersecting circles that transcribe the lives of each character.
2. In the poem "Missing" (*Mother Love*), Dove states that a lost child is "a fact hardening around its absence." Categorize the losses in *Thomas*

and Beulah. How are the characters affected not only by their own losses but by each other's?
3. Discuss the symbolism of the USS *Akron*. What is represented through its presence, the characters' reactions to it, and its fate?
4. Discuss the use of names within *Thomas and Beulah.* What is signified by the fact that Beulah is never mentioned by name in the first section?
5. The critic Righelato has suggested that Jacob Lawrence's paintings numbered 47 and 48 in the migration series depict the conditions faced by young migrants of Thomas's time. Using those paintings as an example, create a pictorial time line to reflect pivotal events in the life of Thomas or Beulah.

Mother Love (1995)

Dove began writing the poems in *Mother Love* as a reaction to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus.* Rilke's collection explores the Greek myth of Orpheus, a skilled musician who journeys to Hades to bargain for the return of his wife. Although Orpheus is able to strike a deal with Hades and Persephone, his love for his late wife is so powerful that it prevents him from upholding his promise, and she is lost forever. Dove also writes of a consuming love, choosing as her topic the unbreakable bond between mother and daughter. Pat Righelato suggests that the poems in *Mother Love* represent Dove's "search to underwrite a new sense of feminine identity, one that will give due weight to that which pulls women to the earth" (171). To accomplish this, Dove explores maternal love in its many forms, seamlessly stitching modern references into the fabric of the myth.

"Sonnet in Primary Colors" stems from Dove's fascination with the underside of history. Written "for the woman with one black wing / perched over eyes: lovely Frida," the piece commemorates the life and work of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Kahlo contracted polio at an early age and later suffered severe injuries as the result of a collision between a trolley and the bus on which she was a passenger. Kahlo spent the majority of her life in isolated pain and a tumultuous marriage, the grief of which she translated into oil paintings. The majority of her work consisted of self-portraits.

Dove, known for her deliberate choices regarding form, writes in the introduction to *Mother Love* that the sonnet "defends itself against the vicissitudes of fortune by its charmed structure, its beautiful bubble. All the while, though, chaos is lurking outside the gate." Dove claims that the sonnet is particularly suitable for conveying the "cycle of betrayal and regeneration" because "all three—mother-goddess, daughter-consort and poet—are struggling to sing in their chains." Many critics have pointed out that although Dove has labeled this a collection of sonnets, the poems she has included depart from the traditional form and function of the sonnet in several ways. Dove has acknowledged this by her inclusion of herself as poet in the three that struggle in their chains. She embraces the sonnet but changes it to allow the full register of her song. Wheeler has suggested that Dove "violates the sonnet form" in order to conjure more fully the violated world reflected in the Demeter/Persephone myth (151).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is accomplished with the use of the word *present* in line 4 of "Sonnet in Primary Colors"?
2. Examine the poems in which Dove has created portraits of historical figures. What do the people in the collection represent? What does Dove's poetry tell us that history does not? How is Dove's choice of form related to the person she seeks to render?
3. Explore *Mother Love* as an expression of T. S. Eliot's "mythical method," whereby the writer "manipulates a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (Righelato 169).

On the Bus with Rosa Parks (1999)

Dove's desire to view history in terms of the many histories of which it is composed is reflected most perfectly in her volume *On the Bus with Rosa Parks.* In these collected poems, she re-creates the

individual life experiences that both led up to the need for a "Rosa Parks" and resulted because of Rosa Parks. The idea for the collection arose from a comment made by Dove's daughter, Aviva, as they were transported between conference sites in Williamsburg, Virginia. Aviva reportedly leaned over to her mother and whispered, "We're on the bus with Rosa Parks." The remark resonated with what Dove already felt about the circular nature of history and stimulated the "meditation on history and the individual" that is the basis of this volume (*On the Bus* 91).

By invoking the name of Rosa Parks in the volume's title, Dove immediately activates readers' prior knowledge of history. Most Americans associate Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a bus with the inception of the Civil Rights movement. Dove would like to draw the reader's attention to the smaller details, thus revealing the larger reality: "History is often portrayed as a string of arias in a grand opera, all baritone intrigues and tenor heroics. Sometimes the most tumultuous events, however, have been provoked by serendipity" (*Time 100*). Through her poetry, Dove illuminates the minor accompaniments that provide the background for the "intrigues" and "heroics."

The volume is divided into five sections. "Cameos" introduces a series of poems depicting the hardships of an African-American family during the depression. Despite Joe's insistence that he "ain't studying nobody," the couple ultimately strives for the same American dream as everyone else. Through their hardships and biases, Dove sheds light on the roles of men and women, blacks and whites, in the time prior to Parks's historic stand.

Where "Cameos" provides an intimate look at the dreams and heartaches of one family, "Freedom: Bird's-Eye View" steps back to examine the institutional biases that have affected generations of Americans. Written after Dove's tenure as poet laureate of the United States, the second section addresses the "artistic health of the nation" (Righelato 181). In "Singsong," Dove recreates the freedom inherent in youth, when a child's knowledge that the "moon spoke in riddles / and the stars rhymed" is yet unchallenged. In essence, she is recalling the innocence of childhood, before we realize our differences and the societal rules to which we will be held. On Dove's 11th birthday, her whole family drove to Washington, D.C., so that her father could participate in the March on Washington, but Rita was left behind with a relative. In an interview with Camille Dungy, Dove discusses the feelings she had "watching history occur . . . on TV" (4). The Civil Rights movement and the Watts riots also happened when Dove was too young to participate. She says that "looking through those kinds of frames" influenced the way she views events. "Singsong," then, opens that same frame to the readers, so that they may see that the world is "already old." The final line, "And I was older than I am today," remarks on the invincibility that characterizes innocence. As we age, we become more vulnerable to the world.

As do many of the poems in "Freedom: Bird's-Eye View," "Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967" has an autobiographical feel to it. Dove has often commented on the hours she spent reading and how, as a child, the library was the only place she could go whenever she wished. In "A Chorus of Voices," she tells the interviewer Steven Ratiner of an incident at a library that had a great impact on her life. A librarian had refused to allow her to check out a risqué novel by Françoise Sagan. Dove's mother wrote a note insisting that Dove be allowed to check out any book she wanted. Although the incident itself was less than dramatic, to Dove it represented the moment when she knew her parents trusted her (Ratiner 205). The freedom to discover "all the time in the world" had been granted her, and sometimes she found "all the world in a single page" (*On the Bus* 33). While some may have been overwhelmed at the magnitude of information available, Dove embraced it as a quest to discover "the stuff we humans are made of," taking a scrawled message on the boarded-up doors of an old garage as encouragement: "I can eat an elephant / If I take small bites" (33).

The final section shares the collection's name and challenges readers to abdicate the comfortable role of historian and accept that each person is an active participant in the formation of future histories. It is

a call to action, requiring that readers ask themselves the same question a young Rita Dove asked of herself in winter 1955: "Would I have been the person to remain seated on the bus?" The first few poems explore the precursors of the Montgomery bus boycott—the mounting frustration of people made to walk "a gauntlet of stares" (77) and the gradual realization that "Our situation is intolerable, but what's worse / is to sit here and do nothing" (76). The duet "Claudette Calvin Goes to Work" and "The Enactment" captures the rising tension and the search for the right symbol to unite "those who can't help themselves" (80).

By the time Dove introduces "Rosa," the stage has been set for a richer understanding of the woman who changed the nation by "doing nothing." History gives us digestible facts: The law in Montgomery, Alabama, of 1955 required separate seating for "coloreds"; Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man; on the day of Parks's trial, Martin Luther King, Jr., organized a boycott of buses, which lasted 381 days. We can read those facts and remain unaffected. Poetry, however, has the power to distill those facts into images that elicit a visceral response. Dove accomplishes this by drawing Rosa with barely a whisper: rendering her "serenely human" through a "sensible coat" and the "clean flame of her gaze."

Yet the volume does not end there. The remaining poems turn the frame inside out, reversing the vantage point so that now we may see the way history has affected the individual. In "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day," Dove recognizes the privileged difference between those who "simply wish to be / on the way" and those who, like Rosa Parks, must "wait on a corner, / hunched in bad weather . . . to feel / the weight of [themselves] sink into the moment of *going home*." While she does not ask for sympathy, Dove admits that she would go home "if [she] knew where to get off." This feeling of dislocation is recurrent for a generation for whom the landscape has so drastically changed. Dove furthers the theme of diaspora with her final poem, "The Pond, Porch-View: Six P.M., Early Spring." In direct opposition to the speaker in "Singsong," who "ran the day to its knees" and dreamed of "trees to swing on, crickets for capture," here the speaker has "come down to earth" and recognizes the fact that she has "missed the chance" to make her life what she had expected. Dove again invokes the image of the bus, herself viewing the world from a "chair in recline" through a window that has rendered her world smaller than it should be. The final line echoes an earlier warning from "Freedom Ride": that we had better consider with care when we "pull the cord" because "where you sit is where you'll be / when the fire hits" (77).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss the role of bystander as history's enabler and the tendency of individuals to stand by and allow wrongs to accumulate into atrocity. How can an individual effect change when there is no Rosa Parks to stand behind?
2. Dove has often discussed her belief that history is what the world is allowed to remember. How has the widespread use of the Internet changed the way history is viewed and recorded? How would that knowledge have affected this poem?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON DOVE AND HER WORK

1. In *The Poet's World,* Dove claims each poem has its "house of sound, its own geographical reverberations. And we could analyze poets for their preferences in domiciles, linguistically speaking." Apply Dove's challenge to the poet herself. Where does the poetry of Rita Dove reside?
2. Compare the poetic domiciles of Rita Dove to those of Gwendolyn Brooks. How does *A House in Bronzeville* differ from *The Yellow House on the Corner*? What can you infer about the influence of race in each poet's work?
3. Compare the doll scene in Dove's *Through the Ivory Gate* with TONI MORRISON's treatment of dolls in *The Bluest Eye*. What role do toys play in the formation of gender and racial identity?
4. In Dove's poem "Dedication," the speaker says:

> What are music or books if not ways
> to trap us in rumors? The freedom of fine
> cages!

What do you think is meant by those lines? Do the speaker's words reflect Dove's thoughts on music and books? Create a case where being trapped in such a "fine cage" is not the negative experience one might imagine. Support your argument with examples from Dove's work.

5. Dove describes a poem's power as a physical reaction that involves our entire body:

> A poem convinces us not just through the words and the meanings of the words, but the sound of them in our mouths—the way our heart beat increases with the amount of breath it takes to say a sentence, whether a line of poetry may make us breathless at the end of it, or give us time for contemplation. . . . Even if we are reading the poem silently, those rhythms exist. (Ratiner 213)

Choose any poem of Dove's to which you have had such a complete physical response. Describe what it is that the poem evokes for you.

6. Discuss the themes of individual and cultural identity within the context of Dove's work. How does the poet resolve the "sense of belonging and not-belonging" (Steffen 114) that has defined the lives of many minorities within the United States?

7. Many poets cite music as a primary influence in their writings. Dove offered the following explanation for its role in her work:

> I believe that language sings, has its own music, and I'm very conscious of the way something sounds, and that goes from a lyric poem all the way to an essay or to the novel, that it has a structure of sound which I think of more in symphonic terms for larger pieces. . . . I also think that resolution of notes, the way that a chord will resolve itself, is something that applies to my poems—the way that, if it works, the last line of the poem, or the last word, will resolve something that's been hanging for a while. And I think musical structure affects even how the poems are ordered in a book. Each of the poems plays a role: sometimes it's an instrument, sometimes several of them are a section, and it all comes together that way too. (Ingersoll 153)

How is this influence manifested in a specific poem or poems by Dove?.

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Louise Erdrich (1954–)

Soon we are trying to travel back to the beginning, trying to put families into order and make sense of things.

(*The Bingo Palace*)

Her settings include Ojibwa reservations on the Great Plains, small North Dakota towns, the Twin Cities region of Minneapolis-St. Paul, and rural New Hampshire. Her characters are extended families of mixed Ojibwa, German, and French background shaped by Native American and Roman Catholic traditions. This is the world Louise Erdrich creates in her fiction and poetry, and it is the world that has shaped her own life and art.

Born in Little Falls, Minnesota, on June 7, 1954, Erdrich was raised in Wahpeton, North Dakota, the eldest of the seven children of Rita Gourneau and Ralph Erdrich. Her childhood was shaped by small-town life, her Catholic school days, her parents' careers as teachers in a Bureau of Indian Affairs school in Wahpeton, and visits to her mother's extended family at the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation. Her father surrounded the family with poetry and with recordings of Shakespeare's plays, nurturing Erdrich's love for language and story.

Erdrich went to Dartmouth in fall 1972, a member of the college's first coed class. After earning her bachelor's degree, she returned to North Dakota, where she worked at a variety of low-paying jobs, including waiting tables and working at a truck weigh station, as well as teaching writing through the Poets in the Schools program of the North Dakota Arts Council. She earned her M.F.A. in creative writing on fellowship at Johns Hopkins University in 1979 and worked in Boston as editor of the Indian Council's magazine the *Circle*.

As a Dartmouth undergraduate, she had met Michael Dorris, then a writing instructor and a faculty member in the newly established Native American Studies program. When Erdrich returned to Dartmouth as a writer in residence, they renewed their acquaintance, corresponding and offering each other feedback on manuscripts in process. After their 1981 marriage, Erdrich and Dorris collaborated intensely and extensively on their writing. Their custom was to read each other's drafts, offering substantive comments and suggestions. They did a great deal of writing together, even publishing under the joint pseudonym *Milou North*. Their major shared work, published under both their names, was *The Crown of Columbus* (1991), released for the quincentenary of the European arrival in the Caribbean.

Working with Dorris, Erdrich published a short story entitled "The World's Greatest Fisherman," which won the Nelson Algren Fiction Prize in 1982. Its success prompted them to expand the story into *Love Medicine* (1984). That first novel won Erdrich a number of major prizes, including the National Book Critics Circle Award (1984), the Los Angeles Times Book Award, and the Sue Kaufman Prize for the Best First Novel.

Love Medicine was the first in Erdrich's series of novels about several extended families living in

the fictional town of Argus and the Ojibwa reservations in the northern plains. Since 1984, she has produced a steady stream of novels dealing with the lives of Ojibwa, mixed-blood, and European Americans, most of whom are related to the Lazarre and Kashpaw families introduced in *Love Medicine*. Critics identify these novels as her Argus cycle or the North Dakota saga. The fiction draws on Erdrich's own ancestry, stories of family and the northern plains, the struggles of reservation life and of Native American adaptation to urban life. The multivocal narration and spiraling chronology established in *Love Medicine* continue to characterize Erdrich's fiction.

Erdrich has told interviewers that her Ojibwa and mixed-blood characters seem to have lives of their own, that she cannot "call them up at will." She says that some minor characters even insist on emerging in later novels as more fully developed individuals. For instance, Erdrich felt she had to find out more about the truck driver June meets in a bar in the opening pages of *Love Medicine;* she discovered that he was really Jack Mauser of *Tales of Burning Love*. Similarly, after the publication of *Tracks,* she knew she would have to return to the character of Father Damien, whose story is fully revealed in *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*.

Just as *Love Medicine* began as a short story, so did many of Erdrich's later novels. Her short fiction appears regularly in magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Esquire*. Between 1985 and 2006, six of Erdrich's short stories appeared in the O. Henry Prize Anthologies of Best American Short Stories: "Saint Marie" (1985), "Fleur" (1987), "Satan: Hijacker of a Planet" (1997), "Revival Road" (2000), "The Butcher's Wife" (2002), and "The Plague of Doves" (2006).

Erdrich began her serious writing career as a poet, in both her undergraduate and master's work. Her first book of poems, *Jacklight* (1984), was followed by *Baptism of Desire* (1989). The new and collected poems of *Original Fire* (2004) won the WILLA Poetry Award from Women Writing the West.

Erdrich's poetry addresses issues of identity: personal, communal, cultural, and spiritual. She explores images drawn from the natural world of earth, water, sky, animals. The poems often blend Ojibwa myths—including the trickster tales of the "Old Man Potchikoo" prose-poems—and symbols from Roman Catholic liturgy, such as those in *Baptism of Desire*. Themes of coming of age, love, and parenthood also recur. Some characters and relationships that Erdrich explores in her poems resurface in her novels; in *Baptism of Desire,* 15 poems in a section called "The Butcher's Wife" might be seen as sketches for characters and relationships that make up *The Master Butchers' Singing Club:* Otto is much like Fidelis, while Eva and Delphine resemble the first and second "Mary Krögers." Her poetry and fiction draw on the same sources and give evidence of similar stylistic features; many reviews of her fiction make mention of her rich lyrical and image-laden prose style.

The many narrative voices in her novels echo the Native American oral tradition. In traditional culture, families passed on their lore, their genealogy, their beliefs in the supernatural, and their traditions of healing and medicines by telling stories, generation after generation. In these cultures, most listeners already know the stories, their characters, and their plots; in the act of telling, the teller gave life to the ancient tale. In *Love Medicine,* for example, Erdrich gives several characters the task of telling the story of June Kashpaw. Each character's relationship to June shapes the particular version of the story. Thus, while Albertine and Lipsha both recall events of June's life, each one's story is distinctive because of the character's experiences and way of speaking. Some of Erdrich's narrators, including Nanapush in *Tracks* and Lipsha in *Love Medicine,* directly address the reader, involving him or her in the creation of meaning as tribal elders would involve the next generation in learning family tales and lore. Erdrich understands the power of the spoken story: She told an interviewer that although she does not read her drafts in process aloud, she enjoys doing public readings of her work, and she tries to do the reading herself when her novels are made into audiobooks.

Another distinctive trait of Erdrich's fiction is the nonlinear or circular chronology of the stories.

Anthropologists who study Native American culture have shown that the sense of time and space of indigenous people is quite different from the perceptions of European Americans. While the Western world conceives of time as a linear progression from one event to the next, and human history as a succession of events leading (inevitably) toward progress and perfection, Native American cultures understand time as cycles or spirals, as in the progress of the seasons. Similarly, while Western images of history emphasize ever-growing human achievement (as in technology or science), indigenous people are generally more concerned with relationships within the immediate and the extended human families, as well as the relationships of humans with the natural and spiritual worlds. Indeed, Erdrich's stories are invariably about the bonds that join her characters, whether through blood, accident, or choice.

Likewise, many major works of literature in the Western European tradition often feature a solitary hero on a quest to find his identity through a series of adventures and conquests. This hero-quest genre includes texts from *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid,* through *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Don Quixote,* to Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* and Updike's *Rabbit* novels. In contrast, as William Bevis and others have pointed out, fiction by Native American authors often emphasizes a central character wounded by his or her experiences in the outer world (often the urban white world) who needs to return to traditional ways in order to find healing and wholeness. Erdrich has discussed this homecoming image in interviews, and her novels—from *Love Medicine* through *The Painted Drum*—consistently illustrate this journey from family/home/reservation outward through difficulty and challenge, and back to the safety and healing of home.

Critics frequently compare Erdrich's fictional universe to that of William Faulkner. Argus and its environs are like Yoknapatawpha County, with many generations of complicated extended families and sometimes bizarre individuals, the apparently disjointed and nonlinear narrations, and the multiple narrators whose stories sometimes blur the story as much as they clarify it.

Her novels are also marked by what Erdrich calls "survival humor": The characters' approach to life that is sometimes sly, sometimes bawdy, sometimes darkly ironic. Oppressed people need to find ways to get through the difficulties that surround them without succumbing to the pain. The image of the Native American trickster often provides humor as well as salvation. A transgressive escape artist like Gerry Nanapush, a good-hearted innocent like Lipsha, a wily schemer like Nanapush all illustrate aspects of a native folk hero who subtly defies and cleverly outwits the oppressor.

Because so much of her work deals with Native American characters, themes, and traditions, many scholars read her work through the lens of multicultural criticism. Erdrich and Dorris told several interviewers that while one "can't write a book about Native Americans without being political," they never want the literature to be "polemical." They see themselves less as Native American writers than as writers who are Native American (Erdrich is Chippewa, Dorris Modoc). Nevertheless, Erdrich's connection to her Chippewa/Ojibwa heritage has continued to involve her in action on behalf of Native people. In 2002, for instance, Erdrich joined forces with two poets—Al Hunter, a Canadian, and her sister Heid E. Erdrich—to present a Native Writers Workshop at Turtle Mountain Community College. Sponsored by the National Book Foundation's American Voices Program, the week-long session provided 11 students, ages 22 to 53, with group and individual instruction in poetry and fiction, mining their own family histories for stories and themes.

In addition to her novels and poetry, Erdrich has written award-winning children's books. In *The Birchbark House* (1999), she offers middle-school readers an alternative picture of life on the prairie, telling the story of Ojibwa people on the shores of Lake Superior as the white American westward movement makes contact. Seven-year-old Omakayas and her family have to adapt their lives as white culture changes their world permanently.

Erdrich has been honored with numerous creative writing fellowships, including those from Johns Hopkins (1978), the MacDowell Colony (1980), the Yaddo Colony and Dartmouth (1981), the National Endowment for the Arts (1982), and the Guggenheim Foundation (1985). In addition to the O. Henry Awards, she has received numerous honors, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas in 2000, the Wordcraft Circle Writer of the Year Award in 2000, and the Minnesota Humanities Prize for Literature in 2002.

When Erdrich and Dorris married in 1981, he brought to the marriage his three adopted Native American children, all of whom had been born with fetal alcohol syndrome. (Dorris's book *The Broken Cord* tells the story of their eldest son's life.) Dorris and Erdrich together had three daughters. Their personal relationship began to unravel in 1991, when their eldest son was killed in an accident, and accusations of sexual abuse were leveled against Dorris. They separated in 1995, and Dorris took his own life in April 1997. Since then, Erdrich has lived with her children in the Minneapolis area, writing and operating a small business called Birchbark Books, Herbs, and Native Arts.

"The Red Convertible" (1981)

Originally published in the summer 1981 issue of *Mississippi Valley Review*, "The Red Convertible" reappeared as a chapter in *Love Medicine* in 1983. In the story, two young men, half brothers from a North Dakota reservation, buy a red Oldsmobile convertible from a lot in Winnipeg and then spend a glorious summer joyriding to Alaska and back. As summer turns to fall, the United States Marines remind the older brother, Henry, that he has enlisted. While he serves in Vietnam, his brother Lyman restores the car to its summertime glory. Upon his return, Henry's severe emotional damage from what he has seen and done disturbs Lyman enough that he takes a hammer to the car, hoping that Henry will pour himself into the therapeutic job of repairing it. They celebrate the renewed car by driving to the Red River, in spring flood. There, unable to continue living, Henry gives the keys to Lyman and leaps into the river. Stunned but sympathetic, Lyman rolls the car into the river, giving it back to his dead brother.

As the narrator of the story, Lyman portrays himself as clever, entrepreneurial, and lucky. He had gone from dishwasher to manager of the Joliet Cafe by the time he was 16; when a tornado leveled the restaurant he used the insurance money to treat his extended family to a fine meal and still had enough to pool with Henry's two paychecks to buy the Olds. They found themselves in Alaska because they promised to take a pretty hitchhiker home. The idyllic summer of driving the convertible, spending time with Susy's family, and relaxing together was a bonding experience for the two young men.

Their closeness makes it extremely difficult for Lyman to witness the pain inflicted on his brother by the war. Henry no longer laughs or jokes, he sits motionless for hours in front of the television, and he is simply "jumpy and mean." The perfectly restored convertible is a stark contrast to the damaged Henry. One day, something he sees on television makes him bite his lip, but he is so far from reality that he is unaware of the blood running down his chin, even into the bread he eats for dinner. Lyman and his mother know that a psychiatric hospitalization and medication will merely take Henry further from reality ("They don't fix them in those places"), so Lyman decides to give Henry something to fix: He beats the car to a ruin and waits for Henry to notice and to act. After Henry's death, the snapshot their little sister takes of them and the restored car becomes both a treasure and a wound for Lyman.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Erdrich describes the Red River in its spring flood stage. Tell how the scene at the river illustrates both life and death for the characters in the story.
2. The story ends with Lyman's describing the car in the river "running and going and running and running." What metaphorical meanings does that phrase have?

"Jacklight" (1984)

The title of this poem, the first poem in *Jacklight,* Erdrich's first published book of poetry, refers to a light used as a lure by nighttime hunters. The speaker of the poem, an unidentified "we," has responded to "this battery of polarized acids, / that outshines the moon" by approaching as far as the edge of the woods. Most of the poem, chantlike, is the speaker's repetitive assessment of the hunters' smell and their violence. The poem ends with the speaker's statement of challenge to the hunters, who will be at a disadvantage as soon as they enter the woods, the speaker's natural habitat.

Erdrich describes the hunters with words suggestive of violence and brutality. Their minds are "like silver hammers / cocked back," and there is "caked guts on their clothes." The speakers smell not only the hunters themselves, but also "their mothers buried chin-deep in wet dirt" and "their sisters of crushed dogwood, bruised apples, / of fractured cups and concussions of burnt hooks." Although they appear "faceless, invisible," to the speaker, they are nevertheless dangerous.

But in the last stanza, the power dynamic changes as the hunters "put down their equipment" and step into the woods, where they will be powerless. The speaker is satisfied with this change in the hunt, because the hunters do not know "how deep the woods are and lightless. / How deep the woods are." That final statement, in its monosyllables, expresses the speaker's confidence that the hunters are now at a disadvantage.

The identity of the speaker is open to interpretation: animals or the natural world facing human hunters? Women facing dominating men? Native people facing the incursions of white culture? Erdrich provides the poem with an epigram that states that one Chippewa word means both flirting and hunting game; another Chippewa word denotes both rape and choking a bear with bare hands. If, then, the acts of hunting and killing game can be expressed with the same words as pursuing and taking a woman, perhaps Erdrich is challenging the reader to worry less about the difference between the hunter (with clenched fists, acid, and raw steel) and the hunted (at home in brown grass in knotted twigs), and to give more thought to the apparent need for violence and domination in human relationships.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the stanzas in which the speaker describes his/her/their environment and actions. Which senses predominate? Contrast these descriptions with the sense imagery used for the hunters.
2. Which consciousness seems superior: that of the hunters or that of the hunted? Explain.
3. What is the artistic effect of the repetitive sentence structure, the lack of variety in the verbs? Compare the first stanza to the second-to-last stanza. Note the vowel sounds that predominate, especially in the final stanza. How do these language choices affect the mood of the poem?

"A Love Medicine" (1984)

In this understated elegy, the speaker stands with her sister Theresa against the violence of a rainy night and the violence of a man. The poem's title alludes to a Native American way of spiritual and physical healing: In the italicized last lines, the speaker promises help, rescue, healing for her sister.

The poem begins gently enough, with the image of light rain and the blue light outside a dairy bar. Theresa is compared to a dragonfly, green and golden, which belongs to the "night of rising water." Laughing, Theresa leaves her man in the foggy dimness.

When the setting shifts to the banks of the raging Red River in the fourth stanza, the sense of violence increases, and the metaphors of setting merge with the experience of the character, jarring and pitching, sockets and arches against fistwork and pilings. The man has followed Theresa, inflicting cold blows, "his boot plant[ing] its grin / among the arches of her face."

The damage is done: As Theresa gropes her sightless way home, the streetlights are "seething," the trees are "aching," while the river maintains

insistently violent background sounds. The speaker offers three parallel sentences to describe her sister's broken condition: "I find her" . . . beaten down in tree roots, grass, ditch water, while the rain continues to pour on the river.

In the final stanza, the narrative voice shifts from singular to plural; as the speaker joins her sister, the violent action is stilled. Since they can see the moon, the sky must have cleared, the rain has stopped, "and the water, / as deep as it will go, / stops rising." The love medicine of the title has been offered in the speaker's compassion for her battered sister. Her mere presence heals: *"Sister, there is nothing / I would not do."*

Ojibwa tradition records two kinds of love medicine: One is the kind that can be purchased from someone who knows how to concoct a potion or blend the right herbs and grasses, but the other is obtained directly from a person with "the touch," a person whose heart heals. Erdrich's poetry and fiction are full of characters who—like the speaker in this poem—see with the heart the suffering of another, who give the presence of a compassionate heart to heal what no potion can touch.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Trace the nature imagery in the poem: water, earth, light and darkness, living creatures. Is nature dangerous or healing? Explain.
2. A recurring theme in Erdrich's poems is human domination of the natural world, or man's domination of woman. In "A Love Medicine," how does the natural world/woman resist, even triumph over, such domination?
3. Why is it important for the characters in this poem to be anonymous, even faceless? Explain.

"Dear John Wayne" (1984)

In this poem, the speakers are contemporary Native Americans at a drive-in watching a John Wayne western on a hot August night. These real Indians are joined by history with the movie Indians and the movie cowboys, embodied by Wayne's character. Through the poem, Erdrich poses many questions about cultural dominance, about the effects of one culture's seizing, possessing, and destroying what belongs to another.

Under the star-lit sky, the screen is filled by the image of the movie star's face. With almost God-like power, John Wayne's eyes gaze out over the audience, and the italicized lines—apparently quotations from one of the movies—voice domination over the listeners. The culture represented by that fictional character, and its vision of violent domination of the land and its people (*"Everything we see belongs to us"*), glow from the movie screen. In contrast to these larger-than-life images and sounds, the spectators see themselves as "speechless and small."

Nevertheless, the speakers challenge that domination. *"The eye sees a lot, John, but the heart is so blind. / Death makes us owners of nothing."* Noting the scars on the enormous face, the speakers refer to the cancer that eventually killed the actor, a disease in which a cell is "burning, doubling, splitting out of its skin." Similar uncontrollable power may well consume any dominator from within. Dramatic victories over the vanquished are costly and may be only temporary.

If the "good guys" in a typical western are the cowboys, then the Indians must be the "bad guys." The poems' speakers challenge such a simple division of the world into "good guys" and "bad guys." Many kinds of violence are alluded to in the poem, from mosquitoes to nuclear weapons.

Dean Rader, an English professor at the University of San Francisco, says that "Dear John Wayne" is "one of the best and most important American poems" of the late 20th century, "a *tour de force* of public and private tensions." As the Native Americans watch the movie, they are simultaneously cheering John Wayne's victory and identifying with his victims. Lounging on the hood of their Pontiac sedan, they are unthinkingly participating in the exploitation of native peoples in consumer culture. Erdrich's skillful creation of a multileveled dialogue allows her to pose many questions to America's dominant culture, as well as about that culture.

For Discussion or Writing

1. List the different groups whose conflicts are suggested in the poem: for example, cowboys versus Indians, moviegoers versus mosquitoes. What is the implied relationship among these conflicts?
2. Explain the poem's title: Is *Dear* an adjective, or is it the address of a personal letter? How does the interpretation of that one word influence your understanding of the poem?
3. Watch one of John Ford's great westerns starring John Wayne, such as *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, *Fort Apache*, or *Stagecoach*, and put yourself in the place of the speakers in the poem. How would the reactions of Native people to those movie heroes be different from those of the audience the moviemakers probably had in mind?

Love Medicine (1984)

Erdrich's debut novel weaves together stories of four generations of an extended family of Ojibwa and mixed-blood characters in Argus, North Dakota, and the nearby reservation. As teenagers, Marie Lazarre and Lulu Nanapush both set their hearts on Nector Kashpaw, who marries Marie but cannot give up Lulu. The story is framed by the Easter morning death of June Kashpaw, abandoned as a child and adopted by Marie. When word of her death reaches the reservation, the clan gathers to remember her, reclaiming her story and their own. Lipsha, another of Marie's adopted children, discovers that June was his mother, and that he shares in the spirit power of the Pillager clan, from whom he descends through his father, one of Lulu's sons. Between the sons and daughters of Nector and Marie, and Lulu and her clan of eight sons and a daughter by various fathers (including Nector), Erdrich shows the power of family to sustain people through difficulties and the power of love—domestic and romantic—to assure survival.

Erdrich's cyclic narrative structure in *Love Medicine* begins in 1981, cycles back to 1934, and then returns full circle to 1984. The interaction of the characters and the interaction of the various versions of the family saga demonstrate Erdrich's engagement with traditional values and images while the characters are firmly rooted as well in contemporary American life.

A trademark of Erdrich's fiction is her use of multiple narrative voices. The 1993 edition of *Love Medicine* comprises six sections or chapters told, wholly or in part, by third-person narrators focused on the inner world of six different characters: June, Gordie, Marie, Lulu, Albertine, and Lyman. Fourteen chapters have first-person narrators: Marie and Lipsha speak three chapters each, while Lyman, Albertine, Nector, and Lulu each narrate two sections. Through this multivocality, some critics claim that Erdrich enacts the communal nature of Native American life; others describe it as a postmodern awareness that there is no single version of truth; still others attribute the technique to a feminist artistic mode that illustrates women's shared responsibility for life and relationships.

The construction of individual and community identity is another continuing theme in Erdrich's fiction. In *Love Medicine*, identity is related to gender, ethnicity, religious practice, and family. For many of Erdrich's male characters, manly behavior is tied to aggressiveness. Lulu's sons are shown shooting cans off fence rails; Nector and Eli are hunters. Too often, that aggression is directed toward women: The army veteran Henry, drunk and depressed, rapes Albertine; King Kashpaw has learned to control his wife by shouting at her and hitting her. The first-grader King Junior hates the violence so much that he chooses to be called Howard to dissociate himself from his violent father.

Erdrich's female characters often combine traits that are generally considered both masculine and feminine. For instance, Marie is the nurturing mother and faithful wife, but she also knows how to take charge of her own life. She buys and lays the linoleum for the kitchen floor and waxes that floor to bar her unfaithful husband's return to the home. But when he arrives at the door, terrified to enter, Marie takes the initiative and reaches through his fear to draw him back to the family.

The Kashpaw twins, Eli and Nector, represent old and new ways of being Indian, giving Erdrich an opening to challenge white America's stereotypical images. When their mother sent Nector to boarding school, she kept Eli hidden on the reservation, where he learned the ways of the woods and spoke the old language; when he is an old man, apparently on the edge of dementia, his children and grandchildren worry that he will forget what English he knows and be lost to them, since, as modern young people, they speak only English. Nector, on the other hand, took his "American" education to Hollywood, getting killed over and over again in westerns, becoming a poster boy for the vanishing Indian. When a famous artist makes Nector the model for her painting *The Plunge of the Brave,* later mounted in the statehouse, he finds himself the image of the noble savage. However, Nector understands that this image of the Indian is the image of a doomed man jumping to his death. Returning to the reservation, Nector settles down with Marie as a family man and eventually is elected tribal chairman. In her portraits of these brothers and their different approaches to traditional and Anglo life, Erdrich shows value and loss in both worldviews.

Nector's son Lyman continues the slide into white culture when he decides to bring economic development to the reservation by building a tomahawk factory to produce traditional artifacts. The workers he hires—cousins, neighbors, friends—are unable to work together. The breakdown in communication extends into a literal breakdown of the machinery, ruining Lyman's plans for industrialization.

Another central issue in *Love Medicine* and throughout Erdrich's fiction is the role of religion in the characters' lives. While some characters, such as Eli, preserve the beliefs and traditions of their ancestors, most of them have accepted Christianity to varying degrees. Missionaries introduced Catholicism to the reservation, and the nuns at Sacred Heart convent in Argus shape the children in the reservation school. In the 1934 episode in *Love Medicine,* teenaged Marie decides to test her vocation at the convent, entering into conflict with the very peculiar Sister Leopolda, whose version of Catholicism is spiteful and egotistical rather than generous and loving.

In contrast, some characters, such as Eli, have maintained the old ways of the reservation. Lulu's eldest son is Gerry Nanapush, whose father is the mysterious Moses Pillager, who practices the old medicine. Gerry's son with June is Lipsha, another of the "thrown-away" children adopted by Marie and Nector. As he learns his identity, including his Pillager ancestry, Lipsha discovers that he has "the healing touch," access to the old medicine way, and begins to make use of his spiritual powers for healing.

Many scholars have discussed Erdrich's presentation of the extended family. While blood relationships are certainly important to the characters, alternative connections often establish stronger family ties. Hertha Wong notes the pattern of incorporating "thrown-away children" into families. Marie raises her own children with Nector but also remains sensitive to the abandoned children in the community, taking them into their home and raising them as her own.

An important consequence of the characters' identity formation is their relationship to the Anglo world off the reservation. Some characters yield to the pull of white society, but few find happiness outside the Ojibwa community. Marie's daughter Albertine studies nursing in Fargo, but a terrifying hotel-room episode with Henry sends her back to the family. Marie's grandson King Kashpaw virtually rejects his Indian identity, living miserably in Minneapolis with his wife, Lynnette, and their son. Beverly Lamartine has a blond wife and a career in the Twin Cities but still feels tied to the reservation by his son with Lulu. That son, Henry, returns from active duty in the army so damaged by his Vietnam experiences that he commits suicide. His half brother Gerry Nanapush resists the influence of white America, landing in the penitentiary for a variety of crimes, asserting that no white man's concrete walls can contain a Chippewa. Gerry's cousins King and Lynnette Kashpaw betray him, inviting the police to their apartment to apprehend him after he escapes from prison.

The central character of "Saint Marie," the first of the flashback chapters, is 14-year-old Marie Lazarre. Raised on the reservation by the extended family and educated in the mission school, she yearns—she thinks—to be accepted at the Catholic convent and absorbed into the religion and culture of white society. Torn by competing pulls, she mothers "thrown-away" children to compensate for her own abandonment.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In your judgment, who is the main character in *Love Medicine*? Argue for June, Lipsha, Marie, Lulu, or Nector as the character who unifies the novel.
2. One of Erdrich's trademarks is her use of multiple narrators. What advantages does this technique provide in the novel? How would chapters/segments change if Erdrich had used a different narrative voice for particular incidents? What is the effect of mixing first- and third-person narrative voices?
3. The spiritual world is very real to the characters in *Love Medicine,* whether they are drawing on traditional beliefs or on the Catholic teachings learned from missionaries. Find incidents in which characters are helped and/or damaged by their commitment to religious beliefs and practices.
4. In the novel, Erdrich illustrates the conflict between the attractions of city life in "white" America and the pull of traditional life of the reservation. What happens to Erdrich's characters who yield to the seductions of white America and leave the reservation?

"Fleur" (1986)

While working on her M.F.A. degree at Johns Hopkins University, Erdrich produced a 300-page fiction manuscript that she set aside, since her primary focus at that time was poetry. Ten years later, she took up the manuscript again and condensed what she deemed valuable into a short story, which was published as "Fleur" in the August 1986 issue of *Esquire.* That story, in turn, became the seed of Erdrich's third novel, *Tracks,* published in 1988. In the novel, "Fleur" has become the second chapter, "Summer 1913, *Miskomini-Geezis,* Raspberry Sun," with Pauline Puyat as narrator.

Ostensibly, the narrator of this short story is telling the reader about the mysterious and threatening Fleur Pillager, but through her language and attitude, she reveals a great deal more about herself. The focus of the story is the summer Fleur spent working in a butcher shop in the town of Argus, where her silent power threatens the male coworkers. After a month of losing to Fleur at cards, the three men assault her behind the slaughter pens. The next day, the oppressive heat blooms into a tornado that roars through Argus, sending the men running to the meat locker for shelter. The narrator, who did not respond to Fleur's cries during the assault the night before, slams the locker door shut but neglects to tell anyone of the men's whereabouts until they are found frozen three days later. Lily, Tor, and Lily's dog are dead, and Dutch only barely survives. Later, back on the reservation, Fleur gives birth to a child.

Despite its title, the short story is more about its narrator than it is about Fleur. Sometimes the narrative voice is plural, suggesting that the speaker is passing on the lore of the reservation women, who keep their distance from Fleur in dread of her mysterious powers. As a girl, Fleur survived three drownings. Each time, though, the man who rescues her dies unexpectedly by water. The women conclude that Fleur is aligned with the water monster Misshepeshu, and because she keeps to herself, no one can find out the truth. The narrator shares in those negative judgments of Fleur, but, in her own shaky identity, she is extremely threatened by Fleur's utter directness and self-possession.

The narrator has gone to Argus because she refuses to stay on the reservation. She wants to associate herself with her mother's white Canadian heritage rather than her Native ancestry. Unable to accept herself as she is, she wants to be invisible, to be erased. In the closing paragraphs of the story, the narrator admits that she can look Fleur straight in the eyes only in her dreams.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine the narrator's descriptions of Fleur's unusual behavior. Summarize the judgments made about her by the people on the reservation. How much of their opinion is based on fact and how much is based on their own fears of the unknown?
2. Who is responsible for the deaths of Tor and Lily?

The Beet Queen (1986)

In her second novel, Erdrich focuses less on the Ojibwa than on the white and mixed-blood people in the North Dakota town near the reservation. Abandoned by their mother, Karl and Mary Adare ride a freight train to Argus to live with their aunt Fritzie and uncle Pete Kozka, owners of a butcher shop, and their cousin Sita. Karl, age 14, leaves town as quickly as he arrived, while Mary, age 11, takes root. Erdrich follows life in Argus as Mary and Sita grow to womanhood. With Celestine James, Mary assumes responsibility for the butcher shop and shares, with her neighbor Wallace Pfef, in the raising of Celestine's (and Karl's) daughter, Dot. Dot's coronation as queen of the Beet Festival is the culmination of a novel in which the characters struggle to find family connectedness.

The Beet Queen covers a span of 40 years, from 1932 to 1972, in direct chronology, unlike the nonlinear structure and flashbacks of *Love Medicine*. Erdrich writes most of the chapters using first-person narrators, scattering among them several short segments in which a third-person narrator fills in information that the main characters could not know themselves, particularly the fate of Mary and Karl's mother, Adelaide, and her third child, a baby adopted by a Minneapolis couple.

Six major characters narrate the 16 chapters of *The Beet Queen*. While most have a single voice, chapters 2 (1932) and 13 (1972) are voiced communally by Sita, Mary, and Celestine. Mary Adare is the central character of the novel, the speaker in five chapters. As a girl, she is "square and practical," and as an adult, she is independent and frank and a shrewd businesswoman. Having seen what happens to delicate and flighty women like her mother, Adelaide, and her cousin Sita, she determines to control her own life and destiny with whatever assets are at hand. As butcher, sausage maker, gardener, and cook, she excels, but she also sees visions and tells fortunes. Critics point out that through the character of Mary, Erdrich challenges stereotyped expectations of men's and women's behavior.

Sita Kozka, on the other hand, is "all girl," interested in fashion, jewelry, and finding a man. Displaced in her own family by Mary's arrival, Sita works as a model and sales clerk in a Fargo department store until she is nearly 30. Her marriage fails along with the fancy restaurant she runs with her husband; with her second marriage, her frustrated dreams lead to a fine suburban house, then drug dependency, disconnection from reality, and a slow slide into madness.

The third female character to narrate four chapters is Celestine James, the steadiest woman in the novel, not prone to the flights of fancy and emotional turmoil that Mary endures. After a surprising and peculiar two-month relationship with Karl Adare, Celestine becomes pregnant but chooses to raise her daughter alone.

Karl Adare, like his mother, is unreliable, unsteady. He is constantly on the move, trying various careers and establishing short-term liaisons with women and men as he struggles to establish his identity. In the three chapters that he narrates, he exhibits emotional extremes, seeking connections but lacking the relational skills to maintain them.

As with Karl, Wallace Pfef does not know his sexual identity until an encounter with Karl in a Minneapolis hotel. In his house, Wallace keeps a photo of a "poor dead sweetheart" that is nothing more than a framed picture he bought at a house sale but that excuses him from the socially sanctioned routines of courtship and marriage. His character is one of the nurturing men Erdrich develops in her novels: He serves as midwife at Dot's birth, stands as her godfather, and shares in raising the child whose baptismal name is *Wallac-*

ette. A civic leader, he is the one who spearheads sugar-beet cultivation in Argus.

Dot Adare narrates the final chapter. She has grown up to be a sturdy young woman like her mother, and feisty like her aunt Mary. But she goes home, drawn back to her mother and the others who love her.

Among the essential themes in *The Beet Queen* is the connectedness of family. The death of Mr. Ober, her longtime lover and father of her children, leaves Adelaide abandoned. She in turn abandons her children and flies off with Omar the Aeronaught Extraordinaire. Mary attaches herself firmly to the Kozka family but alienates Sita in the process. In her turn, Sita tries unsuccessfully to find herself but is unable to find happiness with either Jimmie or Louis. Dot Adare becomes the center of a curious alternative family with her mother, Celestine; her aunt Mary; and her "uncle" Wallace Pfef; her biological father, Karl, is never really part of her life. One day, as Celestine is nursing the baby, she notices a delicate spider at work in the child's hair: "A web was forming, a complicated house." This web becomes a metaphor for the complex of relationships that Erdrich creates in the novel.

In the novel's final scene, that "complicated house" is unified. All of the main characters are reunited at the Beet Festival: Father Jude Miller, the baby brother of Mary and Karl, happens to be in Argus on the day of the festival, unrecognized by his siblings. Russell Kashpaw, the most decorated veteran, rides a float in the parade. Sita Kozka Bohr Tappe is there, too, even though she had died earlier that morning. Mary, Wallace and Celestine, even Karl, are very proud of their daughter; as angry as she is, Dot reconnects with her mother and those who love her so well.

In *The Beet Queen,* as in her other novels, Erdrich challenges readers' expectations of gendered behavior with nurturing men like Wallace Pfef and assertive women like Mary. Even so, the stereotyped categories cease to have meaning in the novels, as Erdrich builds characters of both genders who are strong, nurturing, rational, spiritual, and practical. A character type that often surfaces in Erdrich's fiction is the trickster, the comic shape shifter. In *The Beet Queen,* Karl comes and goes, escaping from disasters, assuming a variety of identities. But others fit this pattern as well, including the tomboy Dot, who becomes the Beet Queen; Wallace Pfef, with his blend of hidden and visible identities; and the unintentionally comic Mary, with her turban and Ouija board.

The Beet Queen takes place in the town of Argus, North Dakota, where parts of *Tracks* are also set. Pete Kozka and his butcher shop appear in both novels, as do Russell Kashpaw, Fleur Pillager, and Celestine James, the daughter of Dutch James and Regina. While *The Beet Queen* covers approximately the same time span as *Love Medicine,* the only significant link between the novels is the presence of Sister Leopolda (Pauline from *Tracks*), who is teaching at St. Catherine's School when Mary enrolls in the seventh grade.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In an interview, Erdrich has suggested that the central motif of *The Beet Queen* is air, hinting that earth, water, and fire would be central in other novels. Locate as many references to air, flight, and flying as you can. Which characters are associated with flight? What do these allusions reveal about the characters? Why?
2. Traditional family structures are few in *The Beet Queen;* instead, many kinds of family relationships are established. What are the common bonds that connect these "families"? What characteristics make for stable relationships? Why?
3. Unlike *Tracks* and *Love Medicine, The Beet Queen* focuses on characters who are not Native Americans. In your judgment, how does *The Beet Queen* affect Erdrich's classification as a Native American author? Justify your answer.
4. Find several of the comic scenes in the novel and analyze the sources of humor, considering such scenes as the following: Mary's falling off the sliding board, Sita's kidnapping, Mary and Mrs. Shumway's naughty box, the Jell-O salad, the Christmas pageant, and Wallace and Dot at the dunking booth. What do these scenes add to the work as a whole? Explain.

Tracks (1988)

In *Tracks,* Erdrich tells the story of the Ojibwa people during the years 1912 to 1924, when U.S. treaty law established the reservation system in tribal territory, removing the land from the Indians' control. Nanapush, one of the central characters, is a tribal elder—a man who bridges the past and present; he saw the last buffalo hunt but who also reads and writes English. During winter 1912, he saves Fleur Pillager after her entire family has died of tuberculosis. That rescue bonds the old man to her as a father. During a summer tornado in Argus, Fleur survives unharmed, but the three men who rape her in the slaughterhouse yard do not. Another survivor, a mixed-blood girl named Pauline Puyat, shows a deep-seated hatred for Fleur. Despising her Indian heritage, Pauline chooses to "become white" by entering the convent, erasing her past to be what Indians can never be. As Sister Leopolda, she becomes "a merciful scavenger, . . . the reservation crow," tending to the sick and dying, mortifying herself beyond all good sense. Meanwhile, Fleur snares Eli Kashpaw's heart, bears a child, and lives apart, separating herself from contact with white men. She refuses to comply with U.S. law and with the lumbermen who have bought the Pillager land by destroying the forest before the loggers have a chance to cut it themselves.

With his wives and children dead, Nanapush eventually marries Margaret, the widow of his old friend Kashpaw. However, he does not accept Catholicism as she does. Nanapush pragmatically selects from the old and new ways what will best serve the survival of the people. In another terrible winter, he saves Fleur's daughter Lulu, gives her his name, and raises her after Fleur abandons the settlement to move westward, away from the American incursions. In the chapters narrated by Nanapush, he is passing on to Lulu the story and legacy of the mother who has abandoned the child.

Published four years after *Love Medicine, Tracks* is a prequel to that novel, opening in 1912, 22 years before the earliest episode in *Love Medicine,* and introducing the ancestors of its characters. The baby borne and abandoned by Pauline (later Sister Leopolda) and raised by the Lazarres is Marie, one of the matriarchs of *Love Medicine.* Lulu is the other. In addition to shedding further light on the earlier generations of their extended families, *Tracks* also provides the political background for the development of the reservations. Twenty-five years after the Dawes Act, the grace period has ended, and the Native people now owe taxes on the lands allotted to them by the 1887 law. With no cash income, the people have few choices. They can either sell their land for ready cash or borrow against the land to meet their immediate needs, driving themselves deeper into debt and into default, at which point the land reverts to the government.

Erdrich uses only two narrative voices in Tracks: Nanapush, a wily tribal elder, and Pauline Puyat, a mixed-blood girl who despises her Native heritage and yearns to be white. The character of Nanapush echoes the Ojibwa mythic figure of Nanabozho, a comic healer and liberator of the people. As a tribal elder and witness to the end of the old ways, Nanapush passes on the lore of the people, especially to his adopted (grand)daughter Lulu. But having been educated in the mission schools, Nanapush also reads and writes English, deciphers the "tracks" on the papers, and tries to rescue the people and their land through his command of the white men's language. Language is the chief weapon in his arsenal; he uses talk to confuse and trick his enemies, to rescue the dying, to outwit the powerful. He attends mass with Margaret but prefers the old ways of belief and worship.

Pauline, on the other hand, rejects her Indianness. She tries to burn away her Ojibwa heritage by becoming a nun, an act not permitted to Native girls by tribal custom. Simultaneously repulsed by physical existence and sexually attracted to Eli Kashpaw, she buys a love potion from Moses Pillager and drugs Sophie Morrissey so she will seduce Eli. Watching their encounter from the bushes, Pauline participates vicariously in their lovemaking. Later, she snares Napoleon Morrissey and strangles him with her rosary beads, but not before becoming pregnant with his child. It is a child she desperately wants to destroy; when she delivers the baby, Ber-

nadette Morrissey rescues the child because Pauline thinks the baby is the spawn of the devil. Fleeing to the convent, Pauline becomes Sister Leopolda and imposes savage penances on herself to drive out the devil, the devil of her Indian blood.

These conflicts—between old and new ways, traditional and Christian beliefs, Native custom and Anglo laws, Nanapush and Pauline—are the framework of the novel. Erdrich clearly sympathizes with Fleur, who refuses to speak English, live in the reservation settlement, and comply with American regulations. In Erdrich's hands, Nanapush straddles the two worlds, seeking to harmonize when possible, and to rescue when harmony is impossible. Nanapush is able to survive in both worlds, but Pauline can exist in neither. The novel emphasizes hybridity as the way to the future.

The novel also offers insights into traditional Ojibwa beliefs about death and the afterlife. The windigo is a spirit of death, a cannibal whose hunger is insatiable. Ojibwa who are lost in the wilderness are prey to the windigo, susceptible to madness in his clutches. The dead walk a three-day journey westward; at one point, Fleur walks into death to gamble with the windigo, trying to save the life of her child.

In Fleur, Erdrich creates a representative of traditional Ojibwa spirit power. The Pillager totem is the bear, *anijinabe,* which is also the Ojibwa word for their people. Fleur dabbles in powerful medicine, overpowers Eli's spirit and lures him to her cabin, works with the physical strength of a man at Kozka's butcher shop, and holds some sort of power over the sea monster Misshepeshu, as shown by her surviving three drowning episodes. Pauline is sure that Fleur's child was fathered by Misshepeshu. In Fleur's final appearance in the novel, it is easy to believe that her power is too great to be explained: With her possessions piled on her cart, she smiles coolly at the gathered loggers, and the forest begins to crash to the ground around them. She retreats into the forest, representing unyielding resistance to the incursions of white American ways.

With Fleur gone, her daughter Lulu is in the care of Nanapush, elder, trickster, storyteller, grandfather. Although he sends her to the mission school, he also makes a point of teaching her the stories of her family, of her mother. Erdrich establishes the duality of 20th-century life for Native Americans: to know their past, their spirit power, and to find ways to live in the white man's world without losing their Native souls. It is not an easy task.

With this historical background to the lives of Kashpaws and Lazarres, Morrisseys and Lamartines, Erdrich lays the foundation for the clans whose lives will occupy a succession of novels and stories. Frustrations and despair, alcohol and failure will dog the characters' lives, but the steady hope for the future lies in her characters' fidelity to what is best in their heritage: powers of spirit, of family connectedness, of healing relationships. These strands continue in Erdrich's fiction and poetry, inviting readers to participate in the cultural hybridity that assures survival.

For Discussion or Writing

1. With no objective third-person narrator, readers of *Tracks* have only Pauline's and Nanapush's versions of events. Although neither narrator is completely reliable, which of the two are you more likely to believe? Give reasons justifying your answer.
2. Fleur is perhaps the central character of the novel. In your judgment, why does Erdrich not allow the reader to hear Fleur's version of events? Explain.
3. As you read *Tracks,* note the images of tracks that Erdrich works into the text. How does she vary the meanings of the metaphors to illustrate her themes? What does this shifting of meanings add to the novel? Explain.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON ERDRICH AND HER WORK

1. Examine the strong female characters in Erdrich's work. Discuss their roles in holding their extended families together, passing on traditional ways, and resisting oppression from white culture or from dominating men.

2. Both traditional and Christian believers revere the power of the supernatural world. In Erdrich's work, which theology seems to offer more hope? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Examine one of Erdrich's characters who appear in multiple works, such as Fleur Pillager. How does that character change over the course of various works? What aspects of the character never change?

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Eileen Quinlan

Carolyn Forché (1950–)

I have been told that a poet should be of his or her time. It is my feeling that the 20th-century human condition demands a poetry of witness. . . . If I did not wish to make poetry of what I had seen, what is it that I thought poetry was?

(quoted in Moyers)

When Carolyn Forché began writing at the age of nine, she did not intend to change the way the world viewed poetry. She did not plan to be a political activist. In fact, when her mother, Louise Blackford Sidlosky (a writer herself before retiring to devote more time to her growing family), introduced her to poetry, Forché saw it as a way to escape from the nonstop commotion inflicted on her as the oldest of seven children. Years later Forché would become famous for her poetry of witness, challenging the strict division between political and personal poetry by introducing the broader category of social poetry, a poetry that attests to the horrific consequences the political can wreak on the human soul.

Born Carolyn Louise Sidlosky on April 28, 1950, in Detroit, Forché says as a child she "wrote obsessively, the way some children draw obsessively" (Ratiner 148). That passion for writing led her to Michigan State University, where she switched majors five times, searching for something compatible with writing. She finally settled on international relations, and, in 1972, Forché became the first person in her family to graduate from college, earning a B.A. in international relations and creative writing.

Detroit, the capital of the American automotive industry, was not an easy place to find a job in the early 1970s. Foreign manufacturers were beginning to dominate the marketplace, causing downsizing and rampant unemployment. Luckily, Forché had inherited a nomadic spirit from her paternal grandmother, Anna Bassarová, who had lived with the family for most of the poet's childhood, often disappearing for long periods and returning with stories of visits to Indian pueblos, Amish communities, and myriad other places where she blended easily within cultures not her own. Forché left her native Michigan to take a job in Washington, D.C., at the Epilepsy Foundation of America, where she worked until she learned of an opportunity to attend a newly formed master of fine arts program at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She applied and was accepted on a full teaching scholarship.

While at Bowling Green, Forché wrote about issues concerning her life up to that point. Many of her poems reflected the strong sense of community she learned growing up in her large Czech-American family and living in the same neighborhood in rural Catholic Detroit throughout her childhood, focusing on the spirituality of family bonds, exploring the Czechoslovakian and Native American cultures. Other poems displayed her deep awareness of nature, invoking images from the northern regions of the country or exploring the sensuality of nature. These poems became the basis for a manuscript that she entered in a competition for poets under the age of 40 who had yet to publish a volume of poetry. The Yale Series of Younger Poets prize is the most

prestigious award available for young poets; shortly after Forché completed her M.F.A. and was hired to teach at San Diego State University, she was notified that she had been selected to receive it. The winning manuscript became her first published collection of poetry, entitled *Gathering the Tribes*.

While teaching at San Diego State, Forché became friends with Maya Flacol, who asked Forché to translate her mother's book of poetry into English. Working from a Spanish edition, Forché discovered that translating poetry was not as simple as substituting one word for another. The poetry of Flacol's mother, Claribel Alegría, was fraught with images with which Forché had no experience—the horrors of life under military dictatorship. Forché agreed to spend summer 1977 in Spain with Flacol at the home of Claribel Alegría. Forché spent her days translating poetry and her afternoons immersed in the company of international writers and artists who congregated at Alegría's home. Through them, Forché began to gain a deeper understanding of the hardships of Latin America and an intense desire somehow to make a difference.

Back in San Diego, Forché returned to teaching and writing letters on behalf of Amnesty International. She continued to work on translating Alegría's poetry (publishing *Flowers from the Volcano* in 1983 and *Sorrow* in 1999). She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, allowing her a year of expense-free travel to work on her writing, but before she could begin her travels, her experience in Spain followed her home in the form of Alegría's nephew, Leonel Gomez Vides.

Vides schooled her in El Salvadorian history, relevant to her plans for further translations of Latin American poets. He taught her about the past and present political climate of Central America, and, when he had completed his tutelage, Vides revealed his true motivation: "Claribel tells me you've won a Guggenheim Fellowship. Congratulations! So what are you going to do with your fellowship year?" (Ratiner 155).

Vides explained that El Salvador was going to be at war soon, and that Forché had the opportunity to be there from the beginning so that through her poetry she could inform people back in the United States about the conditions of war. Although Forché believed that poets did not carry the same credibility that journalists did, Vides insisted that the job required a poet. "What are you going to do," he asked, "write poetry about yourself the rest of your life?" (Ratiner 155). That challenge spurred Forché into accepting his invitation.

Over the next two years, Forché traveled extensively in El Salvador, where she met her future husband, the journalist Harry Mattison, who was covering the war for *Time*. Forché worked closely with Monsignor Oscar Romero, a local church leader, and became immersed in the struggle against the widespread violence being inflicted upon the people of El Salvador by their own government. When the climate became too dangerous for her to stay, she returned home, charged by Monsignor Romero to convince the United States to stop its military aid.

Shortly after her departure, Monsignor Romero and six American churchwomen were murdered. Back in the States, Forché struggled to find an audience to which she could voice the injustices she had witnessed. She testified before the House Subcommittee on Western Hemispheric Affairs, urging them not to send further military aid to the region. Despite her eloquent appeal, the aid was approved.

Meanwhile, Forché had completed a manuscript of her Salvadorian poems. Publishers shied away because of its intense political nature, but Forché found a willing audience in the crowds who attended her poetry readings. A chance encounter with Margaret Atwood led Forché to submit her manuscript to a new publisher; in 1981, *The Country between Us* appeared in bookstores. Although it received the Poetry Society of America's Alice Fay di Castagnola Award and was the Lamont Selection of the Academy of American Poets, the book was attacked by both the political Right, who called Forché everything from naïve to hysterical, and the Left, who accused her of using the conflict in El Salvador to further her own poetic ambitions.

Forché believed that the attacks were mainly the result of "the cyclic debate peculiar to the United

States concerning the relationship between poetry and politics" (Ratiner 161). Poets were not expected to influence public policy with their writing, and, by choosing as her subject the political hotbed of El Salvador (which was receiving military support from the United States), Forché had stepped over some imagined line. In her defense, she began to call for a new way of thinking about poetry, a manner that allowed for works that were neither strictly personal (typified by the emotional) nor political (focused on controversial issues or events), but rather blended the two in a way that required a new classification, that of social poetry:

> The poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political . . . the social had been irrevocably invaded by the political in ways that were sanctioned neither by law nor by the fictions of the social contract. (Forché, *Against* 45)

In addition to outwardly defending the legitimacy of her work, Forché found herself waging an internal struggle. Her experiences in El Salvador had left her feeling that something in her had been broken. She traveled and worked in a variety of positions that allowed her to combat injustice, including as a journalist for Amnesty International and as the Beirut correspondent for National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. She also worked in South Africa with her husband, covering the antiapartheid campaign.

During this time, Forché continued to write, but she felt what she was capturing on paper was disjointed, unlike real poetry. She saved it all in notebooks, considering it notes toward future poems. She recalls:

> Something happened along the way to the introspective poet I had been. My new work seemed controversial to my American contemporaries, who argued against its "subject matter," or against the right of a North American to contemplate such issues in her work, or against any mixing of what they saw as the mutually exclusive realms of the personal and the political. Like many other poets, I felt I had no real choice regarding the impulse of my poems, and had only to wait, in meditative expectancy. In attempting to come to terms with the question of poetry and politics, I turned to the work of Anna Akhmatova, Yannis Ritsos, Paul Celan, Federico García Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, and others. I began collecting their work, and soon found myself a repository of what began to be called "the poetry of witness." (Forché, *Against* 30)

In 1986, Forché and Mattison conceived a child; as his birth neared, they moved to Paris, France, so he would not be born on South African soil. While waiting for the baby to arrive, Forché kept busy by translating a French text that she had found in the apartment's cupboard. It turned out to be a book of poems by Robert Desnos, a poet who died in the concentration camps. (Her translation was published in 1991 as *The Selected Poems of Robert Desnos*.) In his writing, she found the beginnings of an explanation for why her own poetry had taken such an unexpected turn.

Forché found the poetry of witness to be a poetry of extremity, requiring a form of language to which the American literary public was unaccustomed. In order to convey the horrors that they have witnessed accurately, Forché claimed poets needed to resort to language that was itself extreme, as in the case of Desnos, whose poetry was at times violently obscene in order to portray accurately what he had witnessed.

Other times, there is simply no language to describe what has been witnessed. As Forché writes, "The narrative of trauma is itself traumatized" (*Against* 42). Writers are rendered unable to articulate directly that to which they must give voice, causing them to rely upon fragmented images to convey a greater meaning. Forché maintained that the trauma had left a mark on the writer that could be felt in his or her work, even when it was not specifically about war. She cites as example Paul Celan and claims, "If . . . a poet is a survivor of the camps during the shoah [the Jewish term for the Holocaust],

and the poet chooses to write about snow falling, one can discern the camps in the snow falling. The camps are *in* the snow" (Ratiner 163).

In 1987, after the birth of her son, Sean-Christope, Forché returned to teaching in the United States. Over the next two decades she would teach at several institutions, including the University of Arkansas, Vassar College, George Mason University, Skidmore College, and Columbia University.

Still, Forché remained fascinated by the mark of trauma on language itself. She began to organize the poetry she was accumulating into a collection. While she worked, she received grants and fellowships from the Lannon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Art Council, and the District of Columbia Art Council. She took over a decade to complete the book, which includes the works of more than 144 poets, and in 1993 the volume was published as *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness.* In describing the anthology, Forché says she wanted it to be "a symphony of utterance, a living memorial to those who had died and those who survived the horrors of the 20th century. I wanted something that wasn't a statue that pigeons could defecate on. I wanted something that would stay alive like language stays alive" (Ratiner 163).

Working so intensely with the poetry of other writers who had witnessed atrocities gave Forché a lens through which to view her own changed writings. She returned to her notebooks and began to see in them a mosaic, many individual voices speaking through the same poem. To write their message in a meaningful way, Forché knew she would have to step away from the first-person lyrical style of her earlier works.

Forché found a unifying thread for what she calls "these swatches of human language" in the work of Walter Benjamin. His "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" describes an angel of history who perceives history as one single catastrophe. Forché uses this idea as the basis for her fourth book, *The Angel of History.* Published in 1994 and winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Award, *The Angel of History* gives voice to the unspoken words of those who have suffered during the calamity we call the 20th century.

In 1998, Forché was presented with the Edita and Ira Morris Hiroshima Foundation for Peace and Culture Award in recognition of her work on behalf of human rights and the preservation of memory and culture. The foundation routinely presents awards to people whose work in a cultural field furthers dialogue, understanding, and peace in conflict areas.

Forché's most recent collection of poetry, *Blue Hour,* was published in 2003. Her inspiration for the title was the predawn light that the French refer to as *l'heure bleue*. The poems themselves are hauntingly reminiscent of the writing style Forché adopted for *The Angel of History,* seeking to give voice to those who have lost theirs, but she returns to the first-person lyric in some, letting her own memories of childhood and child rearing mingle with images of atrocity.

The most recognized poem in the collection is "On Earth," a 46-page poem that has been described by David Need as illustrating "the unraveling of our hopes at immortality by arranging the movement of a dying person's thoughts in an abecedary—a poem in which the lines are arranged in dictionary order—so that even as one adheres to that order, life unravels, and language breaks."

Since the publication of *Blue Hour,* Carolyn Forché has continued to write and is currently working on a collection of essays. In 2006, Forché accepted a position at Skidmore College in New York, where she serves as professor and director of the creative writing program.

Gathering the Tribes (1976)

The manuscript for *Gathering the Tribes,* produced while Forché was enrolled in the M.F.A program at Bowling Green University, was selected by Stanley Kunitz to receive the 1976 Yale Younger Poets prize. *Gathering the Tribes* is a richly woven tapestry of heritage and nature, blending threads of Native American culture with Forché's own Slovak

ancestry to tell stories of kinship and ritual, sacrifice and ceremony.

With the lines "That from which these things are born / That by which they live / That to which they return at death / Try to know that," Forché invites readers into "Burning the Tomato Worms." From there she tells us of Anna—"Heavy sweatered winter woman / Buried the October before I was grown"—and a granddaughter's struggle to understand the legacy left to her. The portrait Forché paints, of a child who both loves and resents her elder, rings true to the duality of child-adult love.

The poem also explores the dual feelings of guilt and pleasure that accompany first love. The speaker secretly meets a boy in the barn but is sure her grandmother knows, because "It was all over my face," yet her grandmother does not speak of it. The reader is left to guess at whether her silence is a form of disapproval or tacit acceptance.

The character of Anna is based on Forché's own paternal grandmother, who lived with Forché for most of her childhood. The real Anna first left Slovakia for the United States when she was 11 years old and worked in a needle factory to earn enough money to bring over her own parents and grandparents. That spirit of self-determination and hard work is evident in the lines "She had drawn apple skin / Tightly bent feet / Pulled babushkas and rosary beads / On which she paid for all of us."

Forché describes her grandmother as a woman who wandered, often disappearing from the family home for weeks, returning with stories of her stays with Native Americans or Mennonites. Forché admits to inheriting some of that nomadic lifestyle; the results are evident in the seamless way she immerses readers in other cultures. One example is the poem "Alfansa," based on the true story of Chimayo, New Mexico, and its legendary shrine, El Santuario de Chimayó. Thousands pilgrimage travel there each year, believing the shrine to be the site of miraculous healings resulting from a crucifix found in the early 1800s by a local friar. In her poem, Forché addresses El Posito, the sandpit where the crucifix was reportedly found: "People come to this Santuario, / smear themselves with mud, light candles. / Lift dry mud from the mud well to their mouths. / (It fills by itself while they sleep.)" Alfansa, of the southwestern Pueblo Indians, "strings Chimayo's chilis, / like sacred hearts, tongues of fire tied together"; she is old and suffers, but even in her pain she hears the voice of Maria and is told the secret of Chimayo's El Posito by "a voice of hills."

Note that some poems in the book have content intended for mature readers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why do you think Forché chose the title "Burning the Tomato Worms" for this poem? Discuss your reasons, supporting them with evidence from the text.
2. In the poem "Alfansa," why does Alfansa weep as she fills the mud well with baskets of soil? What defines a miracle? Examine other sites where miracles have reportedly occurred. What explanations could account for the miracles? Does the possibility of human involvement in a miracle rule out the divine or support it?

The Country between Us (1982)

When Forché received the Guggenheim Fellowship allowing her a year of travel, she thought she would research foreign poets for possible translations. Instead, she accepted an invitation to travel to El Salvador, which was on the brink of war. By arriving when she did, and with Leonel Gomez Vides as her guide, Forché was able to see the conflict from the inside, immersing herself in the fight for human rights. For two years, she worked closely with Monsignor Oscar Romero and his church group, doing whatever needed to be done, from writing reports for human-rights organizations to searching for missing people in morgues. While she was there, people risked their lives to educate her about their ordeals in the hope that she would return to America to educate the world. The sum of these experiences changed her deeply; she was no longer the person who had boarded the plane

to El Salvador. Her poetry, which had always been focused on the world she knew, changed as that world expanded to include the atrocities of war.

Forché produced seven poems focusing on her experiences in El Salvador, many dedicated to the people she encountered there. They were eventually published as part of her second poetry collection, *The Country between Us*. It was immediately criticized as being too political, too hysterical, an overreaction to events she could not possibly understand. One critic even suggested that Forché had designed the entire trip in order to further her career.

The focus of the most criticism was the poem "The Colonel," which describes a dinner at the home of a high-ranking officer in the military regime. It is like dinner at any American home: a cop show on the television, pet dogs, daughter, son, wife. But "Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs," and after dinner the colonel "returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table." Critics claimed this could not have happened, but later the *New York Times* confirmed that it was not uncommon for Salvadorian soldiers "to cut the ears off the corpses of rebels to verify enemy casualties to commanders" (Farrah 20 May 1986).

The final poem is dedicated to Terrence des Pres, a friend of Forché's. Like Forché, de Pres is famous for his writings about atrocities (most notably *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*) and his challenges to the relationship of politics and poetry. "Ourselves or Nothing" describes the toll this had taken on him: "the chill in your throat like a small / blue bone, those years of your work / on the Holocaust. You had to walk / off the darkness, miles of winter / riverfront, windows the eyes in skulls / along the river." Forché shared de Pres's friendship, his home, and many of the same experiences. In telling readers about the effects writing has had on him, it is almost as if she is giving us a glimpse into the internal struggles she herself has faced. In fact, the lines "Go after that which is lost / and all the mass graves of the century's dead / will open into your early waking hours" seem to be a warning: If you join in a war against atrocity, you will be haunted by what you see. Yet even as she issues that warning and describes what it is that haunts her, she charges the readers to do it anyway: "Everywhere and always / go after that which is lost."

When asked in a 1995 interview with Bill Moyers to name "the country between us" to which the title of the collection refers, Forché responds:

> The country between us is perhaps the distance between one human being and another, how long it takes one human voice to reach another human voice. It's probably also a reference to El Salvador, which was the country that came into my heart when I was just becoming an adult, and the country which probably shaped my moral imagination. But perhaps it is the United States too, because for me the United States is very complex. It was the people of the United States who all through that war were very concerned and who cared about human rights and responded very favorably to all appeals while at the same time the United States was a government that didn't seem to know how to listen to any of that. So I have two countries in my mind: the country of my people and the country of the government that I knew as I was growing into adulthood.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Colonel" was met with harsh criticism; some accused Forché of making up the whole episode to dramatize her point, while others said she wrote the poem purely for its shock value. Many modern songwriters have been accused of the same thing. In what ways might Forché's idea of poetry of witness also apply to modern music (specifically rap)?
2. In describing the colonel's house in the poem "The Colonel," Forché intersperses details of war with the mundane items found in American homes: "There were daily papers, pet dogs,

a pistol on the cushion beside him." How does this technique affect the overall feeling of the poem?

3. "Ourselves or Nothing" includes the lines "There is a cyclone fence between / ourselves and the slaughter and behind it / we hover in a calm protected world like / netted fish, exactly like netted fish." Who is the "we" to whom Forché refers? How does this view of world relations both benefit and harm the "netted fish"?

The Angel of History (1994)

After completing *The Country between Us,* Forché went through a period when her writing seemed to her more like fragmented images than poetry. She collected her writings in notebooks but did not attempt to publish anything other than translations or anthologies of the poems of other writers. Through the examination of poetry produced by writers who have endured extreme situations, Forché began to notice a commonality. Their work seemed deeply rooted in the heart of the trauma, changed in significant ways regardless of whether a particular poem was about the trauma or not. This work turned out to be a valuable process for Forché, allowing her to see in her own disconnected writings a wholeness interpretable only through the trauma. She returned to her notebooks and began to examine the interrelatedness of the images, seeing them in a new light:

> I had this idea that language, human spoken language, might be like radio waves in the universe, always intact as they move onward. Everything that's ever been said stays in the universe in some way—that the earth is somehow wrapped in the poem. There's a line [in *The Angel of History*] that says: "The earth is wrapped in weather, and the weather in risen voices." And all I could feel when I was writing was that I was somehow pulling at these pieces, these fragments, these swatches of human language. (Ratiner 165)

To give adequate voice to "these swatches of human language," Forché needed to move away from the first-person narrative. She described her process of writing in an interview with David Wright:

> I didn't want to write *The Angel of History* in a confessional lyric mode. Or in a mode that was explorative of the self and its sensibilities. . . . I knew I wanted to write in a mode of wakeful listening; in a mode of receptivity; in a mode of recording rather than in a mode of pronouncement or confession or establishment of lyric identity and selfhood. (Available online. URL: www.nimblespirit.com)

Her poems became a story, told through the eyes of Walter Benjamin's "angel of history," who perceives all of human history as a single, continuous calamity. Therefore, this volume of poetry feels less like a collection of poems and more like a novel, told in parts.

One of these parts, entitled "The Angel of History," interweaves the story of Ellie, a survivor of the German invasion of Poland who has lost two sons (one to winter and one "to her own attempt to silence him"), with that of 44 Jewish children hidden until they were discovered and taken to Auschwitz.

"The Garden of Shukkei-en" tells of two women visiting the Garden of Shukkei-en, a restored ornamental garden in Hiroshima, Japan. One woman was present when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945; she tries to tell the other what it was like but warns, "Nothing I say will be enough." As she describes in vivid detail what she has seen, she wonders, "Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore difficult to understand?" Those lines, which seemingly contradict each other, speak to the common theme Forché has described in language about atrocity: that it is at once not enough and too much. It is, as Forché has quoted Jabès, "the wounded words" that are left to the poet (Forché, *Against* 41).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider the line "Perhaps my language is too precise, and therefore difficult to understand?" from "The Garden of Shukkei-en." Usually precision in language serves to clarify, rather than obscure. Give other examples of precise language and discuss the effect they have on understanding.
2. Forché includes a selection by Paul Valéry describing scholars' attempts to translate a book received from an angel. How does Forché's use of Valéry's parable relate to the poems in her book, which mostly address atrocities of war? Compare this to the children's book *Seven Blind Mice,* by Ed Young (1993). What lesson might these stories hold for us regarding the future?

Blue Hour (2003)

In describing the circumstances in which this book was written, Forché writes:

> When my son was an infant in Paris, we woke together in the light the French call *l'heure bleue,* between darkness and day, between the night of a soul and its redemption, an hour associated with pure hovering. In Kabbalah, blue is *hokhmah,* the color of the second *sefirah.* In Tibetan Buddhism, the hour before dawn is associated with the ground luminosity, or "clear light," arising at the moment of death. It is not a light apprehended through the senses, but is said to be the radiance of mind's true nature. (*Blue* 71)

After reading this description, it is easy to see how the poems in *Blue Hour* might have been conceived, sitting in that luminous dark, hovering between thoughts of life and thoughts of death. The poems themselves hover, balanced on a thin line of conscious choice and accidental pairings: abundance and grief, coffins and cups, cribs and smoke. Ghostlike, these paired images haunt the reader until they blend among one's own thoughts, turning every thing of reality into a poem and every poem into a thing of reality.

"Blue Hour," the collection's title poem, is dedicated to the poet's son and describes how one's view of the past—in this case, the Franco-Prussian War—can be reshaped by the gift of a new life. The poem admonishes that one "shall not say *adieu* when a country ceases to be" and tells us that although she sits and learns French while her infant sleeps, she does this overlooking cemetery walls and reliving the horror of war.

While her son sleeps, the speaker revisits her own childhood, where isolation and confinement masquerade as medical treatment oddly like the asylum where her grandmother burned to death among other patients, chained like inmates to bedrails. This comparison leads her to conclude that "one can live without having survived." When her son awakes and looks at her, those memories fade and she is able to put memory in its place and say, "*Adieu,* country," after all.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Blue Hour" juxtaposes the speaker's childhood in a time when *"it was not as certain that a child would live to be grown"* with that of her infant son in postwar France. How does the America of today differ, both politically and socially, from the America when your parents were in high school?
2. Consider the phrase *"The human soul weighs twenty-six grams"* from "Blue Hour." How would you assign weight to something so immeasurable? Choose something that cannot be definitively measured and give it a concrete value, supporting your position.

"On Earth" (2003)

"On Earth" was published in *Blue Hour* and is perhaps the most striking poem of that collection. The poem is prefaced with a quote from George Burgess, which gives us context for Forché's poems:

> In the immediate vicinity of death, the mind enters on an unaccustomed order of sensations, a region untrodden before, from which few, very few travelers have returned, and from which those few have brought back but vague remembrances; sometimes accompanied with a kind of homesickness for the higher sphere of which they had then some transient prospect. Here, amidst images, dim images, of solemnity or peace, of glory or of terror, the pilgrim pursues his course alone, and is lost to our eye.

In contemporary culture, we often hear of a dying person's life's flashing before his or her eyes. "On Earth" puts us in the mind of that person and flashes her life before us as a long list of events—things experienced and witnessed, as well as unfulfilled longings and regrets. The list itself is free-flowing, not categorized in terms of meaning or importance and links each item to the next in the personal way only one mind could, by the free association of experiences.

The extrinsic organizational pattern for the overall poem is based on third-century gnostic abecedarian hymns that have an alphabetical progression. Forché goes beyond the basic abecedary, which is organized by the beginning letter of each line, to categorize the items in her poem also by the alphabetical nature of the prepositional phrases, conjunctions, or articles with which the mind associates them—*at* the city's edge the aged cooling towers, *between* here and here, *the* same rose sold to every mourner—and by so doing weaves a complicated path through memory's journey along the road between life and death.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "On Earth" has been described as the transcription of a mind passing from life to death. Write nonstop for five minutes, listing all the images that would flash before your eyes at the end of your life.
2. Choose one image from "On Earth" that is particularly significant to you. Discuss your reaction to that image and its significance to the overall poem.
3. How does the use of punctuation contribute to the poetic style of "On Earth"? In what ways would changing the punctuation affect the overall meaning or feel of the poem?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON FORCHÉ AND HER WORK

1. In an interview, Carolyn Forché said, "Poetry can't be placed in the service of anything other than itself" (Faulkner). Do you agree or disagree with that statement? In what ways have people tried to place poetry in the service of something other than itself?
2. Forché has stated that "citizens have an obligation to act upon or voice support for their principles" but that "no special obligation accrues to writers" (Faulkner). Douglas Lain and Tim Jones have suggested that "artists have both the ability and the moral obligation to combat deceit and distortion. It is the ability to illuminate even difficult truths that defines an artist" (www.petitiononline.com/Aawii/petition.html). With whom do you agree and why?
3. Upon publication of *Gathering the Tribes,* Kenneth Rexroth compared Forché to Muriel Rukeyser, whose first book of poems, *Theory of Flight,* received the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1935. Review Rukeyser's biographical information and the sample poems available online from Modern American Poetry (www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rukeyser/rukeyser.htm). In what ways are the two poets similar? How are they different? Explain your response, citing from each text.

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Nikki Giovanni (1943–)

It's better to take a chance and be wrong than to be safe and dull.

(quoted in *Virginia Tech Magazine*)

Nikki Giovanni's poetry constantly weaves the stories of yesterday with today's reality. Her earlier poetry plays off Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance poets and adds short word allusions to bigger events. At the same time, Giovanni serves as a bridge to the rap artists of the 1990s and beyond. Her content shifts with personal milestones and tragedies. Her poetry is rhythm-based, readable work that draws in many reluctant readers. She wrote during a specific political and cultural time; she shaped the movement of her day and the movement shaped her. Giovanni's identity was influenced by several strong women, especially the grandmother who pushed her into an activist's life. She grew up in a house of books and music, with parents who were educators and grandparents who taught as well. But this was not a quiet family.

Nikki Giovanni was born Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr., on June 7, 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee, to Yolande Cornelia and Jones "Gus" Giovanni. It was her sister, Gary Ann, three years her senior, who started calling her *Nikki*. The Giovannis moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where her father had grown up. During this time, Yolanda and the girls made frequent trips to Knoxville to visit her parents. Yolanda's mother, Emma Louvenia Watson, would remain a constant influence on Nikki's life.

Giovanni completed first through third grade at Oak Avenue School and then transferred to St. Simon's, which she attended through eighth grade. It was her seventh-grade teacher, Sister Althea Augustine, who would have a tremendous impact on Giovanni's life. When her sister, Gary, transferred to Wyoming High School as part of a desegregation effort, both she and a friend walked out of a classroom when the teacher said that Emmett Till "got what he deserved" when he was killed by white men in the Mississippi Delta in 1955 (Fowler). For Giovanni, the Till murder would energize the Civil Rights movement and remain an important part of the historical African-American struggle.

Giovanni enrolled in an all-black high school in ninth grade, but because of tensions between her parents, she left Cincinnati to live with her grandparents back in Knoxville, where she attended Austin High School. Here she was influenced by her French teacher, Mrs. Emma Stokes, and an English teacher, Miss Alfredda Delaney. Giovanni later wrote about Delaney in the poem "In Praise of a Teacher": "It was, after all, Miss Delaney who introduced the class to 'My candle burns at both ends; / It will not last the night; / But, ah, my foes, and, oh, my friends—/ It gives a lovely light.' And I thought YES. Poetry is the main line. English is the train." Giovanni's grandmother also played a central role during this time. As the biographer Virginia Fowler notes: "Her grandmother, who is involved in numerous charitable and political endeavors, becomes an increasingly important

influence on her, teaching her the importance of helping others and of fighting injustice. When a demonstration is planned to protest segregated dining facilities at downtown Rich's department store, her grandmother Louvenia cheerfully volunteers her granddaughter Nikki" (xxxiii).

Giovanni was encouraged by both Stokes and Delaney to apply for early admission to Fisk University in Nashville. In the book *Racism 101,* Giovanni recalls in "Remembering Fisk . . . Thinking about DuBois": "The Ford Foundation played a small but significant part in my decision. It seems, if memory serves me well, that they had sponsored a study about taking talented students from high school early, as early as the sophomore year, testing them for intellectual readiness, and encouraging certain institutions to accept them as college freshmen. . . . Most of us, it is fair to say, are bored in high school. I jumped at the chance" (31–32).

Upon entering Fisk, Giovanni encountered problems, for she was "unprepared for the conservatism of this small black college. Almost from the outset she runs into trouble with the Dean of Women, Ann Cheatam, whose ideas about the behavior and attitudes appropriate to a Fisk woman are diametrically opposed to Giovanni's ideas about the intellectual seriousness and political awareness appropriate to a college student" (Fowler xxxiii). Giovanni was expelled from Fisk and returned to her parents' house in Cincinnati to help care for her nephew, Christopher. She worked at a Walgreens drugstore while taking classes at the University of Cincinnati and helping her mother with charity work.

In 1964, Giovanni reentered Fisk University with the support of the dean at the time, Blanche McConnell Cowan, who encouraged her during her years there. Giovanni later wrote in "Poem (for BMC No. 1)":

> I was water-logged (having absorbed all that I could)
> I dreamed I was drowning
> That no sun from Venice would dry my tears
> But a silly green cricket with a pink umbrella said
> Hello Tell me about it
> And we talked our way through the storm.
> (lines 5–10)

While at Fisk, Giovanni majored in history, edited the student journal, reestablished the campus chapter of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and was involved in various writing workshops. She found a mentor in the writer in residence, John Oliver Killens, who coordinated the first writers' conference at Fisk. Killens and three friends had formed the Harlem Writers Guild in the early 1950s and worked for social causes and racial equality. Though he knew both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, Killens identified with Malcolm X: "My fight is not to be a white man in a black skin, but to inject some black blood, some black intelligence into the pallid mainstream of American life." Under Killens's mentorship, Giovanni continued to write and met influential figures such as Dudley Randall, the founder of Broadside Press, and (LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka), one of the main leaders of the Black Arts Movement.

After graduating with honors in 1967, Giovanni moved back to Cincinnati, where, later that year, her grandmother, Louvenia Watson, died. That loss had a profound impact on Giovanni, who turned to writing several of the poems that were published in her first volume, *Black Feeling, Black Talk*. Giovanni worked with the Settlement House (a kind of community center) through the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work but "never did make it through grad school," she notes in "My Road to Virginia." She explains that "Dr. Louise Shoemaker thought I was more suited to writing and suggested that I should give myself a chance in that field. . . . And why did I have a difficult time in the M.S.W. program? I'm not institution-prone. Most times, in any dispute between an institution and a person, I take the side of a person" (139–140).

In April 1968, Giovanni attended the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., about which she wrote:

> His headstone said
> FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST
> But death is a slave's freedom
> We seek the freedom of free men
> And the construction of a world
> Where Martin Luther King could have lived
> and preached non-violence. (*Black Feeling, Black Talk*)

She then moved to New York City and published her second volume of poetry, *Black Judgement* (1968), which Broadside Press offered to distribute. While she was teaching at Queens College, her book talks and readings attracted the attention of national and international press. In August 1969, she returned to Cincinnati to give birth to her only child, Thomas Watson Giovanni.

Giovanni was a regular guest/host on the television program *Soul!,* an entertainment show that promoted black art and culture and featured such names as Muhammad Ali, Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, Harry Belafonte, and Sidney Poitier. By the end of 1970, she had become an established voice in the black literary scene and was named Woman of the Year by *Ebony.* In the following year, she published a book of children's poems and her memoir *Gemini,* which is part biography and part commentary on the world around her. *Gemini* prompted a reviewer in *Time* to write: "She is also one of the most visible, not only because she is beautiful but because she is a shrewd and energetic propagandist. In this interim autobiography, both poet and propagandist underscore that point about black love and happiness. Part memoir and part manifesto, it is a plainspoken, lively, provocative, confusing book."

But it was the 1971 release of the album *The Truth Is on Its Way,* which sold 100,000 copies in six months, that truly "launched her career as a national speaker and reader of her own poetry" (Fletcher). It was her first recording that set apart Giovanni as a poet to be heard rather than read. Between 1972 and 1973, Giovanni received many accolades for her writing and her strength as a woman, published more books (including *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People* and *A Dialogue: James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni*), and celebrated her sister's graduation from Xavier University by traveling to Paris and going on an African lecture tour.

Over the next decade, Giovanni continued to publish, travel, and speak internationally, and receive honorary doctorates from various universities. Her writing output slowed, however, when she moved back to Cincinnati to be with her ill father, who was diagnosed with cancer and died in June 1982. Giovanni has served as visiting professor at Ohio State University, Mount Saint Joseph's College, and at Virginia Tech, where she obtained a permanent position in 1989. In 1988, she published *Sacred Cows . . . and Other Edibles,* a collection of what one reviewer called "autobiographical essays" on a wide range of issues. Giovanni later reflected to *City Beat,* "I am iconoclastic. I wrote a book called *Sacred Cows and Other Edibles* and the point was that we take ourselves way too seriously. You have to laugh. I'm black. I laugh at everything. You have to laugh; otherwise, you'll be against yourself" (Wilson).

In 1994, *Racism 101,* a collection of previously published essays, was published. In it, Giovanni takes on a variety of topics ranging from higher education to the making of the film *Malcolm X* to the science fiction television series *Star Trek.* Giovanni notes: "I tried to vary by subject so you wouldn't be reading the same idea either in embrace or under attack, you know? I just wanted to write an interesting book and look at the world I inhabit. I'm a poet; I believe the image will reveal itself" (14).

In 1995, Giovanni was diagnosed with lung cancer. She notes:

> I smoked my last cigarette on Tuesday, February 7, at 9:00 a.m. in the parking lot at Jewish Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio. I don't have any trouble remembering this because I was to go into surgery at 10:00 a.m. and I, quite frankly, was unsure of the results. If I survived the surgery, it would be my last cigarette because I

> would have successfully had a cancerous tumor removed from my left lung. If I did not survive the surgery, well, I still wouldn't have another cigarette. ("A Deer in Headlights")

Giovanni wrote the introduction to the book *Breaking the Silence: Inspirational Stories of Black Cancer Survivors,* by Dr. Karin Stanford. Upon her recovery, Giovanni has continued to publish poetry, essays, and children's books while speaking and teaching. In 2004, her sister and mother died.

Nikki Giovanni's writings are rooted in the context of the Civil Rights movement and the struggle of the black American. Her voice during the height of debate in the 1960s and 1970s put Giovanni's poetry at the forefront of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Founded by the writer and activist Amiri Baraka (born Everett LeRoi Jones), the movement has been called the "single most controversial moment in the history of African American literature—possibly in American literature as a whole" (*Time*). The Black Arts Movement, in its production of myriad forms of art, challenged the canon of literature, which up to this time had been predominately represented by "dead white men," and presented "politically engaged work that explored the African American cultural and historical experience" (poets.org). Many felt that Giovanni's *Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgement* captured "the militant attitude of the civil rights and Black Arts movements of that time" (Hiltz). That attitude included her "call of urgency for Black people to realize their identities and understand their surroundings as part of a white-controlled culture."

The Black Arts Movement is sometimes referred to as the sister arm of the Black Power movement, with groups such as the Black Panthers and controversial figures like Malcolm X calling to the nation's consciousness militant voices that stood in contrast to some of the more peaceable approaches of the Civil Rights movement. In short, the Black Arts Movement did not march quietly through the streets singing "We Shall Overcome" so much as it "shouted emotional/political/cultural charged words as 'Bitter Black Bitterness/Black Black Bitter Bitterness/Bitterness Black Brothers/Bitter Black Get/Blacker Get Bitter/Get Black Bitterness/NOW'" and

> ever notice how it's only the ugly
> honkies
> who hate
> like Hitler was an ugly dude
> same with lyndon
> ike nixon hhh wallace maddox
> and all the governors of mississippi
> and you don't ever see a good-looking
> cop
> perhaps this only relates to the physical
> nature of the beast
> at best interesting for a beast
> and never beautiful
> by that black standard ("Ugly Honkies, or The Election Game and How to Win It")

Most of what has been written about Nikki Giovanni will include some synonym for *controversial* or *militant* or *activist,* and for many readers that is the draw of her writings. For those seeking poetry that strictly adheres to established rules and forms and a consistency of voice, Giovanni's writing will disappoint. For instance, one reviewer remarked that her "Kidnap Poem" contained "all the typical crap . . . the lack of punctuation for no real reason, the clichés weakly masked by NG's trying to fob this off as being from the POV of a child, the poor music, reasonless capitalization (& its lack), meaningless enjambment, etc." (Schneider). For the reader of Giovanni, the term *voice* seems to be a priority. As Fowler notes, "The development of a unique and distinctive voice has been perhaps the single most important achievement of Giovanni's career" (xxi). In fact, many people turn to Giovanni's poetry and essays after hearing a public reading. For Giovanni, Fowler continues, that is carrying on a central cultural theme of being black: "In her poetry Giovanni attempts to continue African and African American oral traditions, and she seems in many ways to have less reverence for the written word than for the spoken" (xxi).

On this theme of voice, it is also important to consider the content of Giovanni's writings, which

began with that militant, in-your-face voice within the Black Arts Movement. The thread that weaves its way through her work is "the centrality of race and gender," as notes Fowler. That focus remains consistent even in later poems, although, as Ryan Wahlberg and Bianca Ward note, "She shows a new emphasis on a universal struggle for truth, exchanging her earlier 'indignation,' for the individual quest for beauty" (Wahlberg and Ward). Giovanni continues to be "truth-telling," as she tells many of her audiences, and perhaps that may be why her writing is compelling: She and her poetry are accessible and yet difficult to categorize (or "institutionalize," as mentioned earlier). Kheven Lee LaGrone may have been accurate in the observation "Giovanni's activism is not an easy, simplistic, 'get-whitey' militancy. It's more reflective than that—her questions have changed with the world. She hasn't mellowed; she's matured" (LaGrone RV-9).

It is indisputable that Giovanni's words have moved some critics to vilify her forms of writing and the content of her emotionally charged ideas. And yet, 30 years after her initial thrust into the social consciousness, Giovanni's poetry, children's books, and nonfiction remain a strong voice in the human struggle for honest admission of past mistakes.

"Nikki-Rosa" (1968)

"Nikki-Rosa" was the nickname given the poet by her sister, Gary Ann (Fowler 381). Some consider this piece Giovanni's signature poem.

In this "childhood remembrances" poem, the speaker refers to specific events from her life that could be seen as constituting a "hard childhood"—but she wants all to know that really "[she] was quite happy." The poem gives the reader a glimpse of how the speaker views her own childhood and what in life really mattered to her.

The speaker reveals what it is like to remember growing up "Black"; in lines 2 through 26, she recalls memories that reflect the tone of Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Deferred" or Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Fowler outlines the time that Giovanni's family was "in Woodlawn" (line 3): "The family leaves Glenview and moves briefly to Woodlawn, a suburb of Cincinnati. Father teaches at South Woodlawn School and works evenings and weekends at the YMCA. Because Woodlawn has no elementary school for black children, sister Gary lives with father's half brother and his wife, Bill and Gladys Atkinson, in Columbus, Ohio, where she attends second grade" (xxxi). This explains the lines "they never talk about how happy you were to have / your mother / all to yourself" (lines 6–8).

The speaker fears that people—"biographers," which could mean literally the people who will write about the poet or, more universally, the reader of the poem who lacks similar experience—will not grasp the importance of the "Hollydale" event to her family. Hollydale was a subdivision located outside Cincinnati and intended for blacks. As had others, Giovanni's father had invested in the project; he purchased the land but was unable to obtain financing to build the house. Fowler suggests, "Because they were Black, they could not find banks to lend them the money" (382). The family sold their share of the investment and instead purchased a house in Lincoln Heights.

The speaker makes reference to her parents' relationship with a concessive tone: "And though they fought a lot / it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference / but only that everybody is together" (lines 22–24). Later, in 1958, Giovanni would have to move to her grandparents' home in Knoxville. But despite the poverty of her growing-up years, she does she want to be pitied, for she notes in the poem, "they never understand / Black love is Black wealth" (lines 29–30). The importance of the black family, Giovanni illustrates, is not based on external, material items (a nice house with indoor plumbing) and all of the niceties of living (quiet, tranquil family interactions). Rather, according to the speaker, the strength of the black family is the togetherness of the entire family—something the white person does not understand. Happiness, she notes, is achieved through from family; family is happiness.

As Kevin Lashley observes, "Giovanni's constant guard against the harmful effects of

dominant white society on American Blacks contributes to her popularity among a Black readership similarly on guard. And to many readers, her work offers a sense of hope where there otherwise is none."

For Discussion or Writing

1. What similarities do Langston Hughes's "Dream Deferred" and "Nikki-Rosa" share as they relate to dreams and families? How do their perspectives differ? Do both poems describe the same reality? Cite examples from each poem as you explain your answer.
2. Giovanni's narrator says "no white person" can ever understand "Black love." What does she mean by this comment? Is she herself stereotyping the "white person"?
3. The poem's speaker is concerned that "biographers never understand" her father's pain regarding the Hollydale situation. As you consider past events that you feel have shaped you, what do you think biographers will get wrong in your life? Why? What do you hope they will interpret correctly?

"Ego-Tripping" (1970)

Originally published in the volume *Re: Creation* (1970), this poem reappeared as the title poem in the 1973 children's collection *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People*. It serves as a reminder that there are bigger and "badder" things out there than humanity. Of all the people who have a right to boast, it is the "I" of the poem—and the poem supplies a list of reasons why this is so.

The first stanza may draw a connection between the Black Arts Movement and its predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance, as both movements' writers drew upon Africa as their heritage ("congo," "fertile crescent," "sphinx," "pyramid"). For instance, notice the echoes of these lines from Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1926):

> I've known rivers:
> I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
> flow of human blood in human veins.
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
> I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
> I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. (lines 1–6)

Giovanni echoes the pride of the "I" in the poem. After the indication that this "I" can compete with nature and the stars, the reader arrives at the colloquial line "I am bad."

The poem connects not only the place-names of Africa, but some of the human names. "My oldest daughter is nefertiti" (line 12) is a reference to "one of the most celebrated of the ancient Egyptians," Fowler notes, "despite the fact that relatively little is known of her" (402). The name *Nefertiti* means "the beauty has come" or "the beautiful woman has come." Most sources indicate she was the wife of Amenhotep IV (sometimes known as King Akhenaten), and, depending on the source, most believe that she helped him raise six daughters. When one of the daughters died, Fowler explains, the "parents' mourning was depicted in wall paintings." The speaker of the poem also refers to Hannibal, known for his military prowess and his conquests of the Punic Wars. Legend has it that he rode elephants to cross the Alps. She mentions that her "son noah built new / ark," perhaps a specific allusion to a contemporary person and Newark, New Jersey, or less symbolically, another vehicle for saving people. Last, the speaker says she puts the person of Jesus (God's son) into the things that "I" have done—specifically that she is "the one who would save."

This "I" is also involved in creation: She has made diamonds, uranium, jewels, oil, and gold. All of these things are traced back to the origin, or the birthplace: the Congo. And throughout the poem, Giovanni includes colloquial elements to connect past to present, sometimes using lofty language, "giving divine perfect light" (line 6), and following

it with "I am bad" (line 7). When she boasts, "I am so hip even my errors are correct" and then "I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal," she uses the common modifier *so* to qualify perfect, divine, ethereal, and surreal.

Interestingly, Giovanni tells a story about flying with her son to Zaire and explaining that Zaire was called Congo: "'The Congo!' he said excitedly. 'Mommy you were born here! We must be in Africa.' He was beaming. And so was I. I was never so happy that I had written a poem than I was at that very moment. 'Yes, Thomas. We're in Africa. I was born in the Congo'" (*Collected* 368).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Giovanni, as in her other poems, makes bold claims through the speaker in "Ego-Tripping." Some may interpret those claims as pride in one's heritage, whereas others may see them as a step backward because of the emphasis on one culture rather than a celebration of all cultures. Compare the assertions of black identity in "Ego-Tripping" with claims made in other Giovanni poems.
2. Is using African imagery a positive way of celebrating black heritage? What is the nature of the relationship between African-American and African culture? Why did writers of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement draw heavily from African heritage? Has there been a shift in later generations of black artists?
3. What is the impact of Giovanni's use of colloquial language? Why does she use such phrases and words, and does she accomplish her overall purpose through their use?
4. What poetic effect does Giovanni create in her selection of specific historical events and people?

"When I Die" (1972)

Published in the 1972 volume *My House,* this poem gives directions about how people should respond when the speaker dies. But in this last will and testament, the speaker takes one last honest swing at those who have perpetuated injustice on her and on black women. She is direct and sometimes punishing with her words toward those who "hurt me," the government for its failure to protect the rights of black women, the "black man" who criticized the poet, and "everyone who loved me." She is specifically concerned that her son be told the correct story of the poet's life—one that is about living "the true revolution."

Whether significant or not, Giovanni, in both this poem and most of her earlier works, uses the uncapitalized first-person pronoun. Perhaps this indicates or represents how the poet views herself in retrospect, or perhaps it is a way to de-emphasize the individual and encourage the viewing of this poem's narrator as one who is speaking truth. Perhaps the lowercase *i* is trying to underscore a theme within Giovanni's work: to focus on the truth and not so much on the speaker of that truth. Whatever the reason, Giovanni will all but drop the *i* for *I* in her poetry beginning with the volume *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983).

The first stanza of "When I Die" is reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno,* in which the poet metes out just and appropriate punishment for the crime committed. The "crime" here is that if those "who ever hurt me" cry, it is not because of regret for their actions but because they are crying false tears. These people (or ideas) are "the evil that passed itself off as a person." The speaker's wish that these people cry until their eyes fall out evokes a common idiom in American culture. Note, too, that in some cultures it is said that the eyes are the windows to the soul. "A million maggots" may be a reference to the French poet Charles Baudelaire's "Au Lecteur" ("To the Reader") in his volume *Flowers of Evil* (1857): "like hives of maggots, thickly seething / Within our brains a host of demons surges" (lines 21–22). Giovanni's speaker claims that she (or truth) has "probably tried to love" this type of "person."

The poet's political criticisms arise in the second stanza, in which she singles out the National Security Council (whose purpose is to advise and assist the president on national security and foreign policy),

Interpol (which facilitates international police cooperation even where diplomatic relations do not exist between particular countries), and the FBI-CIA Foundation, which is Giovanni's way of saying both the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) really function as one unit. All of these governmental organizations, Giovanni notes, protected themselves more than they considered protecting their citizens (and, more specifically, the black woman).

In the third stanza, the speaker instructs her listeners to take those things that represented her work (poetry, books, pictures, posters) and "let them burn—throw acid on them—shit on them" because that is what in truth has been happening all along. Perhaps here Giovanni wants the reader to focus not so much on the poet, as again, on the message of truth.

Her work and life, the speaker continues in stanza 4, will only "[scare] white folk" and make "black ones truly mad." If anything, this stanza articulates the racial tension of the 1960s and the 1970s. For Giovanni, along with others in the Black Arts Movement, the vehicle for this "do what you do" sentiment is art.

The speaker has a special, specific message for her son, however—to tell him the story of how she lived and the story of wanting "rebirth." Here the agent holding the speaker back is not so much white repression or past events that cannot be changed, but her own people, who lack vision and fail to break free of history.

In coupletlike fashion, the poet ends with the truth: "Revolution," or radical change, results from "touching."

For Discussion or Writing

1. List the various things the poem's speaker wants done when she dies. Do these seem consistent with the conclusion she draws in the end—"and if ever i touched a life . . ."—or is this merely wishful thinking?
2. How can we reconcile the revolution of the Black Arts Movement with what Giovanni concludes constitutes "revolution"?
3. Why does the speaker single out Giovanni's poem "Nikki-Rosa" as being one that she does not want read when she dies?
4. How is this poem structured like a Shakespearean sonnet? How does the structure affect its impact on the reader?

"Stardate Number 18628.190" (1995)

This poem was originally published as "Light the Candles" in *Essence,* a magazine that describes itself as "the definitive voice of dynamic African American women." The original title seems to reflect the overall tone of the piece, while the revised poem refers to the *Star Trek* series, to which Giovanni makes periodic references in her talks. For Giovanni, to explore space is a "no-brainer"; she is a fan of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) Space Shuttle program. As she told students at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, she spoke at NASA in February 2003 as the "token black person" during Black History Month.

The format of the poem is a style that Giovanni begins to experiment with in the volume *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983), characterized by the use of block paragraphing and ellipses. The speaker reminds the reader, "This is not a poem" at the beginning of stanzas 1, 3, and 5. For Giovanni, as mentioned previously, poems are the vehicle for art, and preexisting institutions—such as a set way of writing poetry—are meant to be destroyed. Or, in Giovanni's case, deliberately stated: "This is not a poem."

Stanza 1 begins with a small yet familiar metaphor that the speaker recalls: something as simple as a hot drink in the beginning of spring. Giovanni then uses another familiar metaphor, that of a quilt, which evokes memories of family history and perhaps reinforces the idea "Black love is Black wealth." Here she may be referring to what white people do with quilts, treating them as something more to be admired than to be practically useful. For the poem's speaker, however, the quilt is made from family history and is thus comforting and "here to keep me warm."

The speaker begins stanza 3 with "This is not a sonnet," referring to the 14-line form that was popularized in the 1200s and revived in the late 1500s by writers such as Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, and William Shakespeare. The sonnet, to the writers and readers of that era, was a vehicle of rhyme and meter. Not so for Giovanni, who turns to the rhyme and meter of her experiences: hymns, spirituals, and a progression of popular vocalists and performance artists known to the poet. Among them are the opera singers Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price and the blues singers Betsy Smith, Dinah Washington, and Etta James. To the poem's speaker, the voices that truly reflect "Planet Earth" are the voices of black women such as these. And in stanza 3, the common objects and events that make up the experiences of the speaker are what truly matter.

So what *is* this poem that is neither a poem nor specifically a sonnet? "It is a celebration of the road we have traveled," states Giovanni. "This is the Black woman," she continues, and the full range of all she has experienced. It is a celebration of others who have suffered harm or death because of what they represented include blacks who fought in wars and were assassinated.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is poetic about the science fiction series *Star Trek*? What is it about the television series that energizes Giovanni's poem? How is the tone of the poem affected when the title is changed from "Light the Candles" to "Stardate"? Discuss your answer fully.
2. Is the stardate a literal date (in *Star Trek* terms), or do you think Giovanni just made it up? You might consider a letter that Horace Greeley addressed to Abraham Lincoln entitled "The Prayer of Twenty Millions." Why does Giovanni make this reference and what similarities do the letter and this poem share?
3. Why does Giovanni write "This is not a poem," even though the work follows the general tone and form of her poems? Is the statement true in any way?
4. Read a few issues of the magazine *Essence,* for which this poem was first written. How does the editorial content of that magazine reflect the overall tone of this poem? Discuss.

"Train Rides" (1999)

Published in the volume *Blues: For All the Changes,* "Train Rides" continues Giovanni's "truth-telling" expression, connecting trivial things in the near-present (what one wears and when) to the near-trivial train rides of her past. But, as seen in most of her poetry and writings, she will use the vehicle of words to note truth as she sees it and expose that truth's implications as they relate to the poet. This particular volume of work was accepted fairly well, but some critics thought Giovanni was being lazy and relying too much on the poet's personal life as subject matter for her rants.

A main thread in "Train Rides" is the notion of a black male and the desire to be that "beautiful boy." Society is at fault for building institutions to make sure these boys/men do not fulfill their destinies or dreams; according to Giovanni, that institution is the prison—a place, she notes, for which there is "no excuse." The speaker makes a small confession that at one time she thought prisons might be a good idea but now admits that is no longer true. What is true is that money could be spent on other things, such as better roads, but for the speaker, railway systems are the ideal mode of travel. And to complicate matters further, the speaker is going to rail against those black men who are not "beautiful" but are "foolish things" such as a "lawn jockey."

The occasion of the poem is an October day, which may or may not be technically the "first day of fall," but it feels like it. It is a time of transition in nature (working with the soil), but also in fashion. The speaker depicts the petty people (including the media) who emphasize the trivial things in life as the "fashion police" because their role is to shame the individual. Much of Giovanni's poetry echos this idea of living in fear of being shamed.

As she told a college audience in 2002: "I think it's so sad, that we have a whole generation that's afraid. Afraid to speak up, afraid to say anything that may offend somebody, and yet your rights are being taken away slowly" (Brown). She continues this theme with the scene of coming face to face with a mother mouse; the speaker is afraid because "humans don't do very well with other life forms." The mother mouse will not abandon her babies, and thus the speaker recognizes a universal truth in the role of the mother mouse.

The occasion of the poem reminds the speaker of the trips she and her sister would take from Cincinnati, to Knoxville, traveling to her maternal grandparents' home. Giovanni points out that it is a congregation of black men who protect the two girls during their travels. Now, she laments, the black man is no longer in the position of protecting, as he should be, and is instead in prison. Although she admits that segregation is not right, she points out that the "Band of Brothers" watched over them.

The speaker then states that she has a "lawn jockey," which for many African Americans and other is an offensive reminder of the days when blacks were servants to whites. But she has one of them anyway, explaining, "I collect foolish things, but they make me happy." The prime example of the embodiment of a lawn jockey is those who stand in the way of progress for blacks, who are "despicable" and "lack good sense" and "common compassion."

The speaker singles out Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who makes "Thurgood Marshall turn over in his grave" by taking advantage of some of the benefits of desegregation while arguing that it does not work. For Giovanni, growing up in segregated America is a thing to be celebrated because of the sense of "keeping it real" and preserving that sense of community.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the speaker's admission that she has a lawn jockey in her yard affect the tone of the poem? Many African Americans find lawn jockeys offensive. Why would the speaker's collection of such "foolish things" make her happy?
2. What impact does the title have on the rest of the poem? How would you interpret this poem if you did not know its title? Compare the fondness for railways in this poem with the attitudes in stories such as Donald Crews's children's books *Freight Train, Bigmama's,* and *Shortcut.*
3. Read "Train Rides" and "Possum Crossing." Explore the notions of interruptions by nature in both works.
4. Giovanni often returns to the idea of the "beautiful boy," especially in the context of rap and hip hop as well as in her criticism of the prison system. In the late 1990s, when the well-known rapper Tupac Shakur was killed, an *Ebony* writer noted that Giovanni responded by calling rap a "'petition,' a plea from young people to look at their lives." Giovanni added, "That's one reason that beautiful boy [Tupac] is dead, because he tried to 'keep it real'" (Kinnon). Explore Giovanni's concept of the "beautiful boy" in both her writing and her public speaking.

"Possum Crossing" (2002)

This poem appeared in *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not Quite Poems,* published in 2002. For some readers, it sounds like an environmental statement, a variation on a "be kind to animals" sermon. However, such an interpretation would signal a complete shift from the poet's larger work. In Giovanni's later writing, we see her draw upon the entire world around her. In this poem, as in her other work, she continues to explore the relationship between the individual and the surrounding world. "Possum Crossing" is no different: She reminds the reader that as we climb into our man-made vehicles and rush to our destination, there is a whole world out there and we should remember it.

In stanza 1, Giovanni describes in an almost uncharacteristic way a scene: the beginning of a car trip. What is different about this stanza is that it can be considered a normal, formatted structure describing an everyday scene. The stanza has four

lines and no rhyme scheme, but a syllable form of *6-8-8-8*. The car is the thing that interrupts the scene; its "lights cast an eerie glow." The alliteration of "slick street" provides the anticipation for the next line's "Hitting brakes." The speaker does not seem to have learned from past encounters with animals in the road. The problem, she notes through her words and punctuation, is that the animals themselves seem to be bothered by the rushing of humans in their cars: "Mother-to-be possum occasionally lopes home . . . being / naturally . . . slow her condition makes her even more ginger."

The speaker's message, then, is in stanza 3: "We need a sign POSSUM CROSSING." By shifting from the first-person singular (the *I* of the story) to the plural (the *We* of this stanza, including the "coffee-gurgling neighbors"), the speaker is not so much telling the world to look out for nature, but to look out for herself—for she, too, is one of those neighbors whose "coffee splashes over the cup." The sign is to warn, to remind herself (and others) of the context of nature and the world and history: for, she notes, in stanza 4, the place in history that the birds have because of their heritage as the "living kin of dinosaurs." The irony is that in the next moment, that bird could become what it is eating from the road. Giovanni may also be making a reference to humans here, and perhaps this is where the lesson lies: Like the dinosaurs, we are not "invincible."

Back in real time, the speaker, who has not been paying attention to her driving, catches the reflection of light off some kind of animal. The first four lines of stanza 5 reflect the stream of thoughts racing through her mind; she then catches her breath, as indicated by the line length and ellipsis. The thing in the road, surprisingly, is "a big wet leaf" that is described in living terms ("struggling . . . to lift itself"). And the poem makes the connection: All living things are in the yearning, the evolution to be better.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In this particular poem, Giovanni focuses on the theme of nature and how humanity interacts with it. Often a poet will draw conclusions or lessons from these types of interactions. What is Giovanni's intention in describing various aspects of nature juxtaposed with an everyday experience such as driving? To aid in your discussion or writing, begin by listing the contrasting elements of nature and human existence.
2. The traditional haiku generally presents a scene—perhaps from nature—and then surprises the reader with a touch of irony in the final line. With this in mind, how does "Possum Crossing" function like a traditional haiku?
3. Select other poets or writers who use nature as their main subject matter—for instance, Robert Frost, Barbara Kingsolver, or Henry David Thoreau. Compare and contrast the messages expressed by those writers with Giovanni's theme in this poem.

"Have Dinner with Me" (2002)

Like many Americans, Giovanni was deeply affected and disturbed by the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. Her volume *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* contained five poems about the events. These included "Desperate Acts," in which she admits that it is hard to understand "Why angry men commit / desperate acts"; "9:11:01," in which she denounces George W. Bush and says he "blew it" by not asking citizens, especially African Americans, for the United States to be forgiven; "The Self-Evident Poem," in which she reflects on the plight and history of blacks and feels "sorry for the white folks who still do not understand this is another century and we just can't keep bombing the same people over and over"; and "My America," in which Giovanni responds to Hugh Downs (a news anchor during the time of the attacks) by saying her country is "Not a bad country . . . neither the best or the worst . . . just a place we call home."

In "Have Dinner with Me," the speaker pleads for a renewed sense of community. The first stanza

describes falling people as well as "Windows on the World," the restaurant on the top floors of the World Trade Center's North Tower. Seventy-three staff members and 77 guests were reportedly in the restaurant during the attack. Specifically, Giovanni singles out "the brother and the sister" some identified as Norberto Hernandez and Claribel Hernandez in one of the most controversial photos in the media coverage of the attack that became known as "The Falling Man" and showed a man jumping from the building. (It was discovered later that the man was not Norberto and that his remains were in fact found in a stairwell.) This does not, however, detract from the poem, for the reference reminds the reader that individuals were going about their work to serve others and to help their families.

Giovanni's message to the reader is an oft-referenced stanza, a message that is consistent with her major concerns: "This is a time of neighbors / This is a time of neighborhoods." In a kind of summary, she brings the poem's pacing to a close by reviewing the "helpless characters" of the last stanzas with the verbs "Feed . . . Pet . . . Call . . . Eat . . .": all neighborly things to do.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What impact does the later identity of the Falling Man have on the poem? Consider Tim O'Brien's take on "truth" in his story *The Things They Carried:* "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth." Discuss the impact of O'Brien's statement as it applies to this poem and to other written works that may include historical inaccuracies.
2. As with other tragic events in a country's history, the attacks of September 11, 2001, caused many people to attempt to articulate the emotion of the moment and to understand the meaning behind the events. Gather several other artistic and journalistic reactions to the events of September 11, 2001, and compare and contrast the meaning of those texts with Giovanni's poem.

"Quilts" (2003)

The real story behind this poem is its occasion: In 2003, the Contemporary QuiltArt Association called together 40 poets and 40 quilters "to do something special," according to Gayle Bryan, former president of the association. The association matched up the quilters with poets; each pair would collaborate for a year "investigating the intersections between textile art and poetry, ultimately creating artforms that fused the two genres." The quilter Sally Sellers approached Giovanni with the project after her daughter heard Giovanni at school. Seller notes that she struggled with ideas for her quilt she called "I'm Not Sorry," until she received Giovanni's poem "Quilts." Following the poem's first lines, Sellers composed her materials from mostly used and stained linens. "Nikki's words reminded me that imperfect tablecloths were far more interesting than the pristine folds of fabric stashed away in the linen closet," Sellers said. For Sellers, to highlight the stains in her quilt with gold beads was to play off Giovanni's idea that "the stain was what was to be celebrated."

The poem is an interesting extension to her earlier work "When I Die," written when Giovanni was 25 years old. Now, 35 years later, we see the poet considering mutability and age and how she will be remembered. "Quilts," as "When I Die," does not offer an apology or regret for the past. Although the poem's speaker states, "I am a failure," it is not in the usual sense. The failure arises from becoming older—and this is what marks the most noticeable difference between the two poems. Giovanni continues the metaphor of the quilt as a life throughout the poem, utilizing words such as *fading, frayed,* and *failing.* And though the poem longs for those younger days, the speaker is nonetheless content with those memories. The speaker's "plea" appears toward the end of the poem, when she hopes her words or actions will provide comfort to the young and companionship for the old.

Giovanni alludes to this quilt imagery in other poems as well, notably "Stardate Number 18628.190" in the lines "This is not a poem / This is a summer quilt." Fowler notes that this is

"a metaphor of family history and family love; the pieces of the quilt are scraps of cloth, each of which reminds the speaker of an event and a person in her family's history . . . the quilt's value is based on its warming, life-sustaining, and life-nurturing powers" (xxiii–xxiv).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Find a photo of the quilt Sally Sellers made in collaboration with Giovanni (at the time of this writing, accessible at www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5946). How effective is the quilt by itself? How would you describe the quilt's overall impact along with its detail? How is the meaning of Sellers's piece enhanced by Giovanni's poem? How is the Giovanni poem enhanced by Sellers's quilt?
2. In his poem "Ars Poetica" Archibald MacLeish attempts to describe the art of the poem. He ends with the lines "A poem should not mean / But be." MacLeish's contemporary Carl Sandburg attempted the same challenge of defining poetry in the preface of "Good Morning, America." Some poets, such as Robert Blake, have defied traditional definitions of poetry by combining it with other genres. Challenge the assertion that a poem should be able to stand by itself. What are the benefits and drawbacks of multigenre art?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON GIOVANNI AND HER WORK

1. Who is Giovanni's intended audience? From her poetry and essays, defend your answer. Then consider how she treats that audience and identify the tone she uses to address it.
2. Respond to Giovanni's thoughts on the intersection of art and truth: "I like to think that if truth has any bearing on art, my poetry and prose is art because it's truthful. I say that while recognizing that every time a truth is learned a new thesis, synthesis, antithesis is set in motion" (*Sacred Cows*).
3. Respond to Giovanni's justification of the black perspective and why she thinks that viewpoint may be superior: "I'm totally convinced that any Black women who consciously circled the earth, let alone landed on another planet, would have a very different view of the heavens as well as the meagerness of earth. I think Black people, and Black Americans especially, are the only people to really view earth from its proper perspective since we have no land that we can in any historical way call our own" (*Sacred Cows* 61).
4. Giovanni thinks poets bear the responsibility of recording history: "I like to tell the truth as I see it. I hope others do the same. That's why literature is so important. We cannot possibly leave it to history as a discipline nor to sociology nor science nor economics to tell the story of our people" (*Sacred Cows* 61). What is your response to Giovanni's claim?
5. Some have termed Nikki Giovanni the "poet of the people," while others say she is a social poet. Where do you place Giovanni in her overall contribution to the poetical canon?

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Chris Judson

Joy Harjo (1951–)

> This land is a poem of ochre and burnt sand I could never write, unless paper were the sacrament of sky, and ink the broken line of wild horses staggering the horizon several miles away. Even then, does anything written ever matter to the earth, wind, and sky?
>
> (Harjo and Strom 30)

Kimberley Blaeser describes Joy Harjo as a writer who "challenges the boundaries between the oral and written" (253). Those familiar with Harjo's life might argue that the need to challenge boundaries was something instilled in Harjo at birth.

Joy Harjo was born May 9, 1951, as Joy Foster, the daughter of Allen W. Foster, a full-blooded Muscogee (Creek), and Wynema Baker Foster, who was part Cherokee. She later changed her name to *Joy Harjo,* a family name that means "courage." Although her parents raised her in the urban landscape of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Harjo says she has never considered that her only home. In an interview with Sharyn Stever, Harjo associates the feeling of displacement in her work to the 1832 forced removal of her ancestors from Alabama:

> Displacement is a spiritual condition. It is not only physical displacement, but displacement of spirit as well. The original stories first occurred in another landscape, the older spirits live there, a particular matrix that feeds us. It's linked up to the heart. (*The Spiral of Memory* 75–76)

Harjo calls upon that matrix when she writes, invoking the spirit of her ancestors as muse and spiritual guide. That connection is so strong that Harjo admits it is, at times, as if an old Creek Indian enters the room and stands over her as she writes (*Spiral* 37).

While the influence of Indian ancestry has benefited her writing, being "mixed blood" (as she refers to herself) has not always been easy. There was no reservation for the Oklahoma Muskogee, and Harjo often felt caught between two cultures. She found speaking difficult and school a frightening experience. Her teachers were frustrated by her muteness and often threatened to call her parents. Life at home was not much better. Her father suffered from alcoholism and her parents divorced when she was eight.

As a young child, Harjo found a way to express her pain and confusion through drawing. Art was a strong presence in Harjo's life; her grandmother and her favorite aunt, Lois Harjo Ball, were both painters. Painting allowed Harjo to communicate without words, giving her opportunities to succeed in school. When Harjo was 14, she left home to attend the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, a boarding school she describes as "sort of like an Indian *Fame* school," referring to the fine-arts school portrayed in the 1980s television series (*Spiral* 119). But life is never as easy as it is on television, and the same year she graduated she gave birth to her first child.

For many women, becoming a mother at such an early age perpetuates the cycle of poverty, but Harjo wanted to show her new son, Phil Dayn, a better way. She enrolled in the University of New Mexico as a premed student, soon switching her

major to painting. It was during this time that Harjo became friends with Leo Romero, a poet who took Harjo to readings by native writers. The magic of language was nothing new to her; some of her strongest childhood memories involve her mother, who worked as a waitress and cook, sitting at the kitchen table composing "heartbreak songs" on an old typewriter. Still, it was not until the Acoma poet SIMON J. ORTIZ and the Laguna Pueblo poet and writer LESLIE MARMON SILKO took her under their wings that Harjo began to see the power of poetry to express the deep wounds and great joys of native peoples. She read more and more poetry, seeking out writers like Scott Momaday, James Welch, Roberta Hill, and Richard Hugo, authors whose work resonated with personal meaning for Harjo.

In her last year as an undergraduate, Harjo transferred to the English department as a creative writing major. She explains the shift in an interview with Laura Coltelli:

> I found that language, through poetry, was taking on more magical qualities than my painting. I could say more when I wrote. Soon it wasn't a choice. Poetry-speaking "called me" in a sense. And I couldn't say no. (*Spiral* 60)

Poetry entered Harjo's life at a difficult time. She was raising two young children (Harjo's daughter, Rainy Dawn, was born four years after Phil) and was involved in a relationship with a volatile man who alternated between drinking and disappearing. She had no car and had to walk to classes, pushing a stroller loaded with school supplies, baby items, and her kids. Harjo was deeply depressed. Her first poems were borne of that depression; she describes them as poetry that

> made roots from the compelling need to speak, to hear, to walk gracefully from one century to the next—despite the lines at the food stamp office, changing diapers, writing papers for classes, organizing for political action—without the luxury of a wife, a washer and dryer, a cook or nanny or a known library of publications by Indian writers. (*How We Became Human* xx)

In 1975, those early poems were published in a chapbook entitled *The Last Song*. While many of the poems stemmed from Harjo's own experiences, both as an Indian and as a woman, they touched on universal truths, exposing the deepest meanings in the simplest things. Norma Wilson addresses Harjo's ability to capture the realities of life in her 2001 *The Nature of Native American Poetry*: "Rather than romanticizing the lives of Native American women, Harjo writes truthfully about the fragmented families of many of them and their consequent suffering" (112–113). This truth is especially revealed in the lines of the poem "Conversations between Here and Home," where Harjo warns readers, "Angry women are building / houses of stones. / They are grinding the mortar / between straw-thin teeth / and broken families" (*Human* 11).

In 1976, Harjo graduated from the University of New Mexico with a B.A. in poetry and received an Academy for American Poetry Award that same year. Despite her apparent success, Harjo explains that poetry did not immediately transform her life:

> I did not walk off into the sunset with poetry, or hit the town with a blaze of gunfire with poetry guarding my back. Rather, the journey toward poetry worked exactly as the process of writing a poem. It started from the inside out, then turned back in to complete a movement. (*Human* xix)

In 1978, Harjo completed her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and was awarded her first of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts; she received the second in 1992.

Harjo's second volume of poetry, *What Moon Drove Me to This?,* was published in 1980 and contained all of the poems from *The Last Song,* along with 48 new poems. Its release was met with acclaim from literary critics such as Andrew Wiglet, who

said, "At her best the energy generated by this journeying creates a powerful sense of identity that incorporates everything into the poetic self, so that finally she can speak for all the earth" (Wilson 112). The earth for which Harjo speaks is one of myth (meaning cultural stories based on truths) and heritage, where horses can be "finely tuned spirits of the psyche" (*Spiral* 28) and a woman can see herself in the "continuance of blue sky" and "the throat of the mountains" (*Human* 25).

Despite Harjo's decision to trade paintbrush for pen, the influence of her beginnings as a painter deeply informs her writing. In an interview with Marilyn Kallet, Harjo admits, "I made the decision to work with words and the power of words, to work with language, yet I approach the art as a visual artist" (Wilson 110–111). As if to nurture this side of herself further, Harjo studied filmmaking at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe in 1982. This training not only allowed her to accumulate numerous screenwriting credits, including public-service announcements and teleplays, but also served to enrich her poetry.

Published within a year of her film studies, Harjo's third collection, *She Had Some Horses,* is much more graphic than her previous writings. Place had always been an important facet of Harjo's work, but after Harjo's film training, the poems become so grounded in place and the personas depicted in the poems so formed that readers have taken them for real. This is especially the case with "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window." Many readers have approached Harjo about the woman in the poem, "sure that they knew her, or one of her cousins, her sister, or they had read about the story in the newspaper where they lived, be it New York or Lincoln, Nebraska, or Albuquerque" (*Spiral* 19). Harjo's ability to set the scene, to make a woman so real that readers feel they have known her, is what gives her poetry such force.

It is also in this volume that Harjo's writing begins to take on its own unique style, combining familiar literary techniques with her own sense of Indian tradition and ceremony. A primary example is Harjo's use of repetition. Where other poets repeat words or phrases to create a feeling of balance or to accentuate meaning, Harjo uses repetition as a way to include the reader in the ceremony of the poem. Harjo says the technique is effective because "repetition has always been used, ceremonially, in telling stories, in effective speaking, so that what is said becomes a litany, and gives you a way to enter into what is being said, and a way to emerge whole, but changed" (*Spiral* 17).

Giving readers "a way to emerge whole, but changed" is something Harjo does intentionally, believing that poetry should be part form and part function: "In a native context art was not just something beautiful to put up on the wall and look at; it was created in the context of its *usefulness* for the people" (*Spiral* 43). As does Carolyn Forché, Harjo uses her poetry to depict a true picture of the world. Although that world is not always pretty, Harjo writes that "the poet is charged with the role of being the truth teller of the culture, of the times . . . there is something about poetry that demands the truth, and you cannot separate the poem from your political reality" (*Spiral* 141).

Political reality is always evident in Harjo's poetry. She does not shy away from the complex issues of America's colonization and oppression of people of color and what she calls the "myth of Christopher Columbus's 'discovery'" (*Reinventing the Enemy's Language* 21). In 1986, Harjo was invited to present a paper at a conference on aboriginal education in Vancouver. There she met other women concerned over the loss of indigenous cultures. Through a lively discussion over coffee, the women began to recognize the need for an anthology where native women "could speak across the world intimately to each other" (*Reinventing* 21). Over the next three years, Harjo worked closely with her fellow native poet Gloria Bird to gather and edit essays, poems, and stories by contemporary native women from more than 50 tribal nations into an anthology entitled *Reinventing the Enemy's Language.*

Since 1989, Harjo has published six additional books: *Secrets from the Center of the World,* for which she composed poetic prose to be paired with

landscape photographs by the astronomer Stephen Strom; *In Mad Love and War* (1990), which received the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award and the William Carlos William Award; *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994), which featured Harjo's own reflections on her poems and earned the Oklahoma Book Arts award; *A Map to the Next World* (2000); a children's book entitled *The Good Luck Cat* (2000); and *How We Became Human* (2002). Additionally, Harjo's poetry, essays, and short stories have been published in numerous magazines, journals, and anthologies.

In 1992, Harjo added musician to her list of professions, forming an all–Native American band called Poetic Justice. The band recorded two CDs, *Furious Light* (Bethesda, Md.: Watershed, 1986) and *Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century* (Boulder, Colo.: Silver Wave Records, 1996), on which Harjo plays soprano and alto saxophone and reads her poetry to music. Later Harjo would form a new band, Joy Harjo and the Real Revolution, and produce an additional CD entitled *Native Joy* (Brooklyn, N.Y., Mekko Records, 2003). Harjo says she does not separate "the self that practices the art of saxophone from the self who writes poetry . . . [but that] I initially felt closer to jazz than I ever did to any of the poetry I first read." She attributes that connection partly to difference in form: "Music doesn't have the added boundary of words" (*Spiral* 101).

The other reason Harjo may have felt closer to jazz than to poetry may be due to what Gloria Bird refers to as "conventional Euro-American standards of what constitutes good literature" (*Reinventing* 28). Those standards have led to a canonization of literature in the United States that has historically excluded women and people of color. This exclusion also initially caused Harjo to decline offers of teaching positions at universities: "I had run from teaching in the universities . . . I was afraid that in that atmosphere, in that place, I was going to lose my poetry" (*Spiral* 119). Eventually Harjo accepted a position at the University of Colorado and was able to find a way to include her vision of poetry in her teaching. Since then she has taught at Arizona State University, the University of Montana, the University of Arizona, the University of New Mexico, and the University of California.

Poet, essayist, filmmaker, editor, musician, professor, mother, woman, Indian: For Harjo, these are not separate titles, but rather phases "in a continuous exploration of the self and the surrounding environment," a journey necessary for her life's work of "reclaiming the memory stolen from our peoples when we were dispossessed from our lands east of the Mississippi; it has to do with restoring us" (*Spiral* 11; *Reinventing* 59). Harjo's journey continues as she strives to find the perfect way to tell the story of us all, noting with each new experience that her vision "expands, deepens. Eventually, I might succeed in not needing words; perhaps the perfect poem is wordless" (*Spiral* 86).

She Had Some Horses (1983)

Norma Wilson calls Harjo's third volume of poetry "an exorcism of the kind of fear that can paralyze an individual or a culture" (2001). In fact, the collection begins and ends on that note with the framework of paired poems, "Call It Fear," in which Harjo gives name to the "edge where shadows and bones of some of us walk backwards," and "I Give You Back," in which Harjo releases the fear that would haunt her. Between those two poems are other voices, other "Survivors" and "Things I Should Have Said," all tied together because of what has held them back.

"The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" is frozen on the ledge of a tenement building on the East Side of Chicago. She has no name, though her children do, and she is stuck there, between ascension and decline, so that all who see her may see themselves. To Harjo, her name is The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window, and while other poets might have considered the phrase too awkward, Harjo knows it as the woman's rightful name. The name is reminiscent of Indian surnames, like *Black Cloud* or *Running Bear,* and through its repetition the woman becomes worthy of it.

The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window could be anyone. Readers begin to know her through the layering of concrete details upon the repetitive framework of what the woman is—"She is a woman of children. . . . She is her mother's daughter. . . . She is all the women. . . ."—and what she sees: "She sees Lake Michigan. . . . She sees other buildings. . . . She sees other women. . . ." Through the incantation that names her, the woman becomes so real to readers that many have approached Harjo to say they have known her. And though the Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window was not based on a real person or event, Harjo told Sharyn Stever in an interview that the woman followed her "in spirit so to speak" from an empty rocking chair she saw on a visit to the Chicago Indian Center. The woman is real because she is born from "a woman's need to speak, to be seen in a cityscape that deemed her invisible," and she speaks for us all (*Spiral* 81).

A common theme in Native American literature is the role of memory. Harjo acknowledges the importance of memory in preserving traditions and language, in passing a culture onto the next generation. But Harjo also says there is another type of memory:

> I see it as occurring, not just going back, but occurring right now, and also future occurrence so that you can remember things in a way that makes what occurs now beautiful. . . . People often forget that everything they say, everything they do, think, feel, dream, has effect. . . . (*Spiral* 24)

This type of memory is invoked by Harjo in the poems of this anthology. In "Skeleton of Winter," Harjo is "memory alive . . . an intricate part of this web of motion," where she can see with "the othersight." "Remember" implores readers to go beyond the act of thinking about the past, to remember what is and has been as "alive poems," so that we may "remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you."

The title poem, "She Had Some Horses," was inspired by Simon J. Ortiz's poem/song for his daughter, "There Are Horses Everywhere" (*Human* 212–213). While the poem obviously makes use of repetition, its purpose is not so obvious. On the surface, readers can feel the building of momentum, the ceremonial aspect of the phrase "She had horses" pulling them into the poem, inviting them to chant with Harjo. The deeper effect is that readers become comfortable with the pattern of the poem and its opposition of phrases ("She had horses who lied. / She had horses who told the truth. . . . She had horses who whispered. . . . She had horses who screamed . . ."), so that when Harjo turns the poem on end with the last line, "These were the same horses," readers are stunned into recognizing that in this poem, as in many of life's conflicts, polarity is more often a function of the way one chooses to look at things than actual circumstances.

Harjo ends the collection with an attempt to "gather up all the wounded: women, the tribe and other tribes, and provoke a healing in the way that sometimes only the power of language can, by facing fear, addressing it, standing up to it, for fear is a real entity" (*Spiral* 78). In the poem "I Give You Back," the wounded are given voice through Harjo's litany of release and her reminder that fear only has power when we let it consume us. Inspired by "A Litany for Survival" from Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn,* "I Give You Back" is Harjo's reaction to the hate and destruction that fear can instigate.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Carl Sandburg's poem "New Hampshire Again." Compare the techniques of repetition and imagery used by Harjo and Sandburg. Think of an event, person, or place that is central to who you have become and try to capture it in the form of an "I Remember" poem.
2. When asked what the horses in her poems represent, Harjo has replied that she feels "a sense of privacy about the act of poetry itself. I feel this especially about the horses. I have a kinship with horses that is beyond explanation" (*Spiral* 109). Why do you think Harjo may be reluc-

tant to spell out for readers the meaning of the horses? What do the horses represent for you?

3. Analyze Harjo's use of animals in her poetry. Which animals are most common in her work? What does each animal represent in the Creek culture? Does Harjo use each animal consistently with its Creek symbolism? If not, how has she adapted the animals to suit the need of each poem?

Reinventing the Enemy's Language (1997)

Harjo and Bird begin this anthology with an introduction that explains its absolute necessity. They remind readers that "not very long ago, native peoples were 100 percent of the population of this hemisphere. In the United States we are now one-half of one percent, and growing" (21). They describe the continued struggle of indigenous peoples for survival in countries where their lands have been stolen and their customs and languages all but eradicated. The book is necessary as a forum for indigenous peoples to show the world that they are "still here, still telling stories, still singing whether it be in our native languages or in the 'enemy' tongue" (31). To that end, Harjo and Bird have collected poetry, fiction, prayers, and narratives from 87 writers to represent the literature of the aboriginal people of North America.

They believed strongly that "to understand the direction of a society one must look to the women who are birthing and ultimately raising the next generation" (21), and so they invited only women to submit their work. The writers they chose to include are diverse, ranging from the Arctic Circle to the southern United States. Despite their differences, they are all women and have known the same cycles within their lives. Harjo and Bird use these cycles to form the organization for the anthology: genesis, struggle, transformation, and the returning. Harjo herself has two pieces in the anthology, choosing to be heard at both the genesis and the returning.

"Warrior Road" is an autobiographical piece in which Harjo addresses the births of her children. Through detailed description of the sterile, impersonal hospital and the cold detachment of the hospital staff, she emphasizes the inability of some governmental programs to meet the needs of the people they claim to serve. Although the hospital was built to fulfill the government's agreement to provide health care to the Indian people, the staff treats Harjo with disdain because of her heritage, going so far as to offer sterilization as a convenience best provided at the moment of birth.

But "Warrior Road" is more than an indictment of the medical system's treatment of Native Americans. By juxtaposing her own birth with the birth of her son, the birth of her daughter, and finally the birth of her first grandchild, Harjo illuminates the cyclical nature of life and the never-ending connection of family. Although her own mother is not with her at the birth of her son, Harjo feels "the sharp tug of my own birth cord, still connected to my mother. I believe it never pulls away, until death, and even then it becomes a streak in the sky symbolizing that most important warrior road" (55–56).

"Perhaps the World Ends Here" is aptly the last piece in the anthology. Reflecting on the origin of the collection, on women gathered around a kitchen table, the poem suggests that all of life is centered there, at the kitchen table. It is at that table where we are nurtured and at that table where we face our losses. By centering life's events around the table, Harjo suggests that it is in each detail that the greater meanings of life are contained.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* with *Against Forgetting,* an anthology edited by Carolyn Forché. What do the editors state as the goals for each anthology? Is such a compilation the most effective way of attaining those goals?
2. Discuss the meaning of the anthology's title. Harjo grew up speaking English. Why would she consider it the "enemy's language"? Why do bilingual writers in America choose to write in English, rather than in their native tongues?

How We Became Human (2002)

In her introduction to *How We Became Human,* Harjo reminds readers that "Compassion is the first quality of a warrior; and compassion is why we are here, why we fell from the sky. The kitchen table is the turtle's back on which this work is accomplished" (xxvii). It is that theme, of woman as compassionate warrior, that links the pieces in this collection.

Harjo tells readers in her notes at the end of the book that "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" was inspired by a classic Iroquois creation story about a pregnant woman who falls through a hole beneath the Great Tree and begins a new world on the back of the Sea Turtle (222–223). In Harjo's story, the woman falling is Lila, who had "seen God and could tell you God was neither male nor female and made of absolutely everything of beauty, of wordlessness," and she is caught by Saint Coincidence "in front of the Safeway as he made a turn from borrowing spare change from strangers" (96, 98). Saint Coincidence turns out to be Johnny, a boy Lila had known years earlier in Indian boarding school. Their coming together could be symbolic of the divine intervention of God or the chaos of coincidence, but to the stray cat on the corner they represent a disturbance in the web of earth that created a "wave of falling or the converse wave of gathering together" (99).

Lila, like most of Harjo's female personae, is different from many of the women in Anglo poetry. She does not wait to be rescued from the drudgery of her Dairy Queen job. When she feels the urge to fly, she leaves "on the arms of one of the stars" to "find love in a place that did not know the disturbance of fear" (98). Lila knows intuitively that as birds do in flight, "everyone turns together though we may not see each other stacked in the invisible dimensions" (96). And although it is Johnny who catches and saves Lila from her fall, ultimately Lila will rescue him from "wandering without a home in the maze of asphalt" (95).

As Lila does, the woman in "The Deer Dancer" displays the warrior qualities of compassion and transcendence. When the woman in the red dress enters the "bar of broken survivors," no one knows her, although they recognize her as from a tribe related to deer. One man takes her for "Buffalo Calf Woman" and is deeply affected. A woman, Richard's wife, tries to attack her. The others in the bar simply watch as she takes off her clothes and dances on a "table of names" (69).

In order to understand the layers of meaning in "The Deer Dancer," it is necessary for readers to be familiar with the myths upon which the poem is based. Harjo provides a brief description of the stories in her endnotes. Buffalo Calf Woman is from Lakota lore and was said to have appeared to the Lakota in two forms: a beautiful woman and a buffalo. She taught the people how to live and promised to return "every generation cycle" (216). When Henry Jack sees the woman in the red dress, he believes she is Buffalo Calf Woman returned, and he transforms his life because of that belief. The speaker in the poem explains, "Some people see vision in a burned tortilla, some in the face of a woman," referring in part to the pilgrimages people have made to see the face of Jesus, which is said to have miraculously appeared on a tortilla (67, 217).

The speaker in the poem sees "the woman inside the woman" in the red dress and knows her for the Deer Dancer. Although the traditional Mvskoke Deer Woman is portrayed as a sexual temptress who lures away and bewitches the weak, the speaker sees her as "the myth slipped down through dreamtime. The promise of feast we all knew was coming. The deer who crossed through knots of a curse to find us" (69). So, while the woman in the red dress represents threat to some (Richard's wife), to Henry Jack and the speaker she represents hope and salvation.

Not all of Harjo's compassionate warriors are fictionalized. In her poem "For Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, Whose Spirit Is Present Here and in the Dappled Stars (For We Remember the Story and Must Tell It Again So That We All May Live)," Harjo addresses the spirit of a woman who was active in the American Indian Movement: "Anna Mae, / everything and nothing changes. / You are the shimmering young woman / who found

her voice, / when you were warned to be silent, or have your body cut away / from you like an elegant weed" (70).

In the endnotes, Harjo gives readers the actual story of Aquash's death: In February 1976, a body was found on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Unable to identify the body, a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent ordered the hands severed and sent to Washington, D.C., for fingerprinting. The cause of death was listed as exposure and alcohol. Aquash's family later reported her missing and a second autopsy was ordered, which found no alcohol in her blood and the actual cause of death an execution-style murder. The leader of the American Indian Movement called the mutilation an act of war, but Harjo tells Aquash's spirit that rather than give in to "a righteous anger," the women "understood wordlessly the ripe meaning of your murder" (71).

In an interview with Helen Jaskoski, Harjo says poems like the one about Aquash develop from a responsibility she feels to be "one of those who help people remember . . . to keep these stories alive" (*Spiral* 58). The stories Harjo keeps alive are often difficult to tell, as with the case of Jacqueline Peters, a woman lynched by the Ku Klux Klan in 1981, whose story is told in the poem "Strange Fruit." Some stories are so overwhelming that Harjo cannot write about them right away. She says these stories need time to take shape and that "the sheer weight of memory coupled with imagery constructs poems" (*Spiral* 55).

Harjo's "The Flood" is poetic prose that tells the story of a young girl who is called upon to be a warrior in defense of herself. This story, as do most of Harjo's pieces, balances between fact and fiction, myth and reality. Although the story is written in the first person, Harjo says, "The 'I' is not always me, but a way I choose to speak the poem," adding that the stories she tells are always true "on some level" (*Spiral* 67).

"The Flood" is based in part on a Muscogee tribal myth in which *estakwvnayv,* a water snake who can transform himself, represents the power of the Lower World (*Human* 223). The girl in the story faces the water monster, who "appeared as the most handsome man in the tribe" and walks "the stairway of the abyss" to return as his wife. Harjo could have written a simpler story, telling about a girl who tries to kill herself when her parents promise her in marriage, but she invokes myth as a framework to provide a depth of meaning. David Treuer addresses the use of myth as a basis for fiction in his essay "The Myth of Myth": "Myth and language here are not important in and of themselves. They are important because they lend resonance or deeper sonority to the action" (147–148). It is the girl's belief in the water monster that explains her actions and makes the story work.

The girl's belief also functions to caution readers that everything in the story is not what it appears. She is at once a "proverbial sixteen-year-old woman" with an "imagination larger than the small frame house at the north edge of town, with broken cars surrounding it like a necklace of futility, larger than the town itself leaning into the lake," who was lost when she drove her car into the lake, and the survivor who hurries away from the cashier in the convenience store because she "cannot see myself as I had abandoned her some twenty years ago" (103). Readers are left to decide whether they should believe this story told by an imaginative child who believes so strongly in mythology that she uses it to explain her life.

Whether they believe or not, the story is cautionary. The girl warns that "the power of the victim is a power that will always be reckoned with, one way or another" (103). Harjo also uses the story as a forum to warn of cultural loss, writing, "They'd entered a drought that no one recognized as a drought, the convenience store a signal of temporary amnesia" (103).

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" illustrates Harjo's belief that everything we say and do has an impact on the world. Discuss the implications of that belief for relatively small acts like going to see a particular movie or buying a certain product.

2. Discuss the use of the convenience store as a metaphor in both "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" and "The Flood."
3. What is the significance of the deer dancer's stripping off her clothes? How is nudity a metaphor for rebirth?
4. Compare the versions of "The Flood" that appear in *How We Became Human* and *Talking Leaves.* How does the physical structure of the writing differ? How do those differences affect meaning?
5. Water is a common metaphor in literature. Analyze Harjo's use of water in "The Flood," describing the multiple metaphorical uses she employs and their effect on the story.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON HARJO AND HER WORK

1. For Joy Harjo, poetry is only one means of expression. Examine some of the other forms she has used, specifically in *Secrets from the Center of the World* (in which Harjo's writing accompanies the photography of Stephen Strom) and the albums she has produced (where Harjo's poems are spoken to music). How does combining music or photography with poetry enhance the meaning of language?
2. Harjo has said that she has felt constricted by the "male-centeredness" of the English language (*Spiral* 69). How is the English language male? What has led to that maleness? What concepts are difficult to communicate in English, and how else might they be expressed?
3. Many writers of color have been criticized for portraying negative aspects of their cultures, yet Harjo maintains that "part of the process of healing is to address what is evil" (*Spiral* 140). Why are people protective of the way their cultures are portrayed? Does the title *poet* entail responsibilities? If so, what are they?
4. The persona Noni Daylight appears in several of Harjo's poems; then, Harjo says, "she left me and went into one of Barney's [Bush] poems. I haven't seen her since" (*Spiral* 29). Track the journey of Noni Daylight, listing the poems in which she appears and discussing her role and growth throughout them. Why do you think Barney Bush chose to use Noni Daylight in his poem? Has he kept her true to Harjo's vision of her? Why has Harjo "not seen her since"?
5. Discuss the following statement by Joy Harjo:

> I've known some of the greatest warriors in my lifetime. They've stood up in the face of danger, in the face of hopelessness. They've been brave—not in the national headlines, but they've been true to themselves, and who they are, and to their families. Their act of bravery could have been to feed their children, to more than survive. (*Spiral* 57)

Consider the unconventional heroes you have known. How is a lifetime lived in truth to oneself more of an accomplishment than one momentary act of selflessness?

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Barbara Kingsolver (1955–)

> Storytelling is as old as our need to remember where the water is, where the best food grows, where we find our courage for the hunt. It's as persistent as our desire to teach our children how to live in this place that we have known longer than they have. Our greatest and smallest explanations for ourselves grow from place, as surely as carrots grow in the dirt.
>
> (*Small Wonder*)

Born on April 8, 1955, in Annapolis, Maryland, Barbara Kingsolver spent most of her childhood in rural Kentucky. As the second of three children of Dr. Wendell R. Kingsolver, family physician and part Cherokee descendant, and Virginia "Ginny" Lee Henry Kingsolver, homemaker and avid birdwatcher, she enjoyed tremendous freedom to explore the terrain of their Kentucky home.

Kingsolver developed a passion for the life sciences, which she credited to "having grown up among farmers, and . . . having parents who were deeply interested in natural history . . . creating education, entertainment, and pets out of snakes and turtles and every kind of thing we could find" (Snodgrass 9). For most of her childhood, the family had no television, filling their spare time with read-alouds punctuated by visits from the bookmobile. At the age of eight, Kingsolver received a diary and began to write almost daily. Despite the numerous notebooks she filled, she denies ever envisioning herself as a writer:

> I'm in awe of those people who from early childhood seem bent on a passionate vocational path. . . . I planned to be a farmer and a ballerina and a writer and a doctor and a musician and a zookeeper. (*High Tide* 130)

Wendell Kingsolver exemplified for his family the importance of "doing what you think is right regardless of whether or not that's financially or otherwise regarded" (DeMarr 2). His children learned early on about the cruelties inherent in racial and class discrimination. When Kingsolver was in second grade, her parents accepted a public-health posting deep in the African Congo, plunging their young children into a world where they were total outsiders. After a brief return to Kentucky in 1966, the family then moved to St. Lucia in the Caribbean, where Dr. Kingsolver provided medical care at a convent hospital. Even as a child, Kingsolver was aware of contrasts between the cultural beliefs of the native obeah and the Catholicism of the settlers. Kingsolver's memories of the landscape and customs of the island would coalesce years later in the short story "Jump-up Day."

Despite the family's return to the United States and Kentucky, Kingsolver continued to feel like an outsider. She was deeply shy, a condition exacerbated in sixth grade when she stood a full head taller than her classmates. Preoccupation with books and writing further isolated her from peers. She confides in "Letter to a Daughter at Thirteen" that she saw herself as "less valuable than everyone around" (*Small Wonder* 146).

In the essay "How Mr. Dewey Decimal Saved My Life," Kingsolver describes Nicholas County High School, which required shop for boys and home economics for girls. Kingsolver quips, "And so I stand today, a woman who knows how to

upholster, color-coordinate a table setting, and plan a traditional wedding—valuable skills I'm still waiting to put to good use in my life." Kentucky's rank on educational spending in the 1970s was one of the lowest in the nation, but a school librarian rescued Kingsolver by inviting her to sort and catalog books. Through that process, she began to envision a life for herself beyond Nicholas County. Kingsolver's voracious reading "jarred open a door that was right in front of me. I found I couldn't close it" (*High Tide* 51).

Kingsolver graduated as valedictorian in 1972. To remain in Kentucky meant limited options, so she left home to attend DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, on a music scholarship. Citing the impracticality of the arts as a profession, she switched to biology, though she still indulged her creative side by jotting poems in the margins of her science notebooks (DeMarr 6). She graduated magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1977.

Greencastle was by no means urban, but Kingsolver's speech was noticeably tinted by her Kentucky home, again branding her an outsider. She describes herself as "stunned to discover that the world knows almost nothing about 'hillbillies,' and respects them even less." That realization caused "an undercurrent of defensiveness" that she says has guided both her work and her life (www.kingsolver.com/faq/answers.asp).

Kingsolver was drawn to political activism, but she soon sought a break from the politics of the United States. After college, she traveled to Europe, trying a variety of jobs, including housemaid, medical transcriptionist, X-ray technician, archaeologist, and editor. She returned to Kentucky with a greater perspective on America, resolved to "live inside this amazing beast, poking at its belly from the inside with my one little life and the small, pointed sword of my pen" (McMahon).

However, Kingsolver's return to Kentucky was short lived. In 1979, she loaded up her car and drove to Tucson, Arizona, where she completed a master's degree in evolutionary biology and ecology at the University of Arizona. Upon graduation, she served as a science writer, a position that allowed her to combine her two greatest loves—science and writing.

Gradually, Kingsolver began to see herself as a professional writer. During the day, she worked as a freelance journalist, reporting, for example, on the strike against the Phelps Dodge copper mine in 1983. She attracted national attention for her unique insight into the lives of the women who held the line while their husbands sought work elsewhere. Kingsolver's work was eventually published in 1989 as *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983.* At night, she gave free reign to her imagination, crafting stories and poems that often overlapped with her nonfiction.

Meanwhile, Kingsolver married the chemistry professor Joseph Hoffmann in 1985. Although the couple divorced in 1992, their time together produced not only a child (Camille, born in 1987), but also Kingsolver's first novel.

The Bean Trees began as a way to fill the insomnia that plagued Kingsolver's pregnancy. She wrote huddled in a closet so as not to disturb her sleeping husband. The same day that Kingsolver brought home her new daughter, Camille, she received news from her agent: The first draft had been auctioned to publishers—a rare feat for an unknown writer. Kingsolver describes her first novel as the "longest letter to you [her mother] I've ever written. Finally, after a thousand tries, I've explained everything I believe in, exactly the way I've always wanted to: human rights, Central American refugees, the Problem That Has No Name, abuse of the powerless, racism, poetry, freedom, childhood, motherhood, Sisterhood is powerful. All that, and still some publisher has decided it makes a good story" (*Small Wonder* 170).

Readers found her work to be accessible, yet layered with political truths, a balance Kingsolver works hard to maintain:

> I want to write books that anybody can read. . . . I want to challenge people who like literature, to give them something for their trouble, without closing any doors to people who are less educated. (DeMarr 19)

The Bean Trees received an Enoch Pratt Library Youth-to-Youth Books Award and was declared a Notable Book by the American Library Association and the *New York Times.*

In 1990, Kingsolver's short stories were anthologized in *Homeland and Other Stories.* The title piece examines loss of culture through the eyes of a child burdened with remembering her Cherokee heritage. "Rose-Johnny" examines the ostracism of individuals for perceived differences. Each story in the collection examines the theme of how community and place can influence individuals. *Homeland* garnered an American Library Association award.

With the release of the novel *Animal Dreams* in 1990, Kingsolver attracted the attention of academia. Scholarly articles examined her use of place and community and proclaimed her work—with its subplots of Guatemalan refugees, cultural annihilation, and governmental meddling in foreign affairs—as political. Kingsolver embraced the label, remarking that "most of the rest of the world considers social criticism to be, absolutely, the most legitimate domain of art." In her essay "Jabberwocky," Kingsolver describes fiction as "the antidote that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another. By virtue of that power, it is political, regardless of content." *Animal Dreams* received many awards, including the Pen/USA West Fiction Award and the Edward Abbey Award for Ecofiction. It was also a *New York Times* Notable Book.

In 1991, Kingsolver grew weary of what she describes as the "clamor of war worship" in the United States, where yellow ribbons began to feel like "a prayer of godspeed to the killers" (*High Tide* 108–109). She moved her family to the Canary Islands and lived there for nearly a year.

Upon returning to the United States, she faced many changes in both her professional and personal lives. Her divorce from Hoffmann left her embroiled in a legal battle over her own writing. *Another America/Otra América* (1992) introduced the world to Barbara Kingsolver the poet. Despite critical praise, Kingsolver says, "I rarely think of poetry as something I make happen; it is more accurate to say that it happens to *me*. Like a summer storm, a house afire, or the coincidence of both on the same day" (*Small Wonder* 229). The poems included in *Another America* reflect that serendipity, as in "What the Janitor Heard in the Elevator," which uses a real conversation to portray the near invisibility of the lower class.

Pigs in Heaven, released five years after *The Bean Trees,* revisits the characters of Taylor and Turtle and follows their struggle to remain together. The critic Mary Jean DeMarr suggests that the book corrects a serious flaw of Kingsolver's first novel, "the apparent suggestions that a Native American child might be given away lightly . . . [and] that the welfare of the child is the only issue to be considered" (DeMarr 15). Through alternating viewpoints, Kingsolver explores "the places where disparate points of view rub together—the spaces between . . . the sticky terrain of cultural differences" (*High Tide* 154). *Pigs in Heaven* received the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction Prize, the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award, and an American Booksellers Book of the Year nomination. It was also a *New York Times* Notable Book.

Kingsolver met her second husband, Steven Hopp, an environmentalist, while serving as a visiting writer at Emory & Henry College in Virginia. The couple cowrote several essays and articles on natural history and, in 1996, celebrated the birth of their daughter, Lily.

Despite the political undertones of her fiction, some critics have dismissed it as "chick lit," a label Kingsolver abhors: "I don't feel my books are mainly for women. . . . *Moby-Dick* is a whale book, but I don't think only whales should read it" (Epstein 33). She adds that her whole life she's "been reading white guy books and there's plenty of those in the world" (Perry 159). Kingsolver moved politics to the forefront with the 1998 publication of *The Poisonwood Bible.*

Although her family spent two years in Africa during the 1960s, it was only years later that Kingsolver began to understand the United States's role in the political turmoil of the Congo. Kingsolver admits it would be easy to lecture on the evils of

colonialism in developing countries, but instead she uses political allegory to illustrate the humanity behind the headline and examine the question "Given this is what we did as a nation in Africa, how are we to feel about it now?" (Kanner).

The Poisonwood Bible is perhaps her most successful book yet, earning the National Book Prize of South Africa and a nomination for the PEN/Faulkner Award. It was named the American Booksellers Book of the Year, a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book, and one of the *New York Times*'s "Ten Best Books of 1998." In 2000, President Bill Clinton honored Kingsolver with the National Humanities Medal, the nation's most prestigious award for service through the arts.

After the intense research and heavy moral lessons of *The Poisonwood Bible,* Kingsolver returned to Appalachia for the setting of her next novel, *Prodigal Summer.* The terrain of the Kentucky hills may be comfortable for Kingsolver, but she admits in her essay "Taming the Beast with Two Backs" that the book itself, which she describes tongue in cheek as "an unchaste novel," is a bit shocking, even to her. The story focuses on the triumph of life over death, with a heavy reliance on procreation to illustrate that theme. The critic Amanda Cockrell describes the novel's theme as "people sex, bug sex, coyote sex . . . and the drive to pass on your genes" (Snodgrass 166). Kingsolver says that the topic of sexuality is taboo when used by women writers but argues that writers often mine personal matters for universal truths, and that sex should be no exception.

While Kingsolver is best known for her novels, it is in her essays and poetry that she opens herself to readers, sharing personal interests and deeply held beliefs. "Letter to My Mother" describes the guilt and loss that plagued her after she was raped by an acquaintance in her own home. The attack left her with a deep understanding of "the vast ocean of work it is to be a woman among men, that universe of effort, futile whimpers against hard stones" (*Small Wonder* 168). "This House I Cannot Leave" and "Ten Forty-four" (*Another America*) also address the rape, illustrating wounds that go much deeper than "a trace of hair or blood or sperm."

Not all of Kingsolver's essays and poems are so personal, but all address issues in which she takes a personal interest. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, HarperCollins released *Small Wonder,* described as Kingsolver's "extended love song to the world we still have." The book begins as a reaction to one horrific moment in world history and explores the event by discussing "who we seem to be, what remains for us to live for, and what [Kingsolver] believes we could make of ourselves" (*Small Wonder* xiv). Kingsolver's essays challenge readers to examine their own lives for ways to become more responsible members of our worldwide family. Kingsolver led the charge by helping her own family in "realigning our lives with our food chain." She describes her family's journey of turning away from processed foods in the 2007 nonfiction book *Animal, Vegetable, and Miracle.*

Whether creating poetry, essays, or fiction, Kingsolver begins each work with an unmistakable grounding in place and asks readers to remember that every book we pick up "is made from the hearts of trees that died for the sake of our imagined lives. What you hold in your hands right now, beneath these words, is consecrated air and time and sunlight and, first of all, a place" (*Small Wonder* 40).

The Bean Trees (1988)

At a glance, *The Bean Trees,* with its plucky heroine Taylor Greer, may seem a simple coming-of-age story: A young girl leaves home in search of freedom and eventually finds it through increasing responsibility to the world around her. Yet, as is true of all Kingsolver's works, a careful reading reveals multiple layers. *The Bean Trees* is the bildungsroman that it appears, but through Kingsolver's treatment, Taylor becomes much deeper than the typical female protagonist who is forced at story's end to forfeit her independence in order to gain the love of a man. Taylor understands that dependence on a man is not her life's goal. As a result, she is free to redefine coming of age as "being able to behave

with dignity when her desires are counter to her knowledge of what is right" (DeMarr 66–67).

A major theme within *The Bean Trees* is that of identity. As the main character, Marietta, drives from Kentucky to Arizona, she longs to leave her old life behind. She decides to begin by changing her name but believes that "a name is not something a person really has a right to pick out, but is something you're provided with more or less by chance" (11). That belief results in part from her own name, which was chosen for the town in which she was born. Marietta accepts a new name from the town in which her car runs out of gas, Taylorville. The ease with which Marietta transforms into Taylor implies a disregard for the importance of names, yet through her relationships with other characters Taylor grows to understand the power of a name to define a person.

Taylor first encounters Turtle as a "round bundle with a head" (17), lacking a name and any notion of personality. The first real trait Turtle displays is tenacity, grabbing on to Taylor with the fierce determination of a mud turtle that "won't let go until it thunders" (22). Taylor names the baby after the personality trait that defines her and decides to keep that name even when she later learns that the child's name at birth had been April, illustrating her belief that names can be more than chance.

The characters of Estevan and Esperanza deepen Taylor's understanding of the link between name and identity. Taylor first meets Estevan and his wife through Mattie, owner of the auto shop Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. The couple are refugees from Guatemala who put aside their own needs for anonymity to help Taylor adopt Turtle. To blend in with their adopted society, they Americanize their names, changing *Estevan* and *Esperanza* to *Steven* and *Hope*. Taylor seems to mourn their loss of identity more than the couple themselves, telling them: "I love your names. . . . They're about the only thing you came here with that you've still got left. I think you should only be Steven and Hope when you need to pull the wool over somebody's eyes, but keep your own names with your friends" (207). Ironically, Estevan and Esperanza had already sacrificed their "own names" when they first entered America, choosing Spanish names because their Mayan names could not be pronounced in English. Through Estevan and Esperanza, Taylor is able to see that true identity begins with home and family and deepens through the choices we make.

Political concerns are central to *The Bean Trees* and are at the forefront as the characters struggle with large issues on a personal level. Millie's auto shop, which serves as a front for a shelter for refugees, introduces Taylor to the Guatemalan refugees Estevan and Esperanza. Through this couple, Kingsolver draws a parallel between the Mayan people and Native Americans. Taylor is told by Estevan that the Mayan people speak 22 different Mayan languages (193) and she learns that *Mayan* is as incomplete as *Native American* in defining the vastly unique cultures each term is meant to describe.

Like many conquered indigenous peoples, the Maya were transformed into slaves in their own lands. Yet the Maya have preserved their heritage and customs, as well as more than 22 distinct languages, despite governmental efforts to erase the entire Mayan culture. Periodically, the Maya have revolted against their oppressors, only to be beaten down by forces with better training and more advanced weaponry. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan military escalated their attempts to erase pockets of resistance in what has come to be known as the "Silent Holocaust." According to statistics listed on the Web site for the Global Exchange, in one decade of systematic repression, torture, and genocide, military death squads were responsible for the deaths of 200,000 civilians and the destruction of 440 Mayan villages.

As Estevan shares his story with Taylor, she learns about the abduction of his daughter in a ploy by the government to force him to reveal the identities of 17 members of the teachers' union. Taylor is astounded by his decision not to go to his daughter. When Estevan asks what she would have done, Taylor responds, "I really don't know. I can't even begin to think about a world where people have to make choices like that." Estevan's answer, "You live in that world," is a gentle reprimand to those of us

who would claim innocence of complicity in world events (137).

Estevan and Esperanza also draw attention to the fate of those who immigrate to the United States seeking escape from political oppression. Although the 1986 Immigration Control and Reform Act included amnesty for illegal U.S. immigrants, the reality is that once here, immigrants are often treated as trespassers who have no right to take jobs away from "real Americans," an attitude that conveniently ignores the fact that the forefathers of Americans were themselves immigrants. Taylor is praised by Mattie for helping Estevan and Esperanza in their struggle to remain in the United States, but she shrugs it off, saying, "I can't see why I shouldn't do this. If I saw somebody was going to get hit by a truck I'd push them out of the way. Wouldn't anybody? It's a sad day for us all if I'm being a hero here" (188). Taylor's willingness to help Estevan and Esperanza, despite the risk to her, and her belief that it is something anyone would do, echoes a persistent theme in Kingsolver's work: Community and family are necessary for survival of the individual.

It is the theme of interconnectedness that forms the basis for *The Bean Trees.* Kingsolver uses Taylor's inexperience as a mother to illustrate the need of new parents for familial and community support. Taylor's flight from Kentucky has left her without those support systems, yet Taylor is adept at forging new friendships and gains with her new boss (Mattie) a surrogate mother and parenting advice. Taylor's search for a home leads her to Lou Ann, who is also a single mother. Together, the two form a quasi-family that Taylor resists at first because they have fallen into the stereotypical roles of an old married couple. Eventually, Taylor accepts their interdependence and admits that she loves Lou Ann.

Related to the theme of interdependence is the issue of child welfare, which Kingsolver explores through Turtle. Taylor acquires Turtle when a stranger thrusts the baby at her in the deserted parking lot of a bar. Before long, Taylor discovers Turtle is not an inanimate object, but a girl whose gender "had already burdened her short life with a kind of misery I could not imagine. I thought I knew about every ugly thing that one person does to another, but I had never even thought about such things being done to a baby girl" (23). Despite Taylor's inexperience as a parent, she is able to protect Turtle from the abuse she suffered as a baby. But the truth is, Taylor has a lot of help. In her essay "Somebody's Baby," Kingsolver discusses the American distaste for other people's children and our national "creed of every family for itself," suggesting that Americans do not cherish their children the way other cultures do because "the worth of children in America is tied to their dollar value" (*High Tide* 101). Taylor's ability to string together an impromptu support system for her small family illustrates Kingsolver's belief that children "thrive best when their upbringing is the collective joy and responsibility of families, neighborhoods, communities, and nations" (*High Tide* 104).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Discuss Mary Jean DeMarr's assertion that the typical bildungsroman requires a female protagonist to choose between maturation and femininity (66). How is this reflected in Kingsolver's novel? Take a stand for or against her claim and support your opinion with examples from Kingsolver and other writers.
2. In her search for a home, Taylor interviews with Fei, La-Isha, and Timothy to join their cooperative. What does the exchange illustrate about the American class system?
3. Compare the plight of Estevan and Esperanza to the struggles described in Jimmy Santiago Baca's *Immigrants in Our Own Land.*

Animal Dreams (1990)

Animal Dreams explores the concept of national memory, specifically the ability of individuals to distance themselves from tragedy by forgetting about it. The book is dedicated to Ben Linder, an engineer who moved to Nicaragua in the 1980s to construct an electrical dam. Antigovernment contras ambushed the construction site, killing Linder

and two Nicaraguans, Sergio Hernández and Pablo Rosales. Kingsolver has spoken out in her essays against the funding provided to the contras through President Ronald Reagan's covert war in Central America. In *Animal Dreams,* Kingsolver puts a human face on the conflict by infusing the character of Hallie Noline with Linder's commitment to service and then subjecting her to a similar fate.

Although Hallie is central to the story, it is her absence that makes a statement: She is off in Nicaragua serving as a "cross between Johnny Appleseed and a freedom fighter" (30). Hallie is not so naive as to think she can save the world through pest management, yet she is content to help where she can.

Codi is "the sister who didn't go to war" (7). Raised by her emotionally unavailable father, Codi longs for unconditional love, yet she constantly distances herself from others by drifting through places and jobs. Codi even invents alternate lives for herself in conversations with strangers to avoid any "discussion of what I was *really*" (203). Kingsolver admits that there was a time in her life when she, too, would reinvent herself to strangers: "I strove for new heights in perjury, trying to see how absurd a yarn I could spin. . . . Through my tales I discovered not exactly myself but all the selves I might have been" (*High Tide* 260–261).

Although Codi may not consider herself the hero her sister is, even she cannot stand idly by when she discovers that Black Mountain Mining Company is polluting Grace's water. The finding, uncovered when Codi's students examine the pH levels of the river, allows Kingsolver to return to the theme of ecology. The Stitch and Bitch Club raises money through the sale of piñatas to have Grace declared a historic preserve.

Codi also allows Kingsolver to examine the issue of cruelty to animals. In discussing the "sport" of cockfighting, Codi tells her boyfriend, Lloyd, that she "can't feel good about people making a spectator sport out of puncture wounds and internal hemorrhage" (191). Codi's wording depicts the exact manner in which Lloyd's brother dies, a death that serves as a metaphor for the viciousness of such events.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In 2007, the United States adopted the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act, allowing a felony charge for those involved in the interstate transport of animals for fighting purposes. Discuss the issue of animal blood sports in light of Kingsolver's novel.
2. The Stitch and Bitch Club saves Grace by having the town declared a historic landmark. Research the history behind the National Historic Landmark Program and the process required to nominate a site (visit the NHL Web site at www.nps.gov/nhl). Debate the issue of making Grace a historic landmark from the viewpoint of the parties involved.

Pigs in Heaven (1993)

Pigs in Heaven picks up the story begun in *The Bean Trees.* This time, Taylor and Turtle are the refugees, embroiled in their own battle for rights as the Cherokee Nation investigates the legality of Turtle's adoption. Kingsolver admits that after the publication of her first novel, she felt compelled to return to the story: "I had completely neglected a whole moral area when I wrote about this Native American kid being swept off the reservation and being raised by a very loving white mother. It was something I hadn't thought about, and I felt I needed to make that right in another book" (Perry 165).

In addressing her oversight, Kingsolver examines the issue of outsider adoption from multiple perspectives. Taylor, adoptive mother of Turtle, sees the adoption as a rescue from an abusive family. Annawake Fourkiller is a Native American attorney who represents the Cherokee Nation's interests in preserving a heritage nearly decimated by outsider adoption. For her, the interests of the tribe must always be considered over the needs of the individual. Therefore, she sees Turtle's adoption as theft from the tribe; the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act supports her position. As the two square off over the fate of Turtle, their personal experiences make it nearly impossible for either to see the other's side.

Kingsolver uses the peripheral character of Jax, Taylor's boyfriend, to step back from the issue. Through a conversation between Jax and Annawake, Kingsolver illustrates the ways in which culture can influence perception. Jax points out that Annawake's guiding myth is "Do right by your people," and Annawake counters that the guiding myth of America is "Do right by yourself" (88). Kingsolver addresses that issue in an interview with David Gergen:

> Our great unifying myths tell us things like anybody can make it in this country if he's smart enough and ambitious enough. . . . But it works only to an extent, because the other side of that story is that if you're not making it, you must be either stupid or lazy. So a lot of self-blame goes along with poverty.

Taylor's struggle to support herself personifies the breakdown of that myth. Her conversation with Kevin (a would-be suitor) further demonstrates the faulty assumption by mainstream America that "if you can dream it . . . you can be it" (210).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Kingsolver claims that the United States was founded on myths that no longer work for most citizens (Gergen). How is that portrayed in this novel? Discuss examples of myths that have contributed to the "American way of life."
2. Examine the references to the media in *Pigs in Heaven* in light of Kingsolver's essay "Careful What You Let in the Door" (*High Tide*).
3. What does Taylor mean when she admits most commercials are made by "the guardians of truth" (*Pigs in Heaven* 295)? What implications does that have for American society?

The Poisonwood Bible (1998)

Kingsolver's most celebrated work to date, and her most controversial, emerged from her need to understand the events she had witnessed as a child in the Congo during the 1960s. Kingsolver discussed the seed of the story in her 1986 essay "Why I Am a Danger to the Public," in which she described her desire to address "the brief blossoming and destruction of the independence of the Congo, and what the CIA had to do with it." The story took nearly another decade to germinate into the 543-page novel, which avoids taking a didactic stance on the evils of colonialism in third-world countries by focusing on the experiences of the Price family as missionaries in the Congo and their guilt over American complicity in the events they witness. In the author's note, Kingsolver informs readers that the novel is a work of fiction, but that her invented characters have been surrounded by "historical figures and events . . . as real as I could render them" (ix). The book's bibliography reflects the intense research required to attain the level of accuracy that Kingsolver demands of her work.

Although Kingsolver introduced the Price family in "My Father's Africa," which appeared in *McCall's* in August 1991, *The Poisonwood Bible* provides a closer examination of their time in Africa. The novel is unique in both form and narrative method. It is structured using seven "books," six of which are named for books of the Bible (or, in the case of "Bel and the Serpent" and "Song of the Three Children," for books of the Apocrypha, which is not included in the King James Bible). The structure serves both to align the family's experiences with biblical themes and to underscore Nathan's beliefs. The first five books begin with Orleanna, the dominated wife of the Baptist minister Nathan Price, who is speaking years after the family's exodus from Africa. Following Orleanna's narrative, each book is subtitled to orient the reader in place and time and to reflect the focus of the four Price daughters on issues that directly impact the family. The structure also mirrors the dynamics of the Price family, in which Orleanna is a buffer between the strict biblical rulings of Nathan and their four daughters. The last book does not have a biblical title and serves as an epilogue in which Kingsolver pulls back to give a broader view of the novel's events.

The question Kingsolver hoped to answer through *The Poisonwood Bible* is "How do we live with it [America's role in the assassination of the Congolese president Patrice Lumumba] and how do we move on? Given that this is our history, what do we do with it?" She found that "one thing is very clear, there isn't a single answer—there's a spectrum of answers" (Kanner). To convey that spectrum, Kingsolver uses the multiple voices of the women of the Price family: Orleanna, subservient wife to Nathan Price, a Baptist missionary; and the four Price daughters—Rachel, the twins Leah and Adah, and Ruth May. Each perspective offers its own take on coping with the weight of guilt.

Through the Price family, Kingsolver delves into the political hotbeds of genocide, the Congolese exploitation of its own people, female circumcision, and colonialism in third-world countries. Multiple viewpoints allow Kingsolver to step back from these issues and see them fresh through the eyes of the innocent. At the onset of the novel, the Price children are quite young and thus reflect events through that naiveté; as they mature, their ability to understand those events in a historical context deepens.

Although he is not given a voice of his own, Nathan Price is a strong presence in the novel. Kingsolver uses his character to personify the attitude taken by the United States toward third-world countries: "Nathan stands for the conqueror and for the hyperbole of our cultural arrogance" (Snodgrass 157). Rachel, the eldest daughter, sums up his personality as "the Father Knows Best of all times" (131). Throughout the novel, the United States adopts this attitude, both literally in terms of CIA involvement and figuratively through the character of Nathan Price, both of whom presume to know more about what is best for the Congo than those who reside there. Nathan's time in the Congo is a political allegory meant to reflect America's high-mindedness and arrogance. Nathan takes his family to Africa because he wants to give salvation to the uneducated. Yet, to his incomprehension, the Africans do not want his deliverance. Nathan's primary obstacle is the basic assumptions each culture holds about the world. Similarly, a father-knows-best attitude precludes an openness on America's part to understand that so-called less developed countries may be capable of defining their own needs.

Kingsolver best illustrates this difference through linguistic misunderstandings between Nathan Price and the Congolese people. The language of the Kikongo is complex; words may mean different things, depending on how they are spoken. Nathan's arrogance prevents him from attending to the minute differences in inflection that could aid his communication with the Congolese. The most salient example is rooted in the novel's title. The Kikongo word *bangala* can refer to something that is very precious, and it is that meaning Nathan intends when he preaches that "Tata Jesus is bangala." In his ignorance, Nathan uses an alternate pronunciation of the word *bangala,* and his statement actually translates to "Jesus is poisonwood," a reference to an African tree with such poisonous wood that burning it can release fatal fumes. While Nathan (were he not deaf to the nuances of African languages) would consider his own words blasphemous, his inadvertent claim that "Jesus is poisonwood" actually holds more meaning for the Congolese, who have lost much to those intending to enlighten them.

Kingsolver furthers her theme of cultural differences when Nathan's attempts to convert the Congolese to Western thought backfire. Nathan tries to convince the Congolese of the importance of a democratic election, only to stand by while the "congregation of his very own church interrupted the sermon to hold an election on whether or not to accept Jesus Christ as the personal Saviour of Kilanga" (327). Despite Nathan's insistence that "Jesus is exempt from popular elections," Tata Ndu holds an election in which "Jesus Christ lost, eleven to fifty-six" (334).

As is true of all of Kingsolver's works, the theme of family is central to *The Poisonwood Bible*. Unlike the other families who populate her stories, the Price family seems to conform to the "Family of Dolls Family Value" mind-set. Ironically, it is the one family in Kingsolver's work that cannot survive intact. Nathan's tyrannical behavior as head of house results in the meek defeat of his wife, Orleanna, who remains by his side despite his abusive treatment of

her and his inability to "see no way to have a daughter but to own her like a plot of land. To work her, plow her under, rain down a dreadful poison on her." Although Orleanna reviles Nathan "with every silent curse she knows," she fails to retaliate because she believes such an attack would more likely "strike the child made in his image" (191), in other words, her own child. Kingsolver describes her own experience with a painful marriage in "Stone Soup":

> A nonfunctioning marriage is a slow asphyxiation. It is waking up despised each morning, listening to the pulse of your own loneliness . . . it is sharing your airless house with the threat of suicide or other kinds of violence, while the ghost that whispers, "Leave here and destroy your children," has passed over every door and nailed it shut. (*High Tide* 138)

In many ways, Orleanna is representative of all women who are trapped in loveless marriages but stay for "the sake of the children."

The daughters react to Nathan's domination by at first trying all the harder to win his affections: "They elongate on the pale stalks of their longing, like sunflowers with heavy heads . . . they'll bend to his light" (191). Orleanna predicts that a day will arrive when each daughter "turns away hard, never to speak to him again," yet the fulfillment of her prognostication is not of their own choice, but through the death of Ruth May and their father's eventual mental deterioration. Despite Nathan's domination of them, three of the Price girls survive; Ruth May's death serves as a reminder to women that a decision to stay with an abusive husband for the sake of the children is based on a faulty premise.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare *The Poisonwood Bible* to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* with specific focus on theme and character motivation. How is Africa employed as a character in each work?
2. A common theme in Kingsolver's work is the belief that "bloodshed is necessary for preserving our way of life" (*Small Wonder* 182). How is this theme manifested in *The Poisonwood Bible*?
3. How might the story have been different if told through the eyes of Nathan Price or Anatole Ngemba? Why does Kingsolver give neither man a voice in the story?
4. Analyze the character of Nathan Price. What causes his fanaticism and emotional distance from his family? How does he change or fail to change through the course of the novel?
5. How is Adah's hemiplegia important to her development as a character? How does it contribute to the story? What does her recovery symbolize, and what does she gain and lose because of her recovery?
6. Discuss Orleanna Price's plea that readers not "presume there's shame in the lot of the woman who carries on" and her comparison of such women to "the backbone of a history" (383). Is this self-justification on her part, or is it a valid explanation of her actions throughout the novel? How does her statement change the way we look at history?

Prodigal Summer (2000)

Within the pages of *Prodigal Summer,* Kingsolver returns to her Appalachian homeland to explore the "connections between humans and our habitat and our food chain" (Snodgrass 166). The book is divided into three parts: "Predators," "Moth Love," and "Old Chestnuts," each with its own ecological lesson.

"Predators" follows the effort of the forest ranger Deanne Wolfe to restore the coyote to its place as the keystone predator of Zebulon Mountain. Deanne lives a solitary life, filled with quiet moments of celebration, as when she tracks a young family of coyotes and locates the sire. Kingsolver's belief that "a mirror held up to every moral superiority will show its precise mirror image" (*Small Wonder* 6) is reflected through Eddie Bondo. Bondo goes to Zebulon Mountain to hunt a lamb-killing coyote. Throughout their relationship, the pair wrestle with irreconcilable differences: Wolfe attempts to persuade Bondo that destruction of the coyote will cause an imbalance in nature, while

Bondo counters that protection of the coyote is just a matter of choosing one animal over another. The one thing on which they can agree is that "living takes life" (323).

Lusa Landowski, introduced in "Moth Love," finds herself marooned in the Widener homeland, surrounded by a "hurricane of hateful women," when her husband, Cole Widener, is killed in an accident (40). Her struggle to find her place in the overbearing family is eased when she steps in to care for the orphans left when her sister-in-law dies of cancer. Before her marriage to Cole, Lusa specialized in moth pheromones, and her role in *Prodigal Summer* as "champion of nature" is illustrated by her love of honeysuckle and commitment to nonchemical methods of pest control (Snodgrass 106).

"Old Chestnuts" is an apt description for the third set of characters. Garnett Walker, vocational agriculture teacher and farmer, longs to reestablish a chestnut tree named for his father by crossbreeding original stock with a blight-resistant strand. His neighbor, Nannie Rawley, disrupts his plan with her beekeeping and aversion to pesticides. "Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads," Rawley informs him in an effort to convince him that killing off one insect allows the prey of that insect to multiply (216).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Study the issue of sanctioned hunts of nonpredatory species for population control in your area. Are such measures necessary? What factors may have contributed to the increased populations of these animals? How are these tactics portrayed in the novel?
2. Examine the way Kingsolver transforms Jewel Widener from "an empty vessel" to Lusa's savior (70). Is this transformation convincing to you?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON KINGSOLVER AND HER WORK

1. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many Americans rushed out to buy bumper stickers with the slogan "We will not forget." Why did Americans feel it was necessary to declare they would remember that date? Discuss the role of forgetfulness as a way to distance one's self from atrocity in light of Kingsolver's essay "Jabberwocky" (*High Tide*).
2. Read Suzanne Cleary's poem "Anyways" (*Trick Pear* 2007). Discuss Kingsolver's use of language as preservation of cultural values. How is Kingsolver's use of Appalachian vernacular the "powerful instrument" August Wilson describes when discussing his use of black dialect?
3. In response to questions regarding the meaning of symbols and metaphors in her works, Kingsolver has said:

> That's going to be different for every reader. I can't bear the idea that every symbol I've created could be only one thing. That would be static and impersonal. I want it to mean whatever it means to you. (www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_P/pigs_in_heaven2.asp#interview)

How might symbols be open to reader interpretation? Explore Kingsolver's symbols and possible meanings for each, supporting your interpretations with rationales from your own life.

4. Kingsolver claims political power is evident in novels that can "make us weep over the same events that might hardly give us pause if we read them in a newspaper" ("Jabberwocky" *High Tide*). Examine the work of a popular novelist who is not widely considered political and argue its inherent political nature in terms of Kingsolver's definition.
5. Compare the character of Ruth May in *The Poisonwood Bible* to that of the ghost child in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.
6. Throughout her work, Kingsolver repeatedly questions the reliability of media in conveying world events and the accuracy of what comes to be known as history: "History is never much more than a mirror we can tilt to look at ourselves" (Kanner). Compare the political climate

and events as described in Kingsolver's novels to the portrayal of each in popular media. Discuss the factors that may contribute to inaccuracy in media coverage and the measures individuals may take to be better informed.

7. Dialogue is one of Kingsolver's favored techniques for examining cultural differences. Examine the conversations between Jax and Anna Fourkiller (*Pigs in Heaven*), Leah Price and Anatole Ngemba (*The Poisonwood Bible*), and Taylor Greer and Estevan (*The Bean Trees*). Then choose two characters from separate works and construct a conversation in which they discuss the realities of poverty in America.

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Maxine Hong Kingston (1940–)

Readers ought not to expect reading always to be as effortless as watching television.

("Cultural Mis-reading by American Reviewers")

"Who is Maxine Hong Kingston?" asked the critic John Leonard in his *New York Times* review of *The Woman Warrior*. "Nobody at Knopf seems to know," he continues. "They have never laid eyes on her. She lives in Honolulu, nicely situated between the Occident and the Orient, with a husband and small son. She teaches English and creative writing. There is no one more qualified to teach English and creative writing" (78).

Maxine Hong was born on October 27, 1940, in Stockton, California, to Tom Hong (who had renamed himself after Thomas Edison) and Chew Ying Lan (Brave Orchid). Maxine—whose family called her "Ting Ting"—was the eldest of six American-born children. Two previous children had died in China before her mother immigrated to the United States. Her father, a scholar and teacher in China, immigrated to America in 1924 and worked a series of jobs, including in a New York laundry that he started with friends, who later swindled him out of his share of the business. Kingston's mother studied and practiced medicine in China before immigrating in 1939 to America, where she worked in the family laundry business, in agriculture, and in housekeeping. Maxine was named after a blond gambler who always seemed to win in the illegal gambling house that the Hongs managed in Stockton. One of her father's main jobs at the gambling establishment was to "take the blame for the real owner" and be arrested (*China Men [CM]* 242). He never did have a police record because he used multiple aliases, and, after all, "white demons can't tell one Chinese name from another or one face from another" (*CM* 242).

The Hong family later owned the New Port Laundry and lived in a tough neighborhood on the south side of Stockton. (Years later, Kingston's mother and father still lived in the same area, despite their children's urging them to move to a nicer neighborhood.) The children put in many long and grueling hours at the laundry, but it was also the place where Maxine especially, with her mother, neighbors, grandfathers, cousins, aunts, and uncles coming and going, learned to talk-story. She listened to stories and songs, "village ditties," as she called them. "I never knew," Kingston says, "until I got to college and was taking Asian Lit Class, that that was important poetry. I just thought it was my parents' tales. . . . And then I thought later, oh, Tu Fu, and Li Po—this is important stuff" (Chin 70). Kingston was surrounded by creative and imaginative stories; however, the stories often "transmitted the cultural conception . . . that girls were inferior, a useless drain on family resources" (Simmons 7). Expressions such as "When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls" hurt and confused young Maxine (*The Woman Warrior [WW]* 52). She listened, but she also began writing at the age of nine: "The day was very clear to me," she recalls. "I was in the fourth grade and all of a

sudden this poem started coming out of me. On and on I went, oblivious to everything, and when it was over I had written thirty verses" (Robertson 89).

The school years were hard for young Maxine in many ways—she did not fit in the social circles—but she did excel in academics. In 1955, she won a five-dollar prize from *Girl Scout Magazine* for her essay "I Am an American" (Simmons xi). She was awarded 11 scholarships to attend the University of California at Berkeley, where she began college as an engineering major (Simmons 10). But what she felt was her duty to help the American space program gave way to her love for reading and writing, and she soon became an English major (Yeh). She graduated with a B.A. in English in 1962. While at Berkeley, she met and married Earll Kingston, a fellow English major. A son, Joseph, was born in 1963. Both Maxine and Earll taught in the high school in Hayward, California, and were very active in the peace movement, joining with thousands of others in protest against the Vietnam War (Simmons 13). For Kingston, the war was a "special agony . . . as Americans went to kill Asians—'gooks'—and as the media churned out images of strange small people in silly pajama-like garb, who, it was widely expressed, did not value human life in the same way that Americans did"; additionally painful for Kingston was that she had two brothers in the service during the Vietnam War (Simmons 11).

Escalating violence and drug use caused the Kingstons to leave the area in 1967, but despite settling in Hawaii, they still found war all around them. Kingston credits a broken movie projector with helping her finally get started in writing down the stories of her ancestors. On a vacation to the tiny island of Lanai, the Kingstons went to see a movie, but the projector broke down. Maxine had nothing else to do but sit down and begin writing an outline for what would become *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* (Yeh).

The Woman Warrior debuted in 1976 to dazzling critical praise—although Kingston was troubled by many of the stereotyping and exoticizing reviews—and won the National Book Critics Circle Award as best work of nonfiction. It became an immediate best seller, launching Kingston into nearly instant literary fame at the age of 36. Published at the height of the feminist movement, this book about the lives of women—many heroically strong—was embraced by feminists, academics, and general readers alike. Of it, John Leonard says, "Those rumbles you hear on the horizon are the big guns of autumn lining up, the howitzers of Vonnegut and Updike and Cheever and Mailer, the books that will be making loud noises for the next several months. But listen: this week a remarkable book has been quietly published; it is one of the best I've read in years" (77).

It is interesting that *The Woman Warrior*—a memoir—begins with this line of warning from Kingston's mother: "You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you" (3). And then Kingston proceeds to tell. Much of Kingston's writing is about her journey from silence to voice, from her earliest years when she did not talk—"My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint"—to her difficulty with translating between two languages and two cultures to finally tell her own talk-story (*WW* 165). Kingston defines talk-story as "a tradition that goes back to prewriting time in China, where people verbally pass on history and mythology and genealogy and how-to stories and bedtime stories and legends. They pass them down through the generations, and it keeps the community together" (quoted in Simmons 6).

Both *The Woman Warrior* and its sequel, *China Men,* draw on autobiographical and historical fact, but Kingston adds contemporized myth, legend, fantasy, and talk-story to create a genre that is difficult to categorize. Noting that *The Woman Warrior* is subtitled *Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts,* Kingston emphasizes the genre in the subtitle by saying, "After all, I am not writing history or sociology but a 'memoir' like Proust" ("Cultural Mis-readings" 102). And yet, when *The Woman Warrior* hit the market, the world took notice. It was a groundbreaking work, which Kingston describes as, "riding the border between fiction and nonfiction" (Skandera-Trombley 35). She states:

> I'm writing about real people and these real people have powerful imaginations. They have minds that make up fictions constantly, and so if I was going to write a true biography or an autobiography I would have to take into consideration the stories that people tell. I tell the dreams that they have and then when I do that, that border becomes so wide that it contains fiction and nonfiction and both going toward truth. (Skandera-Trombley 35)

The widening border served a practical purpose for Kingston as well. She states in a 2003 interview:

> The way that I wrote when my mother and father were both alive was very different than the way I write now. In *Woman Warrior* and *China Men,* I wrote their stories in such a way that I protected them [her parents] from being deported. Both of them were illegal aliens, and I wrote about their coming from China to Cuba to America. I made up a new genre that is a mix of reality and imagination, and I did that because I was thinking that if immigration authorities read my books they could not find evidence to deport my parents. (Alegre and Weich)

In 1977, Kingston became a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii at Honolulu. She returned from Hawaii in the mid-1980s to her alma mater, UC Berkeley, where she became a senior lecturer; today, she is an emeritus professor there

"To best appreciate *The Woman Warrior,* you do need to read *China Men,*" Kingston advises (Lim 23). *China Men* (1980), the sequel to *The Woman Warrior,* was originally conceived by Kingston to be written alongside *The Woman Warrior*—not separated by gender: "I once meant for them to be one large book," said Kingston. "But the women's stories and the men's stories parted into two volumes, naturally replicating history and geography: the women stayed in China and maintained communities; the men sailed off to Gold Mountain, where they built bachelor Chinatowns" (Lim 24). As Kingston's first book had, *China Men* received high praise, winning the National Book Award in 1981. Both books are based on Kingston's life and the lives of her parents and ancestors—a collage of stories of the men and women, past and present, in Kingston's life.

Kingston's first attempt at "straight" fiction was the novel *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), which won the PEN USA West Award for fiction. It tells the story of Wittman Ah Sing, a fifth-generation Chinese American and would-be playwright, and is set in San Francisco in the 1960s. Wittman, a Walt Whitman incarnate, wants to set a new standard for being American: "The common man has Chinese looks" (*Tripmaster Monkey [TM]* 34). With the creation and performance of his play, he is able to transform his anger at living in a racist and materialistic society into communal love and peace.

In 1991, while returning home from her father's funeral, Kingston learned that the hills of Oakland, California, were on fire and that her home was completely destroyed, along with the manuscript for her nearly completed book to be titled *The Fourth Book of Peace*. Rather than succumb to the loss, she recreated the lost fiction—a sequel to *Tripmaster Monkey*—alongside her own account of life after the fire, including her experiences teaching writing to local Vietnam veterans. The result is a melding of nonfiction and fiction entitled *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), in which Wittman Ah Sing returns as a main character. In this book, Kingston advocates a spirit of nonviolence and peace in the global community.

Kingston continues to be a visible writer and a visible peace activist. Her stories are often about men and women who are silenced—and Kingston feels an obligation to do the talking for them, to imagine what her ancestors might have done, or thought, or said. Kingston is forced to create her own scenarios, to fill in the gaps. She says: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (*CM* 15). Kingston was arrested

in March 2003—along with many other women, including her fellow authors ALICE WALKER and Terry Tempest Williams—while protesting the Iraq War in front of the White House in observance of International Women's Day. She says of her vision for global peace: "I want to be able to manipulate reality as easily as I can manipulate fiction. Do we imagine the world? If we imagine characters, can we cause them to appear in the real world? What if I could strongly write peace, I could cause an end to war" (Seshachari).

Kingston rides the borders and blurs the boundaries between the genres of fiction and nonfiction, reality and imagination, and seems to meld the Chinese and American experiences—and the languages. She states, "My hands are writing English, but my mouth is speaking Chinese. Somehow I am able to write a language that captures the Chinese rhythms and tones and images, getting that power into English. I am working in some kind of fusion language" (Alegre and Weich). Part of this fusion, this melding, is the way Chinese myths have been "transmuted to America," as Kingston says (Simmons 16). As culture evolves, so must the stories. "Stories and myths stay alive when they change like that," she says. "That is being alive. But when they are frozen in one version, that's when they die" (Skandera-Trombley 36). She adds, "Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American" (Lim 24). These border crossings and transmuted myths have served Kingston in creating her own identity as a Chinese American. And the transmutation continues: On the one hand, Kingston's books are about ugly conflict—cultural conflict, gender conflict, the conflict of being a hyphenated Chinese American in an often-hostile white America. But on the other hand, her books are also full of beauty: Riding the border between fiction and nonfiction allows for beautiful prose. Although Kingston calls the language in *The Woman Warrior* "stilted and complicated . . . because I was trying to find a language for a very complicated story" (Lim 5), readers and critics alike most often find Kingston's prose stunning, "a poem turned into a sword" (Leonard, "Defiance" 77).

The critic Maureen Sabine once claimed that Kingston has "secured a place in the American canon as the living author most frequently taught in U.S. universities" (4). Her works cross academic disciplines and are taught in many interdisciplinary courses: Asian studies, postmodernism, women's and gender studies, family history, memoir, folklore, history, anthropology—the list goes on. Kingston notes that "*China Men* is listed in the Dewey Decimal system under California history" and adds, "My work is in so many categories that essentially it has not been categorized" (Skandera-Trombley 34). Among the many awards and honors she has received are the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature (1999) and the title National Living Treasure of Hawaii. In 1997, President Bill Clinton awarded Kingston a National Humanities Medal for inspiring "a new generation of writers to make their own unique voices and experiences heard" ("Famous Berkeley").

"No Name Woman" (1976)

"'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (3). The opening line of "No Name Women," the first chapter in the book *The Woman Warrior,* often anthologized as a stand-alone story, foretells the pattern that continues throughout the story: silencing and the ensuing attempts to find a voice for women, particularly the story's narrator (young Kingston) and her nameless aunt.

The haunting story, told as a cautionary tale by Kingston's mother—"'Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you'"—is about her father's only sister, whose name is never mentioned because of the shame she causes the family when she becomes pregnant years after her husband left to seek his fortune in Gold Mountain (America) (5). Married as one of 17 brides in "hurry up weddings—to make sure that every young man who went 'out on the road' would responsibly come home"—she was to maintain the home and maintain the traditional ways

while her young husband was away. When the villagers discover the impossible pregnancy, they raid the house on the night the baby is to be born; the aunt gives birth in a pigsty, then drowns herself and her newborn baby in the well.

The story of Kingston's nameless aunt instructs her about being a Chinese woman, instruction that she must hold up against what she sees as "American-feminine" (11). She learns about the lowly status of women—that "to be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough"; that "women in old China did not choose" (6)—and that being a daughter-in-law in China means that a woman's in-laws could have "sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her" (8). She learns about "Chinese-feminine": hair removal with a depilatory string, the abandoned practice of foot binding, loud talking, and walking pigeon-toed; however, she must view these in relationship to the American-feminine ideal—which for young Kingston felt quite the opposite.

Kingston finds confusion in feminine identity and in other aspects of the story as well. She needs more information to make sense of the story, but since her mother has "told [her] once and for all the useful parts" (6), and her father forbids any mention of the aunt's name, Kingston is forced to read between the lines. She constructs her own story with what might have happened in an effort to make her aunt's life "branch into [hers]," using a series of *perhaps*'s and *might have been*s: *perhaps* her aunt had a lover, or she *might have been* raped (8). With all the possibilities of what may have happened to her aunt, Kingston finally recognizes, as Judith Melton notes, "that her aunt was no adulterer who brought destruction onto her family; she was an ordinary woman caught in the punishing beliefs of feudal China" (76).

With her pregnancy, the nameless aunt has upset the Chinese tradition and the village structure—she has made a break in the "roundness" (13). She is punished by the villagers "for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them" (13). Roundness is symbolic here of community and wholeness, where the sins of one could pull down many. Community is more important, more necessary, than the individual. Significant, too, is that the "real punishment was not the raid . . . but the family's deliberately forgetting her"—in effect, silencing her—which Kingston ends by "devot[ing] pages to her" and telling the story (16). The telling serves as both an act of self-empowerment and an act of open rebellion against her mother's admonishment.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What attitudes about feminine behavior are prevalent in this chapter? What does the narrator learn about the "proper" roles for women? In what way(s) does she rebel against those attitudes?
2. Research the practice of Chinese foot binding and read Ruth Fainlight's poem "Flower Feet." Think about foot binding in terms of creating helpless women and as a form of beauty. In what ways do women hurt themselves in today's world for beauty's sake?
3. The mother in the story tells cautionary tales, or warning tales—"a story to grow up on," as Kingston says. What cautionary tales have you been told? Has reality differed from those stories? If so, how?
4. Read "No Name Woman" in conjunction with the chapter "White Tigers." Explore the attitudes about motherhood in each story.
5. Read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and discuss Hester Prynne in connection with Kingston's nameless aunt. In what ways are the two women similar?

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (1976)

Throughout *The Woman Warrior,* Kingston searches the memories of her childhood growing up in Stockton, California, but she is haunted by China, a place where she has never been, which she knows only through the tales and stories—the talk-stories—told by those around her, particularly her

mother. Confused about her Chinese-American identity, she asks members of her community:

> Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate the peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing up with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (6)

She gets little help in answering the question. Her father is often silent, and her mother is an unreliable storyteller. In the last chapter, Kingston accuses her mother: "You lie with your stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference" (202).

The *Woman Warrior* has five chapters, each one a story that can stand on its own ("No Name Woman" and "White Tigers" are often anthologized), and each one focusing on a particular woman whose story teaches young Kingston about her identity as a Chinese American. Many of the stories that Kingston tells are about women on the margins, marginalized in life and often completely silenced in history. From the stories that young Kingston hears, she learns that the repression of self is good for the community; thus, a conflict is precipitated between the suppression of the individual and the celebration of an individual's story. Telling the story—often in open rebellion against demands not to tell—is an assertion of the individual, the capital *I*. In the final chapter, Kingston tells of her schooling and the inability to talk: "The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). It was easier to read aloud than to talk aloud, but young Kingston "could not understand 'I'"—a genderless word, a letter with only three bold strokes, whereas the Chinese version had seven "intricate strokes" (166). Kingston points out that there is a "Chinese word for the female *I*—which is 'slave'" (47). Her journey to find a voice is also a journey to find the capital *I*.

In a disturbing scene that goes on for seven pages, young Kingston tortures a quiet, timid Chinese girl in the bathroom at school in an effort to force her to speak. She pinches her cheeks, pulls her hair, screams at her, ridicules her, pleads with her: "'I'll let you go if you say just one word,' I said. 'You can say, 'a' or 'the,' and I'll let you go. Come on. Please'" (179). She lashes out at this girl in a self-hating rage.

She hears the stories of the worthlessness of girls, the powerlessness of growing up as a Chinese-American female, and says, "I am useless, one more girl who couldn't be sold." She wants to believe that "they only say, 'When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls'" (52). "But," she continues, "I watched such words come out of my own mother's and father's mouths. . . . And I had to get out of hating range" (52). Young Maxine feels confusion because her mother told her that she "would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught [her] the song of the warrior woman," Fa Mu Lan, the legendary woman warrior who takes her aged father's place as a soldier, and dressed as a man, leads armies (20).

Kingston's adaptation of the myth is mutilayered: Fa Mu Lan's power is derived as much from the words carved on her back (the burdens of the entire Chinese population) as from the sword in her hand. She wins battles, leads armies, marries, gives birth to a son (all the while disguised as a man), avenges the Chinese population, and becomes a legend of "perfect filiality" (45). Kingston carries words on her back as well—*chink* and *gook*—and she imagines herself as an avenger: Her revenge will be the "reporting" (53). "The reporting," she claims, "is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (53). Kingston, when talking about the importance of words, says in a 1996 interview, "One kind of example I have in mind is to take the word 'swordwoman' and to look at its similarity with 'wordswoman' to include the idea of the woman warrior taking on the power of words" (Meachen and Williams).

Certainly Kingston is a "wordswoman." In the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior,* Kingston's

mother tells her the horrific story of her pregnant aunt (No Name Woman), who is brutally attacked by Chinese villagers and punished for her sexual sin: "Don't tell anyone you had an aunt," her mother says. "Your father does not want to hear her name. She has never been born" (15). But Kingston rebels against the admonishon. She tells the story that she knows and speculates on the parts where her mother is silent. She tells of No Name Woman; she tells of smothered baby girls and young girls sold as slaves in China. Kingston tells the ugly stories, she tells the painful stories, and she reports the words that she carries as a burden on her back. As does Fa Mu Lan, whose heroic deeds are an assurance that she will escape her gender's fate of invisibility and silencing, Kingston, through her own reporting, her own talk-story, her own act of defiance, her *words,* finds her voice in her family, in her Chinese history, and in her own American history.

In the chapter entitled "Shaman," Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, a looming presence throughout the book, is seen as a strong, heroic woman scholar with "a room of her own," who defeats ghosts, earns a medical degree, eats anything (in China, "big eaters win"), and delivers babies, but she is also a woman who may have killed baby girls (90). She tells young Kingston, "The midwife or a relative would take the back of a girl baby's head in her hand and turn her face into the ashes" that had been left by the bedside. "It was very easy" (62). Again, Kingston is confronted with conflicting messages.

The fourth chapter, "In the Western Palace," tells of Brave Orchid's sister, the timid Moon Orchid, and her visit to the United States to reunite with her husband after a 30-year separation. Living in the United States and practicing medicine, he now has a second wife and family and knows nothing of Moon Orchid's visit. Brave Orchid insists that Moon Orchid "go to [her] husband's house and demand [her] rights as First Wife," plotting the different ways that her sister might dramatically surprise her husband. When they finally meet outside his office, her husband tells her she is like a character "in a book [he] had read long ago" (154). Moon Orchid is unable to assert herself. She cannot stand up to her bossy sister or her husband; she is silenced, declared insane, and placed in a California state mental asylum.

In the final pages, Kingston writes a story of reconciliation, a seamless blend of two stories between Kingston and her mother: "The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (206). Kingston's legendary hero, Ts'ai Yen, is a woman whose poetry changes the sounds of captivity into beautiful music, and "it translated well" (209).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the chapter "White Tigers," look at the way the narrator reacts to sexist ideas about women. How does she rebel against these ideas? In what ways does she subscribe to them?
2. We all may have words "carved on our backs"—Kingston says two of her words are *chink* and *gook* (53). Or we might carry stories or "words to grow up on" as part of us. What words might you have "carved on your back"? What stories do you carry with you? What do these words and stories tell you about the values of your culture or family?
3. In the final chapter, the narrator/young Kingston resorts to physical abuse, verbal taunts, bribery, and pleading in her attempts to make the girl speak. Why is she so cruel and so intent on forcing the girl to speak? What is Kingston saying, in a broader sense, about women's being historically silenced?
4. "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (5). Consider this statement and the subtitle of the book, *A Girlhood among Ghosts.* What do the ghosts symbolize?

China Men (1980)

Originally conceived as a part of "one huge book" with *The Woman Warrior, China Men* was instead published as a sequel in 1980. With *China Men,* Kingston moves away from the resentment that often filled *The Warrior Woman* and toward a voice of reconciliation. Unlike her first book, which has

"five interlocking pieces, each one like a short story or essay," and myths seamlessly integrated into the stories, *China Men* comprises 18 chapters, with the myths as separate entries—the pattern of "a myth, and then a modern story, and then a myth," symbolizing that the myths were not as integrated into the lives of the men (Lim 5). Kingston claims that while the women were caught up in the old myths, the men thought, "Why not be rid of the mythical, and be a free American?" (Lim 24).

The stories—most of which take place on American soil—are about Kingston's father and many male relatives and sojourners: grandfathers, uncles, cousins, brother. The stories are particular to blood relatives, but they also tell the tale of the collective male heritage of Chinese Americans: workers in laundries, laborers in sugarcane fields, builders of railroads, and makers of America. A chapter called "The Making of More Americans" is a reference to Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans,* an allusion that "grounds [Kingston's] work in the American tradition" (Lim 5). A prevalent theme in *China Men* is the search for the American dream, which is symbolized in the Chinese name for America—*Gold Mountain*—a name derived from the worldwide gold rush to California. A major part of the American dream was to "get rich quick" and return to the homeland, but many Chinese went through successive generations in the United States, from sojourner to settler to citizen (Chua 61).

Other references to the Hong family's becoming American are artfully arranged throughout *China Men*. When relatives go to Stockton to visit Kingston's family, they are taken to the place where "two of our four grandfathers had had their house, stable, and garden" (171). The relatives take pictures and say, "This is ancestral ground, their eyes filling with tears over a vacant lot in Stockton" (171). Ancestral ground establishes a claim to the land, a spiritual rootedness that reveals a sacred hold on the ground—a claim to being an American that was hard fought and hard won. A particularly poignant chapter is "The Brother in Vietnam." When Kingston's brother receives a Secret Security clearance while in the military, "The government was certifying that the family was really American, not precariously American but super-American, extraordinarily secure—Q Clearance Americans" (299).

As in Kingston's first book, silencing is a consistent theme in *China Men* (which makes the granting of the secret security clearance in the final chapter all the more meaningful). A grandfather is told by his white employer to be silent as he clears land in Hawaii: "Shut up. Go work. China-man, go work. You stay go work. Shut up" (101). Other grandfathers and fathers—who worked in American fields and on American railroads—were symbolically silenced, at least until the last few decades, by their absence from American history texts. And much as in *The Woman Warrior,* when Kingston lacks knowledge of the story because of silences, her only resort is to guess. Her father's story of arrival in the United States takes on several different versions; after telling how her father was smuggled from China in a small crate in the ship's cargo hold, she states: "Of course, my father could not have come that way. He came a legal way, something like this" (53), and Kingston then proceeds to tell the story of her father's stay on Angel Island and his subsequent interrogation before being allowed to enter the country. In a 1996 interview, Kingston relates that when she teaches *China Men,* her students always think the real version is the legal entrance through Angel Island. But in recent years, her mother has told her that her father did indeed come as a stowaway, hidden in a box, and "he did it three times" (Meachen and William).

While *The Woman Warrior* is a story of the struggle to find voice, the *I,* Kingston claims that with *China Men,* "'I' achieved the adult narrator's voice. The 'I' becomes more whole [than in *The Woman Warrior*] because of the ability to appreciate the other gender" (Lim 23). Kingston's first-person voice becomes more distant as she moves throughout the book, and she becomes "a listener by the end" (Chin 59).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the first chapter, "On Discovery," as a cautionary tale for men, much as the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior* is a cautionary tale for women. What is Kingston's warning?

2. Why does Kingston include "The Laws" in the center of *China Men*? Look at the language of the chapter. How is it different from Kingston's prose in other chapters? Why? What effect does this have?
3. How was Kingston's father's life changed with the arrival of his wife in New York? What was his life like before her arrival? What did her arrival change?
4. Why does Kingston end the book with the chapter "My Brother in Vietnam"? How is this title particularly significant in terms of being an American?

Tripmaster Monkey (1989)

When Maxine Hong Kingston set out to write her first novel, she did so in part to answer the reviewers and critics of *The Woman Warrior,* who often characterized her portrayal of Chinese women as stereotypically exotic and mysterious and questioned whether Kingston was writing about the "typical" Chinese-American experience. With *Tripmaster Monkey,* Kingston reveals a protagonist who is anything but stereotypically exotic and typically Chinese American. He is, in fact, American. Michelle Cliff observes: "To underline the Americanness of Wittman, Hong Kingston has named him for the most American of American poets." She continues, "To play with his name is irresistible. Wittman Ah Sing the body electric. Wittman, Ah hear America Singing" (Cliff 11).

The Kingston scholar Diane Simmons tells us that "from her earliest work, Kingston has taken it as her mission to intervene in the process by which the identity of the powerless is invented by the stories of the powerful" (140). In *Tripmaster Monkey,* Kingston sets the fictional Wittman Ah Sing on a journey to "construct an identity by integrating his own dual inheritance," while fighting off cultural stereotypes (Simmons 140). *Tripmaster Monkey* is a book with "American rhythms . . . with slangy American, present day language" (Chin 71). Kingston shows the reader over and over again that Wittman is indeed not Chinese American, but American. Wittman feels he has very little in common with the "fresh-off-the-boat" Chinese immigrants, whom he rather derisively labels as F.O.B.s. He reminds us that he is a fifth-generation native Californian, whose great-great-grandfather "came on the *Nootka,* as ancestral as the *Mayflower*" (41). Much as she does in *China Men,* Kingston again reminds us that there are other stories, less often told and heard, of the making of America. The people who traveled to the United States on the *Nootka* helped build America in an important and essential way, just as those who arrived on the *Mayflower* did.

Wittman Ah Sing is a year out of college as a liberal arts major in 1960s San Francisco. He is a writer, a reader, a beatnik, a hippie, a Walt Whitman incarnate, a drifter, a draft dodger, and a young man who is fired from his job in the toy section of a large department store after setting up a pornographic scene of a Barbie bride and the organ grinder's monkey doll: "A green razzberry to you, World," he says as he walks away (65). He goes on unemployment, falls into an impromptu wedding ceremony officiated by a draft-dodging mail-order minister, and works on the Great American Play. Marilyn Chin calls Wittman a "precocious and unhappy and alienated anti-hero, wading through the shit of American life" (60). But Wittman is also struggling against alienation; he is working toward integration in his quest for identity.

The novel opens with Wittman's contemplating suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge: "Anybody serious about killing himself does the big leap off the Golden Gate" (3). This moment of isolation and alienation is only temporary for Wittman, for not long after, Wittman, the "fool for literature," is reading Rilke aloud to passengers on a crosstown bus, mile after mile, striving for integration, trying to be part of a community (10). As in all of Kingston's writings, the community versus the individual is an ongoing theme. The narrator of *Tripmaster Monkey* (Kingston claims the narrator is female, although she is never directly noted as such) states, "Anybody American who really imagines Asia feels the loneliness of the U.S.A. and suffers from the distances human beings are apart" (141). The vision of community is "a Chinese thing," says Kingston

(Moyers). Wittman, much like his namesake Walt Whitman, is looking for a communal village in a land where individualism is held in highest esteem.

Ultimately, Wittman takes the vision of an integrated community to the stage as he puts on his play at a theater in Chinatown, a play based on the epic Chinese *Romance of the Three Kingdoms,* "required reading for every literate Chinese child," says John Leonard, who continues, "Chinese have been staging one version or another of it in theaters and opera houses in America ever since the railroad and Gold Rush days" ("Of Thee" 771). And Wittman is staging a version of his own. Wittman thinks, "whaddayaknow, I've written one of those plays that leave room for actors to do improv, a process as ancient as Chinese opera and as far-out as the theater of spontaneity that was happening in streets and parks" (141). His play will be the joining of cultures, ideas, and people. As Derek Parker Royal suggests, "Wittman's theater is one of multiple possibility," refusing to define itself in terms of "any static or categorical representations" (142). Wittman is trying to change the world, "solv[ing] the world's problems through fun and theater. And with laughter," says Kingston. She continues, "The reason this is all set in the Sixties is that the monkey was here in the Sixties. Abby Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, you know? They were monkey spirits, trying to change the world with costumes and street theater . . . and bring[ing] chaos to established order" (Chin). Wittman is modeled on the trickster monkey, "one of the most beloved anti-authority figures of Chinese literature" (Simmons 143). As monkey, Wittman can challenge materialism, consumerism, corporate America, and military authority. Bharati Mukherjee describes Wittman as "a werewolf, a shape-changer. He is the Monkey of Chinese legends, a tripper through seventy-two reincarnations, a savior, a discoverer of Inner Truth" (279). He is also playful and full of fun.

Wittman's ancestors immigrated to California not for the gold rush (which drew many Chinese to "Gold Mountain"); instead, they "came to play"—his mother was a Flora Dora showgirl named Ruby Long Legs, and his father, Zeppelin Ah Sing, was a stagehand and, later, an onstage emcee (250). Kingston states in an interview that she wanted Chinese Americans to have a reason to immigrate to America other than gold—a wonderful, honorable reason "like the Pilgrims, like religious freedom" (Moyers). "We came for fun, to put on shows," she says. It is part of the monkey spirit.

While Wittman's monkey spirit is playful, it also transforms into a reader. "Wittman's mind is like an English major's mind," says Kingston (Moyers). She says that she imagined herself as part of a community of "writers both living and dead," and Wittman is very much a part of that community as well (Sabine 6). Kingston asks Wittman to discover what he is going to do with all that knowledge—all the knowledge that is gained from a liberal arts degree and a life as a reader. "I want to see," states Kingston, "whether Wittman can take all this wonderful literature and make the world a better place" (Chin 60). Kingston and Wittman know that America is multilayered, multilingual, culture clashing, and certainly not easily divided into neat categories. "He's tripped out," as Caroline Ong sees him, "not on any of the mind and reality-altering drugs abundant in San Francisco in the 1960s, but on words and language, fictions and histories, handed down from his cultural past"—from a Chinese and an American *and* a global past (285). And Wittman's final trip (at least for now) is to collect everyone he knows together to perform his version of the Chinese stories of heroism and community, a trip that surely draws counterculture community together.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Maxine Hong Kingston claims, "I loved being a young person in the '60s. There were many, many wonderful adventures" (Seshachari). Do a cultural study of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the Beat generation in particular. What were the times like? What are some of Wittman's traits and beliefs that might characterize him as a beatnik?
2. Read Allen Ginsberg's poem "A Supermarket in California." Note Walt Whitman's presence in the poem. What was Ginsberg protesting? What did he find abhorrent? How does this relate to the situation of Wittman Ah Sing?

3. Do you like Wittman Ah Sing? Do you find him offensive? Wittman claims that he wants to offend. Why do you think he wants to be offensive? What purpose does it serve?
4. Kingston tells us that the subtitle *His Fake Book* is a jazz term. It is "a book of tunes that the jazz musicians improvise off" (Skandera-Trombley 41). Think about the subtitle in regard to Wittman. Why do you think Kingston would use this subtitle?

"Restaurant" (1981)

Throughout her life, most of Kingston's writing has been dedicated to prose rather than poetry, though much of her prose is certainly infused with poetic language. In her short book *To Be the Poet* (2002), Kingston writes, "I want poetry to be the way it used to come when I was a child. The Muse flew; I flew. Let me return to that child being, and rest from prose," which causes her to labor, "draft after draft like a draft horse" (4, 10).

Like much of her prose work, Kingston's poem "Restaurant" is about people on the margins of society—in this case, restaurant workers. As do the Chinese railroad workers in *China Men,* who labor under horrible conditions and long hours—yet are nowhere to be found in the photographs taken at the momentous driving of the symbolic Golden Spike at the joining of the transcontinental railroad in 1869—the workers in "Restaurant" labor unseen and unnoticed. The Asian studies scholar Garrett Hongo states that he, like many Asian Americans, "was forever fighting the stereotype, the dehumanized image of Asians in America, the *invisibility* of our historical, social, and cultural presence in this country" (xxi). The workers in Kingston's poem, who have a variety of backgrounds—all of them on the margins—seem destined to the same fate of invisibility.

The poem opens with a sickly image: "The main cook lies sick on a banquette, and his assistant / has cut his thumb," and the litany of names of "other" and "outsider" begin: "China," "Mulattos," "Black so called musician," "Broads," "Whites," "porters, who speak French, from the Ivory Coast"—all outsiders who label and are labeled as "other." The workers are subject to gender barriers, language barriers, and cultural barriers within the busy underground restaurant. They are nameless workers who are not seen and are too busy working to "see" themselves.

The speaker states, "In this basement, / I lose my size. I am a bent-over / child, Gretel or Jill." She becomes small, even more unseen and unnoticed and unreal, presenting "an image of stunted growth and a nascent imaginative self hopelessly grounded by social constrictions" (Colanzi 66). Yet Kingston inserts a possible playful feeling here as well. Gretel and Jill, characters from fairy tale and nursery rhyme, survive traumatic events through cunning and play. Likewise, the nameless workers will survive as well: They will take a "nibble of a slab of chocolate as big as a table." They will rise "out of the sidewalk into the night," albeit to "wonder at the clean diners behind glass in candlelight." Kingston creates an underground world where workers labor until the early-morning hours and go up to an outside world where they are nonparticipants. They can only look at the privileged from behind the glass.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Marge Piercy's poem "To Be of Use," which speaks of the beauty of hard work. Can we read Kingston's poem as a poem about the value of work?
2. Read Langston Hughes's poem "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria." Think about the many people who work behind the scenes in less desirable jobs. How is this poem similar to Kingston's?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON KINGSTON AND HER WORK

1. Research the role of the trickster in Native American culture. How does this trickster compare to a Chinese trickster as portrayed in Kingston's work?

2. How would you define the American dream? What is the American dream for Kingston? For her ancestors? What are the problems for Kingston in finding it? For her ancestors? How does Kingston's American dream differ from yours? What influences have shaped the concept of the American dream?
3. Kingston has been chastised by some critics for falsifying Chinese history and distorting traditional myths and legends. What purpose does this distortion serve for Kingston? Why does she want to revision history? Do you think Kingston's critics are correct in chastising Kingston? How do you feel about Kingston's changing the myths?

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Susan Andersen

Yusef Komunyakaa (1947–)

Poetry is a kind of distilled insinuation. It's a way of expanding and talking around an idea or a question. Sometimes, more actually gets said through such a technique than a full frontal assault.

("Notations in Blue")

Yusef Komunyakaa was born Willie James Brown, Jr., in 1947 in Bogalusa, Louisiana, the oldest of five children. The son of a carpenter and a mother who encouraged her children to learn as much as they could, he has commented on the influence of a set of encyclopedias his mother bought for them. Reading, listening to a small brown box radio, Komunyakaa gradually expanded his ideology to include not only the Civil Rights Movement taking place around him, but a widening world of cultural influences. He says that the first book he read entirely was the King James Bible. According to Susan Conley, "He cannot underestimate its effect on his own writing: 'The hypnotic Biblical cadence brought me close to the texture of language, to the importance of music and metaphor'" (www.ploughshares.org). When he was 16, Komunyakaa discovered James Baldwin's essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name* and decided to become a writer. He graduated from Bogalusa's Central High School in 1965, reading at the ceremony a poem he had written. From 1965 to 1968, Komunyakaa served a tour of duty in Vietnam as an information specialist, editing a military newspaper called the *Southern Cross.* He also saw combat and for his service in Vietnam he won the bronze star.

After his tour of duty, Komunyakaa enrolled at the University of Colorado with a double major in English and sociology. He began writing poetry in 1973 and received his bachelor's degree magna cum laude in 1975. He has since published more than a dozen books, most of them collections of poetry. His first chapbook of poems, *Dedications & Other Darkhorses,* was published in 1977, followed by a second chapbook, *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory,* in 1979. During this time, Komunyakaa earned an M.A. from Colorado State University (1978) and an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine. He also solidified his desire to make writing poetry his life's work.

Upon receiving his second graduate degree in 1980, Komunyakaa joined the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, where he felt he could hone his poetic voice. For an artist, he believes, "a sort of unearthing has to take place; sometimes one has to remove layers of facades and superficialities. The writer has to get down to the guts of the thing and rediscover the basic timbre of his or her existence." The result of these further efforts to polish his art was *Copacetic* (1984), his first commercially published book. A collection of poems that demonstrated his incorporation of jazz influences and everyday speech, *Copacetic* established the voice that would eventually lead critics to pair Komunyakaa with the playwright August Wilson for his skill in capturing the vernacular. His use of jazz—a constant in his poems—leads the critic Keith Leonard to observe that for Komunyakaa, jazz is not so much "an exclusively black discursive practice available only to the black artist who is dedicated to defining blackness against racism" as

"a process of self-definition," assisting in framing the uniqueness of the individual experience:

> Neither exclusively ethnic cultural self-definition nor an erasure of difference, improvisation in Komunyakaa's verse is a postmodern introspective practice that rewrites the social discourses that create and justify exclusion, including but not limited to racism, making it the defining activity of the mind. Improvisation therefore becomes the defining process of all human identity. (826)

After teaching briefly at a number of universities, Komunyakaa moved to New Orleans in 1984. There he at first became an artist in residence in the public schools, working with fifth graders to explore their creativity. While teaching at the University of New Orleans in 1985, he met and married the Australian novelist and short story writer Mandy Sayer. During the early 1980s, having reflected on his Vietnam experiences for more than a decade, Komunyakaa began to write the poems that would give him his greatest fame.

He followed *Copacetic* with *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986), winner of the San Francisco Poetry Center Award. In a 1997 editor's note in *Ploughshares,* Susan Conley states that *Apologize* is the book in which Komunyakaa begins to "to tap into the violence of Vietnam" with such poems as "Unnatural State of the Unicorn," containing the lines "I am a man. I've scuffed / in mudholes, broken teeth in a grinning skull / like the moon behind bars" (www.pshares.org). That same year he followed *Apologize* with *Toys in a Field* (1986), a limited-edition chapbook in which several of his Vietnam poems appeared. When he began to write about the war, Komunyakaa later told the *New York Times,* "It was as if I had uncapped some hidden place in me. Poem after poem came spilling out." According to the poet, he had not deliberately thought about creating poems based on his Vietnam experiences but must have been doing so unconsciously for many years.

His next collection, *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), would explore his memories of Vietnam even more fully. The title of the work means "crazy" in Vietnamese and is the name given by locals to American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. It won the Dark Room Poetry Prize and has been cited by luminaries such as Poet Laureate Robert Hass for its clarified pictures of the war. When the collection appeared, his fellow poet William Matthews declared: "The best writing we've had from the long war in Vietnam has been prose so far. Yusef Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* changes that." Indeed, Komunyakaa has become almost systemically linked with poems about the Vietnam soldier's experience, including for the first time the experiences of black soldiers. Readers who know little about the totality of his work often associate him with the frequently anthologized "Facing It," the concluding poem of *Dien Cai Dau*.

Memories of his experiences in Vietnam still fuel Komunyakaa's creative imagination more than 20 years after the publication of *Dien Cai Dau,* as a selection from *Warhorses* (2008), his 12th poetry collection, testifies. The unnamed poem is from the final section of the work "Autobiography of My Alter Ego." Its speaker is a young man who goes "off to college / with colors & songs in my head. . . . Back then, my whole brain / was a swarm. A hemorrhage / of words & colors. I wanted everything / at once. I wanted to see / & hear everything. I wanted to be / everywhere" (53). But a part of "everywhere" he does not want to be intrudes on his world soon enough: "When my draft notice arrives / I was twenty, with apparitions / of Vietnam on the six o'clock news," the speaker confides. Taking the "unopened envelope" to a bar his father owns, he places it on the bar for his father to open.

When the letter's contents are made clear, his father simply calls, "Drinks are on the house / everybody" (54). Not having served in his generation's war—World War II—the father appears proud for his son to go to Vietnam: "He was now gung ho" (55). The older man does not want "white feathers," the symbol of cowardice in wartime, "to fall from the sky / onto his doorsteps" (55). For him, his son's defection would be unthinkable.

As for the speaker himself, ironically the poem does not offer even a suggestion of his reaction to

the news the letter gives him. The reader is left to puzzle over the speaker's feelings, which perhaps lie somewhere between those his father expresses and others we hear when he arrives home to show the letter to his mother.

For the women in the speaker's life, it is "another story" from the father's reaction (54). His mother, whom he has never heard utter a curse word before, says, "Those bastards / sent you their goddamn death letter" and that night begins a long vigil, staring at the mailbox for the second letter she fears, the one eventually announcing his death in battle (54–55). Roberta, evidently an elderly friend, says, "You go upstairs / & start packing your clothes. / You're my boy, / & you're going to Canada. / I'm not going to stand here / & let them bring you back dead / in a steel box. My forefathers / ran off to Canada, / & now you're on your way too" (55). She asserts that Canada, the ultimate goal of many runaway Southern slaves fleeing to the North, can once again provide protection, as it in fact did during the war in Vietnam, when crossing the border was many young men's means of avoiding the draft. Only a poet with Komunyakaa's skill with powerful imagery and his insight into the destructive evils of war could create this evocative piece.

February in Sydney (1989), the work following *Dien Cai Dau,* continues to explore Komunyakaa's fascination with jazz, combining it with an interest in Australian culture, particularly that of the Aborigine people. The poet has published more than a dozen books, including *Magic City* (1992), a poetry collection focusing on his childhood and New Orleans, and *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1993), for which he received both the Pulitzer Prize and a $50,000 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. Of this volume, the critic Linda Wagner-Martin observes: "The violence of war, the pain of identifying with the Vietnamese, and the anguish of returning to the States ha[s] seldom been so eloquently and hauntingly expressed" as it is by Komunyakaa (www.cengage.com). Notably, he was one of three African Americans to have won the Pulitzer, which had previously been awarded to Gwendolyn Brooks (1950) and to Rita Dove (1987). According to the critic Trudier Harris, Komunyakaa's receiving the prize not only "elevated his reputation [but] spurred critical and teaching interest in his poetry" (http://www.answers.com). His work became impossible to ignore.

After he received the Pulitzer Prize, Komunyakaa's talents became increasingly acknowledged. By 1994 the poet had won two creative writing fellowships, from the National Endowment for the Arts and the San Francisco Poetry Center Award, and had been named the Lilly Professor of Poetry at Indiana University. Subsequent collections include *Thieves of Paradise* (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (2000); *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems, 1975–1999* (2001); *Taboo* (2004); and *Warhorses: Poems* (2008).

A work in progress, "Requiem," demonstrates Komunyakaa's inclination to address current cultural happenings; dedicated to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated his beloved New Orleans in 2005, the poem begins:

> So,
> when the strong unholy high winds
> whiplashed over the sold-off marshlands
> eaten back to a sigh of saltwater,
> the Crescent City was already shook down to
> her pilings,
> her floating ribs, her spleen & backbone,
> left trembling in her Old World facades
> & postmodern lethargy, lost to waterlogged
> memories & quitclaim deeds
> exposed for all eyes, damnable
> gaze & lamentation—plumb line
> & heartthrob, ballast & watertable—
> already the last ghost song
> of the Choctaw & the Chickasaw
> was long gone, no more than a drunken curse
> among the oak & sweet gum leaves, a tally
> of broken treaties & absences echoing
> cries of birds over the barrier islands
> inherited by the remittance man, scalawag
> & King Cotton . . .

In this latest work, Komunyakaa explores one of the issues he feels are overlooked too often in American

cultural deliberations—class: "The Katrina situation underlined a problem that we Americans attempt to deny or erase with silence: We talk about race and [W. E. B.] DuBois' infamous color line, but seldom do we discuss problems of class in America" (Marshall). For Komunyakaa, no cultural issue—however close to the bone it rubs—is immune to poetic investigation.

Komunyakaa's prose is collected in *Blues Notes: Essays, Interviews & Commentaries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000). With J. A. Sascha Feinstein, he coedited *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991), which the pair followed five years later with *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology, Volume 2* (1996). As a cotranslator, he worked with Martha Collins to produce *The Insomnia of Fire* by Nguyen Quang Thieu (1995). Komunyakaa also served with David Lehman as coeditor for *The Best of American Poetry* (2003). He has written dramatic works, as well, including *Gilgamesh: A Verse Play* (2006). In addition to editing the journal *Gumbo: A Magazine for the Arts* (1976–79), Komunyakaa has published work in numerous periodicals, including *Black American Literature Forum, Callaloo, Beloit Poetry Journal, Chameleon,* the *Paris Review, Free Lance, Poetry Now,* and *African American Review.*

A number of the poet's musical compositions, both those performed live and those recorded, include *Slip Knot* (2003), a libretto written in collaboration with the composer T. J. Anderson and the historian T. H. Breen. Created at the behest of Northwestern University, where it was first performed, the work explores the true story of a Massachusetts slave falsely accused of raping a white woman and finally executed. Asked how his theory of composing music compares to that of writing poetry, Komunyakaa says that his songs are much more than poems set to music: "I wanted to write a different kind of lyric, with elements of imagery and surprise, the same as a poem. I didn't want to have the lyric be cliché-driven, which is the situation with most songs. I also utilized rhyme and rhyme-approximations—that's my other distinction between writing songs and poems" (www.poets.org). Although his lyrics of course include many of the powerful poetic devices and images that mark his poems, Komunyakaa has said that when he composes for the musical line, he aims to leave the composers of the music free to improvise as their imaginations see fit, giving them "the freedom to be inventive. . . . I want to find an elastic structure, to pull it this way and that, the same way one does with a poem, to give the composer some freedom. Nothing should be ironclad" (www.poets.org). Komunyakaa believes strongly in the power of art to mitigate the negative forces and strains of culture, and his various creative genres speak to that impulse.

Komunyakaa's many additional honors include the William Faulkner Prize from the Université de Rennes, the Thomas Forcade Award, the Hanes Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Louisiana Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1999 he was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, an honor he shares with poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, W. H. Auden, and Adrienne Rich. Besides teaching at the University of New Orleans, he has been on the faculty at Indiana University and the University of California, Berkeley and in the Council of Humanities and Creative Writing Program at Princeton University. In 2008 the Academy of American Poets and the National Council of Teachers of English selected him as one of our most notable American poets, publishing lesson plans for teachers on their Web site ("Get Ready for Poem in Your Pocket Day"). Currently Komunyakaa lives in New York City, where he is Distinguished Senior Poet in New York University's graduate creative writing program.

Critics encountering Komunyakaa's inventive, wide-ranging poetic style have frequently been at a loss about which literary movement his work reflects. They have variously compared him to "Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), and William Carlos Williams. The author has acknowledged that his work has been influenced by these poets as well as by Melvin Tolson, Sterling Brown, Helen Johnson, Margaret Walker, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay," yet Komunyakaa's work escapes easy categorization (Ashford). Writing in the *New York Times,* Bruce Weber observes that

Komunyakaa is "a Wordsworthian type [of poet] whose worldly, philosophic mind might be stirred by something as homely and personal as a walk in a field of daffodils. His poems, many of which are built on fiercely autobiographical details—about his stint in Vietnam, about his childhood—deal with the stains that experience leaves on a life, and they are often achingly suggestive without resolution" (B1). The lack of resolution for the poetic situations that are Komunyakaa's subject matter greatly accounts for the complexity and staying power his audience has come to expect in his writing.

After the publication of *Neon Vernacular,* the critic Diann Blakely Shoaf observed in the *Bloomsbury Review*: "The short-lined poem, a staple of the Deep Image movement, has seemed stale and tiresome in recent years, as too often it has been shaped by poets who equate the line with a unit of syntax. Komunyakaa mostly avoids this pitfall, in part because of his sensitive and well-tuned ear, in part because he knows that a short line as well as a long one should possess both content and integrity" (quoted in *Contemporary Authors*). The poet Toi Dericotte, writing in the *Kenyon Review,* comments on Komunyakaa's creative imagination in this way: "He takes on the most complex moral issues, the most harrowing ugly subjects of our American life. His voice, whether it embodies the specific experiences of a black man, a soldier in Vietnam, or a child in Bogalusa, Louisiana, is universal. It shows us in ever deeper ways what it is to be human."

In an essay from *Blue Notes* (2000), "Control Is the Mainspring," Komunyakaa writes, "I learned that the body and the mind are indeed connected: good writing is physical and mental. I welcomed the knowledge of this because I am from a working-class people who believe that physical labor is sacred and spiritual." According to Linda Wagner-Martin, "This combination of the realistic and the spiritual runs throughout Komunyakaa's poems, whether they are about his childhood, the father-son relationship, the spiritual journey each of us takes—alone, and in whatever circumstances life hands us—and the various conflicts of war" (www.cengage.com).

Yusef Komunyakaa's work, notable for its imagery and themes, is now being studied from grade three on up. Whether one considers him a war poet, a jazz poet, or simply a poet who consistently crafts a telling image in a moving way, he is a definitely a poet for this or any other time.

"Tu Do Street" (1988)

Asked whether he feels that being a poet gives him an added responsibility to speak out against war, Komunyakaa replied decidedly in the affirmative to the interviewer Tod Marshall, citing a litany of poets whose work has cried out against wars across continents and time:

> I feel that the artist or poet—more than the politician or professional soldier—is condemned to connect to what he or she observes and experiences. One thinks about Walt Whitman's visceral Civil War poems; of Siegfried Sassoon and George Trakl and Wilfred Owen responding to the horrors of World War I; of Anna Akhmatova's "Requiem" and Osip Mandelstam's "The Stalin Epigram" giving voice to an outcry against the repression in the Soviet Union; of Aleksander Wat and Wislawa Symborska and Zbigniew Herbert calling out from Eastern Europe; of Yehuda Amichai and Mahmoud Darwish in the Middle East; of Federico García Lorca and Miguel Hernandez challenging the silence during the Spanish Civil War; of Max Jacob and Berthold Brecht and Alan Dugan attempting to depict the ugliness of World War II; and the long list goes on and on. Plato was aware of the poet's obligation as witness. If one is totally connected to his or her feelings, then one sees and hears and witnesses—fully engaged—and one will have to address what one has seen and heard and dreamt. We address the internal and external, and perhaps speaking of both terrains can almost make us whole. (www.poetryfoundation.org)

Often anthologized, "Tu Do Street" is from the 1988 collection *Dien Cai Dau*. The title, a pun on having two doors, alludes to the racism that black

soldiers encountered in Vietnam, even from the bar girls and prostitutes. As the speaker enters the Saigon bar, he hears the music of Hank Snow on "the psychedelic jukebox" and is suddenly drawn to his childhood in Louisiana, where in memory "White Only" signs are paired with Snow's songs (29). When he orders a beer, "the mama-san / behind the counter acts as if she / can't understand, while her eyes / skirt each white face" (29). Having gone to Saigon for rest and recuperation, he does not at first realize that the racism he knows so well from America has followed him here, so many thousands of miles away.

He soon realizes that the soldiers are united only when "machine-gun fire brings us / together" (29). For black GIs, temporary solace with "these women / we now run to hold in our arms" can be found only "deeper into alleys," past the off-limits signs where the girls, who seem like "tropical birds" to them, do not care about the color of the soldiers as long as their money is United States green (29).

According to the critic Alvin Aubert,

> An implicit distinction is drawn in the poem between the GIs' quest for sexless or pre-sexual socialization in the bars and their quest for sex in other rooms . . . [where] the black soldiers have access to prostitutes whose services are available on a nondiscriminatory basis. These assignations take place in "rooms" that invoke a transformational landscape: They "run into each other like tunnels / leading to the underworld." Implicit in these conduits is a common humanity, linked to a common death, figuratively in sex and literally in war, for black and white GIs alike: "There's more than a nation / inside us, as black & white / soldiers touch the same lovers / minutes apart, tasting / each other's breath" (29). What's "more than a nation / inside" the GIs, black and white, is of course their shared humanity. (122–123)

The speaker comments on the irony that these same soldiers, whether black or white, have "fought / the brothers of these women" back in the bush, where there was no discrimination between them, only the common purpose of victory over the enemy (29). On the battlefield, Aubert notes, "where interracial camaraderie has immediate survival value, a different code of behavior prevails" (122).

Yet the speaker does not blame the women for the inequities he and other black soldiers suffer, even here. They, too, are victims of the war:

> The bar girls and prostitutes of Saigon are metonymically depicted in "Tu Do Street" as victims, their "voices / wounded by their beauty and war." These women are also a part of the "nation / inside us" quoted and commented on above, for it is they—"the same lovers" touched by black GIs and white GIs alike, implicitly by virtue of their capacity for motherhood, for bringing life into the world, and as the primary sources of nurturing—who are the conferrers and common denominators of the universal, of the common humanity that populates Komunyakaa's projected socio-literary commonwealth and makes material his "unified vision." (Aubert 123)

Ironically, it is these women who truly, physically unite the soldiers, even more than their common experience of war.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do some historical research on the peacetime reception soldiers of color received after America's wars were concluded. You might consider the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, whose story was the basis of the 1989 Academy Award–winning film *Glory*; the Tuskegee Airmen; the Navajo code talkers; or Ira Hamilton Hayes, the Pima Native American marine who assisted in raising the flag on Iwo Jima during World War II, immortalized in a famous photograph by Joe Rosenthal. What ironies lie in these soldiers' treatment in peacetime? How do these ironies relate to those of the speaker in "Tu Do Street"? Discuss your answer, citing specifics both from

the historical incidents you research and from Komunyakaa's poem.
2. Listen to several songs by the country singer Hank Snow. Discuss Snow's music as a symbol in "Tu Do Street." Why does Komunyakaa say, "Music divides the evening"?

"Prisoners" (1988)

Also from *Dien Cai Dau*, "Prisoners" is an unusual poem in that it reveals Komunyakaa's sensitivity to and compassion for the Vietnamese soldiers, as well as for his fellow Americans. The speaker first sees the captured Viet Cong, bound and wearing "crokersacks" (burlap bags) at the helipad, where they have been flown in for interrogation by American troops. He notes how thin they are—"thin-framed as box kites / of sticks & black silk / anticipating a hard wind / that'll tug & snatch them / out into space"—making the men's bodies appear almost illusive in their delicacy. Though slight in stature, these men carry a weight, the poet says, that "is the soil we tread night & day" (35). These men are responsible for the danger American soldiers face constantly.

The speaker imagines that they "must be laughing / under their dust-colored hoods," thinking about the rockets that are already aimed at American camps and the sure destruction these rockets will cause in American lives, perhaps before the soldiers' interrogation even begins. He muses, "How can anyone anywhere love / these half-broken figures / bent under the sky's brightness? . . . Who can cry for them?"

Next the speaker recalls the actual procedure of getting information from the men: "I've heard the old ones / are the hardest to break. / An arm twist, a combat boot / against the skull, a .45 / jabbed into the mouth, nothing / works. When they start talking / with ancestors faint as camphor / smoke in pagodas, you know / you'll have to kill them / to get an answer" (35). There is no suggestion of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country) in this poem; Komunyakaa treats the brutality of war with realism and candor.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Thomas Hardy's "The Man He Killed." Compare it with this poem, dealing especially with theme and tone and discussing how each poet achieves these aspects of his poem. Cite from each text to support your analysis.
2. In "Prisoners," Komunyakaa invokes elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Discuss each of these elements as he depicts it and comment on how each adds to the effect of the poem as a whole.
3. Do you sense that the speaker has any reluctance to torture or kill the prisoners? Why or why not? Discuss your interpretation fully, drawing on specific lines from the poem to support your analysis.
4. The poem ends with the lines "Sunlight throws / scythes against the afternoon" (35). Discuss the symbolism of both the scythes and the sunlight.

"Thanks" (1988)

"Thanks," another prose poem from *Dien Cai Dau,* is an extended prayer of gratitude for a coincidence experienced by the speaker on the battlefield. Rather than taking place in a bar distant from the field ("Tu Do Street") or on a base at an interrogation site ("Prisoners"), this poem occurs in the jungle, where American soldiers and the Viet Cong are actively engaged in warfare. The occasion for the poem is the accidental saving of the speaker's life when a random glint of sunlight off the barrel of a Viet Cong soldier's gun alerts him to danger.

Musing about being in San Francisco, arms entwined with a lover, he is hardly aware of his surroundings, much less the presence of a sniper. A tree standing between the two soldiers is another subject of thanks; its limb, which the speaker reaches to pull away from his face, makes him see "the intrepid / sun touch[ing] the bayonet" and

saves his life (44). He recalls other incidents when fate appears to have stepped between him and death. In particular, he thanks whatever Being he addresses in the poem for the fact that a "hand grenade tossed at my feet / outside Chu Lai" was a dud (44). The deadly potential the grenade carried for him recurs in his thoughts. The speaker owes his life, it seems, to a series of lucky coincidences having nothing to do with skill or merit or dedication to purpose. He does not know why he has been spared but is grateful to the whimsical fate that has taken him safely through to this point.

Despite its contemplative tone, "Thanks" reminds the reader of the constant danger inherent in war, and of the caprice that may take one life and save another. With his customary frankness, Komunyakaa creates a tension that remains after the reading of the poem.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Komunyakaa has said that writing a poem "isn't a process of escape, but is one of confrontation and celebration, a naming ceremony" (Citino 141). What is the poet simultaneously celebrating and confronting in this poem? Explain your answer, citing from the text for support.
2. Consider any aspects of irony in Komunyakaa's litany of things for which he is thankful. Where do you find this irony? How does it function in the poem?
3. Comment on Komunyakaa's poetic style in this and other poems in the *Dien Cai Dau* collection, noting such things as his use of the ampersand for *and,* his failure to capitalize the initial word in each line, and his reliance on the first-person singular voice for his speaker. How does each of these techniques function in the poem as a whole? What does each add to the poem?

"Facing It" (1988)

This poem is the final selection in Komunyakaa's celebrated *Dien Cai Dau*. It concludes the poet's creative journey through his Vietnam experiences, finding him at last in Washington, D.C., at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The poem is a masterpiece of perspective, as its persona is simultaneously a part of the crowd gathered at the memorial, in the stone composing it, back in Vietnam, and in his own reflections about the war. "Facing It" is a play on the many actual and figurative reflections a visit to the memorial elicits for him.

It begins with a literal reflection: The speaker sees "My black face . . . hiding inside the black granite" of which the memorial is made (63). Having arrived to pay tribute to the fallen, he has promised himself that he will not cry or show emotion: "No tears. / I'm stone," he cries out inwardly (63). Nevertheless, he realizes that he is also flesh and must feel the impact of the memorial as a flesh-and-blood human being. It seems as if his emotions are raw.

As the light changes, the stone gathers him inside itself, and for a moment he and it are one. In lines 6–13, the speaker is variously inside and outside the memorial. The stone has power over him; it takes and releases him at will: "I turn / this way—the stone lets me go. / I turn that way—I'm inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again, depending on the light / to make a difference" (63). He cannot maintain the emotional coolness of his resolve but is moved deeply by the simple poignancy of the memorial.

The speaker reads the 58,022 names laser-burned into the stone, "half-expecting to find / my own in letters like smoke" (63). Seeing the name of someone he knew in the war, he traces it with his finger. All at once he is back in Vietnam, seeing the white flash of the booby trap that blew up and killed the man.

Next he sees the reflection of the list of names on a woman's blouse, calling him back to where he really stands. He sees the crowd, the flash of a cardinal's wings, a plane in the sky, and the sky itself. Normalcy temporarily returns. It does not remain for long, however, and a ghostly vision of a dead soldier begins to haunt him: "A white vet's image floats / closer to me, then his pale eyes / look through mine" (63).

He is no longer just himself, but a conduit for the soldiers memorialized there, regardless of their color. "I'm a window," the speaker realizes. He-and, by extension, Komunyakaa and his poems—can be a means for giving voice to all the soldiers of Vietnam. After making this admission, he is distracted by movement outside the wall and turns to see what he at first thinks is a woman "trying to erase names" from it, something he presumably will not allow. The poem ends when the speaker becomes aware that the woman is simply brushing her son's hair. Her tender gesture, he implies, is one performed long ago for those memorialized in the hard surface of the granite wall.

For Discussion or Writing

1. When it was designed, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which is central to this poem, was a very controversial monument, because it is a flat surface with names inscribed, rather than a three-dimensional depiction of a person, as so many monuments are in Washington, D.C. After doing some research on the background of the memorial, discuss whether you think it is an appropriate tribute to those who died in Vietnam.
2. In "Facing It," Komunyakaa gives the poem a title that can be taken more than one way. Read another poem in which the title can be interpreted in multiple ways, such as Grace Yamada's "Looking Out." What does the title contribute to each poem by suggesting several interpretations? Support your answer with references to each one.
3. Known for his strong images, Komunyakaa in "Facing It" relies particularly on sensory ones of touch and sight. Select two or three of the sensory images you consider central to the poem and discuss what they add to the effect of the work as a whole.

"Blackberries" (1992)

This poem appears in *Magic City,* the 1992 collection that focuses on the poet's early years, family memories, and recollections of New Orleans, the city of the volume's title. It couples the speaker's memory of picking blackberries on the side of the road with an association between the berries and race.

Out in the "early morning's / Terrestrial sweetness," the 10-year-old speaker has gone to pick berries and earn a little pocket money by selling them (27). Accompanied only by his dog, Spot, he turns busily to his task, finding the ripe fruit plentiful and delicious. The berries are, he says, "so thick / The damp ground was consecrated / Where they fell among a garland of thorns" (27). He compares the appearance of his juice-stained hands to those of a printer or a thief being booked "before a police blotter" (27). Both have hands that are covered with ink—one, to create a literary work that will be read by many people; the other, to serve as a prelude to payment for his crimes. The berries fall quickly as the speaker, as does the thief in the comparison, "steals" the sweet fruit from the vines and drops it into two half-gallon containers.

Komunyakaa invests the simple act of picking blackberries with religious overtones, employing an image from sacred ceremony as the berries spill onto the ground, anointing it with their dark juice. The berry vines also constitute a crown of thorns, like the one worn by Christ in his Passion. When the speaker confesses he is "eating from one [hand] / & filling a half gallon with the other," he defends himself by saying that the pies and cobblers he dreams of are "almost / Needful as forgiveness" (27). It is typical of Komunyakaa's poetic style to invest even the simplest acts with significance.

In the second and third of the four stanzas, Komunyakaa's numerous images describe the speaker's lush surroundings. The ground is damp; "blue jays & thrashers" excite the interest of his dog; he hears "The mud frogs / In rich blackness, hid from daylight" (27). This young boy is obviously comfortable with the world in which he finds himself and appreciates its many beauties. It is a place of rural, romantic calm.

An hour later finds the speaker back on the main road, where he hopes to sell the berries he has

picked. "I balanced a gleaming can in each hand, / Limboed between worlds, repeating *one dollar*" (27). It is easy to picture him, standing between the natural idyll of the berry patch and the commercial reality of being on the side of the road, attempting to sell the fruit. Just as the two cans are balanced, so is he between those worlds.

In the final stanza, a new symbol of reality, a "big blue car," pulls up to the speaker, making him "sweat" (27). The car windows, lowered to permit its driver to purchase the berries, produce a literal and figurative chill: "Wintertime crawled out of the windows" (27). Not only does the air conditioner inside the car exude a chill, but so does seeing the car's occupants, a pair of children the speaker knows. They are just his age, perhaps classmates at school or perhaps acquaintances from another place. Regardless of the context in which he knows them, they make him uncomfortable when they stare at him, smirking. Their mocking is clearly reminiscent of many other implied incidents when these two have made the speaker feel inadequate.

Instantly he is aware of the great divide between their situations. Although Komunyakaa does not identify the children as white, they are at least of a different class than the speaker. Suddenly he feels this disparity down to his very fingertips: When they sneer at him, he says, "It was then I remembered my fingers / Burning with thorns among berries too ripe to touch" (27). Just as overripe blackberries almost dissolve to the touch, the speaker's mood deteriorates at the sight of those smirking children.

By the time Komunyakaa wrote "Blackberries," he had already published a collection of Vietnam poems, many of which explore his blackness, often in contrast to white soldiers as well as to the Vietnamese. Going back to his Louisiana beginnings in the poems of *Magic City,* he looks at the roots of racial difference as perceived by him and by others. New Orleans is not only the largest city near his hometown, but one with a complex ethnic heritage and makes a perfect background for exploring the complexity of human relationships. From the hurtful slight detailed in "Blackberries," other poems in the collection investigate more sinister specters of the racial divide—economic injustice ("Gristmill"), a black World War II veteran who is "blackjacked . . . to the ground" by racist police ("The Steel Plate"), the Ku Klux Klan ("Knights of the White Camellia & Deacons of Defense"), and the lynching of Emmett Till and other innocent black men ("History Lessons"). In each of these poems, Komunyakaa is unflinching in his explorations.

For Discussion or Writing

Examine other poems by Komunyakaa that, as "Blackberries" does, explore the significance of simple acts. How does Komunyakaa invest these acts with greater meaning?

"My Father's Love Letters" (1992)

Several poems in *Magic City* are autobiographical, and "My Father's Love Letters" is one of them. It follows a poem entitled "Mismatched Shoes," which details the family legend of Komunyakaa's grandfather and of his own adoption of the Komunyakaa name. The elder man was a refugee from Trinidad, so eager to get away from the plantation on which he worked that, when given a chance to flee to America, he hurriedly reached for the first clothing he could find: "He wore a boy's shoe / & a girl's shoe," according to family oral history (42). Some years later, Komunyakaa relates in the poem, "I picked up those mismatched shoes / & slipped into his skin. Komunyakaa. / His blues, African fruit on my name" (42). The poet expresses his deep affection and admiration for his grandfather throughout.

Komunyakaa's relationship with his father, however, seems to have been a far different one. The next poem in *Magic City,* "My Father's Love Letters," conveys the tension between the autobiographically inspired speaker and his father, a correlation to real life that Komunyakaa has often expressed both literally and figuratively. While the poem is an artistic rendering of their troubled relationship, it does grow from the strain that the poet says existed between the two. It depicts the father as a hostile and inarticulate man, a wife beater who

has driven his wife away but never ceases to try to get her back.

Every Friday, after returning home from work and reaching for a can of Jax beer (made locally in New Orleans), he asks his son to write to the mother. Illiterate, the father can "only sign / His name" and must plead with his wife through the son (43). His frustration and desire for her are made clear, not only because of his maintaining the ritual of writing, but because of the words that flow "from under the pressure / Of [the speaker's] ballpoint: Love, / Baby, Honey, Please" (43). Each brief word is capitalized to emphasize the father's longing.

She lives far away from them and occasionally sends "postcards of desert flowers / Taller than men" (43). In each letter to her, the father begs her to return, "Promising never to beat her / Again." By positioning the word *again* at the first of the line, the poet conveys the father's abuse as a habitual occurrence, just as writing the letters is. Each week, writing another, the speaker silently wonders whether his mother laughs when she receives them, holding them "over a gas burner" and watching them ignite (43).

The speaker himself rather wishes his mother would not return but does not say why. "Somehow," he relates, "I was happy / She had gone" (43). He placidly waits as his father, struggling to express himself, becomes "lost between sentences" (43). Despite the tension between the two, the son feels a certain empathy for his father, who stands "With eyes closed & fists balled, / Laboring over a simple word, almost / Redeemed by what he tried to say" (43). This man, a carpenter who spends his weekdays laboring in a mill, works even harder on the weekend to dictate his thoughts in a letter. Words are not his natural medium, as are the "old nails, a claw hammer . . . a five-pound wedge" that he has mastered. A skilled laborer, the father can "look at blueprints / & say how many bricks / Formed each wall" (43). Yet trying to build a foundation with language leaves him frustrated and inept. A grown man, he must rely on his son to convey his innermost thoughts. Komunyakaa readily communicates the humiliation the father feels because of his lack of verbal skill, as the two sit together in the tool shed, where the father exudes a "quiet brutality" (43).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," in which a father is depicted. Compare and contrast Hayden's poem with "My Father's Love Letters." What do the fathers in the poems have in common? How do they differ? What do the two narrators share? Discuss your answer fully, citing from each text to support what you say.
2. Almost half of "My Father's Love Letters" consists of elements of the workday world—concrete, voltage meters, pipe threaders, and so on. What do these images add to the poem? Address such aspects as tone and characterization, drawing on specific lines to support your analysis.

"Ode to the Maggot" (2000)

"Ode to the Maggot" is in *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (2000), a collection of 132 poems with four quatrains each. Ranging across topics as disparate as slime molds, nipples, dust, and rollerblades, the volume defies unified description. In choosing the book as one of its 25 favorites of the year, the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* proclaimed: "This new volume is remarkable exactly because it's a category killer, a sustained anti-hierarchy. The poems speak equally to gods and maggots, to the mythical reaches of history, and to erotic immediacy . . . . No turn in any life cycle is taboo as Yusef Komunyakaa examines the primal rituals shared by insects, animals, human beings, and deities" (verso cover).

In "Ode to the Maggot" the poet elevates the lowly destroyer to "master of earth," a powerful force. As a traditional ode would do, this poem pours lavish praise on its subject.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The ode is a very formal type of lyric poem, one classical writers often adopted for special celebratory occasions in which persons of significance are honored. Explain the irony in writing about

a maggot in this fashion. How does Komunyakaa construct the ironic tone in this poem? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.
2. Read "To a Mouse" and "To a Louse" by the Scottish poet Robert Burns. From a handbook of literature, find out about the romantic movement in British and American literature. Compare and contrast Burns's poems with Komunyakaa's "Ode to the Maggot" as to tone, imagery, and theme. How do all three poems fit into the romantic tradition? Support your response with specific references to each text.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON KOMUNYAKAA AND HIS WORK

1. The poetic form known as the *ode* dates back to the Greeks and Romans. The Chilean poet and Nobel Prize laureate Pablo Neruda is said to have revived the ode in the 1950s in a series of volumes containing odes to commonplace things. As does Neruda, Komunyakaa selects ordinary aspects of life as the subject of his odes. Read one written by Neruda and one by Komunyakaa—"Ode to Dust" or "Ode to the Raccoon," for example. What similarities do you see in tone? In imagery? Discuss your response.
2. Komunyakaa's poems often treat mythological beings such as Pan or Venus. Read one of his poems that have an extended allusion to mythology, and then read Edith Hamilton's prose account of the same character(s) or event(s). As a reader, which do you find more satisfying? Why? Discuss your answer.
3. Read three of Komunyakaa's Vietnam poems alongside Tim O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried*. Compare the two genres as to depiction of character, setting, and events. What images does each writer use to convey the horrors soldiers faced, both during the war and afterward? Discuss fully in a well-organized essay.
4. What is the effect Komunyakaa achieves by assuming the nominative plural pronoun (i.e., *we*) as the speaker in his Vietnam poems? Discuss his use of this technique in three poems of your choice, dealing especially with its effectiveness for the work as a whole.
5. Read two poems by Wilfred Owen, a British poet of the World War I era. How are his poems different from Komunyakaa's in theme and imagery? What do the two writers have in common in their views of war? Discuss your answer, including support from each text.
6. Although Komunyakaa is known more for the irony of his writing than its humor, select one or two of his poems that you consider notable for their humor. Discuss how the poet achieves a humorous tone and in what ways you think this tone adds to an overall estimation of his work.
7. Read the introduction to August Wilson's play *Fences*. Knowing that both Wilson and Komunyakaa consider art as a means of social change, what similarities do you see in their approach to that change? Include support from Wilson's introduction and at least two of Komunyakaa's poems in your discussion of the question.
8. One of the advantages of studying modern poets is the frequent availability of audio versions of poems read by the poets themselves. Dozens of Komunyakaa's poems read by Komunyakaa are available on the Internet. (Search the Web to find them; you may refer to such sites as poets.org or poetryfoundation.org.) Listen to at least 10 of the poems, noting Komunyakaa's inflection as he reads. Discuss how his readings contribute to your understanding of the poems, citing specific examples.
9. Read or listen on the Internet to Komunyakaa's "Camouflaging the Chimera," noting his use of vivid images. Select three to five lines that contain images you find especially strong. Discuss what each adds to the effect of the entire work (from "Get Ready for a Poem in Your Pocket Day").

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Patricia M. Gantt

Chang-rae Lee (1965–)

For me, that is what fiction should do—bring home for the reader not just an act, historical or not, but the aftereffects, what happens in the act's wake. And, most interestingly, how people live in that wake.

(interview with Ron Hogan, http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/lee)

Chang-rae Lee immigrated to America as a small child who could speak no English, yet by the age of 30, he had become one of the country's finest writers. Lee credits much of his success to the example of his father.

Lee's father trained in Korea as a physician and moved his family to the United States from Seoul, Korea, when Lee was only three years old. His mother spoke little English and struggled with everyday tasks, such as buying groceries, in a country with little patience for nonnative speakers, but his father overcame language barriers to build a successful psychiatric practice. While Lee was struck by the power of language and the toll it exacted upon his mother, he was inspired by the success of his father: "My father could have been a surgeon, where language isn't as important. But instead he chose a profession where talking is everything" (Garner).

Lee learned English quickly, finding enjoyment in books. When he was 11, he read James Joyce's "The Dead," a short story that made him want to be a writer. He says authors like Joyce are so "conscious of their own language . . . you get the feeling that they're handwriting it out, that very word has texture and contour" (JinAh Lee). Lee majored in English, receiving a B.A. in 1987 from Yale University, but initially suppressed his desire to become a writer, believing that he could not earn a living that way. Instead he went into finance, working on Wall Street as an equities analyst until advice from a friend made him realize he should pursue his love of writing. Lee quit his job and enrolled in the University of Oregon's M.F.A. program. His early writings were heavily influenced by authors such as Nabokov, Pynchon, DeLillo, and Styron, and it was not until after the death of his mother, in 1992, that Lee stepped back enough from his love of those works to examine his own reasons for writing, eventually asking himself, "Why did I get into writing if not to connect with life, with humanity, with other people?" (Marcus). In order to make those types of connections, Lee found he had to begin to write about issues that were important to him.

Lee discarded the novel-length manuscript on which he had been working and began a new one, focusing on the deeper issues of identity, assimilation, and the power of language, themes that he knew about on a personal level. That story became *Native Speaker* and the thesis for his M.F.A., completed in 1993. The book was published two years later and won the Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the American Book Award, among other honors.

Native Speaker began Lee's tradition of choosing narrators who are unreliable in that they are unwilling or unable to tell readers the whole story. In discussing Henry Park, the unlikely spy hero of *Native Speaker,* Lee says, "I wanted to write about

someone who could seamlessly walk about and speak the language, and still feel very isolated, very alien" (Marcus). Park's isolation is partially self-inflicted; he is emotionally unavailable to his wife and chooses espionage as his profession, a job that requires him to invent elaborate alternate selves in order to maneuver into positions of trust for his subjects. Nonetheless, Park is unhappy with his isolation and the distance it puts between him and his own life; he begins to examine his role as a cultural spy when his wife leaves him.

Despite the critical acclaim surrounding *Native Speaker,* New York's 2002 attempt to adopt it as the subject of its fledgling One Book, One City program was met with a hailstorm of controversy. Many objections were not related to the book at all, but rather the fear that a government-sponsored reading program might transform the personal act of reading into a "coercive, collective, and politically correct activity that diminished the autonomy and agency of the reader" (Rachel C. Lee). Those who did object to the book itself focused on its possible portrayal of Koreans or Asian Americans in a negative, stereotypical manner. Lee states that his use of Park's father (a Korean immigrant, trained as a scientist but employed as a greengrocer in New York) was intentional, creating a platform for addressing cultural stereotypes:

> Henry Park is someone who understands that maybe that's the way he is, but who acknowledges that that is a stereotype. . . . I think he's quite dissatisfied with his silences, his inaction, his veiled persona. . . . Of course I could have made him an astronaut or this or that. But one of the things that I wanted to do, I wanted to give that particular greengrocer some humanity, to offer him a real human moment . . . in the hopes that I could give him a typically complicated, sometimes contradictory, sometimes not so pleasant life and personality; to make him real. (Plett)

Forcing readers to see the real people behind stereotypical characters is a skill Lee carries over into his other novels. Published in 1999, *A Gesture Life* delves into the persona of Doc Hata. On first glance, Doc Hata appears to fit the mold of all that has come to embody America's idea of the Asian immigrant: congenial, hardworking, solitary. But as Doc slowly reveals himself, readers begin to see him for who he actually is: a man haunted by his past, incapable of truly facing his own history for fear it may tarnish the façade he has worked so diligently to build.

The idea for Chang-rae Lee's second novel grew out of an article he read while researching Korea (Garner). The article described the Japanese army's practice during World War II of forcing thousands of women, mostly Korean, to serve the troops in the capacity of "comfort women." While the phrase seems compassionate and respectable, what the women were actually subjected to was not. Girls as young as 10 years old were taken from their homes and forced into sexual slavery, a custom the Japanese military claimed would serve to prevent random sexual aggression against women in occupied territories, while curbing the rampant outbreaks of sexually transmitted diseases contracted from prostitutes, as well as boosting the morale of the troops. Lee describes how he felt after reading the article: "I was just blown away. I remember being on a bus after reading what otherwise was a pretty dry academic article on the subject, and I had to get off and walk home just to think about what had happened" (Garner). That thinking led to work on a story told from the perspective of a Korean comfort woman.

Lee flew to South Korea and interviewed several surviving comfort women, working to capture on paper what they told him. In a 2000 interview with Ron Hogan, Lee says the story was especially difficult to write because the nature of the crime was so horrendous, it left little room for drama. After a year, he decided something was missing: "I began to feel that what I had written didn't quite come up to the measure of what I had experienced, sitting in a room with these people. I began to feel that there was nothing like live witness" (Garner). Eventually Lee abandoned the manuscript in favor of a new viewpoint, promoting the minor character Doc Hata to narrator.

A Gesture Life received even higher critical acclaim than Lee's first novel, earning him the Anisfield-Wolf Prize, the Myers Outstanding Book Award, the NAIBA Book Award, and the Asian American Literary Award for Fiction, among others. It was also selected for Seattle's 2003 "If All of Seattle Read the Same Book" program, sponsored by the Seattle Public Library.

In Chang-rae Lee's third novel, *Aloft,* readers are introduced to another unreliable narrator, but one who appears on the surface quite different from Henry Park and Doc Hata. Jerry Battle is neither Asian nor introspective. He is an outspoken Caucasian man rapidly approaching the age of 60, one who spends more time thinking about food, sex, and money than the needs of his family. What connects Battle to Henry Park and Doc Hata is his unwillingness to talk openly about important issues with those he loves, as well as his inability to see the role he has played in shaping the current circumstances of his own life. When several family members face simultaneous crises, Battle is forced to contend with both past and present, finally giving his family the leader they need.

Using a non-Asian narrator affords Lee the opportunity to address issues of race, alienation, and language from a new perspective. The fact that Battle has married an Asian woman and produced children he describes as "mixed blood" (30) presents the perfect forum for exploring how unaware members of the majority can be of the feelings of alienation experienced by minorities, even those within their own households. Further, Battle's aging father faces alienation when he is placed in a nursing home, a socially acceptable form of ostracism to which many elderly are condemned.

Battle concedes that words matter, yet he believes others are overly concerned with cultural labels like *Asian American* versus *Oriental.* He considers his children Asian American despite the fact that they were born in America, but he has no qualms about calling himself "an average white guy" (73) and an American, even though his own family emigrated from Italy. Battle's attitude serves to illustrate further the discrepancy in which different types of immigrants are allowed to call themselves "American" without the obligatory hyphenated country of origin, one more way that language (and the way it is used to label people as "Other") is everything.

The idea that language is everything is more than just a common theme for Lee; it is also the way he approaches writing. He confesses, in an interview with JinAh Lee, to being obsessed with language, focusing so much on the weight of each sentence that he has thrown out entire manuscripts when something is not right: "For me, the unit of measure is the sentence, and I really can't change it sentence by sentence. You spend so much time on that sentence. How can you extract it or make it do something different?" (2000).

Lee's fourth novel, *The Surrendered* (2010), examines the effects of war on an American soldier, a Korean refugee, and the wife of a minister at an orphanage.

Lee currently lives with his wife and two daughters in New Jersey and teaches at Princeton University, where he serves as director of the creative writing program. He admits to his students that all stories have been told before, so new writers should "figure out your own voice . . . it's in the telling of [the story] that makes a writer special" (JinAh Lee). As for his own writing, Lee says, "I'm trying to figure out my own kind of story which, of course, I never will. I don't think I ever will. I hope I never do. Once I do, that's death" (Hogan).

Native Speaker (1995)

While many writers address controversial issues at the heart of their work, Chang-rae Lee's first novel begins that discussion at the molecular level of title and genre. Before readers can even open the book, they are faced with the pairing of the phrase "native speaker" with cover art depicting an Asian-American child in a cowboy suit superimposed over the image of an Asian-American adult. There is no doubt the pairing is intentional and meant to call into question what it means to be a native in a nation of immigrants.

The fact that many Americans would lay claim to the title *native speaker* reflects America's his-

tory of repression and forgetfulness. As Rachel Lee points out in her article in *Melus,* when Americans hear the phrase "native speaker," they think not of "the speaker of Nuahtl, Navaho, or the myriad other native languages," but of themselves, forgetting that in America English is an immigrant tongue. By pairing the title *Native Speaker* with the face of an Asian American, Lee reminds readers that immigrants of all origins have equal right to that title.

Chang-rae Lee uses the substance of his novel to develop that idea further, never actually telling readers to whom the title refers. It could refer to the novel's main character, Henry Park, but he learned English through the filter of his parents' Korean and is overly conscious of language. Even his wife, Lelia, upon first meeting him, comments on his deliberate speech, saying, "You speak perfectly of course. I mean if we were talking on the phone I wouldn't think twice. . . . You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you're doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker" (12). Later, Henry finds a scrap of paper under their bed on which Lelia condemns him as a "False speaker of language," a phrase that seems to haunt him. The title could be applied to Lelia, too: As a trained speech pathologist, she describes herself as "the standard-bearer" for the English language (12). But Henry depicts her as "executing the language" (10), implying that although she speaks well, she kills true meaning. By not directly labeling any one character as *the* native speaker, Lee invites readers to consider many possibilities.

Lee also uses the framework of genre to mirror the deeper controversies within the novel. On its surface, *Native Speaker* is a spy novel. Yet Lee has chosen to use the genre of spy novel in much the same way that Henry uses his "legends," the descriptions of his fictionalized lives. The legends are the masks that Henry will present to his subjects while he uncovers their secret lives. Tina Chen describes Lee's use of the spy story as a mask in her book *Double Agency* (2005): "As Henry discerns the paradoxical truth, that the masks he wears prevent him from speaking even as they are the very things that enable him to articulate a semblance of self, readers of *Native Speaker* discover that Lee's novel itself operates behind the mask of the spy story in order to expose the limitations of form in narrating Henry's story" (154).

Throughout the novel, Lee challenges the conventions of the spy novel, replacing high-profile daredevil characters with the understated Henry Park, substituting mundane conversations for cloak-and-dagger escapades. In fact, Henry himself describes his occupation as the antithesis of the stereotypical spy:

> In a phrase, we were spies. But the sound of that is all wrong. We weren't the kind of figures you naturally thought of or maybe even hoped existed . . . our job was simply to even things out, clear the market as it were, act as secret arbitrageurs. . . . We pledged allegiance to no government. We weren't ourselves political creatures. We weren't patriots. Even less, heroes. We systematically overassessed risk, made it a bad word. Guns spooked us. . . . We knew nothing of weaponry, torture, psychological warfare, extortion, electronics, supercomputers, explosives. Never anything like that. (17)

So why does Lee employ the framework of the spy novel when he resists its conventions at every turn? According to Tina Chen, the spy novel affords Lee the opportunity to address prejudicial assumptions about Asians. Chen asserts that both Henry's demeanor and his profession serve to expose the stereotypes of Asians as "sneaky and inscrutable" (178). By casting Henry as a spy, Lee invokes the cultural memory of all Asian sleuths who have used stereotype to the advantage of their profession and provides readers with a counterexample: someone who is cursed by his own inscrutability.

Beyond being inscrutable, his status as an Asian American renders Henry in many ways invisible. He is invisible to the Asian-American people on whom he spies because they perceive him as one of their own, and therefore not a threat, but he is also invisible to non-Asian Americans because they perceive him as different, and therefore not important. This tendency of the majority to interact with minority

immigrants as though they are nonentities is explicitly illustrated through Henry's father's customers. Although Mr. Park earned a master's degree in industrial engineering in Korea, his limited English and cultural barriers relegate him to the status of a greengrocer. The customers in his store do not see the educated man behind the grocer's apron; they do not see the man at all. Henry learns, through working in his father's shop, that "if I just kept speaking the language of our work the customers didn't seem to see me. I wasn't there. They didn't look at me. I was a comely shadow who didn't threaten them" (53). Such invisibility may seem a desirable trait in spy work; however, as Chen points out, invisibility that is not self-determined can be psychologically damaging, causing a feeling of "fractured identity, the loss of internal coherence, and a longing for wholeness that is ever deferred" (164).

Lee expands upon the themes of immigrant status and the importance of language within the body of the novel. Through Henry's interactions with his father, his wife, and his son, Lee demonstrates the power of words both spoken and withheld. Henry's dealings with the city councilman John Kwang expose the "ugly immigrant truth" that pervades America.

Henry Park is a man who wields words as weapons, crafting backstories to define himself to his subjects and transcribing the minutiae of those interactions into reports for unseen buyers. Yet even as he brokers in language, Henry allows others to use it to shape his true identity. He allows his boss to call him "Harry," his coworker to call him "Parky." Through his father, Henry begins to understand the weight of silence, the way in which Koreans tolerate and use silence to their advantage, but white Americans cannot: "We perhaps depend too often on the faulty honor of silence, use it too liberally and for gaining advantage. I showed Lelia how this was done, sometimes brutally, my face a peerless mask, the bluntest instrument" (96).

Henry's relationship with his wife begins with a discussion of race and speech, but, despite their willingness to address such issues, race and speech later divide the couple and contribute to their separation. An incident involving Henry's father's housekeeper serves as the first clue of what is to come. Lelia asks the woman's name and Henry says he does not know. Lelia cannot reconcile the fact that the woman "practically raised" Henry, yet he does not know her name. Henry attributes the misunderstanding to cultural differences:

> Americans live on a first-name basis. She [Lelia] didn't understand that there weren't moments in our language—the rigorous, regimental one of family and servants—when the woman's name would have naturally come out. Or why it wasn't important. (69)

When Lelia leaves Henry, she hands him a list of words. He becomes preoccupied with the words, accepting them as a true description of himself. Despite Henry's willingness to allow others to define him, when his son is called names by the neighborhood children, Henry denies the power of language, telling him, "They're just words" (103).

Councilman John Kwang serves not only as a subject for Henry's spy work, but also as the platform from which Lee can address the issue of immigration in America. Although Kwang is "unafraid to speak the language like a Puritan and like a Chinaman and like every boat person in between" (304), to mainstream America he is "just another ethnic pol" (303) and, as such, an outsider, someone who is not "native." During the course of the novel, Kwang and Henry are faced with several incidents that draw attention to immigrant issues: the random killings of cab drivers, the pattern of extortion and violence of Korean and Chinese gangs, and the arrests of aliens who had been smuggled into the country aboard a freighter. Each of these may seem to be an isolated occurrence, but as Leti Volpp points out in "The Legal Mapping of U.S. Immigration, 1965–1996," such incidents are inherent in a system that allows "economic demands, exclusions based on moral and sexual concerns, and politics [to define] overlapping and at times competing state policies about immigration." Henry himself comments upon the troubled

relationship between America and its immigrants, along with his own role (and his father's) in that oppression:

> My ugly immigrant's truth, as was his, is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited. This forever is my burden to bear. But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous. You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (319–320)

At this point, the narrative shifts from Henry's simply telling his story to directly addressing readers. By so doing, Chang-rae Lee draws readers into the novel, linking them to that ugly American truth and reminding them again that while this may seem to be one man's story, it is really the story of us all; we are all bound together by our inherited immigration, Puritans and Chinamen and every boat person in between.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Create a character study that compares Henry Park to the nameless protagonist of *Invisible Man,* by Ralph Ellison.
2. Lee uses a portion of Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers" as an epigraph for the novel. Why do you think Lee chose those lines to speak for the novel? Read the poem in its entirety. What effect does the context of those lines within the poem have on their meaning and on their relationship to the book?
3. Consider the phrase "A good spy is but the secret writer of all moments imminent" (198). How does Henry succeed or fail in that regard? How might the phrase apply to national intelligence agencies?

A Gesture Life (1999)

All Franklin Hata wants for himself is a quiet life of respect in the town of Bedley Run. When readers first meet him, it seems he has achieved just that. Recently retired from the medical-supply business he founded, Franklin Hata is greeted by townspeople as a regular fixture, with "an almost Oriental veneration as an elder" (1). They hail him as "Doc Hata," and, although he tells them that he is not a doctor, still they go to him for advice, which he freely gives.

Doc Hata would have people believe that he has lived his life serving others, that he is the "living breathing expression of . . . privacy and decorum and the quietude of hard-earned privilege" (275), but as the story unfolds we begin to view him as he really is: a man paralyzed by choice, unable to stand up for what he knows is right in the face of societal expectations. In this way, he is an unreliable storyteller, and he readily warns of that: "It seems difficult enough to consider one's own triumphs and failures with perfect verity, for it's no secret that the past proves a most unstable mirror, typically too severe and too flattering all at once, and never as truth-reflecting as people would like to believe" (5). The mirrors he shows us are his old store and his home, and while he intends them to reflect his life as a hardworking, dedicated man, instead they reveal deep fissures between who he wants to be and who he has become.

Soon after introducing himself, Doc Hata takes readers to his old store, Sunny Medical Supply. Named for his adopted daughter, the store was a source of great pride for him. Beyond being the local supplier of medical and surgical equipment, the store was his connection to the residents of Bedley Run; now that he no longer runs it, he has begun to feel that connection slipping away. As if to erode his place in the community further, three years after the sale, the gold signage is flaking and the same display is still half assembled in the window. Doc feels sorry for the Hickeys (the couple who purchased the place from him), admitting that he initially questioned their ability to run a store

with limited income and a young child, but implies that most of their trouble is due to a recession and the recent opening of a larger store nearby. When he stops in, Mr. Hickey verbally attacks him, and Mrs. Hickey confides that their son has been diagnosed with congenital heart disease, the financial burden of which has put them on the verge of bankruptcy. Nearly fleeing, Doc Hata takes readers to his home.

Doc Hata describes his house as "older vintage" in pristine condition. He tells of the slate swimming pool and the leaded glass and wrought-iron conservatory, the fireplace and the piano. It seems the perfect symbol of a life well lived until he takes readers inside, almost as an afterthought, to a room patched and painted to cover the hundreds of tiny holes that remained when his adopted daughter, Sunny, left. Instead of reflecting a prosperous, happy life, the house illustrates a life barely lived. By the end of the book, even Doc must admit it is nothing but "a lovely, standing forgery" lacking "the thousand tiny happenings" of life that would have made it a home (352).

The people who attempt to get close to Doc Hata see past the mirrors he presents. While in the service, Captain Ono, a superior officer, tells him, "There is the germ of infirmity in you, which infects everything you touch or attempt. Besides all else, how do you think you will become a surgeon? A surgeon determines his course and acts. He goes to the point he has determined without any other faith, and commits to an execution. You, Lieutenant, too much depend upon generous fate and gesture. There is no internal possession, no embodiment. Thus you fail in some measure always. You perennially disappoint someone like me" (266). Sunny, his adopted Korean daughter, for whom he tries to create a home and a successful business, is also disappointed in him and indicts him for his attempts: "All I've ever seen is how careful you are with everything. With our fancy big house and this store and all the customers. How you sweep the sidewalk and nice-talk to the other shopkeepers. You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You're always having to be the ideal partner and colleague" (95). While it is expected that a child be critical of the parent, Sunny's comments seem more than teenage angst and are confirmed by Mary Burns, Doc Hata's romantic interest, who is reproachful of the way he raises Sunny: "You treat her like a grown woman . . . as if she's a woman to whom you're beholden . . . you act almost guilty, as if she's someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you're obliged to do whatever she wishes" (60). The death of Mary Burns, the decline of his old store, and increasing pressure from a local realtor to sell his home combine with the return of his estranged daughter to become the catalyst for Doc Hata's examination of the life he has lived.

Doc has spent his entire life carefully arranging matters so that his past is as distant from him as possible, so he is not the type of person to sit down and write a long confessional. Instead, he tells his story in small increments, reporter style, devoid of any real emotion, parceling out details only as they occur to him. Lee admits much of the story's drama results from that tension:

> That was very important to me, that he [Doc Hata] was to just let you know what happened and let it sit there, and the distance between the act described and the calm and placid person telling you about it would be so great that there would be some drama in the telling as well. That for me is part of the drama of the story: How is he going to begin to tell you all these things that he doesn't want to tell you? (Hogan)

And, although Doc casts himself in the role of paramedic and father, he seems unable to admit his own culpability in the events that occur, describing himself more as the helpless bystander who can only "sort out and address the primary disaster," not treat the "chronic, complicated difficulty" (77). This difficulty takes the form of two life-changing situations: Doc Hata's position as medical assistant in the Japanese army, where he must oversee the health of "comfort women" (Korean women who were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese military), and, years later, his teenage daughter's unplanned pregnancy. It is through

brief flashbacks into these incidents that readers understand the deep-rooted reasons behind Doc Hata's life of gestures.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Many critics have compared Doc Hata to the character Stevens in *The Remains of the Day,* by Kazuo Ishiguro. In what ways are they different?
2. Choose one point in Doc Hata's life and describe how his life would have been different had he taken "hold of some moment and fully acquit[ted him]self to it, whether decently or ignobly" (340).
3. While the horrific treatment of the Jewish people during World War II is well known throughout the world, Japan was able to keep its military's use of comfort women a secret; in fact, many people are still unaware of it. Discuss the political, social, and religious factors that account for this discrepancy.

Aloft (2004)

In his third novel, Lee chooses as protagonist Jerry Battle, a white upper-middle-class man about to turn 60. From his name, readers might assume Jerry Battle is a man who would meet life's challenges head on—that is certainly the way his father, "Hank the Tank" Battle, approaches adversity. But Jerry prefers to "decline the real," hiding both figuratively and literally with his head in the clouds, drifting high above unstable ground. His failure to make purposeful decisions in his life has led to a convergence of all things avoided, which have festered and now pose significant problems: He has finally driven away his longtime companion, the family business is in ruin (in no small part due to his son's mismanagement), his daughter is facing simultaneous pregnancy and grave illness, and his father is resentful of his life in a nursing home. In essence, anything of lasting importance in Jerry's life is on the verge of being lost. Yet the real story in *Aloft* is not the events leading up to this crisis, or even its eventual resolution. The real story, told through gradual revelations, is Jerry Battle himself—what he has done or failed to do, and how he will finally stand up for what he believes in or watch it all float away.

Death is a pervasive issue in *Aloft:* Jerry's brother and wife have both died prior to the commencement of the book, his daughter is diagnosed with cancer, his father's girlfriend chokes to death in front of him, and a coworker overdoses on painkillers. It is a wonder Jerry does not share Doc Hata's impulse to see himself as "at the vortex of bad happenings" (*A Gesture Life* 333). But Jerry Battle is very different from the quiet Asians who grace *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*. Viewing the world in more visceral terms, he is likelier to comment on food, money, or sex than on his role in the deeper issues of life. Despite, or maybe because of, the ways in which he differs from Lee's other characters, Jerry provides a platform for further addressing the issues of ethnicity, language, and passivity that are frequent in Lee's earlier works.

Although Jerry would probably not be considered a racist, he is extremely race-conscious. Race is often one of the first things he mentions when describing the people in his life. He tells readers that his daughter says he does so because he is "like most people in this country . . . hopelessly obsessed with race and difference and can't help but *privilege* the *normative* and *fetishize* what's not" (12). Jerry prefers to believe that his focus on race is due to his concern for his own children, whom he alternately describes as not "wholly normative of race" (13) and "mixed blood" (30), as a result of his marriage to the Asian American Daisy. While he proclaims himself the "father of Diversity," he fails to include himself in that diversity, seeming to consider himself more American than the hyphenated minority, despite his own immigrant ancestry. This tendency to view descendants of European immigrants as culturally more American than those of Asian or Eastern ancestry is a common theme in Lee's work; it is supported by Leti Volpp in her article regarding the impact of immigration law on the cultural diversity of America. Despite his obsession with ethnicity, Jerry does have a moment when he realizes, mostly through his dealings with

his daughter's fiancé, the Asian-American writer Paul Pyun (in occupation and choice of subject matter reminiscent of the author Chang-rae Lee), that individuals are not defined by their race:

> People say that Asians don't show as much feeling as whites or blacks or Hispanics, and maybe on average that's not completely untrue, but I'll say, too, from my long if narrow experience (and I'm sure zero expertise), that the ones I've known and raised and loved have been completely a surprise in their emotive characters, confounding me to no end. This is not my way of proclaiming "We're all individuals" or "We're all the same" or any other smarmy notion about our species' solidarity, just that if a guy like me is always having to think twice when he'd rather not do so at all, what must that say about this existence of ours but that it restlessly defies our attempts at its capture time and time again. (248)

This sentiment, voiced by Jerry Battle as a White American, represents a shift from the accusatory tone of Henry Park's "This is your history" speech (*Native Speaker* 320) to one of hope that America will eventually embrace all of its immigrants.

While *Native Speaker* focuses on the role of language as barrier/bridge between cultures, both *A Gesture Life* and *Aloft* explore the complexity of language within families. Both Doc Hata and Jerry Battle know the power of silence—each learned it from his father. For Hata, silence seems less choice than cultural inheritance, but Jerry employs silence with a vengeance, following the advice given by his father after Daisy nearly bankrupts the family to "be a little brutal. . . . Treat her badly, don't give her any money or attention, or even a chance to bitch or argue" (111). Jerry admits he knows "how effective it can be to say grindingly little at the very moments when you ought to say a lot," and although he himself has been wounded by his father's tendency to invoke silence as a form of punishment, Jerry accepts his father's suggestion, which only contributes further to Daisy's mental imbalance.

Jerry also allows silence to dominate his interactions with his children, especially his son, Jack. Communication is difficult between the two, in part because of what has not been addressed in the past, namely, the death of Daisy, Jerry's wife and the mother of Jack and Theresa. Jack was young when Daisy died, and he is profoundly affected by the loss, and although Jerry does not learn the full reason for that until years later, he does see that "for a year or so after she died he hardly said a word, he was just a kid with eyes" (85). Jerry's natural tendency toward passivity and Jack's withdrawal after Daisy's death set a pattern of noncommunication that makes it difficult for them to discuss important matters, such as the state of the family business or Theresa's illness. When it becomes impossible to avoid the subjects any longer, Jerry laments that his son is not more like him, so that "it would be easier to say something to him that I could be sure was tidy and effective, an impartial communication, like a patriarchal Post-it note with simple, useful information . . . or else something slightly chewier, some charming Taoist-accented aphorism bespeaking the endlessly curious circumstance and befuddlement of our lives" (236). But Jack is not Jerry and eventually Jerry realizes that his noncommunication is making the situation worse, that "over time it's this already anticipated turbulence that brings a family most harm, the knowledge unacknowledged, which at some point you can try but can't glide above" (152).

Beyond what language does within his family, Jerry is also aware of its power within a culture to define both individuals and their place in society. Jerry's family is what he calls an "ethnically jumbled bunch, a grab bag miscegenation of Korean . . . Italian . . . and English-German" (72), and while he claims not to notice that much, he often finds himself on shaky ground with his daughter and her fiancé, arguing over terms like *Asian American* versus *Oriental*. Theresa and Paul believe that the question of race is one that should not be asked

because it allows for the assignment of the label *Other*. Jerry does not understand what all the fuss is about but notes that "words matter inordinately to Theresa and Paul" (30) and that they "inordinately fear and respect the power of the word" (73). How easily Jerry has forgotten the history of his own immigrant family, who years before changed their name from *Battaglia* to the "ethnically indistinct" *Battle*.

Just as Doc Hata leads what Chang-rae Lee refers to as "a life of refraining from things, of being an abstainer in important ways" (Garner), Jerry Battle employs the same sort of passivity. Jerry's daughter describes him as "preternaturally lazy-hearted" (43); his longtime girlfriend, Rita, claims he uses the death of his wife as an excuse to take the view that "everybody is a potential codependent" (273). What Rita does not see is that Jerry was this way long before his wife died.

Although Jerry was the older of the two, he found himself living in the shadow of his brother, Bobby, whose death in Vietnam cast an angelic halo around his memory, impenetrable by his previous behavior or Jerry's attempts to be the perfect son. Jerry may blame much of his present circumstances on having to parent two children after Daisy's death, but he credits Bobby's death with saddling him with the family business, holding him back from a career in aviation (157). Jerry's father often comments on how Bobby should have married Daisy or should have inherited the family business, but Jerry remembers Bobby as less than perfect, with a tendency of "cutting short his involvement before anything could really develop" due to his "long-ingrained insoluble indifference" (156–157): harsh criticism from someone who admits he has "been disappearing for years" (23).

Jerry's disappearing act manifests itself primarily in the form of distancing himself from problems, both physically (as he does each time he isolates himself in his airplane) and mentally (through his personal motto of "I decline"). He describes this as the tendency to "not want to examine the issues too rigorously, . . . to keep it *Un*-real, keep the thinking small because the issues in fact aren't issues anymore but have suddenly become the all-enveloping condition" (250). While Jerry claims to "decline the Real," as if the real were something that could simply be passed on, in actuality what he declines is to accept his role in influencing the outcome of the real, to face the inescapable truth that he can and does have a choice and what he does (or declines to do) affects not only him, but also those around him. He declines to accept that those issues have become the "all-encompassing condition" in part because of his refusal to deal with them. Jerry would have readers believe that his affable, good-guy exterior and his socially acceptable rationalizations somehow make his failure to engage in his own life better than quitting.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is Jerry's "quick response" to Daisy's death indicative of the way he handles all of life's problems? In what ways does his avoidance actually contribute to the problems?
2. Death and the avoidance of dealing with death are central themes in *Aloft*. Examine the ways in which Jerry handles Daisy's illness and, later, Theresa's. What is his role in each woman's death?
3. Discuss the symbolism of the novel's beginning (Jerry flying a plane) and ending (Jerry standing in the recently excavated pool). How are those positions a metaphor for Jerry's growth?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON LEE AND HIS WORK

1. The protagonists in Chang-rae Lee's novels are each unreliable storytellers. In what ways are they the best and the worst characters to tell the story?
2. How is the character of Jerry Battle (*Aloft*) similar to the characters of Doc Hata (*A Gesture Life*) and Henry Park (*Native Speaker*)? What makes them each distinct?

3. Compare CAROLYN FORCHÉ's poetry of witness to Chang-rae Lee's attempt to depict the violence faced by comfort women during World War II.
4. Walt Whitman is referred to in both *Native Speaker* and *Aloft*. In what ways might Chang-rae Lee have been influenced by the poet's work? Cite specific examples.
5. Consider the following excerpt from President John F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants:*

> There is no part of our nation that has not been touched by our immigrant background. Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life. As Walt Whitman says,
>
> These States are the amplest poem,
> Here is not merely a nation but
> A teeming Nation of nations.
>
> To know America, then, it is necessary to understand this peculiarly American social revolution. It is necessary to know why over 42 million people gave up their settled lives to start anew in a strange land. We must know how they met the new land and how it met them, and, most important, we must know what these things mean for our present and for our future. (Mendoza xxvi)

What might Kennedy have said about the role of fiction, particularly Chang-rae Lee's fiction, in furthering this understanding?

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Cormac McCarthy (1933–)

> The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.
>
> (*Blood Meridian*)

The third of six siblings, the novelist, playwright, and screenplay writer Charles Joseph McCarthy, Jr., was born on July 20, 1933, in Providence, Rhode Island, to Charles Joseph and Gladys Christina McGrail McCarthy. Four years later, the McCarthy family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, where McCarthy's father served as chief counsel for the Tennessee Valley Authority. The eldest son named for his father, McCarthy legally changed his named to the Gaelic equivalent of "son of Charles," adopting "an old family nickname bestowed on his father by Irish aunts" (Woodward). Growing up in Knoxville, McCarthy attended Roman Catholic high school and the University of Tennessee briefly (1951–52) before joining the air force. During his term of service he hosted a radio show and read voraciously. He returned to the University of Tennessee, majoring in engineering and then business administration. While there he published two short pieces of fiction and won the 1959–60 Ingram Merrill Award.

In 1961, he married Lee Holleman, a poet and fellow student; moved to Chicago; worked as an auto mechanic; and began writing *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), which won the William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel. Set in rural eastern Tennessee during a time when this hilly region was still remote and disconnected from what many in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s might have considered civilization, *The Orchard Keeper* tells the story of three southerners from different generations who search for their place in the world in the face of urbanization and modernization: Marion Sylder, a middle-generation bootlegger; John Wesley Rattner, a young boy who captures game illegally; and Arthur Ownsby, an older man who is the orchard keeper. Marion kills a man and leaves the body in a peach orchard. Arthur finds the body but does not report it to the authorities, leaving the corpse to rot for seven years. At the novel's close, the outside world, represented by the law and those who enforce it, closes in. Marion is arrested, and Arthur, presumed insane, is sent to an asylum. Not only do the themes encompass the dying of the Old South and the encroachment of the modern world upon rural life—themes worthy of Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses* (1942) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930), but also the novel, as with the works of Flannery O'Connor, focuses upon misfits, those normally not chosen as subjects. McCarthy's early outcasts foreshadow his many grotesque characters yet to be created.

Fortuitously, McCarthy began a strong working relationship at this time with Albert Erskine at Random House, William Faulkner's editor until his death in 1962, who had also sponsored Malcolm Lowly's *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). McCarthy and Erskine would work together until Erskine's retirement in the early 1990s. The year of *The Orchard Keeper's*

publication McCarthy divorced and sailed to Ireland with money he received from a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. On board the ship he met Anne DeLisle, a British pop singer–dancer who was working on the ship. They married in 1966, traveled extensively, and settled in an artist colony on the island of Ibiza, where he finished preparing his second novel, *Outer Dark* (1968). The McCarthys returned to Tennessee, and *Outer Dark* was published.

A story of incest between a brother (Culla Holme) and sister (Rinthy), *Outer Dark* contains many of the gothic elements for which McCarthy is known. Ashamed after impregnating his sister, Culla refuses to get help as Rinthy delivers their child; Culla takes the boy and leaves him to die in the woods during the dark night. A tinker comes upon the baby and takes him under his care. Most of the novel deals with the milk-carrying Rinthy's quest to find her child and Culla's journey to find Rinthy. An episodic story that, as with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury,* uses italics to signal flashbacks, the novel is set in the early 20th-century Deep South, an area much like eastern Tennessee. As with *The Orchard Keeper, Outer Dark* deals not only with a taboo subject but also with sinister figures, three night riders who torture Culla, cut the baby's throat, and hang the tinker in a tree, leaving him for vultures.

McCarthy's next book, *Child of God* (1974), based on actual events, follows the reclusive serial killer and necrophiliac Lester Ballard as he lurks in the woods and caves of Sevier County, Tennessee. With its lyrical style, McCarthy's narrative tempts readers to empathize with Ballard, who, despite his reprehensible actions, remains a pitiable and alienated outsider dispossessed of both home and community. In the end, Ballard is forced to retreat into the very earth, hiding from an angry mob in a system of caves, and eventually dies of pneumonia in a state mental hospital. The last chapter occurs a few months after Ballard has died and describes a farmer's discovery of the cave where seven of his victims lie rotting. This macabre and seemingly sympathetic portrait of human depravity garnered mixed reviews from critics, though many were quick to perceive its literary merits. As Jonathan Yardley wrote in the *Washington Post's Book World,* "[Somewhere] deep in Lester Ballard, beneath all that anger and outrage and despair, there is love and yearning. It is that which makes his story so poignant and, in the end, surprisingly and affectingly universal" (1).

In 1975, McCarthy penned a screenplay called *The Gardener's Son*; he separated from Anne DeLisle in 1976 and moved to El Paso, Texas. In 1979, he published *Suttree,* a novel written over a 20-year span. Shifting in perspective and fragmented by design, *Suttree* tells the story of a man, Cornelius Suttree, who leaves his wife and infant son for the life of a fisherman, living on a houseboat in a community of outcasts. For example, Gene Harrogate, the character who serves as Suttree's foil, is sent to prison for sexually molesting watermelons. Filled with quirky characters and experimental in style, *Suttree* has been compared with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), with which the novel also shares a dark sense of humor. Set in the slums during the 1950s in Knoxville, Tennessee, the novel follows Suttree through his day-to-day experiences. Like *Outer Dark, Suttree* is an episodic work relying on the reader to stitch together narrative threads. Interestingly, the narrative ends with Suttree's breaking free of the Knoxville world, setting out for a new life, as did McCarthy some three years prior to the novel's publication. With its large cast of characters and focus on the suffering outcast, *Suttree* has been hailed as one of McCarthy's greatest achievements.

In 1981, McCarthy received a MacArthur Fellowship "genius" grant, which supported him while he wrote his first western novel, *Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), a bloody epic of scalp hunters who terrorize the Southwest in the 1840s that has often been compared with Melville's *Moby-Dick*. A historical novel that McCarthy spent much time researching, *Blood Meridian* chronicles the life of the "kid," who learns to enjoy violence, and the sinister Judge Holden, a grand, archetypal Ahab-like figure. While critics praised his use of language, many critics and readers were deterred from reading it by the novel's graphic vio-

lence. Nevertheless, it is now viewed as being one of the most significant works McCarthy has written and lauded by critics such as Harold Bloom as one of the finest works in the American literary canon.

In 1990, McCarthy was inducted into the Southwest Writers Hall of Fame. Characteristically, he neither attended nor allowed his picture to be taken. Significantly, upon Albert Erskine's retirement, McCarthy began working with the editor Gary Fiskerton at Alfred Knopf. Through the years 1992 to 1998, McCarthy published The Border Trilogy, a series of novels about the adventures of John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in the American Southwest and Mexico: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). As Arnold and Luce detail, "Combining a love story, an action plot, and a coming-of-age narrative, [*All the Pretty Houses*] sold over 100,000 copies in less than a year's time" (9). In addition to the readers McCarthy then gained, *All the Pretty Horses* garnered the National Book Award (December 1992) and the National Book Critics Circle Award (March 1993). Previously a small cadre of dedicated scholars had been following McCarthy's career closely; after the critical and commercial success of *All the Pretty Horses,* reviews, articles, books, and dissertations on McCarthy began to proliferate. In 1998, with *Cities of the Plain* complete, McCarthy married Jennifer Winkley and fathered a son, John Francis, with this, his third wife. They moved to Tesuque, New Mexico, where McCarthy has an office at the Santa Fe Institute, an interdisciplinary think tank.

No Country for Old Men (2005) and *The Road* (2006) are McCarthy's most recent works, the first a tale of a man on the run trying to escape borderland drug cartels, and the second a story of a man and son struggling to survive in a postapocalyptic world, a future America covered with ash where gangs of cannibals roam the highways in search of their next meal. In June 2007 the reclusive McCarthy shocked both critics and readers by appearing on daytime television for Oprah's Book Club, resulting in the printing of nearly 1 million copies of *The Road,* which is slated to become a major motion picture. Clips from this rare interview can be found on various Internet sites, including youtube.com (Oprah's Web site includes clips from the interview: http://www.oprah.com/media/20080601_obc_267033502CORMACWEBEA_O_VIDEOv1). By January 2008, Joel and Ethan Coen had won multiple awards for their film adaptation of *No Country for Old Men,* and Cormac McCarthy had become a well known name, his work topping best-seller lists and taught in high school and college classrooms across the United States.

Although McCarthy remained reclusive during the early part of his career and refused to give interviews, he has now been interviewed by the *New York Times* and by the talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, appeared on television with the Cohen brothers, and had the good fortune of attracting the interest of top-notch scholars who have documented his life and works, most notably Robert L. Jarrett in *Cormac McCarthy* (1997), Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (1999), and Kenneth Lincoln in his recent study of all the McCarthy works to date, *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles* (2009). As Lincoln carefully observes:

> Distinctly removed from literati, Cormac McCarthy is a college dropout and autodidact spanning popular border cultures and the high broad arts of American letters. He blends adventure tales and excruciating tragedies, mixes high jinks and low spirits, fuses the lyric sublime and revulsive grotesque. This self-made writer cobbles his own hybrid genres from history, literature, and science. The novels and scripts cross tall tales with gritty truth, fuse adult westerns with futuristic apocalypse, pair raw innocence with mesmerizing debauchery, etch pure love of land and natural life-forms into Southern Gothic, city wasteland, and Southwest naturalism. (2)

While critics continue to debate whether his works contain gratuitous violence, whether his worldview is nihilistic, or whether he has neglected women in his works, many agree McCarthy is one of the most significant writers in the American literary

tradition, a novelist whose command of language and epic vision challenge us to confront the brutality of human life and the inevitability of death.

Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West (1985)

A novel that blends history and fiction often considered by critics to be McCarthy's finest work, *Blood Meridian* depicts savage acts done in the name of Manifest Destiny, a term used during the 19th century to describe the expansion from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific Ocean as the United States's responsibility, one ordained by God. Relying upon numerous historical records, the novel follows a gang of scalp hunters led by John Joel Glanton, a member of the U.S. Army in the mid-19th century. Although the historical Glanton was initially hired by Mexican authorities to hunt and kill the Apache, eventually his gang began to scalp and massacre citizens, becoming one of the most notorious bands of outlaws in the Southwest. McCarthy went to great lengths in researching and writing the novel, learning Spanish and reading historical accounts, especially *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue* by Samuel Chamberlain, a member of the Glanton gang. Further, McCarthy relied upon *Audubon's Western Journal 1849–1850* (1906) by John Woodhouse Audubon (for the full text, visit http://www.archive.org/details/audubonswesternjOOaudufo) and *The Scalp Hunters* (1860) by Thomas Mayne Reid (for the full text, visit http://www.archive.org/details/Captain_Mayne_Reid_The Scalp_Hunters). Thus, the novel supplants stereotypical notions of the "Wild West" found in radio shows such as *The Lone Ranger* and in Hollywood blockbuster films starring John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, leaving us with a bloody history instead of the romanticized mythology of the Southwest.

McCarthy relies upon the Glanton gang's story for the novel's action, which contains some of the most graphic violence in the literary tradition, violence that has prohibited many readers from making it through the book. At the book's core lies the gang's drive for human scalps, for which they receive $200 apiece. *Blood Meridian* tells of the gang's initial hiring to kill the Apache, the gang's descent into the scalp trade, the pursuit of the gang by Mexican authorities, the gang's commandeering of a ferry used by Yuma Indians, and the gang's massacre at the hands of the Yuma. While such graphic descriptions might alone sustain interest in the conflicted past that often was justified under the name of God, what enables this book to be read and reread are its masterful language and its characters, which transcend the historical framework.

The novel's protagonist, "the kid," is born during the Leonids meteor shower of 1833, an ominous sign: "Sign of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall" (3). At 14 the kid leaves his home in Tennessee, makes his way to New Orleans and Galveston, and ultimately rides a decrepit mule into the town of Nacogdoches, Texas, in 1849. There he meets the book's antagonist, who is "bald as a stone" and has "no trace of beard" and "no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them": Judge Holden, whom the literary critic Harold Bloom calls "the most frightening figure in all of American literature" and "a villain worthy of Shakespeare, Iago-like and demoniac, a theoretician of war everlasting" (*Cormac McCarthy* 1). Holden sees violence as endemic to the human condition and war as a sacred ritual: "War is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god" (*Blood Meridian* 249). While the first chapters of the novel focus on the kid—his birth, travels, and ultimate imprisonment—the violence that follows dominates the narrative in which the kid appears. After the Yuma massacre, however, the narrative shifts to the kid, who along with Holden survives the Indian assault. Ultimately, Holden and the kid meet again in the book's penultimate scene, when Holden crushes the life out of the kid in an outhouse. At this dramatic moment, the narrative shifts to a brief epilogue that provides another haunting image: a man who makes holes in the

ground, ritualistically "striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there" as wanderers behind him search for bones or "move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet so that they appear restrained by prudence or reflectiveness" (337). Here and throughout the novel, McCarthy opens up mythic possibilities, asking us to weigh image with word and deed, drawing us to make meaning from a powerful text whose interpretation can be as difficult as its violence is to bear.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Write a well-developed essay on Cormac McCarthy's use of graphic violence in the novel. As you weigh the purpose and effect of the book's many gruesome descriptions, decide whether the violent images are gratuitous or necessary. Support everything you say about McCarthy's use of violence by using historical sources, especially *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue* by Samuel Chamberlain, *Audubon's Western Journal 1849–1850* (1906) by John Woodhouse Audubon, and *The Scalp Hunters* (1860) by Thomas Mayne Reid. Contrast historical passages with detailed descriptions from *Blood Meridian*.
2. What wisdom does the judge offer? Write a well-developed essay on the figure of Judge Holden and what he may represent. Consider not only what the judge does but also what he says, the wisdom he imparts. Speeches worth glossing can be found on the following pages: 329 (on death), 250 (on morality), and 141, 146, 199, and 245 (on the nature of reality).
3. Compare Judge Holden with Ahab in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. What qualities do the two share? How do both comment upon the order or lack thereof of the universe and the relationship between the human and the divine?

All the Pretty Horses (1992)

The first of McCarthy's novels to be widely read, *All the Pretty Horses* follows the exploits of John Grady Cole, a dispossessed adolescent who ventures from his family's ranch in San Angelo, Texas, to Mexico in search of the cowboy life that is quickly disappearing from the American Southwest. Thus the novel is both a coming-of-age story that chronicles Grady's loss of innocence and idealism as well as a lamentation for the death of an iconic and distinctly American myth: the self-sufficient and morally pure frontiersman. Though McCarthy's first western novel, *Blood Meridian,* dramatically questions the idealized picture of the cowboy and America's westward expansion propagated by numerous western novels and films, *All the Pretty Horses* offers readers a sympathetic protagonist who tries to live up to the moral codes these works enshrine.

John Grady Cole is the last inheritor of a long family tradition of ranching and working with horses. His grandfather, the last real rancher of the family, has died, and his mother proceeds to sell the family spread to oilmen. Unwilling to accept the options open to him in San Angelo, Grady leaves with his friend Lacy Rawlins for the "white space" on the map: Mexico. Grady and Rawlins are joined by a younger boy, Jimmy Blevins, whom they encounter on their way to the border atop a suspiciously valuable bay horse. Whereas Rawlins seems to be slightly more mature than Grady and is quick to recognize danger, Blevins proves to be superstitious, immature, gun-happy, and more than willing to live the cowboy life Grady idealizes.

After the three cross the Rio Grande into Coahuila, they have fair luck until Blevins loses his horse, pistol, and clothes in an attempt to evade the lightning of a passing storm. This image of frailty and ill fortune marks the beginning of trouble for the boys: When the three ride into the town of La Encantada, Blevins recognizes his missing bay horse tied up in an abandoned house and they scheme to get it back. During the chase that ensues, Blevins becomes separated from Rawlins and Cole in an attempt to draw off the villagers pursuing them. The narrative then follows Rawlins and Cole as they travel farther south and eventually find work at a ranch owned by Don Hector Rocha y Villareal. After proving his brilliance with horses, Grady

befriends Don Hector, who entrusts him with his finest horses. Grady quickly falls in love with Don Hector's daughter, Alejandra, and, despite the admonitions of both Rawlins and Alejandra's aunt, Duena Alfonsa, pursues a secret romance with her. When Don Hector eventually learns of Grady's transgressions with his daughter, he turns them in to the police captain of Estancia as accomplices of Blevins, who is being held in the town jail for horse theft and murder. The three are reunited in jail and sent to Saltillo prison. En route, the captain stops the convoy and executes Blevins, whose last act is to give Grady the rest of his money from his boot.

Grady and Rawlins live in constant fear for their lives while incarcerated at Saltillo: Each day entails another fight with inmates and the two make few friends. Unfortunately, neither Grady nor Rawlins has enough money to buy their way out. Rawlins is stabbed by an inmate and hospitalized. Grady, now alone, uses Blevins's money to buy a switchblade from one of the few friends he has made in the prison. The purchase proves to be well timed: Grady soon has to kill an assailant wielding a cafeteria tray and a knife. Severely wounded from the encounter, Grady heals in a pitch-black cell where he senses "men had died" only to emerge with the news that Duena Alfonsa has bought their freedom in exchange for Alejandra's promise not to see him again. Rawlins embarks homeward and Grady hopes to find and marry Alejandra. When he arrives at the hacienda, Duena Alphonsa attempts to dissuade Grady by relating the tragedies that had befallen her and her revolutionary friends. Grady remains steadfast in his idealistic vision of the future despite these warnings and meets Alejandra in the town of Zacatecas. They briefly rekindle their romance in an old hotel, only for Alejandra to return to her aunt despite Grady's professions of love. Thus defeated he begins the long journey home and, upon passing a sign pointing the way to La Encantada, rashly decides to reclaim the horses confiscated by the captain after their arrest. Grady succeeds in stealing the horses back, takes the captain hostage, and flees northward with a posse pursuing him. Shot in the leg, Grady stops the bleeding by cauterizing the wound with the fire-heated barrel of his pistol. Soon afterward, a mysterious group of mountain people carry off the captain, and Grady escapes. After crossing the Rio Grande once more, Grady attempts to find Blevins's family to return the horse. This eventually lands him in court, where a judge rules in Grady's favor after hearing his story of how he came to possess the horse. Afterward, Grady seeks the judge's counsel regarding his guilt at having killed a man and betrayed the trust of Don Hector.

As the novel ends, we are left to contemplate John Grady Cole riding in a solitary and desolate landscape, leading a horse whose rightful owner he cannot find, unsure whether he has acted justly in his adventures. Unmoored and exiled from both San Angelo and Mexico, Grady maintains his earnest and romantic dedication to the cowboy way of life, alienating him from human society, and ultimately from himself. Whereas *Blood Meridian* forces readers to reconsider national myths of the West by emphasizing the violent and amoral character of its conquest, *All the Pretty Horses* focuses on the psychological and interpersonal tragedies that the cowboy myth creates for a nostalgic 16-year-old making his way in a chaotic world where industry and urbanization are encroaching upon the vast expanses of the old West.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Throughout the novel John Grady Cole encounters characters who attempt to explain the ways of the world to him, including his self-professed "enemy," Duena Alphonsa. Toward the end of the conversation Cole has with her upon returning to the hacienda from prison, Duena Alphonsa tells him:

> In the end we all come to be cured of our sentiments. Those whom life does not cure death will. The world is quite ruthless in selecting between the dream and the reality, even where we will not. Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting. I've thought a great deal about my life and

> about my country. I think there is little that can truly be known. (236)

Later, as Cole contemplates a doe's death, the narrator observes:

> He remembered Alejandra and the sadness he'd first seen in the slope of her shoulders which he'd presumed to understand and of which he knew nothing and he felt a loneliness he'd not known since he was a child and he felt wholly alien to the world though he loved it still. He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be exacted for the vision of a single flower. (280)

In a well-developed essay, examine how McCarthy's protagonist is changed by his experiences in Mexico, focusing especially on his encounter with Duena Alphonsa. What sort of knowledge does Duena Alphonsa offer? How is it supported (or undermined) by the events of the novel? Would Cole agree with his antagonist's pronouncements by the novel's close?

2. Read McCarthy's entire Border Trilogy, paying special attention to the similarities between John Grady Cole and Billy Parham, the protagonist of *The Crossing*. In a well-developed essay, explore Cole and Parham's differing reactions to loss and their reasons for crossing the border into Mexico. While both characters are drawn to the cowboy life, are wrongfully prosecuted for horse theft, and become violent fugitives yearning for the past, they arrive at this common predicament by dramatically different paths. In your essay, describe how the themes of these two divergent plots resonate with each other and how McCarthy intertweaves them in the final installment of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*.

The Road (2006)

Set in a postapocalyptic future, one when ash dusts the earth, clouds obscure the sun, and human beings have regressed to barbarism, *The Road* is a radical departure from the western novels McCarthy has been writing for some 20 years. It is a story of a father and son, one dedicated to McCarthy's son, John Francis. The father and son limp along the road, two vagabonds, like Estragon and Vladimir in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. As with Beckett's work, there is little to be done. But whereas Beckett stages a surreal setting in which a comedy in the style of Charlie Chaplin or Laurel and Hardy ensues, *The Road* offers no way of laughing at our fate. But it does offer the authenticity of a father-son bond, one unbroken by countless travels and one that does not end in death. In this sense, the novel deals with what alone is real in a world lacking transcendent values: our dependence upon one another. Although the boy wonders about God and the mother who adopts him at the novel's close assures him that "the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time," *The Road* portrays a wintry, ashen world where our connection with the divine is through familial bonds, care the only lasting value in a world that has ceased to imagine its own future. Both a book about the end of the world and a gift to McCarthy's son, the book is a story about stories, each one vital to our understanding and self-preservation despite the fact that all stories, as the man tells the boy, are lies, and the world of the living causes the man to envy the dead.

That McCarthy provides a bleak, dystopian setting for a novel professing the importance of paternal love, one with an emotional, even sentimental ending, attests to the work's many layers of meaning and the many contradictions it records. As it provides little information about what has happened, why the world as it has been has vanished, *The Road* relies upon our ability to supply likely contexts, whether this context is global thermonuclear war, the sort of asteroid strike that probably ended the age of the dinosaurs, or a biblical apocalypse. All we know is that at 1:17 the world has stopped

being what it was and has become a nightmarish wasteland. As with all of McCarthy's masterful storytelling, *The Road*'s language and texture sustain interest and propel the reader into the narrative, one page quickly turned after another. Where *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy rely upon epic catalogs, Faulknerian sentences, and densely packed prose, *The Road* is an immediate text, one whose fragmented form mirrors the world it describes. As Kenneth Lincoln aptly observes, "The writing settles into a postholocaust grammar of scree, shards, smoke, fractals, bits and pieces of charnel, dead flesh and sallow bone" with "no plot line or story arc of character development" (165). Instead of the usual elements that stabilize the text and help us take meaning from it, the novel depicts what Lincoln refers to as a "double bind": "Nobody wants to be in the world and nobody wants to leave it." Yet it is a story of continuing, of surviving against all odds. Although, as with the brook trout at the novel's close, this is a world that can "not be made right again," it is a world that hums "of mystery" (*The Road* 287).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Write a well-developed essay on *The Road* as an example of dystopian literature. To help understand the genre and to provide points of comparison, first see Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner,* another work set in a dystopian future. Next, read another dystopian work of literature such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984.* As you define the genre through these works, weigh the vision of the artist in each. Do these writers agree about the future of humanity? How do their outlooks coincide, and how do they differ?
2. While the two authors use radically different writing styles, both Samuel Beckett and Cormac McCarthy depict end-of-the-world scenarios in two of their most significant works, Beckett's *Endgame* and McCarthy's *The Road*. Write a well-developed essay that compares the two works, considering not only similarities of setting but also the assumptions about life's meaning and purpose these two works provide.
3. Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* is not only a mainstay of Beat literature but also the story of an American journey, one that traverses American highways as two men explore life's many possibilities. Read *On the Road* and then write a well-developed essay on the way Kerouac and McCarthy comment upon the American experience in their road narratives.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON MCCARTHY AND HIS WORK

1. Like William Faulkner writing of the American South and James Joyce of Dublin, Cormac McCarthy enshrines a region in his western novels: the Southwest. First, read a couple of McCarthy novels from his western period, roughly from *Blood Meridian* in 1985 to *No Country for Old Men* in 2005. Then, write a comparative essay on the way McCarthy both mythologizes and demythologizes the region he enshrines, using evidence from both texts.
2. In translating works of art from book to film, directors make choices: what to include, how to represent the language they encounter, what to emphasize and deemphasize. In short, they create interpretations of literary works by necessity. Talented directors have transformed several of McCarthy's novels, notably Joel and Ethan Coen in their adaptation of McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*. First, read McCarthy's novel. Then, see the film, thinking about how the directors rendered McCarthy's novel. Finally, write a well-developed essay that analyses the way the Coen brothers interpreted McCarthy's work.
3. Many have taken McCarthy to task for both the lack of women in his works and the way he represents women in his works. With these critiques in mind, Kenneth Lincoln provides a thought-provoking rejoinder:

> No less than the classical masters, cultural historians, or modern prophets and eco-scientists, McCarthy alerts us to the disasters of history, the monstrosities of moral deviance, the absurdities of human fate, the sublime ranges of will and courage, the depths of suffering, pain, and psychopathology. He writes about old-time, frontier, futuristic America from the bottom up, portraying men from the decent and conflicted, to the raw and grimy, to the deformed and malign. He lyricizes landscape, climate, and animals with native reverence. He chronicles the search for justice and redemption with tragic sorrow and heroic stoicism. In lineage with Hemingway's homosocial focus on male agonies, McCarthy writes unapologetic canticles of masculinity about the challenges, dreams, betrayals, and defeats of men, as Adrienne Rich or Alice Walker focus on women. (3)

After considering the way McCarthy depicts women in at least two of his works, write a well-developed essay that considers both the critique of McCarthy and Lincoln's defense. Back up everything you say with textual evidence.

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Blake Hobby

Larry McMurtry (1936–)

> Texas is rich in unredeemed dreams, and now that the dust of its herds is settling the writers will be out on their pencils, looking for them in the suburbs and along the mythical Pecos. And except to the paper riders, the Pecos is a lonely and a bitter stream.
>
> (*In a Narrow Grave*).

Larry McMurtry was born into a cattle-ranching family in Wichita Falls, Texas, on June 3, 1936, and grew up steeped in cowboy culture. In the 1880s, McMurtry's grandparents William Jefferson and Louisa Francis Jefferson bought a half-section of land in Archer County, west Texas, where they raised their 12 children and watched the last cattle drives headed north (Busby 3). McMurtry writes, in a 1968 essay, that his family members "bespeak the region. . . . All of them gave such religious allegiance as they had to give to . . . the god whose principal myth was the myth of the Cowboy, the ground of whose divinity was the Range. They were many things, the McMurtrys, but to themselves they were cowboys first and last, and the rituals of that faith they strictly kept" (*Narrow Grave* 142).

McMurtry's parents, William Jefferson, Jr., and Hazel Ruth, lived on his grandfather's ranch until Larry was six years old. Hazel Ruth wanted to be nearer "civilization," so they moved to Archer City. In a 1978 lecture entitled "The Southwest as the Cradle of the Novelist," McMurtry explains that it was while living in town and visiting the ranch that he realized "one set of values and traditions was being strongly challenged by another set of values and traditions. . . . I grew up just at the same time when rural and soil traditions in Texas were really, for the first time, being seriously challenged by urban traditions" (quoted in Busby 6). The changes in his family and community that McMurtry witnessed as a child and adolescent helped shape his personality and perspective—and became an important element in much of his writing.

McMurtry was "unable to master the finer points of ranch work"; he writes that the family found him insufficiently "mean" for the kind of work they did (*Narrow Grave* 158), so he discovered books (Reynolds 6). McMurtry remembers when he was eight years old "sitting in a hot pickup near Silverton, Texas, bored stiff, waiting for my father and two of my uncles . . . to conclude a cattle deal". He was reading *Last of the Great Scouts*—a book about Buffalo Bill Cody—when his father and uncles returned to the pickup. When they saw what he had been reading, they reminded each other that they had seen Cody once near the end of his life at a show in Oklahoma. Buffalo Bill Cody was "one of the most famous men in the world, and they had seen him with their own eyes," McMurtry wrote 60 years after the experience (*The Colonel and Little Missie* 12). And, although he explains that the heat in the pickup was the most memorable part of that incident, it is significant because it clearly illustrates McMurtry's position between two worlds: a world in which his own father and uncles not only saw Buffalo Bill Cody but also lived the kind of rough, pioneering lives that Cody and his show mythologized; and Larry's world—a world filled with books and stories that glorified the past his parents and grandparents had experienced.

McMurtry became, as he called himself, a "herder of words" instead of cattle (Reynolds 6). As a teenager, McMurtry was a good student with varied interests. He was an honor student at Archer City High School, where he lettered in band, basketball, and baseball. He was also a 4-H Club officer, editorial writer for the school paper *Cat's Claw*, member of both junior and senior class plays, fourth-place winner of the district mile race, and second-place winner in editorial writing (Peavy 13).

After graduation in 1954, McMurtry began college at Rice University. One semester later, he transferred to North Texas State University in Denton. While working toward his B.A. degree, McMurtry wrote what he deemed 52 "very bad" short stories, which he later burned (15). In 1958, during his senior year of college, he wrote two stories utilizing his cowboy background: one about the destruction of a cattle herd and the other about a cattle rancher's funeral. Sensing a connection between the two events, McMurtry continued writing a week after graduation. The result was the first 100 pages of *Horseman, Pass By*. He continued working on the novel, and by 1961, when it was published, he had been through six drafts (Peavy 16).

During McMurtry's years at North Texas State, he published fiction, poetry, and essays in *Avesta,* the student magazine, and the *Coexistence Review*. The latter was an unauthorized literary magazine that he and his friends Grover and John Lewis began (Busby 10). The second issue of *Coexistence Review* includes a poem by Jo Scott, a student at Texas Woman's University. McMurtry and Scott married in 1959 and had a son, James Lawrence McMurtry (15).

McMurtry returned to Rice University for graduate school, where his studies focused on English literature. He earned his M.A. in 1960 and was awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University. Although McMurtry was reportedly shy and reserved, he did form long-lasting relationships with several young writers at Stanford. McMurtry connected with Ken Kesey, probably because of their shared western upbringing, as well as the Australian writer Chris Koch. Many of the 1960 Stegner Fellows continue to correspond, offering support and praise for one another's success. In a 1994 interview, Kesey said, "When Larry won the Pulitzer Prize for *Lonesome Dove,* it gloried all of us" (Busby 16–17).

When McMurtry's fellowship at Stanford ended, he returned to Texas, where he taught at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth in the 1961–62 academic year. The following year, he went back to Rice to teach English and creative writing. In 1963, Paramount released a movie adaptation of *Horseman, Pass By* called *Hud*. *Hud* was the first of many film and television adaptations of McMurtry's work. Mark Busby writes:

> Not only does McMurtry write in such a way that his works lend themselves to film, but he is the product of a generation that grew up on movies and moved into maturity as film itself began to be seen as a significant art form rather then mere entertainment. Movies have therefore shaped his imagination, and the more he began to work in the industry, the more his fiction began to reflect his knowledge of it and the actors and directors with whom he became friends. (279)

Hud and *Horseman, Pass By* dramatize the demise of the traditional cattle ranch and the displacement of the cowboy. Both the novel and the film mourn the loss of the Texas cattle-ranching way of life while attacking and undermining and undoing sentimental and romanticized notions of what it means to be a cowboy.

In 1963, Harper and Row published the second book in what has become known as McMurtry's Thalia Trilogy, *Leaving Cheyenne*. In this novel, McMurtry explores the possibilities of fulfillment in various types of southwestern rural life through three characters: Molly, Gid, and Johnny. Gid is a responsible, settled rancher; Johnny is a freedom-loving cowboy. Both men love Molly, but instead of choosing either one, she marries Eddie, an oil field worker. The novel's themes include unrequited love, unmet expectations, and generational conflict.

McMurtry spent most of the 1960s teaching at Rice, except for 1964–65, when he received a

Guggenheim Grant for creative writing (Peavy 22). Gregory Curtis, editor of *Texas Monthly,* was one of McMurtry's students at Rice. He describes McMurtry's teaching style as "polite discouragement" (quoted in Busby 19). McMurtry did not seem very interested in his students' writing, but, according to Curtis, he inspired by example. The 1960s were also a challenging time in his personal life. In 1964, McMurtry and his wife separated. They divorced in 1966 and McMurtry raised their son, James, who became a successful singer-songwriter (Busby 15). The year 1966 was also when Dial Press published McMurtry's third novel, *The Last Picture Show*. In *The Last Picture Show,* McMurtry "examines [the small west Texas town of Thalia's] inhabitants—the oil rich, the roughnecks, the religious fanatics, the high school football stars, the love-starved women, —with an eye that is at once sociological and satiric" (Peavy 34).

In 1969, McMurtry left Texas, both literally and figuratively. He moved to Waterford, Virginia, where he opened a rare-book store, Booked Up, with Marcia McGhee Carter, the daughter of the Texas oilman-diplomat George McGhee. McMurtry's romance with McGhee did not last, but their friendship and business partnership did. He lived in the area for nearly a decade, teaching at George Washington University and American University and, of course, writing. He wrote the screenplay for *The Last Picture Show,* which was released in 1971, as well as his Houston trilogy: *Moving On* (1970), *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* (1972), and *Terms of Endearment* (1975). By 1978, McMurtry was back in Archer City, where, according to Mark Busby's biography, he spent a significant amount of time at the Dairy Queen south of town, thinking about the art of storytelling, the literary critic Walter Benjamin, and his hometown (22).

In the early 1980s, McMurtry worked on a screenplay called *The Streets of Laredo.* No one seemed interested in it, so he switched genres, turning his trail-drive screenplay into a novel, *Lonesome Dove,* which was published in 1985. *Lonesome Dove* was a huge success. In the late 1960s, someone had given McMurtry a shirt with the words *Minor Regional Novelist* printed across the chest. Not surprisingly, photos of him wearing the shirt while "typing . . . playing pool, . . . thoughtfully pondering a book—all activities that a minor regional novelist can reasonably be expected to take part in" appeared in the *Houston Post* (Ray Isle). While *Lonesome Dove* is certainly a regional novel, it solidified McMurtry's status as a serious and respected major American novelist when it won the Pulitzer Prize. McMurtry's hometown, which was less than enthusiastic about him after having been depicted so negatively in his writing, honored him by proclaiming one Saturday in October 1986 "Larry McMurtry Day." In a speech he gave that day, McMurtry thanked the hometown of which he had been so critical:

> It's one thing to write a book that appeals to the taste of the people on the [Pulitzer] prize committee. It's harder to earn the respect of people who know you. The myth is that small towns in America don't care about their writers and are small minded and intolerant. But here I am, a writer being honored by his hometown. In a sense, you have all helped me with this award. I don't know if I have ever used a literal event that has happened in this town, but what I have used are the intimations and hunches you have given me. (quoted in Busby 25)

The Pulitzer Prize–winning novel was adapted into a television miniseries starring Robert Duvall, Tommy Lee Jones, and Angelica Huston in 1989. The series proved as successful as the book.

McMurtry continued writing through the late 1980s and 1990s, publishing *The Streets of Laredo* (1993) and *The Evening Star* (1992), among other works. But he also spent time managing his bookstores Booked Up in Dallas and Houston and running the Blue Pig Book Shop in Archer City. He also dealt with some serious health problems: In 1991, he had a heart attack and underwent quadruple-bypass surgery. Fortunately, he recovered quickly and continued working—although the darkness of *Streets of Laredo* reveals some of the depression McMurtry suffered after his surgery.

More recently, McMurtry has been writing about the history of western icons and continuing

to expand his book business. His most recent public success is the 2005 Academy Award, for a screenplay he cowrote with his companion and writing partner Diana Ossana for the film *Brokeback Mountain*—a film adapted from a short story by Annie Proulx. Not surprisingly, McMurtry attended the Oscars wearing jeans and cowboy boots with his jacket and bow tie. And he thanked the booksellers of the world in his acceptance speech: "Remember," he said, "*Brokeback Mountain* was a book before it was a movie. From the humblest paperback exchange to the masters of the great bookshops of the world. All are contributors to the survival of the culture of the book. A wonderful culture, which we mustn't lose" ("Winner: Writer . . .").

The Last Picture Show (1966)

The Last Picture Show (1966) satirizes small-town Texans of the 1950s. The novel's sarcastic dedication to McMurtry's hometown, Archer City, is just one more manifestation of McMurtry's conflicted—largely negative—feelings toward his home. The novel begins with Sonny Crawford, a high school senior, surveying Thalia's main street from the cab of his '41 Chevrolet truck early one Saturday morning. "Sometimes Sonny felt like he was the only human creature in the town," the novel begins (1). Although Sonny finds his friends in the pool hall that morning and continues to interact with others throughout the novel, he remains isolated and lonely—as does nearly everyone else in Thalia. The novel's main characters, Sonny; his best friend, Duane; the much-sought-after Jacy Farrow; and the coach's wife, Ruth Popper, fail in their attempts to build and sustain meaningful, mutually rewarding relationships. Although characters in the novel try new things and learn about themselves and each other—*The Last Picture Show* is a kind of coming-of-age story—they are unable to connect emotionally.

Much of the novel's action revolves around the sexual adventures of Sonny, Duane, and Jacy. Sonny and his girlfriend, Charlene Duggs, break up toward the beginning of the novel. Unaffected by the loss of Charlene—whom he never really liked and only dated because she was less prudish than the only other unattached girl in school—Sonny pines for Jacy Farrow. Jacy is the daughter of a wealthy oilman and the prettiest girl in school. She and Duane are a couple, despite Duane's lowly social and economic status. Although Jacy professes to love Duane and, initially, plans to marry him, she uses and manipulates him to get the attention on which she thrives. While Sonny yearns for Jacy, he is surprised by Ruth Popper's sexual advances. Ruth is alternately ignored and mistreated by her husband, the high school athletic coach, who is a latent homosexual. Ruth is as desperate for attention as Jacy Farrow, but, unlike Jacy, she is a powerless, pathetic character. She and Sonny have an affair that affords Ruth some opportunity for growth and fulfillment. But when Sonny leaves her for a time, she realizes how physically and emotionally dependent she is on a teenage boy who is not nearly as invested in the relationship as she is.

For Jacy, sex is a tool. She withholds it from Duane to make him—and the rest of the school—want her more. She decides that the senior-class trip to California is the perfect time to lose her virginity to Duane because all the seniors will know about it. After deciding a relationship with Duane has nothing else to offer her, Jacy breaks up with him and starts sleeping with Lester, a wealthy kid who is part of the social set to which Jacy wants to belong. She puts up with Lester in order to get the attention of Bobby Sheen, an even better target. Sex becomes a mode of climbing the social ladder and a way to keep people talking about her.

The characters in the novel are trying to escape—from bad marriages, bad decisions, and boredom. Sex provides a kind of escape. So do movies. Sam the Lion, a character who symbolizes several kinds of displacement, runs the pool hall and the picture show. Showing "comedies and serials and Westerns" to the kids in Thalia helps him recover from the death of his sons, the loss of his wife, and the end of the cattle-ranching lifestyle he had known and loved (4). For Sonny, the picture show is an escape from his distant relationship with his father,

his boredom with school and work, and his unsatisfactory relationships with women.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does McMurtry begin his novel with Sonny's description of Thalia? What is significant about the way Sonny views his hometown?
2. How does the picture show function in the lives of Thalia's residents? What is symbolic about its demise?
3. Analyze the final scene in the book. Why does Sonny go back to Ruth Popper? Why does she accept him? Describe their conversation/interaction. In what ways have the characters changed since their first meeting? In what ways have they remained the same?

Terms of Endearment (1975)

Terms of Endearment follows *Moving On* and *All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers* as the third book in McMurtry's Houston trilogy. In his preface to the novel, McMurtry explains that he had been reading several 19th-century novelists before he began writing *Terms of Endearment,* novelists who "had taken a very searching look at the fibers and textures of life" (5). "I doubt that I aspired to such profound achievement [as these European novelists]," he writes, "but I did hope to search at least a little less superficially among the flea market of details which constitute human existence" (5).

Terms of Endearment does indeed study the fibers and textures of life. It is a novel about normal—for the most part—middle-class people who live normal suburban lives. It explores parent-child, husband-wife, upstairs-downstairs, and husband/wife-lover relationships in ways that are touching, funny, and insightful. Its characters are likable, absurd, and engaging. Its descriptions are rich and its images evocative. And its themes and conclusions are accessible and meaningful to any thoughtful reader.

Divided into two parts, "Emma's Mother, 1962" and "Mrs. Greenway's Daughter, 1971–1976," the first section's focus is Aurora Greenway. Aurora is an attractive Houston widow who hates to wear stockings, parks her big black Cadillac two feet from the curb, and has impeccable taste. She expects the world to revolve around her, and most of the time, it does. Aurora is selfish and manipulative and childish, but she is also intelligent and perceptive and can be generous. And she loves the people in her life—although that love manifests itself in unusual ways.

Aurora's main difficulty in the novel is choosing a suitor. Beloved by a four-star general who lives down the street, a washed-up Italian opera singer, a card-playing oilman, and a playboy yachtsman, Aurora cannot bring herself to marry any of them. Instead, she takes the general as her lover and continues allowing the other men to adore her.

Emma's problems in the novel revolve around men, too—mainly her husband, Flap. Emma loves him but recognizes that her mother's criticisms of him are accurate. She also realizes that she does not have the energy to make him a successful man, and he does not have the drive to do it himself. "Emma's Mother, 1962" takes up most of the novel, but Emma's pregnancy with her first child and her relationship with Flap are a significant part of Aurora's life. As Emma struggles to remain close to Flap, she tries to understand her mother better, especially her mother's marriage to her father.

By the time the second part of the novel begins and the focus shifts from Aurora to Emma, 10 years have passed since the birth of her first child, and Emma has given up on her marriage. Flap has become a tenured professor and eventually department head at a university in Nebraska—in spite of which, both he and his wife consider him a failure. He has a mistress named Janice. He is a decent father to their three children, and Emma does not hate him for his infidelity. Instead, she has her own unsatisfying affairs with several men. At 37, Emma is diagnosed with terminal cancer and dies quite quickly. Aurora takes her children to raise. About Emma, McMurtry writes, "Though often praised for my insights into women, I'm still far from sure that I know what women are like; but if my hunches are anywhere near accurate, and if I'm not idealizing her, then Emma is what women are at their best" (7).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Analyze point of view in *Terms of Endearment*. What is the effect of readers' access to characters' thoughts at certain moments? Why not tell the story from Aurora's point of view only? Or Emma's? Or Rosie's?
2. Why does McMurtry think so highly of Emma? What are her strengths? Abilities? Quirks?
3. Why do you think the novel is titled *Terms of Endearment*? Refer to Emma's conversation with Flap on page 400 as you formulate your answer.

Lonesome Dove (1985)

Larry McMurtry's ambivalence toward Texas is "deep as the bone" (*Narrow Grave* 142). "Such ambivalence," he says, "is not helpful in a discursive book but it can be the very blood of a novel" (*Narrow Grave* 142). McMurtry's being of two minds about Texas and its history animates his nearly 900-page novel *Lonesome Dove*. According to Don Graham:

> The most surprising thing about *Lonesome Dove* was the fact that it was written at all. Just three years before [its publication] McMurtry had cast a cold eye on Texas letters, in a long article in the *Texas Observer* . . . Texas writers were lazy and unproductive, they were ill-read in the 19th-century masters of the craft, and they spent far too much of their time gazing backwards nostalgically at the vanished and superior past, and the days of cattlemen and land-centered values of small farmers, small towns, and small Dairy Queens. . . . McMurtry's prescription for curing Texas letters [was to] explore the "less simplistic experience of city life." (*Coming Home*)

McMurtry acknowledged, at one point, that although he is critical of the past, he is "apparently attracted to it" (*Narrow Grave* 141). So instead of taking his own advice, he wrote a western that was a combination of "nostalgia, nineteenth-century realism, and Hollywood-like heroes" (Graham 312).

Lonesome Dove is a story packed with all the elements of a good western: former Texas Rangers, Mexican banditos, prostitutes, lawmen, horses with plenty of personality, farmers, cowboys, and bloodthirsty Indians. But this western story is hardly simplistic or romantic. In-depth character development is one way McMurtry debunks—or at least complicates—the stereotypes of the genre. Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call are aging former rangers who run the Hat Creek Cattle Company, just outside the town of Lonesome Dove. Both men are legends in Texas, and they have almost superhuman abilities. But long before readers see them saving kidnapped women or hanging horse thieves, they are exposed to the two men's doubts, vanities, and weaknesses. In addition to being the most resourceful, cool-headed man anyone could want in a fight, Augustus (Gus) is lazy and loud. He talks more than he works, and he will argue with anyone he can engage in conversation. Call, on the other hand, feels compelled to work constantly and retreats to solitude every night rather than sit with Gus and the other hands. Both men have serious regrets about women from their pasts. And neither one is satisfied with life in Lonesome Dove. When Jake Spoon, a man Gus and Call rangered with years ago, returns to Lonesome Dove talking about Montana, Call decides he wants to start a cattle ranch there.

As McMurtry's other novels do, *Lonesome Dove* addresses themes of displacement and loss. Life is not what it used to be for Gus and Call: The Indians in Texas have been about beaten and the Mexican cattle ranchers with whom they used to compete are dying off and losing power. Although they would not readily admit it, both men feel unimportant and uncertain about what to do next. Their former occupations and skills have become largely obsolete. Gus does not crave action and physical challenge as Call does, but his desire to visit—and possibly win over—the love of his younger days, Clara, motivates him to agree. So they decide to

head to Montana with their hired hands and several thousand head of cattle, most of which they stole in Mexico.

Lorena, another of the novel's main characters, wants to escape Lonesome Dove, too. Lorena is a prostitute at the Dry Bean Saloon. In order to cope with a life of card playing, alcohol, and the men who visit her, she withdraws mentally and emotionally. She is known for her silence and aloofness. And half the men in Lonesome Dove think they are in love with her—especially Dish Boggett, a skilled cowboy who hires on with Gus and Call. Lorena, even more than Gus and Call, feels trapped in Lonesome Dove. When she and Jake Spoon get together, she decides Jake is her ticket out of the Dry Bean Saloon and the dusty town. She, with some help from Gus, compels Jake to take her with him and the Hat Creek Outfit as they head toward Montana. Lorena seems determined—and able—to get what she wants from men, especially weak men like Jake. And as she gets farther away from Lonesome Dove and her former lifestyle, she becomes more human and even allows herself some optimistic thoughts about the future. It seems possible Lorena will conquer her past, her dependence on men, and her fears. She seems to start changing from a victim of circumstance and society and a few particularly brutal men into a capable woman who will determine her own destiny. But *Lonesome Dove* is not a romance. Lorena is kidnapped by Blue Duck, an Indian with a reputation for cruelty and mercilessness. The kidnapping is the result of Lorena's own foolish disregard of potential danger, as well as Jake's carelessness. Gus rescues Lorena eventually, but the experience halts her progress toward self-fulfillment and independence.

McMurtry depicts the cattle drive with the same kind of realism. Readers do not find images of contented cowboys singing around an evening fire after a hard day's work. Instead, the harsh and sometimes disturbing details of the experience destroy any idealistic notions of a cowboy's life. Newt—Call's young illegitimate son who is eager for experience and adventure—is assigned to ride behind the herd. Nearly chocked by the dust kicked up by thousands of hooves, Newt learns that driving cattle is not quite what he had imagined. His daily experiences disillusion him, and the losses he experiences shock and unnerve him. Newt and the entire outfit are particularly affected by the death of Sean Allen—a young Irish immigrant who was hired on mainly because he and his brother did not have anywhere to go or anything else to do. During a routine river crossing, Sean accidentally rides into a nest of water moccasins. The snakes kill Sean and his horse while the other cowboys look on helplessly. Newt is haunted by the sound of Sean's screams as the snakes swarmed over his body. Readers, too, are haunted by the images of Sean's death—and the other violent and tragic incidents that occur as the outfit heads north.

Lonesome Dove, though realistic, is not humorless. Some of the novel's humor is supplied by the animals in the story. Call has a beautiful, powerful horse that is the envy—and fear—of anyone who has anything to do with her. Named Hell Bitch by the Hat Creek hands, the horse has a way of outsmarting and surprising Call—something few humans would even attempt. Gus's pigs are also comic figures. They have the run of the place in the beginning of the novel and, according to Gus, are more intelligent than many men he has encountered. The pigs accompany the group all the way to Montana without being eaten by animals or cowboys. Several characters' intense fear of women also adds humor and depth to the novel. Pea Eye—a dense but likable cowboy—becomes acutely uncomfortable whenever Gus tells him he ought to marry a young widow Pea Eye has interacted with a couple of times. Pea Eye is completely mystified by women; he cannot imagine what it would be like to live with one. So he does his best not to think about the prospect.

Gus and Call and their group do make it to Montana, but at considerable cost and for reasons that never become clear. Gus does not win Clara's love. And, as the result of wounds sustained during a surprise Indian attack, he dies in a stuffy hotel room in Miles City. Jake is hanged for stealing horses. Lorena, who has become totally

dependent on Gus since her rescue, collapses and retreats into solitude and silence when she learns of his death. And Call, who pushed everyone to make the cattle drive, stubbornly returns to Texas with his friend's body—making the journey to Montana seem pointless. Newt is the only main character who seems to have grown and changed in significant ways as a result of the long and arduous drive. But even he is hopeless at the end of the novel because Call lacks the emotional honesty and courage to acknowledge Newt openly as his son and thereby pass on to him leadership of the new Montana ranch.

Although *Lonesome Dove* has been criticized for historical inaccuracies, structural problems, and inconsistency (Clay Reynolds in *Taking Stock* 327), it is recognized as great literature for several reasons. It plumbs the "depths of emotional experience" through several of its characters' relationships (Sewell, *Taking Stock* 317). It makes the trail drive a legitimate literary subject. And it develops characters who are "stirring" because they are "real people, and they are still larger than life" (Nicholas Lemann, *Taking Stock* 327). But "ultimately," as Mark Busby points out, "the strength of *Lonesome Dove* is the complex way that it intertwines myth and anti-myth into an intricate whole, for it is not simply an attack on the myth, nor is it simply a formula novel serving up larger-than-life heroes without real human traits" (184).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is significant about the sign Gus posts on the Lonesome Dove property? What is the meaning of the Latin phrase he writes, and what might be McMurtry's reason for including it?
2. How does McMurtry treat western myths, particularly the myth of the cowboy, in *Lonesome Dove*?
3. Does *Lonesome Dove* have a hero and/or heroine? If so, who? If not, what disqualifies the main characters from that role?
4. Using specific examples from the text, describe Gus's moral code. What is right and wrong, acceptable or unacceptable to him? Which events and experiences in his life contributed to the development of his personal codes?
5. Analyze the young cowboys' attitudes toward women. Why are they afraid of—or at least made uncomfortable by—women? How do they think about and treat specific women, such as Lorena and Clara?
6. The novel begins with an image of the blue pigs eating a rattlesnake. The pigs have a presence throughout the novel—they even make the trek all the way to Montana. What might they symbolize?
7. Interpret the final scene in the novel. Call discovers the saloon—the Dry Bean—was burned to the ground with its owner inside. Why end the novel that way? What does it mean? What is symbolic about Dillard's final statement, "They say he missed that whore" (843)?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON MCMURTRY AND HIS WORK

1. How does McMurtry treat western myths, particularly the myth of the cowboy, in his work? How does he express his ambivalence toward Texas?
2. Compare McMurtry's historical novels to his work set in the present. Which do you find more effective, and why?

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Rachel Rich

Pat Mora (1942–)

Language nurtures me and it also frees me.

(Leonard 154)

Pat Mora's intimate relationship with words began early. She spent much of her childhood listening to stories told by her mother, aunt, and grandmother. She was born in El Paso, Texas, and her home was filled with Spanish and English; for as long as she can remember there were always "two languages sort of streaming in and out of [her] mind" (Torres 248). Both sets of her grandparents immigrated to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, and her parents had to deal with a large dichotomy between their home and school cultures. By the time Mora was born, English was as much a part of her home as Spanish. So from her birth Mora has been bilingual; she literally cannot remember a time when she did not know both English and Spanish. Since both of her parents spoke English and Spanish interchangeably, she has always had a "sense of being at home in two languages" (Torres 244). Her years of education in Texas make her more English-dominant, but her poetry shows a unique blend of the two languages. Mora's work often includes seamless transitions from English to Spanish and back again.

As Mora mentions in an interview, "For the first seventeen years of my life I did not consider anything other than being a nun" (Ikas 131). The Catholic schools she attended for her elementary and high school education had a great impact on Mora's life. One of Mora's works, *Aunt Carmen's Book of Practical Saints,* weaves stories of saints with carvings of those saints. Her plea to Saint Clare shows how much the religion of her childhood has influenced her writing: "Spark your Carmen's pale faith to flare" (Mora 54), her speaker pleads, to persuade the saints to relight her own faith.

Mora earned bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Texas in El Paso, where she majored in English with a minor in speech. Mora went on to teach elementary, middle, and high school very briefly, but she has dedicated "much of her life as a writer and teacher to the preservation of her culture" (Ikas 128). She believes that there is a lack of understanding in the educational system, and teachers need to encourage "people to sing out their names, sing out their lives without embarrassment" (Mora UCTE). If teachers do not honor their students' home language, then they are making them choose which language is better (Mora UCTE). When Mora writes in Spanish, she does not include translations but instead allows readers to discover for themselves how Spanish and English are both essential to the poem's meaning. Her dedication to preserving her culture is one of the many reasons her poetry "is dense with cultural allusion" (Augenbraum 178).

In 1963, at age 21, Mora married William H. Burnside, but they later divorced. In 1984, she married the anthropologist Vernon Lee Scarborough and, for the first time, left behind her desert landscape for the cityscape of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Although Mora was always involved in speaking and writing projects at school, she did not seriously consider writing until she had children. As the children grew up, she began taking notes on possible subjects for writing, but when she first began to write, she says, "Every now and then I wrote a few things, and then they would be rejected, and I would just stop" (Ikas 131). Her first success was in the form of a Hallmark card, but it was not until much later that she began writing seriously. It was partially the influence of her colleague Larry Lane that drew her writing out of the shadows. He convinced her to exchange writing when she was not sharing her work with anyone. His presence in her life was brief—he died a few months later—but important. Once she began writing, Mora became a well-loved name for both children and adults, but the path to publication was especially difficult. Her writing was an "upwelling" of the pleasure she took in language (Torres 259), but publishers often tried to take the multiplicity out of her writing by making it monolingual. Mora's particular style of writing about marginalized cultures in several genres makes her work accessible to many audiences.

Her first published works were poems, "Disguise" and "Migraine," which appeared in *Poets and Writers* in 1981. Her first collection of poetry, *Chants,* appeared not long after, in 1985. *Chants* is composed of what Mora calls "desert incantations" between a personified desert and Mora's own voice (Beaty 764). After *Chants,* Mora published *Borders* (1986), *Communion* (1991), *Agua Santa/Holy Water* (1995), and finally *Aunt Carmen's Book of Practical Saints* (1997). She has also delved into the realm of nonfiction with *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993) and *House of Houses* (1997). By far, Mora's most abundant works are children's literature. She has published more than 30 children's books, which have won numerous awards, including the National Hispanic Cultural Center Literary Award (2006), the Golden Kite Award (2005), and the Literary Lights for Children Award (2002).

Mora's writing often focuses on the literal and figurative borders between the United States and Mexico, English and Spanish, and different cultures. Charles M. Tatum recognizes Mora's duality, noting that "Mora traffics between the borderlands as geography and the borderlands as a spiritual site of practical disposition" (Tatum 244). "Gentle Communion," for example, even crosses the border between life and death when Mamande goes to the speaker, "from the desert" (Mora, Communion 2). As Mora states, "The issue is not so much ethnicity or gender. It is about the way we reach a point of communion as human beings sharing this difficult journey called life" (Ikas 127). Throughout her poetry, Mora manages to include her readers, whether they are bilingual or monolingual. She uses Spanish and English, but the poems flow between them successfully, crossing language and cultural borders concurrently. Mora has a great love for the desert and believes that "women like herself who grow up in the desert acquire some of its resilience and strength" (Tatum 184). All through Mora's writing, she "employs the imagery of land and matrilineal healing" (Tatum 154), drawing from her childhood a knowledge of the power of women from the desert, evident especially in her grandmother. With her Spanish-speaking maternal grandmother in the house, Mora connected to her heritage from early childhood. In her poem "Gentle Communion," Mora shows how much of an effect her *mamande* had on her life. Alongside the gendered poetry is the element of landscape. The desert, an unyielding and complex environment, is "portrayed as a place that offers solace and inner peace" (Ikas 128).

Although Mora seems to pull her different experiences into a unique and individual culture easily, she "remains acutely aware of her position as a person living between two cultures" (Augenbraum 180). Her poem "Sonrisas" directly addresses the borderlands where Mora feels she resides. As Augenbraum states in *U.S. Latino Literature,* "Mora has achieved that status of an internationally respected poet, yet her work remains both accessible and illuminating to the general reader" (182). In other words, Mora's universality has not diminished her individualism in writing. Readers feel that Mora's writing applies

to their personal lives even if they do not share the same background. Liz Gold notices that Mora leaves traces of meanings for those readers who are not bilingual but also gives a special treat to those readers who are (Augenbraum 251).

Mora describes her ideal reader as "the person who really hears what I'm saying, who is so open and attentive that the words have a chance of entering the reader" (Ikas). Reading Mora's poetry is like standing in the desert's searing heat and feeling a cool breeze lift your hair. Her sense of flow is flawless; when she transitions from English to Spanish, the reader feels as though she (or he), too, can speak two languages. When Mora wants to distinguish between the two languages, she adds crisp consonants and marked accents. Her relationship with Spanish is very intimate because she was educated mainly in English and considers it her dominant language. Spanish, however, was the only language her maternal grandmother spoke. She realized early on that Spanish did not "belong in school" (Torres 248) and thus Spanish became more of a home language for her. Her parents both spoke English and Spanish interchangeably, but Mora still says, "Family-Spanish doesn't have to, but can often be a very affectionate language" (Torres 248). Mora is grateful to be bilingual because is "allows [her] to name the world in two different ways and also gives [her] two registers in which to work when writing" (Torres 248). She notes that having more than one language can help people figure out the world around them.

Mora encourages everyone to look for his or her own culture and environment. She says, "There is an incredible wealth that is there for us when we go back and do this sort of excavating work and find out about our own particular family" (Ikas 130). Mora's own family has been a source of inspiration for her, an inspiration she did not know would be there. Her family was "an incredibly loving household" that provided safety and motivated her to do well in school (Torres 248). Knowing her own background, she wants other children to have the same kind of safety at home. Instead of treating Spanish as a secondary language, she would like students to be able to communicate in both languages. Her main concern is "the perception that the home language could be a handicap" (Torres 248). One of her goals in writing is to take away the fear of having several languages accepted at home and school, to allay the anxiety some people have, so "that we could have a multiplicity of languages that are educationally sanctioned" (Torres 248).

Mora feels a kinship with writers who must cross borders of communication. Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, *Mary Oliver,* and Lucille Clifton are among the authors she cites as her inspiration. She does not claim to share their experiences but instead draws similarities between their situations. For example, she admires Clifton's courage and tenacity in writing. For Mora, language "nurtures" and "frees" her (Gold 154).

Although she is mainly known for her poetry, Mora has also published several prose works. She sees prose as "being practical . . . a way of reaching an audience that . . . poetry may never reach" (Ikas 132). Each of her works is crafted from her many experiences growing up on the border between Texas and Mexico, but her "identification radiates from her homespace" (Torres 246). She realizes that readers begin with their own backgrounds and biases, but by reading with an open mind, they can gain a deeper understanding of a culture that is both complex and magical.

"Borders" (1986)

At first glance, "Borders" may seem to be about the Mexican/American border, given Mora's geographical background, but as the poem progresses, it becomes evident that there are many kinds of borders addressed. There are borders between countries and cultures, borders between languages, borders between generations and ages, and borders between genders, and that is where the poem climaxes. Although not all these borders are examined in the poem, Mora certainly describes the many cultural boundaries humans must cross. The speaker of the poem is not able to communicate with her spouse or partner because gender separates them. They may use the same words, but they interpret them differently.

The first section is a border between languages. It deals with a translation, so to speak, from Spanish to English. The point of the first section is to realize that even if one translates from one language to another directly, there is still a difference in meaning. As the poem states, the meaning is "similar but different" (9). Specifically, *luna* is translated as "moon," but the connotation can be distinct in each language. The speaker "tasted *luna*" (5) with her tongue and felt the long open vowels of *moon* as a melancholy sigh (8). Here the art of communication, talking, is sensory, giving more depth to the words.

As the second section begins, the poem turns toward age distinctions. Children and adults speak on different levels, and with different meanings. The talk of children does not function for adults. Again, speaking is associated with the senses; "the child's singsong / I want, I want / burned our mouth" is a line rich with physical sensations coinciding with words. Why do the children's words burn? They burn because the speaker is no longer a child, and it does not matter what the speaker wants anymore, for it is time to move on to adult responsibilities.

The poem progresses and the speaker moves from age differences to gender relations. The final section is about a couple, it seems, who have grown apart over the years. Although they were talking to each other, it is as though they were not getting the translation correct (as in the struggle in the first section of the poem) or not defining things the same way. The speaker in the poem is asking for help figuring out what her partner is saying so they can communicate. There is a difference here between talking and communicating. Here is the final relationship with the senses and words, for words are "[tossed] back and forth . . . / over coffee, over wine / at parties, in bed" (19–23). The speaker and her spouse spoke, but that does not mean they were communicating. *Success* and *happiness* are ambiguous words that have very personal meanings. Perhaps the speaker's idea of both success and happiness was different from her spouse's. Even though they have spent time together, varying from a casual cup of coffee to the intimacy of the bedroom, they have not lost their own translation of words.

The spacing adds a dimension of meaning to the poem, as in the final section the word *understood* is double spaced so the reader understands how the speaker may be yelling it and also disdainfully simplifying her language, making it slower so her husband can understand it. The first two lines of the poem are separate from the rest of the poem, almost a summation of the poem's plea. They are intelligent, but that does not mean they can overcome the years of gender separation.

Several similar phrases are repeated in the poem. As the poem begins, the speaker realizes the difference between Spanish and English, "similar but different" (9). In the second section, the speaker realizes that adults and children are also using the same words for different things, and that she must adjust as she grows older, for "like became unlike" (12). Later, the speaker realizes that her relationship has been the same way. Her spouse was not speaking the same language, though their words sound the same. Again, their language includes more than just the words. The speaker seems to be asking for someone to "translate us to us" or, in other words, make them understand each other (31). The problem between them now is that they are not together, but two people parallel, who, as two parallel lines, will never meet.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the difference between translating and understanding the connotation of a word? How do the two people in the poem understand the words but not the meaning? Which words in particular do the couple not comprehend?
2. Does the poem suggest that it is even possible for the couple ever to understand each other? Or are their differences too great and their misunderstandings too deep? Explain your answer.

"Sonrisas" (1986)

"Sonrisas" is a poem about two worlds separated by language, attitude, and appearance. The characters

of the poem seem to be in the field of education but are two very different kinds of educators—one, relaxed and welcoming, and the other, tedious and detail-oriented. The speaker is in a position between them, as if in a doorway (1). She does not have to decide between the two worlds; in fact, it seems more that she cannot choose, but is fixed in between, for the speaker states, "I live in a doorway" (1). The speaker cannot pass between them, to enter one of them and occupy it, but is straddling a line between the two. It seems at first that she is trying to make a decision on where she will go, but then the reader realizes that the speaker is always going to be on the border between the worlds, forever bound by both, so she decides to observe how the worlds collide.

The first world is the one of the typical American teachers (or office personnel), with bitter coffee and subdued colors and subdued speech and subdued attitudes. These people are always watching themselves, not letting their emotions show. Their words are crisp and careful like *click, tenure,* and *curriculum* (4–5). They seem to indicate that the teachers are not just dignified, but also separated. Each word has a hard consonant sound stopping the flow of the sentence. They do not have a sense of camaraderie but cut off their association with appropriate subjects. Each word is also associated with the mechanics of school, how much money to spend, who will still be working there next year, and what the plan is for the future. They do not stray into comfortable subjects that build friendship.

In the other room, the women seem a swirl of skirts and steam. These women are still careful but seem more worried about disturbing the other room than about hiding who they are. There are camaraderie and friendship, but a "hush hush" attitude about them. This room is relaxed and contented. Even the word sounds suggest the difference. Instead of hard consonants, the words flow together with gentle *s* and *w* sounds. For example, their "laughter whirls with steam" (12–13). Each word in the phrase is able to blend into the next, creating an atmosphere of peacefulness. This room seems to represent the Mexican educators/office personnel, with women who are smiling with their eyes, laughing, and at ease. They are friends, as is obvious by their dialogue and laughter. Despite the obvious distinction between the two rooms, they are connected. The speaker connects them. She is able to understand both rooms, both mentalities. The speaker does have preference for one room over another. The more friendly and open room with "señoras / in faded dresses" is portrayed in a more positive light. On the one hand, the speaker can hear the American teachers with their "quiet clicks" (3) discussing their careers, but on the other she "peeks" into the room with Mexican teachers (9). Why does she hear one group and see the other? The women are identified by their differences from the norm. In the first room, the speaker notices how distinct the teachers sound. In the second room, the speaker must see them to be able to distinguish who they are because she feels that their language and conversation are a part of who she already is.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is there evidence in the poem—that is, through tone, word choice, or flow—that the speaker prefers the second room? Why would the speaker feel caught between the two rooms? Does the poem suggest that the speaker is frustrated by the separation or that she has accepted it?
2. Who do you think the speaker of the poem is? Although both rooms are full of people involved in education, is the speaker like them or is she in a different situation?
3. Although the tone of this poem is lighter than that of "Borders," the speaker is still dealing with cultural boundaries. How do cultures create boundaries even without a language barrier (although these people have that as well)? Support your response with examples from both poems.

"Immigrants" (1986)

"Immigrants" uses many different elements of language to show the fear and frustration immigrants must face as they enter their new country, try to fit

in, and, most importantly, make sure their children will be able to fit in. The entire poem is a continuous sentence, listing each fear beginning with the word *immigrants.* There is no other punctuation in the poem than a question mark. These immigrants are afraid and do not know what they need to do to become "American" enough.

The poem begins with a list of stereotypical American actions and items. Rather than encouraging their sons and daughters to remember their heritage, the parents feed them "mashed hot dogs and apple pie" (line 2). Even though their skin may be different from the majority's, they still buy their children "blonde dolls and blink blue eyes" (3–4), the conventional ideal of fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. Also, the dolls with blond hair are typically the ones that have the most accessories. The media enforce the immigrants' perception that to be American, their child must not be different. They force their children to learn the culture of their environment so that they will be liked.

As the poem progresses, the parents try to hide their own origins from their child, refusing to speak in their native tongue, and using "thick English" instead (7). Only in the privacy of their beds do the parents allow themselves to voice their fears. Although the reader has the impression that the parents speak their native tongue in that "dark parent bed," the poem is written only in English. These immigrants are not allowed to speak for themselves. Instead, there is an omniscient third-person narrator who translates all their dialogue into English. This narrator even spells the words they speak differently, including the accent. *Speak* implies not the normal communication parents and children have, but a stilted and forced form of communication; speaking English, however, still seems better to the immigrants than speaking their native language (7). They whisper their native language only when the baby is asleep, as though it is a curse to speak a language other than English.

The sheer number of items in the list overwhelms the reader, just as the responsibility of teaching a child how to be "American" weighs on the immigrants. No capitalization is used unless the speaker is naming something. Interestingly, *America* is capitalized at the beginning of the poem, but when quoting the immigrants, a lowercase *a* is used (1). This capitalization seems to suggest that despite all their work, the parents still wonder whether their child will ever be a capital-*A* American, or whether their child will remain an immigrant living in the United States.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Several stereotypically "American" items are listed in the poem. Why do you suppose the immigrants force these items on their children? Discuss your answer.
2. The form of the poem is similar to that of an Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet. Why do you think Mora uses this form to describe the situation of the immigrants? How does the use of a formal stanza reinforce their cultural situation?
3. Throughout the poem, a narrator's voice overshadows the immigrants' voices. Why do the immigrants not "speak" in the poem? Discuss Mora's use of the voicelessness of immigrants in the context of current events about immigration policy.

"Gentle Communion" (1991)

In the poem "Gentle Communion," the speaker seems to be either Mora herself or someone with a background similar to hers. She uses a confessional style of writing here, using her own biography as subject for the poem. "Mamande" is Mora's maternal grandmother. This grandmother lived with Mora as she grew up and her presence influenced Mora's life. The poem seems to suggest that Mamande has died, since she "can't hear" and the speaker will "never know" about her past. The speaker's grandmother returns to her from the desert, and her memory follows the speaker around, raising questions that cannot be answered.

The title suggests that the poem will have subtleties instead of explicit statements. The communion is a gentle one, and the language matches the mildness of the title. Mamande's simple actions follow the speaker around. Each action is an act

of service for the speaker. Her grandmother first "[folds] socks" (5), then "sits and prays" (15); she also lets the younger speaker sit in her lap, plays "I Spy" with her, and eats peeled grapes with her. Although the memory is a pleasant one, the tone of the poem is still subdued and melancholy. Her grandmother is not a jovial woman but has a "sad album face" (12). She is not described by her appearance, but by her actions. When she is described physically, each phrase seems to describe how much she has done. For example, her face is compared to an old photo album and her hands are worn "like the pages or her prayer book" (22).

The descriptions of Mamande in the fifth stanza contain much religious symbolism. The reader has the impression that Mamande was very religious in her own way. While the speaker writes, she prays. Apparently, this is an activity she often did, as her prayer book is as used and worn as her hands. Even her presence suggests a religious feeling to the poem; she is "from the desert" and prays in devotion (2). The imagery used to characterize Mamande connects her with children, just as the speaker would have been connected to her grandmother as a child. Although her grandmother had white hair, it "dries white, girlish" (17), and when she prays serenely, she is "like a child" in her posture (20).

There is a sense of regret to the poem as well. The speaker realizes that it is too late to ask her grandmother questions. Her past is gone, the past in which she could have made her questions known and had them answered, but as a child, they were "questions I never knew to ask" (6–7). Although the poem begins with a statement about the dead, the character of Mamande is taken back from her literal and figurative borders to talk with the speaker without words. Another use of the word *communion* is to describe a situation in which two people communicate without words, beyond words. By the end of the poem, however, the reader becomes very aware that Mamande only "came to [her] from the desert" (2). This location seems to signify not only her grandmother's place of origin but also the border between life and death.

Compare the experiences the speaker used to have with her present experiences. Now the speaker tries to make her grandmother laugh, but in the past people tried to make her change, smile for the camera, wear makeup, and speak in English (12). Her grandmother still ignores the demands of others and lives her own life, her own history. Later in the poem, the speaker sits in an old chair and remembers vividly the experiences she had playing games with Mamande. The speaker even switches to the present tense to describe the memories better. And yet this switch makes it even more obvious that Mamande is not living. The rich description of eating grapes together is sadly sweet as the speaker realizes her grandmother is gone except from her memories.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does Mamande visit "from the desert" (2)? Is Mora equating the desert with death? Discuss your answer.
2. Although the speaker claims to know little about her grandmother, what evidence do you find that shows what the speaker does know about Mamande? Do you agree with the speaker's claim that Mamande "ignores the questions I never knew to / ask" (6–7)? Does a lack of communication recur in other Mora poems? Which ones? Discuss your responses, citing specific texts.
3. From Mora's biography, we learn that her pet name for her grandmother was *Mamande*. Does this mean that the speaker is Mora? Support your answer with examples from the text.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON MORA AND HER WORK

1. Although "Borders" and "Sonrisas" include Spanish words, neither of the other poems discussed includes Spanish. Why do you think Mora uses Spanish in "Sonrisas" and "Borders," but not in "Gentle Communion" or "Immigrants"? Support your answer.

2. Mora claims that there are always "two languages sort of streaming in and out of my mind" (Torres 248). How can you tell that she is bilingual from her poetry? Where are specific examples of her mastery of both English and Spanish? Can you tell whether she favors English or Spanish as a dominant language?
3. Research confessional poetry. Mora seems to use a confessional style of writing, that is, writing from her personal experiences. Which of her poems seems to demonstrate this best and why? Compare and contrast her work with that of another poet of the confessional school, such as Robert Lowell. Support your response by citing examples from both texts.
4. Although none of Mora's poetry is overtly political, several of her poems seem to address current political situations. Do you find Mora's poetry to be critical of current U.S. policies? Why or why not? In what ways? Support your answer, providing specifics on current events.
5. Much of Mora's poetry deals with different kinds of borders—spiritual, physical, cultural, or geographical. Why do you suppose her poetry centers on this theme? What examples of borders do you find in her poetry? Fully discuss your answer, providing citations from and analyses of several poems.
6. Mora's poetry is written without major reliance on obvious rhyme or meter. What are some possible reasons she avoids classical rhyme and meter? Are there examples of classical structure in her poetry as well? Support your answer with examples from three of her poems.
7. Compare the work of Pat Mora to that of Julia Alvarez. What impact does the genre have on the subject? Why do you suppose Alvarez chooses prose, while Mora mainly writes poetry?
8. Mora also writes children's literature. Look at some of these books. In what ways are they like her books for adults? Discuss your response fully.
9. While Mora often uses Spanish in her poetry, she does not provide a translation. Why do you suppose she chooses to omit translation, while authors such as Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* provides a glossary?

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Amber Bowden

Toni Morrison (1931–)

> Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.
>
> (*Nobel Lecture*)

Toni Morrison became a writer in part to counteract what she saw as the erasure of African Americans from "a society seething with [our] presence" ("Unspeakable" 12). Like so many women and minorities, Morrison grew up surrounded by books written by, for, and about white men. Although she loved those stories for what they offered her, she wondered where the stories about everyone else were. When she became an adult, her love of books drove her to become an editor at a major publishing house, where the lack of stories reflecting America's diverse culture became even clearer. It was an absence so intentional that Morrison examined it in her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," in which she contends that although books specifically about African Americans were virtually nonexistent prior to the 1970s, the presence of African Americans was palpable—invisible, but "not necessarily 'not-there.'"

Even more alienating than invisibility is the misrepresentation of an entire race by those writers who did include African Americans in their stories. Morrison explains the bias as a cultural inability to see value in the outsider: The African with all his heritage was labeled "savage" and summarily dismissed as incapable of articulate thought. African Americans appeared in stories as caricatures, horribly rendered to have more in common with animals than Americans of European descent.

Morrison contends that critics continue to place an inordinate burden on African-American writers, demanding characters cut from a "politically representative canvas." As a result, works by black writers are often judged not in terms of aesthetic value, but by their characters' ability to bear the weight of an entire culture—a judgment inescapably rooted in politics:

> If Phillis Wheatley wrote "The sky is blue," the critical question was what could blue sky mean to a black slave woman? If Jean Toomer wrote "The iron is hot," the question was how accurately or poorly he expressed the chains of servitude. (*Sula* xi)

While Morrison acknowledges the difficulty faced by writers whose work will automatically be labeled political, she shuns the suggestion that being a black writer is a problem to overcome: "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racist world" (*Playing* 4). Morrison embraces the role of "black woman writer" and strives to reflect universal truths about being black and being a woman in a country that has historically devalued both. The resulting novels are steeped in the politically charged atmosphere that is home to her characters and yield a richly brewed "black-topic text" that

could not exist apart from the political realities of a historically oppressed people.

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, to George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. Second of four children, Morrison had the benefit of growing up in an integrated northern town while remaining firmly cradled in southern black culture through the songs and folktales of her parents. The stories her parents shared, of hard times and strong families, would later add texture and depth to Morrison's writing.

Ramah Willis Wofford, Morrison's mother, was born in Alabama long before the Civil Rights movement. Ramah's father, John Solomon Willis, was a former slave who owned land until white men used his illiteracy to cheat him out of it. In that era, African Americans had very little protection under the law. Left with no land, he became a sharecropper. While the term technically refers to a system of farming in which one person farms the land of another and shares in the profit, in practice it was a tool of oppression.

As if poverty were not enough, a black man in the South during that time could be attacked, beaten, or lynched and the law ignored it. Children and women were just as likely to be victimized. Willis escaped to Birmingham, where he worked as a musician and waited for his wife to join him. In 1906, Morrison's maternal grandmother gathered her seven children and made the perilous journey north with just $30 in her pocket. Eventually the family settled in Lorain, Ohio.

It was in Lorain that Morrison's mother met George Wofford, the man who would become Morrison's father. Originally from Georgia, Wofford's family settled in Ohio during the great migration of 1880–1920, when many blacks left southern agricultural regions for the industrial North. Growing up in Georgia, where lynchings were common, had left its mark on Wofford; he remained distrustful of whites all of his life. Morrison describes her father as a dedicated man who took such pride in his work that he once signed his name to a perfect seam he had welded. He often worked two or three jobs to support his family during the Great Depression.

As a child, Morrison was surrounded by story and song. Her mother was a homemaker who played piano accompaniment in movie houses for silent movies and loved to sing. The arrivals of her mother's book club parcels filled Morrison with a sense of security. Morrison's grandfather played violin and told stories about his own childhood, her grandmother kept a dream journal, and even her father found time to thrill the children with ghost stories. Despite the wealth of story that surrounded her, Morrison never thought she would become a writer.

The community of Lorain was integrated, and although she was the only black child in her first-grade class, Morrison contends that she had no experience with prejudice until dating became an issue. In 1949, Morrison graduated with honors from Lorain High School and attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she was called *Toni* after her middle name. Despite Howard's place as a premier black college, African-American writers were not part of the curriculum. Instead Morrison studied the classics and joined the Howard University Players, touring the South to perform for black audiences. Morrison went on to complete a master's degree at Cornell University, with a thesis that examined alienation in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.

Morrison taught at Texas Southern University for two years before returning to Howard University. There she met the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison, whom she married in 1958. After the birth of their first son, Harold Ford Morrison, in 1961, Morrison began to feel lost within her marriage: "It was as though I had nothing left but my imagination. I had no will, no judgment, no perspective, no power, no authority, no self—just this brutal sense of irony, melancholy, and a trembling respect for words" (David 12). An ache for others who shared her passion for literature compelled her to join a writers' group at Howard University. In an effort to produce something for the group, she dashed off a short piece based on a childhood memory of a friend's prayer for blue eyes. Although Morrison realized the story's potential to convey a profound message about the identity formation

of young black children, the story was quickly put aside—sacrificed to the more pressing demands of child rearing and teaching.

In 1964, Morrison became pregnant again and left Howard University to travel Europe with her husband and son. The trip only intensified the couple's marital problems, which Morrison claims stemmed primarily from differing cultural expectations between Jamaicans and Americans: "Women in Jamaica are very subservient in their marriages. They never challenge their husbands. I was a constant nuisance to mine. He didn't need me making judgments about him, which I did" (David 12). After the birth of their second son, Slade Kevin Morrison, the couple divorced. Morrison took her young sons and returned to the safe harbor of her parents' home.

Morrison's independence would not allow her to rest there long. In the fall, she accepted an editorial position at a textbook subsidiary of Random House. To fill quiet evenings after the children were in bed, Morrison began to write, yet she would not let her new pastime interfere with her duties to her children: "What they deserve and need, in-house, is a mother. They do not need and cannot use a writer" (Kubitschek 6). Her devotion to her children produced two highly successful sons, one an architect, the other a sound engineer. Morrison admits that it was hard to be editor, teacher, writer, and single parent, yet she contends that black women have always served as "both safe harbor and ship"—the nurturing home and the financial provider—for their families.

Random House promoted Morrison to senior editor in 1967, and Morrison relocated her family to New York. The 1960s were a time of social and political changes: Martin Luther King, Jr., marshaled blacks to adopt a program of nonviolent civil disobedience, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson worked to build a "Great Society based on liberty for all," and the 1964 Civil Rights Act (which banned segregation and discrimination) was followed by the Voting Rights Act in 1965, ensuring African Americans the right to vote.

Rising out of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements was the Black Arts Movement (also called the Black Aesthetic Movement), which advocated art reflecting the black experience and promoting racial pride. Morrison worked diligently to guarantee the black writer a place in the publishing industry where someone would "understand what he's trying to do, in his terms, not in somebody else's" (Tally 139). Morrison liked writers who focused on the "information you can find between the lines of history . . . the intersection where an institution becomes personal, where the historical becomes people with names" (Tally 139). Her list included authors such as Muhammad Ali, Andrew Young, Angela Davis, and Toni Cade Bambara. Morrison's role at Random House also allowed her to participate in a groundbreaking project to document the lives of people who have been "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Tally 143). One part encyclopedia, two parts scrapbook, the project was eventually published in 1974 as *The Black Book*.

Morrison's tenure at Random House allowed her to make significant contributions to "the shelf" of African-American literature, but she found herself wanting to read books that were still not being written. She says that in this way her own journey into writing sprang from "a very long, sustained reading process—except that I was the one producing the words" (Tally 46). The words at first were based on the story she had written about the girl who prayed for blue eyes. Morrison revised and rewrote until she found herself with a novel called *The Bluest Eye*. Ironically, her position as editor in a major publishing house inhibited her quest for publication. Rather than announce to Random House that she had written a book, Morrison sent the manuscript to Holt.

When *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970, the critic John Leonard lauded it as "prose so precise, so faithful to speech, and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry" (David 15). The public, however, paid the book little attention. They did notice that someone was finally writing about black issues, however, and on that front, Morrison gained a wide audience. The *New York Times* published several articles and book reviews by Morrison while she continued to work at Ran-

dom House, taught writing courses at the State University of New York, and contemplated whether she would write another novel.

The women's liberation movement was at its peak during the early 1970s, with a rallying cry for a universal sisterhood of support. Morrison saw the cause as belonging to middle-class white women; in her experience black women had always supported one another. Considering the differences in the way women related to each other led Morrison to explore the friendship between two black women in her new book *Sula*. Published in 1973, *Sula* gained national exposure when an excerpt appeared in the widely read women's magazine *Redbook*. Critics praised the novel, and in 1975 it was nominated for the National Book Award.

Morrison shifted from the female friendships of *Sula* to the education of the middle-class black man in her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*. Although she felt a strong desire to write a book "informed by the male spirit," the transition was difficult for her. It was the death of her father that helped Morrison break through the gender barrier:

> I began to think about the world he lived in through his point of view. . . . My father had that wholeness. He was able to command enormous respect from all sorts of people, though he was quite gentle. . . . And so I got interested in how it might happen that a human being could become complete. (Denard 19)

As illustrated in many of her books, Morrison does not view death as the end of one's presence on earth. As does her character Pilate, Morrison conversed with her deceased father, finding answers and inspiration. She dedicated *Song of Solomon* to him and begins it with the inscription "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names." *Song of Solomon* became a *New York Times* best seller and earned the National Book Critics Circle Award.

After the success of *Song of Solomon,* Morrison authored *Tar Baby* (1981), a novel that utilizes the Tar Baby of African folktales to illustrate the relationship between power and story, past and present, men and women. The novel was Morrison's most controversial to date, exposing the complexities of relationships within the black community. Despite four months as a *New York Times* best seller, *Tar Baby* met with lukewarm reviews from critics, who remarked on Morrison's "excessive use of dialogue" as "overly didactic" (David 104).

In 1986, Morrison's only play premiered in New York. Morrison had been attempting for two years to write a piece reflective of "a collision of three or four levels of time through the eyes of one person who could come back to life and seek vengeance" (Beaulieu 106). When the New York State Writers Institute commissioned the play, Morrison put her latest novel on hold and turned her full attention to the project. Performed by the Albany Capital Repertory Theatre to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, *Dreaming Emmett* resurrected a young black man named Emmett Till to illustrate "the contradiction of fact" surrounding his 1955 murder. No written record of the play exists.

The novel that Morrison had set aside to write her play was *Beloved*. During her earlier work on *The Black Book,* Morrison had read a newspaper article from the 1850s that told the story of Margaret Garner, a slave woman who escaped with her children and attempted to kill them rather than allow them to be made into slaves and "murdered by piecemeal" (David 112). The depth of despair that would drive a mother to take the lives of her children profoundly impacted Morrison, and, although the novel was difficult to write, she drew strength from the characters within the story and dedicated the novel to the "sixty million and more" African people sacrificed to slavery.

Beloved differed from anything that had been written about slavery before. The novel received critical acclaim, with John Leonard suggesting in the *Nation* that "*Beloved* belongs on the highest shelf of our literature even if half a dozen canonized Wonder Bread Boys have to be elbowed off. . . . Without *Beloved,* our imagination of America had a heart-sized hole in it big enough to die from." For many black writers, Leonard had hit on

the true reason that, despite accolades from reviewers, *Beloved* was overlooked for both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award: *Beloved* did not conform to expectations set by the white authors who preceded it. In January 1988, nearly 50 writers and critics expressed their frustration in the *New York Times Book Review*. The signed tribute accused the selection committees of "oversight and harmful whimsy" (David 24). The Pulitzer Prize committee seemed to agree and selected *Beloved* to receive its award in March of that same year.

Princeton University courted Morrison to join its efforts to build one of the nation's top programs of African-American studies, appointing her the first black woman to serve as a named chair in an Ivy League college. The position allowed Morrison to pursue her passion for examining the influence of black culture on white writing, and 1992 saw the publication of her theories in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and the introduction for a collection of essays entitled *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality,* which she edited.

That same year Morrison published *Jazz,* a novel Henry Louis Gates, Jr., described as a redefinition of "the very possibilities of narrative point of view," which creates "an ensemble of improvised sound out of a composed music," referring to the way the writing mirrors jazz music and the improvisation of individual players within the overall piece. The "melody" of the story is given to readers on the first page, yet readers find themselves "bumping up against that melody time and again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth" (Tally 63). *Jazz* was not Morrison's first attempt at using the nuances of music within her writing; the 1983 anthology *Confirmation* included Morrison's only published short story, "Recitatif," which mimicked sung narrative in form.

In 1993, Morrison traveled to Stockholm to receive the ultimate honor: the Nobel Prize in literature for her "novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import" and her ability to give "life to an essential aspect of American reality." Not only did Morrison's selection represent a personal achievement, it also represented a milestone for women and blacks. Never before had a black American or a black woman of any nationality received the award. Her acceptance speech, based on a story derived from folklore, emphasized the power of language and the responsibility of all to keep language alive and use it for the benefit of everyone.

Morrison's own writing continued to reflect that belief through her next novels, *Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003), which challenged readers to coauthor the text by filtering it through the lens of their own experiences. Morrison believes that the reader "supplies the emotions . . . some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so that the reader can come into it" (Kubitschek 9). Allowing readers to enter the text gives them power over the story and therefore the interpretation of the story. While many would argue that the author is the determiner of a book's meaning, Morrison disagrees and allows that readers who agree with her intended meaning may not be "any more right than people who see it another way" (Kubitschek 11).

After her retirement from Princeton in 2006, Morrison set to work on yet another novel, *A Mercy,* published in 2008. Set in the late 1680s, when slavery was relatively new to America, it, like *Beloved,* invokes the powerful themes of motherhood and abandonment.

While Toni Morrison could be described using any number of terms—novelist, professor, Nobel Prize laureate, African American, woman—she is much more than the sum of those parts. No one can describe the importance of her work more eloquently than Morrison herself:

> There is no place that you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presence of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and the ones who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or wreath or wall

> or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place did not exist (that I know of), the book had to. (Denard 44)

Through her lifetime achievements, Morrison herself has become "the small bench by the road" and she reminds us of the enormity of the job she has accepted for herself when she announces: "Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people who has to reappropriate it" (David 31).

The Bluest Eye (1970)

The idea for *The Bluest Eye* originated from Morrison's memory of a childhood friend who prayed for blue eyes. At first the image of "very blue eyes in a very black skin" repulsed Morrison, but, as an adult, she gradually realized her friend's wish stemmed from the "damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (*Bluest* 210). How could a black child grow up surrounded by white dolls, white movie stars, and white politicians and not learn to associate beauty with the definitive characteristics of whiteness?

The 1960s were a time of great change for African Americans, who, through social campaigns like Black Power and the Civil Rights movement, began to seize for themselves the "liberty and justice for all" guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Regarding the social upheaval around her, Morrison says she felt it "was not about me. . . . Nobody was going to tell me it had been that easy. That all I needed was a slogan: 'Black is Beautiful.' It wasn't that easy being a little black girl in this country—it was rough. The psychological tricks you had to play in order to get through—and nobody said how it felt" (David 40). Morrison began to write because of that absence, to put down on paper "how it felt" to be black and female in a country that negated both.

To portray the crippling effects of societal loathing internalized, Morrison invented Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who feels so unloved she wishes for the one thing society has taught her to value: whiteness. In Pecola's community, and in fact American society in general during the early 1900s, whiteness is valued above all else. While the African Americans in her town are "free," they continue to be subjugated by a system of oppression that does not recognize them as worthy of any but the most menial of jobs. That blacks were until the 1960s denied the inalienable rights guaranteed to "all men" by the founders of the country implies that white America viewed blacks not only as inferior, but also as less than people. Black women were doubly excluded, first by their race and then by their gender. (Women had not secured the right to vote until 1920, and though women were guaranteed equal pay under the 1963 Equal Pay Act, the realization of equal pay was still a point of debate in the 2008 presidential campaign.)

But what causes racism to permeate the soul goes beyond issues of rights and pay scales to the standard upheld by mainstream culture. In Pecola's era, America was bombarded with images of idealized whiteness. Morrison illustrates this cultural bias in her work through the movies that shape the self-image of Pecola's mother, the mug of white milk upon which Shirley Temple's blue eyes and white dimpled cheeks are imprinted, and, most dramatically, the dolls mutilated by Claudia, Pecola's friend and the narrator of the story. Claudia destroys the white dolls to "see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability" and later transfers her curiosity to white girls, wondering, "What made people look at them and say, 'Awwwww' but not for me?" (22).

A further example of institutional racism is illustrated through Morrison's use of the Dick and Jane stories. The series, featuring a white middle-class family, was used from the 1930s through the 1970s as a primer to teach children to read. Many scholars have since argued that the stories convey the message that Dick and Jane, with their middle-class yet involved father and their doting stay-at-

home mother, are the ideal family and that many Americans feel "less than" because that standard is not reflected in their own homes. That the standard may not be attainable, or even desirable, does not lessen the psychological impact it has on those who are outside it.

Morrison uses the Dick and Jane story as subtext to illustrate those effects. *The Bluest Eye* begins with a prologue, which introduces readers to a simple Dick and Jane tale in which Mother laughs and Father smiles as Jane searches for someone with whom to play. The tone is light and readers take comfort in knowing that Jane was never really in jeopardy of being rejected; of course, Jane does find a friend. Immediately after the tale's happy resolution, Morrison repeats the whole story—word for word, but absent any punctuation or capitalization. The effect is a chilling illustration of function without form. To drive home the point further, Morrison again repeats the tale, this time removing even the spaces between words, creating a frenetic jumble that is so completely devoid of the original carefree tone, it takes on a feeling of urgency and foreboding. Readers no longer feel so certain that Jane's new friendship is not malignant.

Morrison uses the features from Jane's world to introduce readers to the stark contrast of Pecola's: Jane's house is green and white and "very pretty," while Pecola lives in an abandoned storefront that "foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy" (33). Jane's mother is always present, happy and interacting with her children; Pecola's mother must work 12 to 16 hours a day as a housekeeper in a white home, and, when she is home, her interaction with the children is based on correction, which creates in her son "a loud desire to run away" and in Pecola a "fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (128). Pecola's father cannot hold down a job and beats his wife when he drinks, which is often. In effect, he is the antithesis of Jane's responsible, smiling father. In Pecola's world, she cannot even find friendship in the cat, which is used by a "light skinned" boy as a weapon to alienate her further.

Although *The Bluest Eye* is primarily about Pecola, she is not strong enough to tell her own story, so the novel unfolds through the insight of an omniscient narrator and the commentary of Claudia MacTeer, Pecola's best friend. Claudia begins the story by drawing in readers with the confidential tone contained in the words "Quiet as it's kept" and telling us right away the "what" of the story is Pecola's impregnation with her father's baby and the baby's subsequent death. But Claudia also informs us that there is more to the story—the "why" of it all, a topic she dismisses as "difficult to handle," and the "how" of it all, in which we "must take refuge." And more importantly, Claudia alludes to her own culpability in Pecola's fate:

> All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. . . . Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. (205)

The idea that racism is not limited to whites alone is common in Morrison's work. Most of the damage inflicted upon Pecola is from the black community, who see her as personification of all the negative characteristics associated with blackness. Pauline, Pecola's mother, internalizes the racist ideals of popular movies and begins to hate herself for failing to measure up to the standards they espouse. When Pauline sees the features she abhors in herself mirrored in newborn Pecola, she distances herself from the child, teaching Pecola to call her Mrs. Breedlove and not Mother. A further abandonment occurs when Pecola vomits on a rug belonging to the white family for whom Pauline works. Pauline lashes out at Pecola and rushes to comfort the white child.

Pecola's father, Cholly (a derivative of *Charles*), is even more instrumental in Pecola's ultimate

breakdown. Abandoned on a trash heap by his mother, Cholly is raised until age 13 by his great-aunt. When she dies, Cholly seeks solace in the arms of Darlene, but the couple are interrupted by two white hunters, who fix their flashlights on Cholly and tell him to "get on wid it." Though their ridicule renders Cholly impotent, he pretends to have sex with the girl while the hunters watch. Cholly's impotence is more than sexual—he wants to strike out at the hunters, but to do so would probably result in his death, so he transfers the rage and hostility he feels to the only other person available, Darlene.

Cholly runs away in search of the father he never knew, only to be "rejected for a crap game" (160). With nothing to lose, Cholly realizes he is truly free, untethered by the commitments of friends and family, until he meets Pauline and marries her. The marriage, with its "sheer weight of sameness," dulls Cholly to despair. When their marriage produces children, Cholly, who had never had a real family, feels no connection to them. While his background cannot excuse Cholly's abuse of his wife and eventual rape of his daughter, it does explain his inability to perform the role of husband and father, and how through his warped view of the world, he may think that his rape of Pecola stems from love.

Critics have often reflected on Morrison's ability to use the techniques of narrative to infuse a subtle layering into her novels. Morrison herself comments on the purposefulness of that layering in her collection of essays *Playing in the Dark,* in which she asserts that language has always been used to "powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people" (Tally 153). Morrison turns the power of language to her own use when she pulls readers into her stories, making them accountable for their hidden biases. *The Bluest Eye* opens with one such device—the phrase "Quiet as it's kept" is meant to imply illicit gossip, the type of "back fence" speech women would use with close neighbors. Morrison hoped the use of the phrase would produce "sudden familiarity" so that readers would not have the chance to build a wall between themselves and what follows—the "terrible story about things one would rather not know anything about" (*Bluest* 212).

Morrison's opening is also indicative of her commitment to write a truly African-American story, one that possesses an "aural quality . . . like spoken words instead of written words" (David 32). She carries that technique throughout *The Bluest Eye,* writing many phrases as the speakers would have actually voiced them. Yet Morrison's attempts to capture the sounds and cadence of black language differs significantly from those of the early American writers whom she has criticized. Morrison writes from the sacred place of insider, able to convey the reason and meaning behind inflection and tone, whereas writers who endeavor to portray dialects that are foreign to them always taint the language with the static of their foreignness.

Still, the process does not come easily to Morrison, who claims some works stretch her attempts to "work credibly and, perhaps, elegantly with a discredited vocabulary" (*Sula* xiv). Even within her work, Morrison allows her characters to luxuriate in language, as when Claudia reflects on the talk of the adult women:

> Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like the throb of a heart made of jelly. . . . We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words . . . so we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre. (15)

Morrison's readers, however, can know the "meanings of all their words" because Morrison so clearly depicts the faces, hands, feet, and timbre of the speakers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the difference between institutional racism and individualized prejudice? Outline

examples of institutional racism in *The Bluest Eye* and trace their effects on Claudia, Pecola, and Frieda. How does institutionalized racism manifest itself today? What effects does it continue to have on minority cultures and the dominant culture?

2. Look at sample pages from Dick and Jane (at the time of this writing, accessible via the Valparaiso University Web site at http://faculty.valpo.edu/bflak/dickjane/index.html). How do they portray the "typical" American family? Examine current children's literature for examples that refute that stereotype. Is there such a thing as a typical American family? Should children's literature reflect reality or uphold societal values? And who is to determine those values?
3. What purpose is served by the character of Soaphead Church? How does the "gift" he gives Pecola affect her?
4. Morrison contends in her 1993 afterword to the novel that the story fails to "handle effectively the silence at its center: the void that is Pecola's 'unbeing'" (215). In view of Morrison's later novels, how might she reshape that void into the "emptiness left by a boom or a cry"? Try rewriting the last section of *The Bluest Eye* to clarify Pecola's psychosis through her invention of an imaginary friend.
5. *The Bluest Eye* has often been compared to the film *Imitation of Life* for its portrayal of the pressure on blacks to be part of white society. View the movie and compare and contrast the characters of Pauline and Annie in terms of roles, self-identity, societal place, and family dynamics.

Sula (1973)

Morrison began writing *Sula* during the early 1970s, when members of the women's liberation movement rallied behind a sisterhood in which women supported one another. She was surprised to learn that for "a large part of the female population a woman friend was considered a secondary relationship" (Denard 79). Such a revelation piqued Morrison's curiosity about related matters, such as the choices "available to black women outside their own society's approval" and the shape of the "friendship between women when unmediated by men" (*Sula* xiii), questions she chose to explore in her 1973 novel *Sula*.

Writing *Sula* presented a major problem for Morrison. While she was committed to portraying the black community from an insider's viewpoint, as did many black writers of the time she felt the "white gaze" of mainstream readers. Her original draft began with Shadrack in the midst of his life with the sentence "Except for World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day." But Morrison questioned the ability of white readers to enter the black-topic text without their own "emotional luggage." To cushion the entrance she created a new beginning as preface to Shadrack: The reader is taken by the hand and gently led toward the black community by the 'valley man.' Morrison assumed that white readers would resist being plopped down abruptly in the black community, but that they might allow themselves to be guided in by another outsider, this valley man. While the choice made sense in 1973—no other writer had yet to write directly to a black market—Morrison later called this technique an embarrassing compromise to reconcile "the mere fact of writing about, for, and out of a black culture while accommodating and responding to mainstream 'white' culture" ("Unspeakable" 26).

Despite her compromise, Morrison does realize her goal of expressing the truth of her story. Even in the "safe, welcoming lobby" where Morrison defers to "the line of demarcation between the sacred and the obscene, public and private, them and us," she describes the black community of the Bottom with an image of white violence against blackness: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood." Morrison painstakingly chose the types of plants to be symbolic of her double protagonists: Nel—the blackberry patch—"reliably sweet, but thorn-bound," and Sula—the nightshade—

"dangerously female . . . uncontained and incontainable" ("Unspeakable" 25).

The novel explores the relationship between Nel and Sula and the forces that act upon their friendship. Morrison uses the symbol of a cross to explain the book's structure, describing Hannah, Nel, Eva, and Sula as the "points of a cross—each one a choice for characters bound by gender and race" and the main conflict as occurring on the "nexus of that cross" through a "merging of responsibility and liberty difficult to reach, a battle among women who are understood to be least able to win it" (*Sula* xiv). Sula is raised by Hannah, whose promiscuity is considered nonthreatening and almost complimentary by the women of the Bottom, and Eva, who is reported to have sacrificed her leg in return for money to support her children yet cannot provide the emotional nurturing they truly need. Their influence creates in Sula a woman capable of "extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things" ("Unspeakable" 25). While Hannah and Eva's nonconventional rearing liberates Sula from "lifelong dependency on others," it also renders her incapable of forming any emotional attachment (Beaulieu 46).

Nel's friendship with Sula is based on her need to escape the rigid confines of her own mother, Helene. Helene would like others to view her as the perfect example of a middle-class housewife. Her fear that the facade may slip creates a need to control every facet of both her life and her daughter's. Helene's definition of "perfect" has been shaped by pressure to be less black, which she confers upon Nel—for instance, forcing her to wear a clothespin on her nose to make it less broad. Through her friendship with Sula, Nel finds the freedom to be herself.

Yet the same uncontainability that initially attracts Nel to Sula allows Sula to live so completely outside the norms of society that the people of the Bottom turn away from her. That Sula has a birthmark over her eye (which is varyingly interpreted by the community as a rose, a serpent, or the ashes of Sula's dead mother) and that her return to the Bottom is marked by a plague of robins give the community all of the evidence it needs to make Sula a scapegoat for their ills. The ability to label one person as evil has a cleansing effect on everyone else, who band together against her.

Nel is the one person who tries to stay faithful to Sula. She welcomes Sula into her home and counsels her in how to care for the aging Eva. Eventually, however, Sula's nonconformity leads her into conflict with Nel over their disparate definitions of womanhood. Nel, who sees her role as woman defined by her position of wife and mother, cannot forgive Sula for sleeping with Jude, Nel's husband. When Sula takes ill, Nel confronts her about the betrayal, asking, "What did you take him for if you didn't love him and why didn't you think about me?" Sula's response—that she did not take Jude, just had sex with him—infuriates Nel, who cannot accept Sula's claim that a good friend would "get over it."

Morrison as narrator refuses to take sides. She stated in an interview that "one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good—you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to. Evil is as useful as good is" (David 64). By presenting both sides of a moral dilemma, Morrison forces readers to examine their own values in the context of the greater community.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of Shadrack's World War I experience? How does his involvement in the story shape Sula's?
2. On her deathbed, Sula asks Nel, "How you know . . . about who was good?"—suggesting that perhaps Nel was not the righteous one she believed herself to be (146). Examine the lives of Nel and Sula, making a list of virtues and faults. Whom do you believe to be "good" and on what factors do you base that conclusion?
3. Consider Morrison's statement that "evil is as useful as good is" (David 64). Do you agree or disagree? How does Morrison use evil as a conduit to good in Sula?
4. Critics have suggested that *Sula* is a lesbian novel, despite Morrison's insistence to the contrary (Tally 22). Debate the validity of each view, using examples from the novel for support.

Song of Solomon (1977)

Toni Morrison's third novel makes a significant shift in perspective. While *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* focus primarily on female characters—viewing men only in terms of their roles in the lives of women—in *Song of Solomon* the roles have reversed. The story centers around the protagonist Macon Dead III, the first black child to be born in No Mercy Hospital. As a child, Macon is known as Milkman by everyone but his parents, a nickname that disgusts his father because he believes it to be rooted in "some filthy connection" to Milkman's mother. Milkman does not know the origin of his nickname, although it hardly bothers him until a confrontation with his father reveals the reason for his father's suspicions. The disclosure spurs in Milkman a need to uncover the basis for his nickname, but his best friend, Guitar, tells him, "Niggers get their names the way they get everything else—the best way they can" (88). Milkman is not satisfied with that answer and begins a quest for truth.

Song of Solomon is in many ways a traditional bildungsroman (the story of a young person's maturation): Milkman is content to live his life passively, benefiting from his father's money and social status and the easy attentions of women, until he realizes he does not even know the meaning of his own nickname. Milkman's search for that meaning becomes a quest for identity attainable only through an understanding of his family's history and the ultimate acceptance of his adult role within a community.

Milkman's quest allows Morrison to explore the importance of naming to a culture that has been stripped of its identity. Ron David addresses slavery as theft of identity:

> Every black American whose ancestors were taken from Africa by force has been robbed of his family name. That was no accident; you enslave a person's spirit by wiping out her identity; your name—and your family name—are badges of your identity . . . so an African American, free at last, is a person in search of his name. (35)

Slaves were property, devoid of any identity separate from their owner. As a result, many slaves—if they had a surname at all—were called after their owner. First names were given out of convenience, as is later evidenced in Morrison's novel *Beloved,* where the slaves at Sweet Home are all named Paul. By the time slavery was abolished in 1865, most blacks had been sold away from their families, and many had no way of knowing their rightful names. Milkman is named after his father and his father's father, yet the name they share—Macon Dead—results from an error on his grandfather's papers and "shows a mistake . . . the carelessness of white people . . . and the indifference when . . . they don't pay much attention to what the records are" (Denard 113).

It is interesting to note that Morrison herself experienced an inadvertent name change. Her first book was published under the name *Toni Morrison* because the editor knew her by her nickname, *Toni.* While the mistake was understandable and certainly not malicious, Morrison still felt upset: "My name is Chloe Wofford. Toni's a nickname. I write all the time about being misnamed. How you got your name is very special" (Denard 101).

Unlike the names given them by white slaveholders, nicknames are conferred by a person's own family or community and in some ways take on even greater meaning. Many of Morrison's characters have nicknames born of legends, a fact she discussed in a 1995 interview: "[Black people] don't just hand [nicknames] to you, they wait until you do something that they think represents something" (Denard 113). Macon is christened "Milkman" by the town gossip, Freddy, who happens to catch him still being breastfed at the age of four and cries, "A milkman. That's what you got here, Miss Rufie. A natural milkman if ever I seen one. Look out, womens. Here he come. Huh!" (14). Freddy's statement acts as part prophecy: As Milkman grows older "the women did everything for him," allowing him to remain in perpetual infancy "until he finally grew up" (Denard 113). Milkman's emotional maturation occurs once he understands the history behind his identity and accepts its importance: "When you know your name, you

should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do" (333).

That Milkman's given name is *Macon Dead III* has as much significance to the story as his nickname. The name becomes a joke between Milkman and Guitar when Hagar (Milkman's cousin with whom he breaks off a long-term affair) begins her attempts to kill him: "She can't kill me, I'm already Dead." Later in the story, the laughter behind the joke is lost. Guitar has joined a secret group, known to members as "the Seven Days," the purpose of which is to avenge the death of murdered blacks by killing a random white in the same manner and on the same day of the week as the murder. Eventually Guitar believes that Milkman has betrayed him and goes after Milkman. While Milkman had waited passively for Hagar's attempts on his life, dismissing her worth and the worth of his own life, by novel's end, Milkman turns to meet his death. Karen Waldron asserts that for Milkman, "facing death consciously becomes a means of flying, of outlasting pain and turning it to love, knowledge, and *responsible* freedom" (Beaulieu 97).

As Waldron suggests, flight is pivotal in the plot of *Song of Solomon*. The story opens with a dramatic suicidal leap by an insurance salesman (who later turns out to have been a member of the Seven Days) from the roof of No Mercy Hospital. That Morrison produces the entire scene without once referring to the man's leap as his death is no accident. Even when the firemen arrive, they are too late, for "Mr. Smith had seen the rose petals, heard the music, and leaped on into the air" (9). This leap is mirrored at the end of the book, when Milkman, having completed his quest for identity, "without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees," leaps from the cliff above Ryna's Gulch (341). Again the leap is not to certain death, but only to the question of it, as now Milkman knows "what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (341).

Although critics have identified the flight in *Song of Solomon,* and specifically Mr. Smith's leap at the beginning, with the legend of Icarus, Morrison contends that it is based on the African flying myth. Morrison has admitted that she does employ Western mythology in her novels but usually does so to signal that characters are out of their element, that "they are pulling from another place that's not going to feed them" (Denard 113). Morrison goes on to insist that flying in this novel is not about "some Western form of escape" but "the whole business of how to handle one's self in a more dangerous element called air, learning how to trust, to risk . . . to be able to surrender one's self to the air, to surrender and control, both of those things" an act that requires the ability to "give up all of the weights, all of the vanities, all of the ignorances" (Denard 115–121). Indeed, Milkman's newfound understanding—that surrendering power is the first step toward achieving it—implies that he has cultivated those abilities.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Critics have described Morrison as being "on the one hand, a basher of many myths of Western culture, on the other, a new mythmaker who creates meaning out of connections to the past and to spiritual love," while allowing that "Morrison has created novels that transform and embody two warring literary selves" (McKay and Earle 14). Explore the references within *Song of Solomon* to the myths of Western, African, and Indian cultures. How does Morrison interpret these stories in the context of the African-American experience?
2. Discuss the role of Pilate as ancestor. How does she function as transmitter of both male and female knowledge to the next generation? What effect does the progressive distancing of women from male knowledge (indicated through Reba and Hagar) have in *Song of Solomon*? What does this loss imply for an American culture that is increasingly composed of single-parent homes?
3. Debate the form and function of the Seven Days from the perspectives of Guitar and Milkman. What effect does the secret organization have on each and on the greater society?
4. Morrison is skilled at the use of magical realism within her novels. *Magical realism* refers to the treatment of fantastical occurrences with as much credence as fact. Explore *Song of Solomon*

and *Beloved* in terms of magical realism's ability to "remember, express, and account for those experiences which Western notions of history, reality, and truth have failed to address" (Beaulieu 198).

5. Examine the characters of Milkman, his father, and Guitar in the context of Robert B. Stepto's *From Behind the Veil*. Which characters reflect Stepto's "articulate survivor"? His "articulate kinsmen"? Is one role better than another? Must black women conform to the same choices?

Tar Baby (1981)

Morrison opens *Tar Baby* with an epigraph from the Bible: "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you." The verse, from First Corinthians, gains significance when readers are reminded that *Chloe* is Morrison's given name, therefore, "the house of Chloe" refers to Morrison's own community—black women. In this context, the epigraph serves as warning to the reader that Morrison is about to address the discord between blacks and whites (Kubitschek 100).

Never one to back away from controversy, Morrison follows through on her promise, addressing the rift between black American and white American on multiple fronts. Although Morrison could write an essay outlining her points in academic form, she chooses again to utilize allegory as a nonthreatening approach to her readers. The title is from the African folktale of Br'er Rabbit, in which the fox tries to trick Br'er Rabbit with a doll coated in tar. Yet throughout history, the tale of Br'er Rabbit has been appropriated to express the moral of the storyteller. Morrison is able to make her point regardless of which variation of the story readers have heard. In fact, the differences in the two tales are part of that point:

> This masked and unmasked; enchanted and disenchanted; wounded and wounding world is played out on and by the varieties of interpretation . . . the Tar Baby myth has been . . . subjected to. Winging one's way through the vise and expulsion of history becomes possible in creative encounters with that history. Nothing, in those encounters, is safe, or should be. Safety is the foetus of power as well as protection from it, as the uses to which masks and myths are put in Afro-American culture reminds us. ("Unspeakable" 31)

Morrison wants readers to see the Tar Baby tale as about "not masks as covering what is to be hidden, but how the masks come to life, take life over, exercise the tensions between itself and what it covers" ("Unspeakable" 30). Morrison further explains that the masks worn by each character in her novel have been carefully constructed by the characters themselves and have come to life to determine and limit the choices available to those characters.

A surface reading may seem to expose direct connections between the roles in the Tar Baby tale and the characters Morrison has created. Son runs "lickety-split" like Br'er Rabbit and refers to Jadine as a "tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap" (220). Yet Trudier Harris cautions against making a strictly literal comparison of the novel to the folktale: "It becomes increasingly less clear in Morrison's work whose territory is being invaded, who is the tar baby, who is trapped, who needs rescue from whom, and whether or not he (or she) effects an escape" (McKay 144). In fact, some critics have suggested that the tar baby in Morrison's novel is not a specific character at all, but the act of "oversimplifying oneself or others for a false dream of safety" (Kubitschek 112) or even the text itself (McKay 153).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Valerian calls his son a "cultural orphan." What does the term imply? Who else in *Tar Baby* might be classified as a cultural orphan? What is the implication for society?
2. How has the Tar Baby tale been incorporated into the folklore of different cultures? Read several versions of the Tar Baby story and discuss the cultural and political implications of each.

3. Morrison's *Tar Baby* has often been compared to the Tar Baby stories of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus and to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Create a chart in which you analyze the major characters in Morrison's tale and their likeness to characters from the other texts.

"Recitatif" (1983)

Morrison's only published short story appeared in the 1983 anthology *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women,* edited by Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) and Amina Baraka. Morrison describes "Recitatif" as an "experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (*Playing* xi).

The story begins on the day that Twyla is taken to St. Bonaventure, known as St. Bonny's, a home for "state kids," most of whom have "beautiful dead parents in the sky." Twyla is sent to room with Roberta, another new arrival, and the two soon learn that despite their racial differences, they have one important fact in common: The mothers of the girls are still alive—Twyla's mother, who leaves her alone to go out dancing, and Roberta's mother, who is ill. Twyla and Roberta's friendship is born of necessity; no one, not "even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians," will play with them.

The friendship does not come easily. At first Twyla does not want to room with Roberta because of the racial differences between them. It seems that between her bouts of dancing, Twyla's mother tells her "something important . . . they never washed their hair and they smelled funny." The "they" to whom her mother referred is "a whole other race" from Twyla's, but which race that is is left unspoken. Morrison explains that the words *black* and *white* were purposefully not applied to her main characters, stating that such words often act as "metaphorical shortcuts" that "provoke predictable responses" (*Playing* x; Denard 75).

Morrison's purposeful use of language causes readers to become aware of how "the process of understanding depends on one's own prejudices, cultural memories, and expectations" (Tally 103). Readers must enter the text as active participants, and, in essence, the prejudices of those readers become another character in the story. Abena Busia describes the typical reader's back-and-forth assignments of race to the characters and maintains that his or her tendency to spend so much effort scouring for racial clues underscores Morrison's point regarding the overreliance of readers (and writers) on those clues (Tally 104).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Examine "Recitatif" closely for character description. What does Morrison tell readers about the characters? What is not said, but rather learned through the characters' interactions and behaviors? What is left to the reader?
2. What purpose does the character of Maggie serve? How is she central to the conflict between Twyla and Roberta, and how does each girl identify with her?
3. Discuss the effects of gentrification on individuals, families, and the community. Are there areas in your community that have been affected by gentrification? Choose an area in your city and debate whether it should be subjected to renewal. Be sure to research and represent the views of all stakeholders.

Beloved (1987)

Beloved was born from Morrison's desire to understand the forces behind the true story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed her child rather than allow her to be returned to slavery. Morrison says to explore the effects of slavery on the enslaved, we must "get rid of these words like 'the slave woman' and 'the slave child,' and talk about people with names, like you and like me, who were there" (Denard 105–106). In this way, *Beloved* follows in the footsteps of other neoslave narratives in their attempts to overcome the misrepresentation of blacks in American history books and early

fiction. While the initial slave narratives sought to illustrate the evils of slavery, the time of their writing required the authors to balance on the edge of a very thin political line, between desire to encourage abolitionists and fear of alienating their readers. Neoslave narratives are concerned with an authentic representation of slavery and culture from the black perspective and do not worry about appeasing white audiences.

As Claudia warned readers in *The Bluest Eye,* sometimes the why of a story is "difficult to handle," and we "must take refuge" in the how. It is that "how" that Morrison explores in *Beloved*. How does one woman kill the very thing she loves? How can she ever justify that choice? How can she ever be forgiven? The answers are found only when readers understand the true nature of slavery as a theft of the self and a chaining of the soul, the effects of which do not disintegrate when the bonds are lifted. To illustrate this, Morrison begins her novel in 1873, years after Sethe's escape from slavery and the murder of her daughter. The reader enters the book the same way Paul D enters 124 Bluestone Road, considering the house itself and its rage: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."

One of Toni Morrison's greatest attributes is the manner in which she unfolds a story. We may believe life is lived in linear fashion—first we are born, then we experience *x,* which affects us, produces *y* and resolves through a confrontation with z, then we die—but the truth is that as we live our present lives, we are constantly bombarded by our thoughts, memories, and sometimes (as in the case of *Beloved*) confrontations with the past. These breaks in linear motion impact the choices we make and shape who we become. Morrison is able to capture that flux and channel it into the framework of the novel. Ron David likened Morrison's approach to the music of Charles Mingus, which "straddled history" by incorporating aspects from jazz's past and future, without regard to the present (37). Walter Clemons, writing for *Newsweek,* described Morrison's technique as "the splintered, piecemeal revelation of the past . . . that isn't storytelling but the intricate exploration of trauma" (David 124).

In *Beloved,* even the trauma is layered. The 1856 newspaper article that served as inspiration for *Beloved* recounts the Reverend P. S. Bassett's visit to Margaret Garner. Even in the midst of legal slavery, Rev. P. S. Bassett reflects, "Oh how terrible is irresponsible power, when exercised over intelligent beings!" Bassett goes on to contemplate such "fruits" in light of the fact that "we are frequently told that Kentucky slavery is very innocent" (Plasa 41). Bassett's comments reflect the difficulty in placing blame for the death of Garner's child. Does it lie with Garner herself, or with a society that has condoned a systematic destruction of humanity? Morrison furthers that debate by delving into the events that could have led up to Garner's actions through the character of Sethe Suggs and the singularly horrific condition that was the life of a black woman during slavery.

A slave woman represented "property that reproduced itself without cost" (228). Barbara Omolade describes in her essay "Hearts of Darkness" the slave woman as a "fractured commodity":

> Her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina. Her back and muscle were pressed into field labor where she was forced to work with men and like men. Her hands were demanded to nurse and nurture the white man and his family. . . . Her vagina, used for his sexual pleasure, was the gateway to the womb, which was his place of capital investment—the capital investment being the sex act and the resulting child the accumulated surplus, worth money on the slave market. (Plasa 124–125)

Not only did the slave woman belong to the slaveholder, but so did her unborn child. This use of slaves as brood mares is emphasized several times throughout *Beloved*: with Ella, who was kept locked in a house by a father and son and who "delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet'" (258); with Sethe's African mother, who discarded every child and "without names, she threw them" (62),

except the one conceived by her own choice with a black man; and with Sethe, whose milk is stolen by the schoolteacher's nephews and on whose back a chokecherry tree is carved with a whip, while the men protected the unborn slave in her belly by forcing her to lie in a pit, a type of "grave for the living" (Plasa 125). Even Denver, born into freedom, understands the black woman's place in the slave system: "Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them" (209).

This forced reproduction had severe consequences for slave women. Many died in childbirth or as a result of giving birth so frequently. Others learned to protect themselves emotionally and "loved small" (162) by closing off a section of themselves, rejecting the label of *mother* as having anything to do with what they had suffered. Those women, as do Ella and Sethe's mother, often refused to nurse the newborn children, unconcerned with whether they lived or died.

Sethe turns from either definition of motherhood. She believes instead that motherhood is the part of herself that "exceeds the bounds of slavery" (Plasa 125). Such feelings were dangerous for slaves, whose families could be torn apart, raped, killed, or sold, all on the whim of a white man. Maternal instincts often worked to the advantage of the slaveholder, a type of guarantee that the woman would not run away and abandon her children. Sethe's attachment to her children was fostered at Sweet Home, which seemed the least hateful type of slavery until Mr. Garner died. Then the schoolteacher and his nephews took over the farm, intent on proving to all that "definitions belonged to the definer—not the defined" (190) and that nothing—not a slave's self or her children—is beyond the entitlement of white ownership.

Once free of Sweet Home, Sethe is overcome with love for her children:

> I was big . . . and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide. Look like I loved em more after I got there. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. (162)

Sethe survives flight from Sweet Home through her determination to get her milk to her baby. Once there, she defines herself solely in terms of her children, who she feels are "all the parts of herself that [are] precious and fine and beautiful" (163). When the schoolteacher arrives to take them back to Sweet Home, Sethe loves them so much that she wants to put them "where no one could hurt them" (163). It is her consuming love for her children that causes Sethe to try to kill them rather than see them live to be slaves. It is Beloved, the two-year-old child who is "crawling already," who dies and for whom Sethe wants to atone.

Much debate has focused on the elusive character of Beloved: Who—or, more accurately, what—is she? Denver believes at once that Beloved is her lost sister returned. Her joy at finally having a sister temporarily prevents her from accepting that Beloved is not the benevolent presence she seems. Although it takes Sethe longer, she, too, has to accept that Beloved "came right on back, like a good girl, like a daughter" (203). Even Paul D senses in Beloved a supernatural power that drives him from Sethe's bed and then her home.

Deborah Horvitz endorses this spectral image of Beloved in "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in *Beloved*," in which she claims that the character of Beloved is not only the "ghost child who comes back to life" but also an "intergenerational, inter-continental, female" (Plasa 59) who represents Sethe's own African mother. Through her interactions with Beloved, Sethe remembers her mother's death and her own feelings of abandonment.

Pamela Barnett describes the novel as "haunted by rape," elevating the ghostly child to a "succubus, a female demon and nightmare figure . . .

[that] . . . drains Paul D of semen and Sethe of vitality" (Plasa 74). Barnett cites Morrison's depictions of and allusions to rape as explanations for Sethe's murder of Beloved: "Sethe kills her child so that no white man will ever 'dirty' her, so that no young man with 'mossy teeth' will ever hold the child down and suck her breasts" (Plasa 73). Further, Barnett points out that rape is the trauma that most deeply marks the men of *Beloved*: Witnessing rape causes Halle to suffer a mental breakdown, Paul D to lock away his heart, and Stamp Paid to turn from his wife.

Elizabeth House takes an opposing view, arguing in "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved" that Beloved is not supernatural but "a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery" (Plasa 67). House suggests that Beloved's stream-of-conscious thoughts in part 2 be read as poetry. Such an analysis supports House's contention that, as is implied by the book's biblical epigraph ("I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved" Romans 9:25), Beloved is not Beloved. In this interpretation, Beloved's story is not about her own physical death, but rather her capture by slave hunters and her experiences during the middle passage. Beloved's supernatural references to "men without skin" and the "little hill of dead people . . . [that] fall into the sea which is the color of bread" (211) allude to white slave traders who push the Africans who have died on the ship into the ocean. Beloved is a witness as her own mother commits suicide by leaping into the sea with the corpses, rather than remain captive on the ship. Her feelings of abandonment create in her a ravenous hunger and propel her on an endless quest for her mother's smile. When she awakens to see Sethe smiling down at her, Beloved believes in Sethe as her mother. The character of Stamp Paid, a black man who helps fugitive slaves reach freedom through the Underground Railroad, seems consistent with House's interpretation of Beloved as corporal. He tells Paul D about "a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman . . . since she was a pup" and suggests that Beloved could be that girl (235). Beloved herself supports Stamp Paid's theory when she tells Sethe that there was a man "without skin . . . in the house I was in. He hurt me" (215).

Morrison suggests that both views of Beloved may be correct, claiming that what is known as "superstition and magic" to Western readers is just "another way of knowing things" for the African-American culture. She laments that much of that culture has been lost as mainstream America marginalizes and discredits any way of thinking that is not Eurocentric. Morrison strives to recognize and reflect the cultural knowledge of her characters in her writing through attempts to "blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other" (Plasa 57). In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison describes the character of Beloved as the embodiment of that blending:

> She is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from a true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience, which blends beautifully in her questions and answers, her preoccupations, with the desires of Denver and Sethe. So when they say "What was it like over there?" they may mean—they do mean—"What was it like being dead?" She tells them what it was like being where she was on that ship as a child. Both things are possible, and there's evidence in the text so that both things could be approached, because the language of both experiences—death and the Middle Passage—is the same. (Plasa 32–33)

Whether readers accept Beloved as ghost reincarnate, escaped slave, or both, what they can all agree on is the effect of Beloved's presence on Sethe.

Sethe neither apologizes for nor explains Beloved's murder until Beloved appears to her as

flesh and blood. Then Sethe vows to tend to her and make her understand the reasons for her death. But "Beloved wasn't interested" in forgiving Sethe and, as does Barnett's succubus, begins to drain the life from Sethe through constant demands for attention and her never-ending need. Only through the help of the community and the acceptance that she is her own "best thing" is Sethe able to survive the weight of her guilt.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of the name *Garner* for the owners of Sweet Home? What were Mr. Garner's motives for calling his slaves "men"? Did that make him better or worse than other slaveholders?
2. Compare Paul D to the character Albert in ALICE WALKER's novel *The Color Purple*. How do both of these men benefit from the women they love? What do they offer in return? What do they sacrifice?
3. Read historical accounts of slavery and the Underground Railroad in high school history texts or popular encyclopedias. How do such accounts fail to represent the truth of American history accurately? In what other ways is the teaching of American history to students lacking?
4. In *Song of Solomon,* Pilate asks, "What difference do it make if the thing you scared of is real or not?" (41). Cite evidence from the text in support of two different theories of Beloved's existence: Beloved as Sethe's murdered daughter reincarnate or House's escaped slave girl. How does either interpretation change the meaning of the story? Is Pilate correct in her assertion that the reality of a thing does not matter?
5. Compare the use of dialect in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Gold-Bug" and Morrison's *Beloved*. How does the way in which a writer portrays language impact the reader's opinion of the characters?
6. Explore the allusions to hunger and thirst in *Beloved*. How does Morrison's employment of physical need represent the emotional needs of her characters?

Jazz (1992)

As did *Beloved, Jazz* germinated from Morrison's experience working on *The Black Book*. As she poured through artifacts looking for the truth of black America, Morrison discovered a picture taken by the photographer James Van der Zee for *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. Morrison was intrigued by the photo of a pretty girl in a coffin (in the 1920s, family members often took pictures of their deceased loved ones), but the story behind it—of a young girl who so loved her killer that she protected him even to her death—compelled Morrison to compose a novel. And, as many critics have reflected, compose is just what she did: "Like Duke Ellington, Morrison has found a way, paradoxically, to create an ensemble of improvised sound out of a composed music" (David 146).

Such composition did not come easy to Morrison. She wanted the novel to reflect the feel of the 1920s, to be unmistakably jazz. To Morrison, jazz music represents "improvisation, originality, change," and she wanted her novel to do more than describe those characteristics; she wanted it "to seek to become them" (*Jazz* xvii). Creating that feel required Morrison to "pull from the material . . . the compositional drama of the period, its unpredictability," yet she constantly found herself frustrated with the character of Violet. Although Morrison knew everything about Joe's wife—her rage at discovering her husband's affair with a young girl, her violent attack on the girl's corpse during the funeral—she could not find the "language to reveal her." In her disgust, Morrison began typing out her frustration:

> Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. (*Jazz* 3)

That impromptu purging of facts had exactly the feel Morrison wanted for the piece and became the book's opening. Furthermore, this unnamed narrator provided a gossipy tone that allows Morrison to effect the false start common in improvisational music—a miscue, which readers (and the narrator) at first trust but slowly begin to doubt as actual events are revealed through "shifting tempos and combinations [that] allow the emergence of secrets, of the past," as the narrator's view is "destabilized by the ruptures and distinct rhythms of the various characters' unexpected solos" (Beaulieu 182).

Morrison intended the story of Dorcas Manfred to be part of *Beloved*, had in fact conceived of *Beloved* as a three-part tale (including *Paradise*) that would examine different versions of relationships and truth. Editors convinced Morrison that each tale could and should stand alone, but Morrison still prefers to think of them as her "trilogy" on love. Lay readers usually think of a trilogy as three separate and complete stories that contain the same characters, the same setting, or at the very least a continuation of the plotline. In this regard, *Jazz* is nearly unrecognizable as a continuation of *Beloved*. Yet Morrison defines her trilogy in terms of a more formal definition, which allows that the works be strongly related in theme. When examined in this context, Morrison's intent becomes clear: *Beloved*, with its focus on "mother-love," explores "how and what one cherishes under the duress and emotional disfigurement that a slave society imposes"; *Jazz*, with its focus on "couple-love," explores "how such relationships were altered, later, in (or by) a certain level of liberty"; and *Paradise*, with its focus on exclusion, explores what happens when one community loves itself so much that it seeks to protect that love through isolation (*Jazz* foreword).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explore the characters of Violet Trace and Alice Manfred, their relationship to each other, and the change that occurs in that relationship.
2. Morrison has called Wild a "type of Beloved" (Beaulieu 380). In what ways are the two characters similar? Knowing that Morrison intended *Jazz* to be a continuation of *Beloved*, what purpose does Wild fulfill?
3. Why does Alice Manfred decide not to seek prosecution of Dorcas's murderer? Debate whether crying all day is as bad as being in jail. Why does Alice think Joe is crying? Why is he really crying?
4. Compare the passage in which Alice discusses jazz music (54, 59) to Langston Hughes's description of bebop in *The Best of Simple* (McKay 159). How is music a conduit for true emotion? What does today's music express?

The Nobel Lecture in Literature (1993)

In 1993, Toni Morrison was selected to receive the Nobel Prize in literature for her ability to give "life to an essential aspect of American reality." In keeping with her deep belief in the intergenerational aspect of the present, Morrison's Nobel banquet speech was an acknowledgment of those whose "astonishing brilliance" has challenged and nurtured her own, as well as an anticipation of those who "are mining, sifting, and polishing languages for illuminations none of us has dreamed of" (33).

Citing the importance of narrative in her own life, Morrison chose to begin her Nobel lecture with a fable that reflects her belief in the power of language. The story tells of some young people who go to an old blind woman to ask a question. The question—"Is the bird I am holding living or dead?"—could be interpreted two ways. Is it a trick by spiteful youth intent on "disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is" (10)? That is one interpretation.

But Morrison has ever held dear the role of ancestor. So, she chooses to tell another version: of a wise old woman who has turned her back on children in need of teaching. Morrison shows us that the children see the woman's blindness as a blessing allowing her to "speak the language that tells us what only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names" (28). The children implore

her to help them define themselves by defining the things from which they have come: "Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man" (28). They want to know about their ancestors and the journey to become free. In their questioning, they recount a "wagonload of slaves" arriving at an inn and they repeatedly ask how—*how* they sang, *how* they knew, *how* they thought. Not *what* they did or *why,* but *how*. This attention to the *how* recalls Claudia's warning in the first pages of Morrison's inaugural novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Claudia tells readers "*why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*" (*Bluest* 6). The children of Morrison's speech understand the difficulty in knowing why a thing happens, but they also know that through exploring how it occurred, they may free themselves.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Morrison's Nobel lecture touches on the core of her beliefs. Suppose you were asked to give a similar speech. What core belief would you hope to convey? Choose or create a metaphor to help your audience understand your belief. Possible forms include poetry, story, song, and quotation.
2. How is it possible for language to die? Through her lecture, what response or reaction does Morrison hope to provoke from her listeners?
3. Is Morrison's speech consistent with her body of work? Explain your analysis with examples from her novels and the speech itself.

Paradise (1998)

Ralph Ellison warned that those unable to free themselves from the "straitjacket of racist ideology" would create conditions where race takes a "position of total (really totalitarian) importance" (Morel 60). Perhaps Ellison was thinking of a place like Ruby, Oklahoma, Morrison's all-black community. Founded by families who were "disallowed" from the light-skinned town of Fairly for being too poor and too black, Ruby seeks to remain separate from the outside world by excluding those who are not black enough.

Yet Ruby's youth are not content with the isolationist policies of their parents' generation. Encouraged by a young minister, the youth join the Black Power movement and express their beliefs by painting a black fist (the symbol of Black Power) on the side of the Oven. While the youth have adopted the Oven as their hangout, it has deep importance to the older generation, who remember the days when the Oven served as Ruby's gathering place—the town's "communal and symbolic center" (Beaulieu 262). The painting of the fist and the ensuing argument over the Oven's illegible inscription lead to a deepening rift between the generations, which culminates in an attack on the Convent.

While the Oven is a symbol of the town's patriarchy, the Convent is a place of "female subversiveness" (Beaulieu 262). Originally the mansion of an embezzler who used it to host an orgy, it was leased to the Catholic Church and used as a school where young Arapaho girls were taught. Later the Convent becomes a haven for troubled women, who are taken in and healed by Connie, a nearly blind visionary. Connie tells the women tales of Piedade, the maternal embodiment of paradise, and leads them through a type of therapy that involves "loud dreaming" (264) and birth reenactment. The strange actions of the women are interpreted as evil by the the men of Ruby. As such, the Convent and its women become an easy scapegoat for the men who feel threatened by the division brewing in their small community.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the premise of *Paradise* with Morrison's statement in her Nobel lecture concerning the Tower of Babel story:

> Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet.

> Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life. ("Nobel Lecture")

How could the residents of Ruby find "the heaven they imagined"?

2. *Paradise* opens with the line "They shoot the white girl first." What is accomplished by that opening? Is the race of the first one shot relevant to the story? Compose an argument for the identity of the white girl using evidence from the novel.
3. Examine Morrison's treatment of art and music within *Paradise*. How is each used to express the power of language?
4. What does the Oven represent to the youth of Ruby? To its elders? How do the Oven's physical changes throughout the novel represent the political changes within the town of Ruby?
5. What role does written language play in the novel? How is that consistent with Morrison's belief that "oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge"?

Love (2003)

In her eighth novel, Morrison seeks to the explore the "way sexual love and other kinds of love lend themselves to betrayal" (Denard 214). Morrison says she "wanted to give back to the worn-out word 'love' the emotions that it has lost through eternal presence" (Denard 225). To reinvest the word with the power she felt it should wield, Morrison used it sparingly "so that it would be raw when the first time those women say it, is the only time they could say it" (Denard 220).

The story revolves around Bill Cosey, a black entrepreneur living before the Civil Rights movement, whose quest to build a "playground" for affluent African Americans serves as "a cautionary lesson in black history" (201). Morrison has often remarked on history as a function of the historian and the fact that most of American history has been recorded from a Eurocentric perspective. Through her novels, Morrison attempts to "reappropriate" America's past, revisioning events through the lens of a black woman writer. The rise and decline of Cosey's Resort allow Morrison to examine the Civil Rights movement through the eyes of the black bourgeoisie, showcasing the negative aspects of forced integration on a "vibrant, independent black society" (Denard 208).

The focal point for Morrison's consideration of the construct of love is Bill Cosey. Although the inscription "Ideal Husband. Perfect Father" appears on his tombstone, his failure in both roles is reflected in the lifelong relationship between two women, Heed and Christine, who even 25 years after Cosey's death cannot undo his power over them. Christine is Cosey's granddaughter; her relationship with Heed is described by the narrator as "a child's first chosen love." The power of this first chosen love is derived from innocence:

> If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. (199)

The innocence of each girl is taken by Bill Cosey, sacrificed to his pedophilic tendencies and his wanton quest for sexual gratification when he first molests Heed, then marries her when she is 11. Christine's reaction, first of jealousy, then rage, has been taken by some scholars as implying that Cosey had also molested her.

The friendship is ruined, yet the girls remain bonded by this strange marriage even after Cosey's death. Each girl believes she should inherit Cosey's Resort (now abandoned as a result of the Civil Rights movement's integration policies), and each interprets differently Cosey's informal will, scrawled on a menu bequeathing all to his "sweet Cosey child." As a result of the ambiguity, neither

woman will leave the resort and the two live in silent opposition for years, until a mysterious girl appears in answer to Heed's classified ad calling for a secretary capable of "light but highly confidential work" (20). It is only through the girl's betrayal that Heed and Christine finally realize that they "could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere" (189).

For Discussion or Writing

1. To whom was Bill Cosey referring when he scrawled the words "sweet Cosey child," and how were those words interpreted by the women in Cosey's life? Examine the possible connection of the two wills in light of the suggestion by "L" of "a baby on the way."
2. Select a panoramic word that, as Morrison's choice of "love," can function in multiple layers and embody complex meanings. Construct a short story or poem in which you never use the word you have chosen but employ it fully.
3. "L" tells readers that they may see Mr. Cosey as "a good bad man, or a bad good man," a choice that "depends on what you hold dear—the what or the why" (200). Make an argument for either position, supporting your view with "the what" or "the why." How is this statement by "L" consistent with Morrison's portrayal of characters in her other novels?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON MORRISON AND HER WORK

1. Examine the use of music in the works of Ralph Ellison, August Wilson, Joy Harjo, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison. How does music, specifically jazz, contribute to the texture and meaning of the novel?
2. Toni Morrison has described *Beloved, Jazz,* and *Paradise* as a trilogy. In a well-developed essay, discuss the thematic strands that link them. What sets these three novels apart from the rest of Morrison's novels?
3. Morrison once stated that in seeking to interpret literary work, readers should "trust the tale, not the interview" (Kubitschek 11). How does this statement support Morrison's view that the author is not the final authority on a text's meaning? How is the meaning of a work to be determined?
4. *Sula* is the only one of Morrison's novels in which she allows the opening to be a "seductive safe harbor" that buoys the white reader gently into the black world (*Sula* xv). Compare the opening of *Sula* to that of Morrison's other works. How does sudden immersion in the black-topic text impact the reader?

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Joyce Carol Oates (1938–)

I am a chronicler of the American experience. We have been historically a nation prone to violence, and it would be unreal to ignore this fact. What intrigues me is the response to violence: its aftermath in the private lives of women and children in particular.

("Author Joyce Carol Oates on 'Adolescent America.'" *U.S. News and World Report*)

Joyce Carol Oates has been both hailed for the depth of her chiseled characterization of class and criticized for her insistence on the darker, violent side of humanity. Oates, who her friend and fellow writer John Updike claimed "was perhaps born a hundred years too late" (119) because she needs an audience hungrier for words, has produced an astonishing number of works: At the time of this writing, she has published close to 50 novels and numerous collections of short stories, poems, plays, and essays of literary criticism. Although the sheer volume of her published work is by itself impressive, it is the haunting precision with which she portrays the inner workings of the criminal or the exploited mind that makes Oates's writing memorable. The settings and characters in her stories are unmistakably American, and occasionally regional, but the struggles the characters face—moral, ethical, religious, or political—appeal to a wider, more universal audience.

Oates began writing at a young age and recognition occurred early, encouraging her to pursue what has been a remarkable career of more than four decades and counting. Oates received her first writing contest prize in 1959 from *Mademoiselle* magazine while still in college; among her other honors, she has won the National Book Award twice, has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist three times, and, in 2005, won the Prix Femina, a French literary prize for best foreign fiction. While she has created a body of well-received works in multiple literary genres, she is probably best known for her short stories, for which she has received an O. Henry Special Award for Continuing Achievement.

Even though Oates has consistently devoted herself to portraying violence and victimization, especially of women, as integral parts of the human experience, she has defied clear and strict classification: She is by no means simply a writer of horror stories or a feminist crusader. In her 2003 book of essays *The Faith of a Writer,* she maintains that writing is above all an art form and, as such, is "the most solitary of arts" (xi). She explains another unique aspect of writing possibly observed by critics and readers:

> To write is to invade another's space, if only to memorialize it; to write is to invite angry censure from those who don't write, or who don't write in quite the way you do, for whom you may seem a threat. Art by its nature is a transgressive act, and artists must accept being punished for it. The more original and unsettling their art, the more devastating the punishment. (33)

On the theme of violence, she tells Jay Parini in a 1987 interview, "People frequently misunderstand serious art because it is often violent and unattractive. I wish the world were a prettier place, but I wouldn't be honest as a writer if I ignored

the actual conditions around me" (Milazzo 155). Oates's characters face rape, incest, murder, patricide, suicide, infanticide, self-mutilation; sometimes these acts of violence are survived by the actors or even the victims and the reader is privy to a chilling view into their plight.

Oates was born on June 16, 1938, in Rockport, New York, into a working-class family. She was the oldest of three children. Her father, Frederick Oates, a tool and die designer, had an Irish background, while her mother, Carolina (née Bush), descended from a family of Hungarian immigrants. The family lived in a farmhouse shared with Carolina's parents. Oates attended a one-room schoolhouse she remembers fondly: "I would walk the approximate mile from our house, carrying my new pencil box and lunch pail, to sit on the front, stone step of the school building" (*Faith* 4). While she has equally affectionate memories of her teacher, Mrs. Dietz, and her lessons, her profound literary inspiration was received from Blanche, her Grandma Woodside, who presented her with Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* when she was eight years old. As Greg Johnson reports in his biography *Invisible Writer,* Oates was inspired by how "[Alice] manages not simply to survive some very odd, alarming experiences, but to triumph. Everything shifts and changes about her, nothing is very stable . . . but Alice asserts herself," and that for her, Carroll "affirmed the sovereignty of the imagination" (33). A typewriter, another gift from her grandmother when Oates was 14, added the sense of "self-awareness as a writer," and she soon pounded out her first novel, which she submitted for publication. It is no small irony that the publisher found the work too dark for its intended audience and rejected the manuscript without knowing how young the writer was (48).

Two characteristics distinguished Oates in her high school years: her insatiable appetite for reading and writing, and her aloneness. While her English teachers constantly praised her for meticulously preparing herself for class and writing profusely, her junior high gym teacher confronted her about always being alone. The character Laney Bartlett in her novel *Childwold* (1976) meets a similar fate. After ninth grade, Oates transferred from North Park to Williamsville High School, newly established yet strongly rooted in conservative traditions and strict morality. For Oates, from a small country school, the affluent middle-class environment provided a new challenge. She was made conscious even of her clothing—"homemade outfits sewn by Carolina and by Grandma Woodside" (Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 49). Yet "by her senior year, Joyce had become one of the most active students in her class: she sang in the chorus, played basketball and field hockey, worked on the yearbook, served as associate editor of *The Billboard* [the school newspaper], became president of Quill and Scroll [an honorary society for students interested in writing] and vice president of the French Club, and for good measure also joined the Drama Club, the Debate Club, the International Club, and even the Bowling Club" (51). She was even "given an affectionate nickname: 'Oatsie'" (51).

While Oates thus dispelled the early stereotype of her as a social misfit, the true extent of her passion for writing remained unknown to most at this time. She developed a keen interest in the works of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Thoreau; for practice, she began to imitate their writing styles. "Hemingway's disaffected posturing did not appeal to her, . . . but his structural device of arranging short stories into a novel would influence several of her mature works, including such otherwise dissimilar novels as *Bellefleur* (1980), with its maze of interlocking tales, and *Marya: A Life* (1986), each of which first appeared in story form" (Johnson, *Invisible Writer* 53). In *The Faith of a Writer,* she confesses: "In my life I've fallen in love with (and never wholly fallen out of love from) writers as diverse as Lewis Carroll, Emily Brontë, Kafka, Poe, Melville, Emily Dickinson, William Faulkner, Charlotte Brontë, Dostoyevsky. . . . In reading the new edition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* not long ago, I discovered I had memorized entire passages" (26).

In 1956, Oates graduated from Williamsville and, as the first of her family to attend college,

entered Syracuse University on a New York State Regents scholarship, matched by the receiving college. The ambitious Oates excelled in her studies, especially under the devoted tutelage of one of her English professors, Donald Dike, and began to submit stories to the *Syracuse Review*. Soon, however, Oates broke into nationwide publication when she won the prestigious *Mademoiselle* college fiction contest in 1959 for her short story "In the Old World."

In 1960, Oates was accepted in the graduate program of the University of Wisconsin, where she received an M.A. in English the next spring and married a fellow graduate student, Raymond J. Smith. After a year's uninspiring stay in Beaumont, Texas, both she and her husband received teaching positions at the University of Detroit. It was here in the university library that she accidentally found one of her stories listed on the year's Honor Roll in Martha Foley's *Best American Short Stories* and decided to devote herself to writing. From 1967 to 1978, she and her husband joined the English Department at the University of Windsor, Ontario, after which she became a writer in residence at Princeton University, where she is currently the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of the Humanities.

To place her earliest stories, Oates created an imaginary rural setting that she called, with unmistaken irony, Eden County, New York, a setting similar to the area where she grew up. The short story collections *By the North Gate* (1963) and *Upon the Sweeping Flood and Other Stories* (1966), set in this "barbarous Eden," as Greg Johnson calls it in his eponymous essay, "scrutinize with dogged thoroughness the moral conditions of an unstable American reality. They provide a carefully detailed portrait of the post-Depression rural poor; they investigate women's experience in a patriarchal mid-20th-century culture that conformed to long-standing social, religious, and family models, and they suggest the moral vacuum at the heart of such 'sacred' American institutions as the law and academe" (15). The common strand of these stories are mental and physical brutality and violence told in a chilling realistic and naturalistic style.

Urban and rural themes prevail in her next three novels, which compose a trilogy: *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) tells of a migrant worker; *Expensive People* (1968) examines the superrich of suburbia; and *them* (1969) takes on the classes in between. It was the third novel of the trilogy, *them,* that earned Oates the National Book Award in 1970. In her preface to the novel, Oates explained who "they" are:

> They are Americans of a certain class and era—infected, in part, by the glamour of America, the adventure of aggressive and futile dreams—but they are not Americans most of us know. Neither impoverished enough to be italicized against the prodigious wealth of their culture, nor affluent enough to be comfortably assimilated into it, the Wendalls exist—and they continue to exist—in a world for which, for the most part, despair itself is a luxury, incompletely understood, and failure unthinkable. (*[Woman] Writer* 366)

The story line was prompted by the recollections of a student in a writing class taught by Oates, but she cautions that—despite incorporating the echo of the realistic circumstances, even her own name for a character in the story—it is true fiction. Oates confesses to be committed to art "in which human beings are presented honestly, without sentimentality and without cynicism" (367).

It was the artist's commitment further to explore American social institutions, as well as the psychological construct of the individual within, that spurred her on in the 1970s. In *Wonderland* (1971), Oates "explores the boundaries between 'objective' and 'subjective' modes of discourse—between science and romance—as they define personality and as they construct categories of gender" (Daly 49). Both *Wonderland* and *Do with Me What You Will* (1973) probe societal constraints that produce potentially damaging father-daughter relationships, but Oates focuses on the aspect of the law in the latter. While in *Do with Me What You Will* she experiments with parodying the staples of romance novels, the following two novels, *The*

Assassins (1975) and *Childwold* (1976), "[mark] a dramatic shift in her vision," namely, "the mother-daughter story will figure in a more central way in Oates's novels informing and sustaining her comic vision throughout the 1980s" (91). The 1979 *Unholy Loves* "is dedicated to reforming the vision of authority that governs the 'unholy loves' of the academic community" (123) and at the same time furthers Oates's reputation as a maturing female satirist.

A celebrated realist by the early 1980s, Oates surprised her readers and critics by turning to genre writing. She completed what has come to be known as the gothic trilogy: *Bellefleur* in 1980, *A Bloodsmoor Romance* in 1982, and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* in 1984, which "blurred to near invisibility the line between Miss Oates and the scribblers of gothic romances," John Updike noted in 1987 (119), though not without a sense of concern about the literary art. On the one hand, Oates believes that "the imaginative construction of a 'Gothic' novel involves the systematic transportation of realistic psychological and emotional experiences into 'Gothic' elements" (*[Woman] Writer* 370), and therefore she considers it "experimental" writing; on the other hand, she is devoted to exploring "the wrongs perpetrated against [American] women, for instance, and the vicious class and race warfare that has constituted much of America's domestic history" (374). Through the stories of women she follows over generations, Oates is still writing the history of America: "America is a tale still being told—in many voices—and nowhere near its conclusion" (371).

It is this devotion to chronicling America through intricate portrayals of characters haunted or devoured by their psychological struggles that pervades Oates's oeuvre in the following two decades. Unfailingly, her stories probe the destructive nature of love, whether erotic or filial, often against the complex social backdrop of class, race, or gender politics. The 1986 *Marya, A Life* and the 1987 *You Must Remember This* present strong autobiographical elements, while the 1990 *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* returns to the familiar themes of race and violence. The latter novel was nominated for the National Book Award and praised for its "innovative structure" that "challenge[s] traditional 'realistic' novels, which, when they fail to challenge hierarchies of difference, perpetuate injustices" (Daly 180).

In the 1990s, Oates continued to engage her readers with novels both innovative in form and politically sensitive in content. Her 1992 *Black Water* reconstructs the brief and tragic encounter between a drunken politician and the young woman he leaves to drown when his vehicle plummets from the bridge into the dark water below. Though the plot recalls the similar event of 1969 involving Senator Edward Kennedy, the much-debated sexual-political power dynamics of the early 1990s are hard to dissociate from the story line. Told from the victim's point of view, *Black Water* is "taut, powerfully imagined and beautifully written" (Bausch); it secured Oates a place on the finalist list for the Pulitzer Prize. In another gripping tale, the 1993 *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang,* Oates explores the binds and politics of sisterhood, however feeble and short-lived: A group of 1950s high school girls lash out against male (father, teacher, classmate) violence and sexual harassment.

It would be a mistake to call Oates a popular writer who writes *about* violence; rather, she is intrigued by investigating the workings of violent action on the human—specifically, the American—mind. The 1994 *What I Lived For* unravels the tale of Corky Corcoran, an Irish Catholic man, through an interior monologue; Corky has lived with the memory of the violent death of his father, and now he faces an opportunity to redeem himself through saving another person. In *We Were the Mulvaneys* (1996), Oates meticulously investigates the moral ruination of a family after the daughter is raped by a fellow student; the novel is told from a brother's point of view. The 1995 horror novel *Zombie* employs a third version of male monologue; this time, however, it springs forth from the mind of a serial killer who engrosses the reader in the disturbing story of a modern-day, criminally insane Dr. Frankenstein–like figure: Jeffrey Dahmer is on a quest to create a zombielike life companion for himself, one who will be loyal to him. In 1996,

the book earned the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award and the Boston Book Review's Fisk Fiction Prize.

Always remarkable and innovative in her portrayal of the troubled American soul, Oates hauntingly memorializes the iconic figure of Marilyn Monroe in her 2000 novel *Blonde*. Oates has said that she "came to think of her as a universal figure" (*Faith* 151), and, though she included biographical elements, the book should be read as fiction (148). What amplifies the tragedy of the young woman who was created by a culture yet also destroyed by it is that she tells her story *after* she commits suicide. *Blonde* was not only generally well received, but also distinguished by the National Book Award and became a Pulitzer Prize finalist, Oates's third.

While Oates has long been devoted to the study of violence and its "aftermath," she has also been meticulous about the form, the presentation, the art of her writing. "It took several years for me to acquire the voice, the rhythm, the tone of *Bellefleur,*" she confessed in her preface to the novel. In the 2002 *I'll Take You There,* she effortlessly recreates the voice of a breathless teenager, which evolves into that of the self-assured young woman by the end of the story. The book is also Oates's most autobiographical novel to date, as well as a beautiful homage to philosophy as a way of enriching one's life and empowering one's dreams.

Oates is considered one of the most prolific writers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, who has created a significant body of works of fiction (also under the pseudonym *Rosamond Smith*), poetry, drama, and essays on diverse topics. In addition, she has been among the most admired authors of short stories since the publication of *By the North Gate,* in 1963. Her 2006 collection *High Lonesome* contains old favorites—among them "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"—and new additions of high acclaim.

Writing is a passion for Oates, an art form she seeks to perfect. She says in *The Faith of a Writer*: "I've never thought of writing as the mere arrangement of words on the page but the attempted embodiment of a vision; a complex of emotions; raw experience. The effort of memorable art is to evoke in the reader or spectator emotions appropriate to that effort" (35).

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1970)

Joyce Carol Oates's most frequently anthologized short story first appeared in her collection *The Wheel of Love* (1970) to great acclaim. In her book *(Woman) Writer,* Oates reflects that

> it was cast in a mode of fiction to which I am still partial . . . "realistic allegory," it might be called. It is Hawthornean, romantic, shading into parable. Like the medieval German engraving from which my title was taken, the story was minutely detailed yet clearly an allegory of the fatal attractions of death (or the devil). An innocent young girl is seduced by way of her own vanity; she mistakes death for erotic romance of a Particularly American/trashy sort. (317–318)

Like many of Oates's stories, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is based on real events—the story of a "tabloid psychopath known as 'The Pied Piper of Tucson'" whose "specialty was the seduction and occasional murder of teen-aged girls" (*[Woman] Writer* 316). What intrigued Oates was that "for some reason they kept his secret, deliberately did not inform parents or police" (316) and "that a number of teenagers—from 'good' families—aided and abetted his crimes" (317). The story suggests that the individual stands alone in the face of death (or the devil) and becomes the victim of his or her own vanity, which makes that person vulnerable to the seductive power of evil.

Connie, the central character, is a typical American adolescent girl who becomes vulnerable to the approaches of evil not only by virtue of her young age and lack of experience, but also because of her surroundings:

> Her name was Connie. She was fifteen and she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right. Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Connie about it. "Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty?" she would say. (249)

Oates skillfully draws the picture of a teenager who is left to her own resources to cope with temptations: Her mother looks upon her with jealousy, her father "was away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and he read the newspaper at supper and after supper he went to bed" (250); and her sister, who is nine years older and still lives at home, is "plain and steady" and has very little in common with her younger sibling. Consequently, as do other young female characters in Oates's work (e.g., *You Must Remember This*), Connie develops a double personality: one for home and one for going out to the mall. Even the narrator sounds distanced and detached, adopting a clearly ironic tone that emphasizes Connie's isolation. Oates herself describes her protagonist as "shallow, vain, silly, hopeful, [and] doomed" (*[Woman] Writer* 318), thus vulnerable to seduction.

In "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" the author "dramatizes . . . a fiercely Nietzschean view of human relationships as a battle ground of contending wills" (Johnson, *Joyce Carol Oates* 44), where the female is entrapped by and is faced "with rapacious male power" (44). Connie is confronted by this potentially destructive power in the form of Arnold Friend, who pays a visit at her house while her family is away at a barbecue. Now Connie is truly alone. Many critics have pointed out that Friend resembles and possesses a power similar to that of the devil of Christian mythology; as such, he gains a hypnotic power over Connie, whose feeble resistance is effortlessly cancelled out by Friend's persuasion: He "reduces Connie to a zombielike state of docile submission" (45) and eventually leads her off, possibly to rape and murder her—though the nature of her "sacrifice" (*[Woman] Writer* 318) is not revealed at the end. Oates writes that Connie "gives herself" (318) to Friend to save her family, exacerbating the sense of inevitability of her fate.

The greatest and darkest irony of the story is that it is Connie's fate to become powerless in the face of the devil:

> Arnold Friend said, in a gentle-loud voice that was like a stage voice, "The place where you came from ain't there any more, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it. You hear me?" (265)

Thus Oates skillfully creates a story that works on multiple levels, utilizing elements of the grotesque: The female falls victim to the intrinsic contradictions of her heart as she is unable to transcend the dichotomy of her own realistic and idealistic expectations. Connie longs for sexual attention and, when she is visited by a mock–gentleman caller, the puzzling forces of her own unfulfilled feelings versus the hypnotic power of the ultimate seducer enervate her sense of reality and finalize her fall.

A recurring theme in Oates's literary art, a "debased religious imagery" (Joyce Wegs, in Wagner 87), plays an important part in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Connie is fascinated by popular music, and it surrounds her—there is a song playing at the mall at all times and the radio is always on at her house, blaring shallow lyrics. It is these songs and their morals that seem to command Connie's spiritual life. In the restaurant that is shaped like a bottle (which visually recalls the shape of a church building), Connie and her friend "listened to the music that made everything so good: the music was always in the background, like music at a church service; it was something to depend upon" (251). Ironically, that is the music they should *not* depend upon.

Yet, with this story, Oates also memorializes popular culture. She maintains in her comments to the movie version that she "was intrigued by the music of Bob Dylan, particularly the hauntingly elegiac song 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue,' [and she] dedicated [it] to Bob Dylan" (*[Woman] Writer* 318). Connie has brown eyes, yet Arnold Friend's last words to her, "My sweet little blue-eyed girl," which "he said in a half-sung sigh" (266), clearly indicate the connection as well as emphasize the irony and the tragic finality of what is about to happen at the end of the story.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read closely the author's descriptions of Arnold Friend and write about the clues that indicate the character's devillike appearance and possible identity.
2. Watch the movie *Smooth Talk,* which is the screen adaptation of the story. Does the movie do justice to Oates's story? Citing examples from both text and film, discuss how a different medium, that is, the visual presentation of the movie, adds to or subtracts from the effectiveness of the written story.
3. Read Joyce Carol Oates's response to the aforementioned movie version of her story, reprinted in her book *(Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities.* Do you agree with her point that the different ending in the film is justified? Why or why not?

You Must Remember This (1987)

Oates's 18th novel, *You Must Remember This,* as she puts it, "takes place in a fictitious city, Port Oriskany, an amalgam of two cities in upstate New York—Buffalo (the first large city of my experience) and Lockport (the city of my birth, my paternal grandmother's home, suffused forever for me with the extravagant dreams of adolescence)" (*[Woman] Writer* 379). The time is that much more real: the decade spanning 1944 to 1956, which W. H. Auden called the "age of anxiety," a time of dreams and hopes suffocated by fears fueled by political propaganda. The characters' personal struggles are overshadowed and influenced by figures such as Senator McCarthy and Adlai Stevenson, as well as events like the Korean War and the execution of the Rosenbergs.

The novel chronicles the life of the Stevick family during the early 1950s. Lyle, the father, runs his own shabby used-furniture store, while Hannah is a stay-at-home mother and wife. Their oldest child and only son, Warren, is seriously wounded in the Korean War and, upon his return home, joins the early antinuclear protests, while the three girls' lives reflect three different paths for young women of the time: Geraldine marries young and is engulfed by having and raising her children, Lizzie enters show business, and Enid Maria is accepted to college.

According to Oates, the novel's

> focus [is] upon Enid Stevick and her uncle, Felix, who loses his youth in the course of the novel, as Enid loses, by degrees, in a countermovement, her attraction for death . . . Enid exorcises an instinct for suicide, by way of passion, and its somber consequences; Felix exorcises an instinct for self-destructive violence. The one suggestively "female," the other "male": poles of masochism and sadomasochism. Which is not, of course, to suggest that we are defined by such poles; only that they exert a gravitational pull, weak in some, powerful in others. (*[Woman] Writer* 380)

In the opening scene, while her family is laughing at the television downstairs, 15-year-old Enid attempts suicide by swallowing the contents of a whole bottle of aspirin. John Updike wrote, upon the novel's publication, "Her attempted suicide, insofar as it is a romantic stratagem, demonstrates to [Felix] her toughness and places them on a plane of equality as death-defiers, as familiars of violence" (121). Enid, however, not only defies death but also searches for control over her life—a daunting quest for a teenager at any given time in history but especially in the 1950s. Her daring acrobatics on the trampoline, her self-starvation, her determination to excel in her studies and later at the piano,

and, ultimately, the suicide attempt are all different stages of her search.

Yet Enid's suicide attempt is a turning point in her development: She not only signals to her seducer that she must be taken seriously, thereby taking control in their relationship, but also closes the phase of her life in which she needed a self-created alter ego—Angel Face—that represented the defiant and daring side of her character. In Enid's character—"the contours of whose soul so resemble my own" (380), Oates confesses in her book *(Woman) Writer*—she explores another doubleness: While, on the one hand, the exemplary student and dutiful child, "I was always, and continue to be, an essentially mischievous child. This is one of my best-kept secrets," she said in a 1978 interview (Phillips, in Milazzo, *Conversations* 75).

Similar to Enid's, Felix's path is determined by violence: He is a failed prizefighter, and, after Enid's abortion, his life drifts into heavy drinking, reckless driving, and fighting in bar brawls until his one-time protégé, Jo-Jo Pearl's handicapped father, cudgels him unconscious in the men's room in a bar. Felix survives the attack but disappears from Enid's life. Enid becomes her own person and finally builds on her strength—her musical talent—instead of submitting her will and person to a jealous older lover.

In her preface to the novel, Oates insists that "the Stevicks live through the era [1950s] and, to a degree, embody it; but should not be thought of as representative" (*[Woman]* 381). With their last child gone from home—Enid is accepted to college as a music education major—Lyle and Hannah embrace in the bomb shelter Lyle insisted on building in their backyard. After many years of dutiful but passionless marriage, they, too, discover how much more they can still embrace in their life.

For Discussion or Writing

1. John Updike suggests that "not only chemical smells haunt Port Oriskany but Roman Catholicism, a creed shunned by most characters" (123). Follow the path of a member of the Stevick family and trace how that character "shuns" the teachings of the Catholic Church. Discuss how such behavior may connect with or relate to that character's fate.
2. Reread the boxing scenes in the novel and explore how Oates's "comma-stingy, onrushing style" (Updike 122) of writing enhances the reader's participation in the experience.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON OATES AND HER WORK

1. The title of the novel *You Must Remember This* is taken from the theme song of the 1942 movie *Casablanca*. Watch and study the movie; then discuss how the song and the plot of the movie may bear clues to the lives of the novel's characters.
2. Oates's work has often been compared to the writings of modernist Americans such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, and John Steinbeck, among others. Do you agree that Oates's work has more in common with the works of these writers than with those of writers of her own time? Why or why not?

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Susan Nyikos

Tim O'Brien (1946–)

> It wasn't the material that Vietnam presented me with so much as it was a revolution of personality. I'd been an academic and intellectual sort of person, and Vietnam changed all that.
>
> (interview, *Artful Dodger*)

William Timothy "Tim" O'Brien is, at least as a person, one of contemporary literature's most elusive authors. His experiences as a soldier during the Vietnam War made an indelible mark on O'Brien, and the war is present in everything he writes. But O'Brien also transcends the classification as *Vietnam writer,* acknowledged as a brilliant author beyond any single topic and a valuable voice in the American conscience.

O'Brien was born in 1946 to William T. and Ava Schultz O'Brien, an insurance salesman and an elementary-school teacher. Both parents participated in World War II, his father as a soldier in the Pacific theater and his mother as a volunteer in the navy division WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service). His father wrote about his war experiences, publishing personal accounts about Iwo Jima and Okinawa in the *New York Times* (Smith 1–3). O'Brien grew up in small-town Minnesota, the first of three children. He describes his hometown by saying, "If you looked in a dictionary under the word 'boring,' you will find a little pen-and-ink drawing of Worthington" . . . and "the people of that town [who] sent me to war . . . couldn't spell the word 'Hanoi' if you spotted them three vowels" (quoted in Smith 2, brackets and ellipses in original). According to Don Lee, "As a child, O'Brien was lonely, overweight, and a professed 'dreamer'" (1). He occupied himself by perfecting magic tricks (Lee 1), a habit mirrored by the lead character of his novel *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994). An unathletic child as well, O'Brien writes, "I couldn't hit a baseball. Too small for football, but I stuck it out through junior high, hoping something could change. When nothing happened, I began to read. I read Plato and Erich Fromm, the Hardy boys and enough Aristotle to make me prefer Plato" (*If I Die* 14).

O'Brien attended college at Macalester in St. Paul, where he studied political science. The Vietnam conflict was well under way while O'Brien was a student, and he opposed the war actively, attending peace vigils and campaigning for the anti–Vietnam War presidential candidate and congressman Gene McCarthy. O'Brien's postcollege goals included working for the State Department because, he says, "I thought we needed more people who were progressive and had the patience to try diplomacy instead of dropping bombs on people" (quoted in Lee 1). O'Brien graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and president of his class. Barely a month after graduation, he was drafted. When he received his draft notice, O'Brien said, "I took it into the kitchen where my mother and father were having lunch, and I dropped it on the table. . . . They knew my feelings toward the war, how much I despised it, but they also knew I was a child of Worthington" (quoted in Smith 4).

O'Brien contemplated fleeing to Canada, but he ultimately felt too pressured by the weight of community to let his family and hometown down, a

mind-set explored in his short story "On the Rainy River" in *The Things They Carried* (1990) as well as in his memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973) and his novel *Northern Lights* (1975). But O'Brien accepted his conscription, and his unhappiness only deepened when the army made him a grunt (foot soldier) and sent him to Vietnam in 1969. O'Brien said, "I couldn't believe any of it was happening to me, someone who hated Boy Scouts and bugs and rifles" (quoted in Lee 2). Of his decision not to dodge the draft, O'Brien writes, "I was a coward. I went to Vietnam" ("The Vietnam in Me" 52).

O'Brien spent a year in Vietnam with the Americal division of the army, stationed in the Quang Ngai province. Quang Ngai includes the village cluster known as My Lai, site of the My Lai massacre. The massacre at My Lai is the Vietnam War's most infamous atrocity and the worst documented war crime in U.S. history. On May 16, 1968, Lt. William Calley, possibly under orders, led his men to slaughter 500 or more unarmed Vietnamese civilians, many of them women, children, and elderly adults. Many victims were also raped and/or tortured before being killed. By his own admission, Calley, a draftee from Columbus, Ohio, killed at least 22 people (the number he was charged with during his trial). The U.S. government initially covered up the massacre, but letters from soldiers and the work of the independent reporter Seymour Hersh brought the events to light in America. In 1971, the government indicted 30 participants in the My Lai massacre. "Calley was by no means the only one responsible for the massacre at My Lai—but he was the only man ever found guilty of any offense committed there. In 1971, he was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor. Within three days, President Nixon ordered that he should be released from jail pending appeal" (Bilton and Sim 2).

The American people's awareness of the atrocity further divided a nation unsure about its role in Vietnam.

> The second moon landing was on the front pages when the news from My Lai broke late in 1969. For a time the two stories vied side by side for news space: one story revealing the new horizons opening for mankind; the other, a ghastly slide into horror. . . . With My Lai the heart of darkness came home to America. . . . "It was this Nazi kind of thing," [Americans] were told again and again by men who were there—an observation underscored by a single unassimilable thought: How could we behave like Nazis? (Bilton and Sim 3)

The youth and normalcy of the perpetrators at My Lai only further compounded America's uncertainty—the killers had an average age of 20 and were a typical sampling of the American boys serving in Vietnam. Tim O'Brien went to Quang Ngai province at age 22, less than a year after the My Lai massacre. The hostility he faced from the locals, combined with the details of the attack, profoundly impacted O'Brien's thought and writing. While My Lai is not always literally present in O'Brien's fiction, it looms in the background, a permanent shadow over Tim O'Brien, one he will not let fade from the American consciousness of Vietnam.

Of his proximity to the My Lai massacre, O'Brien says, "When the unit I went with got [to Vietnam] in February 1969, we all wondered why the place was so hostile. We did not know there had been a massacre there a year earlier" (quoted in Smith 6, brackets in original). As a soldier, O'Brien received a shrapnel wound from an exploding grenade, for which he received a purple heart. He returned home a sergeant in 1970 and took up graduate work in political science at Harvard's Kennedy School. Rather than completing his dissertation, O'Brien began working as a national affairs reporter for the *Washington Post,* where he had been interning (Smith 6). His memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* was published in 1973. Smith says, "The memoir introduced readers to O'Brien's trademark style and draws on a long tradition of American war writers with journalist backgrounds, including Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, Normal Myler, and Philip Caputo" (6). Smith speaks later of how O'Brien and his contemporaries were also influenced by "the New Journalism, a style popularized by journalist Tom

Wolfe, who used a stream-of-consciousness narrative, creative details, and a conversational style to transform what had to that point been a traditional, objective news story into something that reflected the chaotic, surreal qualities of the subject" (12).

If I Die was written shortly after his hiring by the *Washington Post.* O'Brien stayed at the *Post* for one year before quitting to become a full-time book author. The title of *If I Die* is from a song new soldiers learn during basic training, "the violent and vulgar words ringing in their ears as their instructors turn raw recruits into more efficient soldiers—and killers" (Smith 26). The book is constrained by its memoir form, but O'Brien plays with the genre, using his strong journalistic background to record historical events in objective detail while also fictionalizing dialogue and plot points for emphasis or sustained narrative flow. Smith says, "The memoir is a precursor to his fiction, where O'Brien harnesses dichotomies—chaos breaking contemplative silence, death intruding upon the innocence of a young man's dreams—that create a jarring effect, negating the possibility of working within the comfort zone of absolutes" (27).

Northern Lights (1975) followed *If I Die.* O'Brien's first novel, it is about two brothers—one a war hero and the other a farm agent—who fight for survival during a blizzard in the Minnesota woods. The book explores Vietnam's influence on both soldiers and noncombatants, the complex relationships between human beings, and the smallness of humanity in the face of indifferent nature. *Northern Lights* received moderate critical acclaim, but O'Brien may be his own toughest critic, saying, "Overwriting is probably the chief flaw of the book. It's maybe a hundred pages too long" (quoted in Smith 46). Still, as a first attempt at fiction, *Northern Lights* is noteworthy, as it further establishes O'Brien's complex thoughts and themes surrounding the Vietnam War.

Going after Cacciato (1978), O'Brien's second novel, established him as a major voice in American literature. *Cacciato,* published three years after the United States ceased military operations in Vietnam, earned O'Brien serious critical and popular attention. The book, which received the National Book Award in 1979, focuses on the perspective of a soldier, Paul Berlin, who, while on watch one night in Vietnam, remembers events that have happened in the last six months and imagines chasing his fellow soldier, Cacciato, who has abandoned the unit and is walking to Paris. The critic Richard Freedman deems *Cacciato* a novel that transcends the genre of "Vietnam writing," saying, "To call *Going after Cacciato* a novel about war, is like calling *Moby-Dick* a novel about whales" (1).

In 1985, O'Brien published *The Nuclear Age,* "about a draft dodger turned uranium speculator who is obsessed with the threat of nuclear holocaust" (Lee 2). *The Nuclear Age* found a much cooler reception than *Going after Cacciato.* It was followed, however, by a book to rival *Cacciato* in the O'Brien canon: *The Things They Carried* (1990). The well-known *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani says of *The Things They Carried,* "Mr. O'Brien gives the reader a shockingly visceral sense of what it felt like to tramp through the booby-trapped jungle" (C21). Some argue *The Things They Carried* is a collection of short stories, others that it is a novel. Either way, each chapter stands alone, but some characters and settings are featured throughout, frequently including the narrator named "Tim O'Brien." *The Things They Carried* allowed O'Brien to play with concepts of truth and reality in a way his memoir could not and provides, both literally and figuratively, a voice for Vietnam soldiers who do not have one.

In the Lake of the Woods directly explores the My Lai massacre and its influence over the life of a soldier who was there. The book opens with John Wade and his wife, Kathy, absorbing the shock of Wade's failed senatorial campaign after the revelation he was involved in the massacre. While recuperating at a lakeside cabin, Kathy goes missing, and the book deftly plays out different scenarios about what might have happened to her. *In the Lake of the Woods* received generally favorable reviews (although not to the level of *Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*) and "places the reader in the position of a jury member asked to analyze, organize, and make sense of the known information . . . [which] leads finally to an ambiguous outcome"

(Smith 118). At the time of publication, O'Brien considered *In the Lake of the Woods* his best-written book.

With *Tomcat in Love* (1998), O'Brien departed from his previous work by writing a comedy, featuring Thomas Chippering, a very unreliable narrator who has recently lost his wife to another man. *Tomcat,* as with previous works, toys with narrative time and space while putting a pseudoscholarly tone to the whole process, enhancing the humor (as opposed to the horror, as in *In the Lake of the Woods*). And despite *Tomcat*'s comedy, the novel "only superficially conceals the serious topics that O'Brien explored in his earlier fiction" (Smith 132).

O'Brien's last novel to date, *July, July* (2002), acts as a retrospective look at the Vietnam generation. It is the eighth O'Brien book to explore Vietnam, nearly 30 years after *If I Die*. The book examines "a patchwork quilt of characters' shared experience" and met with ambivalent acclaim on par with that of *The Nuclear Age* (Smith 148). *July, July* features an impressive cast of characters getting together for their 30-year reunion, catching up and reminiscing about their lives in the 1960s and beyond. The character-driven novel contains vignettes of great beauty while occasionally suffering from larger narrative incoherence. It includes O'Brien's deliberate attempts to write strong female characters and allows him to make a broad assessment of the three decades since Vietnam as well as the war's impact on average Americans.

Despite the near-constant presence of Vietnam in his work, "war writer" is only one way to describe Tim O'Brien. Vietnam acts as just one of the themes and/or backdrops (albeit a major one) for O'Brien's literature. He displays an almost obsessive craftmanship toward writing—one anecdote has him throwing out thousands of pages just to keep nine for *The Nuclear Age*. O'Brien's perfectionist nature, combined with sheer talent, is part of what makes him a great figure in contemporary American literature. "I think in every book I've written," O'Brien says, "I've had the twins of love and evil. They intertwine and intermix. They'll separate, sometimes, yet they're hooked the way valances are hooked together. The emotions in war and in our ordinary lives are, if not identical, damn similar" (quoted in Lee 3). This love is mirrored by O'Brien's late marriage and the birth of his son. In a letter to his then-16-month old, O'Brien writes, "I had loved myself only insofar as I loved a chapter or a scene or a scrap of dialogue. . . . I doubt that at [age] twenty-eight or even thirty-eight I would have been so willing—so eager—to walk away from my work to warm your bottle" (15). O'Brien says every story he writes begins with an image, "a picture of a human being doing something" (quoted in Lee 3). And that image is profound, whether it is Cacciato walking to Paris, John and Kathy Wade sitting on their lake-view porch, or Tim O'Brien getting up from his computer to prepare a bottle for his infant son.

Going after Cacciato (1978)

Tim O'Brien had already published a memoir and a novel when *Going after Cacciato* appeared in 1978. Neither of his previous efforts met with much general acclaim and acceptance. *Cacciato,* on the other hand, won the National Book Award. Dean McWilliams called it "the most important literary consequence of the American involvement in Vietnam" (245).

Going after Cacciato, told from the perspective of Paul Berlin, contains three distinct narrative threads. The first involves Berlin's squad's chasing Private Cacciato, a soldier just shy of mental retardation who has deserted his post and is planning to hump (walk) from Vietnam to Paris. The second thread explores Berlin's memories of the past six months in Vietnam. These memories are told out of chronological order and involve several deaths in the squad. The third and last narrative thread constitutes the narrative present of the novel—that is to say, the time in which the story is literally happening—as opposed to Berlin's thoughts about the past or, as we realize over time, his imaginary chase after Cacciato. In this narrative present, Paul Ber-

lin stands watch overnight (these chapters are all named "The Observation Post"), using his imaginary adventures on the road to Paris as a distraction from both the boredom of being on watch and the horror of his Vietnam memories. As Tobey C. Herzog writes, "O'Brien faces the problem of capturing the special character of the Vietnam experience (episodic, confused, and illogical) within a fictional framework providing unity, coherence, perspective, and meaning" (95).

As a result of the imaginative quality of the Cacciato sequences, *Going after Cacciato* has often been dubbed magical realism, a literary genre that toys with the reader's concepts of reality. In O'Brien's book, Cacciato's desertion begins the story, setting up the reader to believe his subsequent chase by Berlin's squad actually occurs. However, as the squad's adventures grow more and more fantastic—falling into a tunnel and discovering a trapped Vietnamese officer, narrowly escaping from an Iranian prison with the help of Cacciato himself—the reader begins to see how this narrative functions as an escapist fantasy for Berlin. And Cacciato (whose name derives from "the hunted" in Italian) becomes a foil for Berlin's guilt, as "Berlin sees himself as an innocent caught in the Vietnamese quagmire, an individual carried along mechanistically by forces beyond his control. If, however, he retraces recent events in their proper order, he will have to face a pattern which shows, first, his failure to live up to the idealistic goals he set for himself and, second, his complicity in mutiny and murder" (McWilliams 246). Berlin's desire to view himself as good and innocent becomes complicated when viewed alongside Cacciato's actual innocence.

Berlin's memory sequences appear out of order and skirt around the squad's fragging of their former commanding officer, Lt. Sidney Martin. (*Fragging* in Vietnam meant killing one's commanding officer.) Arguably, Martin brings the murder on himself by doing everything by the book, to the detriment of the men in his squad (specifically, ordering the men to inspect tunnels for Vietnamese soldiers [VC] before blowing them up, a very dangerous task, one the men's next commanding officer, Lieutenant Corson, does not insist upon). But, as McWilliams writes:

> The deaths in the tunnels are important not only because they reveal Berlin's failure to live up to his idealism but because they created the fear that leads to the fragging of Lt. Martin. The killing of Martin is absolutely crucial, and it is the event Berlin least wants to confront. In fact, he never confronts it completely. . . . What is *not* recounted is at least as important as what is recounted in this narrative. . . . By assenting to Martin's murder, Berlin and the others take a decisive moral step. . . . Henceforth, they will participate in the war only on their own terms. (248)

Despite Berlin's continued wishy-washy attitude, he condemns himself by being the soldier sent to gain Cacciato's agreement in Martin's fragging. When Cacciato will not touch the grenade that symbolizes complicity in the plan to murder Martin, "Paul Berlin pressed it firmly into the boy's hand," while Cacciato remains oblivious (*Cacciato* 286). Cacciato's strange and beautiful innocence, the dream of a world without war and murder, lies at the root of what Paul Berlin chases by "going after Cacciato."

Another foil for Berlin is Sarkin Aung Wan, his Vietnamese girlfriend during the Cacciato chase. As such, Sarkin Aung Wan exists only in Berlin's imagination, the voice of his conscience urging him to walk away from a war of which he disapproves. The essential conflict between Sarkin and Berlin comes to a head once the squad has reached Paris. Berlin imagines a diplomatic conference between him and Sarkin with her urging him to follow his heart while he argues for duty. "My obligation is to people, not to principle or politics or justice," Berlin tells her but goes on to say, "More than any positive sense of obligation, I confess that what dominates is the dread of abandoning all that I hold dear. . . . I fear the loss of my own reputation. Reputation, as read in the eyes of my father and mother, the people in my hometown, my friends" (377). O'Brien reflects on the cold honesty of this way of thinking in other works, including *The Things They Carried* and *If I Die*.

The complicated and confusing narrative structure in *Going after Cacciato* "mirrors the American soldier's problem of handling his Vietnam experiences by establishing meaning, order, and control in his life. . . . [The book] also involves readers in the pursuit of control as they struggle to master the disordered events in the book, find the center, and separate fact from fantasy" (Herzog 88). Paul Berlin becomes a symbol for the average soldier in Vietnam, as well as the average American citizen, going along to get along, "always marching at the rear of Third Squad, . . . helplessly dragged along by the day-to-day events" (Herzog 90). In contrast, there is Cacciato, the unachievable dream of innocence during war, making his impossible trek to Paris.

For Discussion or Writing

1. *Going after Cacciato* has been called a novel of magical realism. Read some works in this genre by famous authors such as Gabriel García Márquez. Then compare and contrast these works' use of magical realism with O'Brien's, noting particularly the techniques related to time.
2. Much of *Going after Cacciato* has a "filmic" quality—especially the sequences involving the chase to Paris. Vietnam stands as the first war in America where television, film, and other media had an overpowering presence, and in some ways the films dealing with Vietnam are as famous as any book on Vietnam. Watch some of the most famous of these films: *Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter, Full Metal Jacket, Born on the Fourth of July.* Discuss the ways these films compare with *Cacciato* in their depictions of violence, women, ambiguity, morality/ethics, the country of Vietnam, the war, and America's involvement.

The Things They Carried (1990)

The Things They Carried may be Tim O'Brien's masterwork, a selection of linked chapters overseen by the presence of the narrator "Tim O'Brien"—"a 43-year-old writer who discusses his need for storytelling and guides the reader through the text, serving as a bridge from story to story and from reader to experience" (Smith 98). Despite the use of his name, O'Brien clearly fictionalizes details about his narrator, making a distinction between "Tim O'Brien," the author of a novel, and "Tim O'Brien," the created character of that novel. As he writes in the chapter "How to Tell a True War Story":

> In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. . . . And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (71)

Thus, Tim O'Brien takes on a task even more complex than that in *Going after Cacciato*—the exploration of truth in fiction, untruth in fact, and the inevitable complicating of the difference between soldiers and the people who stayed at home. In the end, O'Brien questions the people on both sides who insist on knowing what is what, because ultimately "What happened?" does not matter if the story is *true.*

In the initial chapter, "The Things They Carried," O'Brien details the physical, emotional, and psychological baggage carried by the men of Alpha Company. Through his description, the reader gains a sense of who these men are—Jimmy Cross, Norman Bowker, Rat Kiley, Mitchell Sanders, Henry Dobbins, Kiowa, and others—fictional (?) characters to whom the book is dedicated. "The things they carried were largely determined by necessity," O'Brien writes, and "For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity," and, finally, "They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight" (2, 19, 21). Through the fol-

lowing lists, and the story of Ted Lavendar's death, O'Brien creates a crash course in life as a grunt in Vietnam—not for the soldiers who were there and already know, but for every person who wished those soldiers well and stayed home. At the same time, O'Brien establishes himself as the storyteller, the voice, for every Vietnam vet unable to tell his own tale.

O'Brien continues his job as instructor in "How to Tell a True War Story," juxtaposing advice on how to tell or identify a "true" war story with details about Vietnam, most especially the death of Curt Lemon and its effect on Lemon's best friend, Rat Kiley (not to mention the narrator himself). The story begins with Rat's writing a letter to Lemon's sister after Lemon has been killed: "It's a terrific letter, very personal and touching. Rat almost bawls writing it," O'Brien says, and then, "What happens? Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back" (67, 68). In this way, "the dumb cooze" becomes a stand-in for every person back home, female or otherwise, who does not have the heart or stomach to listen to a vet's story. "Nobody listens," Mitchell Sanders whispers later on. "Nobody hears nothin'. Like the fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody's sweet little virgin girlfriend" (76).

Scattered throughout the "story" portion of "How to Tell a True War Story" are instructions for how to read or hear one. These instructions are probably not for the soldier telling the tale. "A true war story is never moral," O'Brien tells his readers. "It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue. . . . If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie" (68–69). Other points include the inherent obscenity in war ("Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty" [69]) and the way a true war story never seems to end: "It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (78). O'Brien adds another nonlistener into his narrative, another "dumb cooze," an older woman, "of kindly temperment and humane politics" who does not realize that "it *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story" (84, 85). And O'Brien, continuing his play with truth, will tell such a person that none of the story was real—Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley and the baby water buffalo Rat kills in his grief—"none of it happened" (85), because for people who don't get it, who cannot truly *hear,* none of it did.

"The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong" extends this interplay between the soldier in Vietnam and the person back home when Rat Kiley tells the story of a former squad mate who shipped his girlfriend to Vietnam. Rat insists the story is true: "This cute blonde . . . just barely out of high school . . . I swear to God, man," Rat says, "she's got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater" (90). Sweet Mary Anne starts out as you might expect—cuddling with her boyfriend and playing sister/sex object to the other men stationed in the medical unit. But then she begins to help with emergencies and learns how to fire a weapon. The relationship between Mary Anne and her boyfriend begins to break down; she then disappears into the Green Beret compound at the edge of the camp, "goes native," as it were. Rat needs to explicate at this point: "She was a girl, that's all," he says. "I mean, if it was a guy, everybody'd say, Hey, no big deal, he got up in the Nam . . . got seduced by the Greenies. . . . You got these blinder's on about women. How gentle and peaceful they are. . . . Pure garbage. You got to get rid of that sexist attitude" (107).

The last time Rat sees Mary Anne, she is in the Green Berets' barracks, wearing her normal clothes and a necklace of human tongues. She says, "Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country. . . . When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body . . . I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else" (111). The last Rat hears of her, she has disappeared into the jungle. With "The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong," O'Brien offsets the indifferent "readers" of the previous stories (mostly women) with a young girl who, upon going to war, becomes just as involved as any man, if not more. In the words of Pamela Smiley, "Women who never go to

war are not innocent so much as they are ignorant of their own capacity for violence" (604).

In *The Things They Carried*'s concluding chapter, "The Lives of the Dead," O'Brien tries to merge the adult Tim O'Brien damaged by war (formerly the child "Timmy") with his childhood sweetheart, Linda, who died of cancer while they were children. This creates an androgynous union between the "women" who stay home and the "men" who go to war, a linking of life and death, fiction and fact, that completes the trend he began with stories like "The Things They Carried" and "How to Tell a True War Story" and deepened with ones like "The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong." When it comes to Linda, O'Brien "keep[s] dreaming [her] . . . alive. And Ted Lavendar, too, and Kiowa, and Curt Lemon, and a slim young man I killed" (225). Being dead, Linda tells him, is "like being inside a book that nobody's reading. . . . An old one. It's up on a library shelf, so you're safe and everything, but the book hasn't been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading" (245). O'Brien reconciles the dead with the living—the veteran with the noncombatant—by telling the true story of the Vietnam War. "But this too is true: stories can save us," O'Brien says, and then, "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head" (225, 230).

O'Brien stands as a Vietnam veteran turned storyteller, vying to end misunderstanding between people while not denying the horrors of Vietnam (the inclusion of the My Lai massacre). He says in his essay "The Vietnam in Me," "Evil has no place, it seems, in our national mythology. We erase it. We use ellipses. We salute ourselves and take pride in America the White Knight, America the Lone Ranger" (52). By complicating people, veterans and noncombatants both, by portraying characters who are both good and evil, O'Brien puts the lie to "black-and-white" worldviews. He also creates a bridge between those who went and those who did not. There are, certainly, other aspects of *The Things They Carried* that can be looked at, other ideas to read into it, but no discussion of the book as a whole would be complete without exploring O'Brien's desire for connection between average American readers and the boys they sent to Vietnam.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Kurt Vonnegut's war novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* bears several similarities to *The Things They Carried,* such as an emphasis on the youth of soldiers, fiction versus fact, and a highly self-aware, pseudobiographical narrator. Discuss similarities and differences between the two books' portrayals of two different wars—World War II and and the Vietnam War. What changed in the American historical consciousness between those two times, and since? What purpose do the playful aspects of the narrations serve?
2. *The Things They Carried* features several female characters, many of them out of step with typical portrayals of women/girls in war literature and films. Discuss some of the ways O'Brien casts women in traditional or nontraditional roles. How about men? Why might O'Brien have included so many females in this book?
3. Do further research into the My Lai massacre (such as by reading *Four Hours in My Lai,* by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, or *My Lai: A Brief History in Documents,* by James S. Olson and Randy Roberts). What incidents, or potential incidents of excessive violence or degradation committed by American soldiers on Vietnamese in *The Things They Carried* do you see? Do you think O'Brien's choice to write about such incidents is related to My Lai in any way? As you read these episodes, do you feel sympathy for the Vietnamese, the American soldiers, or both? Why?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON O'BRIEN AND HIS WORK

1. O'Brien's work often deals with the meaning of courage. Discuss the ways O'Brien's definition of courage in his fiction is similar to or different

from that of other famous American examinations of warfare, such as Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Discuss what *courage* might mean to Americans in particular.

2. The Vietnam War is a central feature in much of O'Brien's work, but not always as a setting. How does the war figure in works with post–Vietnam War settings, such as *July, July*? How do characters' attitudes toward the war change as they examine it in retrospect?

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Sarah Stoeckl

Mary Oliver (1935–)

Imagination is better than a sharp instrument. To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.

("Yes! No!" *White Pine,* 8)

In her 1995 essay collection *Blue Pastures,* Mary Oliver writes that the most important and exciting experience to affect her growth as a poet occurred in 1953, when she left Ohio the morning after her high school graduation to visit the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay's home, Steepletop, in Austerlitz, New York. Oliver had been exchanging letters with Millay's sister, Norma Millay Ellis, since she was 15 years old. By 1953, Norma and her husband had moved into the Millay estate. Oliver had written to request permission to visit Millay's home, and Norma had granted it. It took her two days to drive from Ohio to Steepletop, and she stayed for three. She visited again and again, and eventually, Oliver moved in and served as a companion, secretary, and writer's assistant to the family. Norma's eccentricities and the stories about Edna St. Vincent Millay and her circle of friends, particularly from her Greenwich Village years of the early 1910s and 1920s, would have a lasting impact on Oliver, both personally and poetically.

In "Steepletop," another essay from *Blue Pastures,* Oliver remarks that she "would not be a biographer for all the tea in China" (74). Prompted by the "secrets" that Norma Millay Ellis shared with her about her sister's surreptitious love affairs and "weaknesses of various kinds," Oliver explores the biographer's responsibility as she wonders about the motivation behind telling such secrets and concludes that they were shared from "the uncomfortable position of being unable to select, from all that was not written down, what was important from what was not important—or, more severely, what was proper biographical material from what was not" (78). Oliver wonders how it might be possible for a biographer to "know when enough is known, and known with sufficient certainty," and in the same essay from *Blue Pastures,* she asks the reader directly to consider the following questions:

> What about secrets, what about errors, what about the small black holes where there is nothing at all? What about the wranglings among minor characters, the withholding of facts for thoughtful and not-so-thoughtful reasons—or their mishandling—and this not even in the present but in the past, hidden in letters, in remembered conversations, in reams of papers? And what about the waywardness of life itself—the proclivity toward randomness—the sudden meaningless uplift of wind that tosses out one sheet of paper and keeps another? What about the moment that speaks worlds, as the saying goes, but in the middle of the night, and into deaf ears, and so is never heard, or heard of? (73–74)

It is no wonder that Mary Oliver was considering the value of privacy as she listened to the secrets, errors, and misinterpreted black holes of Millay's private life.

The next important moment in Oliver's poetic development was the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies,* in 1959. Lowell's break with traditional forms and subject matter helped spark a revolution in American poetry. W. D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman all began writing openly about material that had not been previously discussed in the public arena. Private experiences with death, abortion, divorce, relationships, and depression, and the subsequent psychological responses to such traumatic events, were addressed, often autobiographically, in what the critic M. L. Rosenthal called "confessional" poetry. By the time Mary Oliver's first book, *No Voyage, and Other Poems,* was published in the United States in 1965, after previously appearing in England in 1963, it was clear that her poetry would be quite different from the soul-baring laments of her contemporaries. While many of the poems address her poetic influences, people she knew, and even events from her life, they are not revelations of her inner emotional struggles.

Both the confessional writing style of the period and her intimate exposure to Edna St. Vincent Millay's private life would inform Oliver's writing style as well as her treatment of her own public persona. As if pushing against confessional poetry, often defined as the poetry of the personal, Oliver describes her approach to poetry as a literary disappearing act. In part, this explains her tendency toward keeping her personal life private, because, as she explains in an interview in the *Bloomsbury Review,* "if I've done my work well, I vanish completely from the scene. . . . I am trying in my poems to vanish and have the reader be the experiencer. I do not want to be there." However, much as a biographer may want to imply that Oliver's poetry pushes up against a confessional writing style, her poems are at once deeply personal and yet also intensely private.

Mary Oliver was born on September 10, 1935, in Maple Heights, Ohio, to Edward William Oliver and Helen M. Vlasak. Her mother's family had emigrated from Bohemia to farm in Ohio, and her father was a teacher in Cleveland. Mary Oliver spent her childhood and adolescence growing up in Ohio. After her stay at Steepletop with the Millay Ellis family, Oliver briefly attended both Ohio State University and Vassar College, which many critics have said marked Oliver's journey in the footsteps of Edna St. Vincent Millay, one of her major literary influences. After leaving Vassar, Oliver moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and settled into the artistic community that had also embraced Millay.

In the late 1950s, another significant moment occurred for Mary Oliver: She met someone and fell in love. Since that time, Oliver has dedicated almost every book to this same woman, whom she did not openly acknowledge as her partner and life companion until 1992, when she received the National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems.* Perhaps prompted by the "out and proud" winner Paul Monette (nonfiction, *Borrowed Time*) and the nominee Dorothy Allison (fiction, *Bastard Out of Carolina*), Sue Russell, a poet and writer, reported in the *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review,* "Oliver took the stage at the award ceremony and thanked both the Democrats and 'the light of my life, Molly Malone Cook'" (Russell). True to her inclination to keep her personal life separate from her public persona, Oliver did not again mention the relationship, which would ultimately last nearly 50 years, until 1999 in *Winter Hours,* where she wrote simply: "M. and I met in the late fifties. For myself it was all adolescence again—shivers and whistles. Certainty. We have lived together for more than thirty years, so far. I would not tell much about it. Privacy, no longer cherished in the world, is all the same still a natural and sensible attribute of paradise. We are happy, and we are lucky." As if in answer to queries from the gay and lesbian community about her hesitation to share this relationship with the

world, Oliver continues: "We are neither political nor inclined to like company. Repeat: we are happy, and we are lucky" (100).

Mary Oliver's first book of poetry, *No Voyage, and Other Poems,* received an unusual amount of attention when it appeared in the United States in 1965, two years after its debut in London. It was widely reviewed in intellectual publications such as the *New York Times Book Review,* the *Christian Science Monitor, New Statesman,* and *Commonweal,* often by such prominent poets as Philip Booth and James Dickey. Some of the reviews, however, were stinging in their criticism. *No Voyage, and Other Poems* was a volume dedicated to what would become Oliver's lifelong theme, an exploration of the relationship between the human and natural worlds, and some critics found Oliver's book to be "too feminine." Oliver had not relied on free verse and the allusive language of her confessional peers but had utilized fixed patterns of meter and rhyme and preferred the plain, accessible language of another major literary influence, Robert Frost. As does Frost, Oliver turns again and again in this volume to nature, which she treats directly and in unsentimental fashion. Many of the reviews also noted the connection between Oliver's poetry and that of Edna St. Vincent Millay, a connection that was not seen as a compliment. In the *Christian Science Monitor,* Booth wrote that Oliver's "inclination toward what's 'poetic' becomes openly embarrassing," while in the *New York Times Book Review,* Dickey added "conventional and ordinary" to describe the volume. His main complaint was that "Miss Oliver . . . is good, but predictably good; . . . She never seems quite to be in her poems, as adroit as some of them are, but is always outside of them, putting them together from the available literary elements." One wonders whether Oliver's first book of poems would have been better received if she had been more willing to bare her soul.

The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems appeared in 1972, seven years after Oliver's first publication. Although this volume maintains her interest in traditional poetic forms, unlike her first book it turns more often to human, familial, and social relationships for solace than to the natural world. While the confessional style of the late 1950s and early 1960s and the unfavorable response to *No Voyage* may have prompted this more personal and social subject matter, this preference may just as easily have been the influence of Robert Bly and James Wright, who had attempted a new method of joining nature and the human world through poetry using the "deep image." In the end, though, *The River Styx* is more of a local fact than a mythic image and yet more alienating and isolating than even *No Voyage* had been for Oliver. In short, both the natural and human worlds had failed to offer her any comfort. While magical places like Walden and the River Styx, Ohio, seem appealing in their mythology, Oliver realizes that the most difficult voyages are still intensely personal and introspective.

Oliver's subsequent publications, beginning with two chapbooks published by small Ohio presses, along with *Twelve Moons,* her third book, which was published in 1978, focus more intently on the natural world and move farther away from human subjects, although she is even bolder in her exploration of myths and symbols than in *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems.* In *The Night Traveler,* a chapbook published in 1978 by Bits Press in Cleveland, Oliver continues to utilize the "deep image" in order to describe, explore, and convey what Walt Whitman called "the merge." Through the surreal imagery of this mythic dimension, Oliver sees her character "the Night Traveler," who is made of "bits of wilderness. . . . Twigs, loam and leaves," as a guide meant to intercede for the poet (or anyone) attempting to merge the natural and the human realms. The award-winning author and literary critic Joyce Carol Oates calls these poems "carefully, beautifully, constructed around an image out of nature, or out of the poet's family life," which illuminate the tension between "two worlds, that of the personal and familial, and that of the impersonal and inhuman." As had her transcendentalist and romantic predecessors, Oliver wants desperately

to reconcile these two worlds by exploring their interconnectedness and their overlap by returning again and again to the places where they meet. *Twelve Moons* also explores natural processes and cycles and focuses specifically on particular items in nature, as in "Stone Poem"; identifiable plants like "Aunt Leaf," "The Black Walnut Tree," and "Looking for Mushrooms"; and animals such as "Turtles," "Bats," "Sharks," and even "Snakes in Winter." The volume is arranged around 12 moon poems, which refer specifically to phases of human experience and summon recollections of a time when lunar cycles were said to shape human behavior.

Oliver's next book, *American Primitive* (1983), won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for poetry and was praised for its portrayal of familiar, natural objects and places in fresh and precise ways. Again concerning herself with "the merge" between humans and nature, Oliver utilizes "recurring images of ingestion" through the volume, according to Bruce Bennett's review in the *New York Times Book Review*. Bennett continues, commending Oliver's "distinctive voice and vision" as he describes the thoughtful journey that readers of *American Primitive* must take: "As we joyfully devour luscious objects and substances . . . we are continually reminded of our involvement in a process in which what consumes will be consumed."

Throughout her career, Oliver seems to alternate the focus of her books back and forth between nature-based and human-based themes as she struggles to connect and reconcile the two worlds. While *American Primitive* focused on the natural world, *Dream Work* (1986) shifts again to human nature and history, including a poem that frankly and starkly addresses the Holocaust. *Dream Work* was praised for its lyrical mastery and was, for the poet-critic Alicia Ostriker, a move "from the natural world and its desires, the 'heaven of appetite' . . . into the world of historical and personal suffering." Ostriker further asserts that Oliver steadily confronts "what she cannot change." In fact, Colin Lowndes of the *Toronto Globe & Mail* called Oliver "a poet of worked-for reconciliations."

Oliver's dedicated effort to reconcile, present, explore, and reconnect nature with humanity and spirituality is apparent in all of her subsequent work, including *House of Light* (1990), *New and Selected Poems* (1992), *White Pine* (1994), and *West Wind* (1997). She said herself, in an interview with Eleanor Swanson featured in the *Bloomsbury Review,* that nearly all of her poems "employ the natural world in an emblematic way, and yet, they are all—so was my intent!—about the human condition." Even Oliver's essays, prose poems, and handbooks further her work with humans and nature by examining words, language, and lyric, metered poetry as the mechanisms she uses to achieve that reconciliation.

Called "Blake-eyed" and "as visionary as Emerson," and compared to Keats for her "controlled, lyrical flights," Mary Oliver finds herself in excellent poetic company. Although she values Millay's and Frost's commitment to metered, fixed-form poetry, she has also been dubbed "the best living practitioner of the free verse line." While many critics have cited Oliver's poetry as a continuation of the work of Marianne Moore, D. H. Lawrence, and Elizabeth Bishop, her poetry, prose, and essay style is all her own. Indeed, Mary Oliver's clarity, her freshness of perception, her directness, and her commitment to accessible vernacular language are joyful and, ultimately, deeply moving.

"The Black Snake" (1978)

Originally collected in Oliver's third major work of poetry, *Twelve Moons* (1978), "The Black Snake" is an excellent representative example of the types of poems that appeared in that collection. From *Twelve Moons*'s first poem, "Sleeping in the Forest," Oliver guides her readers toward the unifying theme of the book by beginning with the lines "By morning / I had vanished at least a dozen times / into something better." As

she dreams over and over again that she is actually becoming a physical part of the forest, Oliver sets the stage for her readers, prompting them to imagine that they are engaging and reconnecting with the natural world and natural processes.

The structure of *Twelve Moons* also lends itself to this interpretation of reconnection; the book begins in April's springtime, which is representative of new birth, and continues on through the seasons of nature's cyclical calendar, ending in March on the cusp, again, of spring. The collection of 51 poems travels the course of a year and is divided by 12 moon poems that represent each month. This lunar structure, along with the title of the collection, is suggestive of a time when human affairs were thought to be influenced by the moon, immediately hinting at the value of reconsidering a human connection to nature.

As do the 12 moon poems also found in this collection, "The Black Snake" presents a moment of connection between the poet and nature through the precise description of highly focused observation and imagination. This poem focuses specifically on one moment after a literal collision between nature and the human world. The speaker begins as if she is retelling a poignant story: "When the black snake / flashed onto the morning road, / and the truck could not swerve— / *death,* that is how it happens." In these first four lines, readers might be startled by the quick movement of the snake as they recall the surprises and near-misses they may have had in their own automobiles. We understand those unavoidable and accidental moments and dread the end of the line, which tells us "the truck could not swerve." When we encounter the em-dash at the end of that line, our eyes slide like the truck into the inevitable thud of the italicized word *death* at the beginning of the next line. The narrative tale and the rhythm of the poem are interrupted both by the em-dash and the word *death* itself, as the speaker abruptly makes the grammatical choice to exchange "the black snake" for *"death"* as the subject of the sentence. The black snake's death is immediate, unexpected, and regrettable.

The speaker stops the car and notices that the snake is now lying as "looped and useless / as an old bicycle tire." As she carries him into the bushes on the side of the road, she notices that "He is as cool and gleaming / as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet / as a dead brother." Oliver's choice here first to compare the snake to a whip and then to examine the beauty of his quiet body as if it were our own dead brother's is an obvious appeal to our emotions. We realize that we are expected, as readers, to feel the loss of this snake as poignantly as if he were a close relative. However, Oliver does not simply romanticize the snake's death; she also acknowledges the potential danger inherent in nature by comparing the snake to a gleaming, braided whip. With each simile, Oliver highlights her desire to reconnect with the natural world. At first the speaker is alienated, disconnected from the natural world. She sees the dead snake as garbage, a "thing" to be disposed of. Then, she acknowledges the fear and danger that exist in the real natural world, and, finally, she accepts the snake as part of her own family.

The speaker drives on, thinking about "*death*: its suddenness, / its terrible weight, / its certain coming," and we feel her fear. The repetition of the word *its* in each of these three lines trudges heavily onward and inevitably toward the end punctuation that occurs in the middle of the line. But the line that begins with "its certain coming." ends with a hopeful "Yet." The poem continues by asserting that "a brighter fire," in each of us, devoid of reason, insists that we will not die. Oliver calls it "the story of endless good fortune" that "says to oblivion: not me!" She is certain that "It is the light at the center of every cell," and that "It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward / happily all spring through the green leaves before / he came to the road." Oliver's asserting that each of us, including the black snake, has "a brighter fire," and repeating two precisely declarative statements (*It is, It is*), tell readers of this poem that not only does Mary Oliver believe everything has the "brighter fire" of a soul, she knows it for a fact.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Mary Oliver places her poem "The Black Snake" near the beginning of her book *Twelve Moons,* just after the first moon poem, "Pink Moon—The Pond," and just before the poem called "Spring." Discuss why or why not this placement is appropriate for a poem about death.
2. Compare Oliver's poem "Snakes in Winter" to "The Black Snake." Instead of using the traditional spiritual/religious imagery of a snake that embodies evil, Mary Oliver depicts snakes that seem more benevolent, with forked tongues as "sensitive as an angel's ear." Their bodies flash like whips, and yet they are either sluggish or dead in these two poems. Discuss the implications of these apparent contradictions.

"In Blackwater Woods" (1983)

In *Winter Hours: Prose, Prose Poems, and Poems* (1999), Mary Oliver writes that "for many years, in a place I called Blackwater Woods, I wrote while I walked. That motion, hardly more that a dreamy sauntering, worked for me; it kept my body happy while I scribbled" (5). Over the course of her career, Oliver wrote often about this place, in poems called "At Blackwater Pond," "White Heron Rises over Blackwater," and two significantly different poems with the same title: "In Blackwater Woods." This entry will examine the poem that was originally collected in *American Primitive* (1983). The longer poem with the same title can be found in Oliver's collection *White Pine: Poems and Prose Poems* (1994).

"In Blackwater Woods" begins with the command "Look," immediately signifying to the reader that action is necessary and urgent. As we might expect from Oliver, the verb *to look* could simply be a suggestion to pay attention to the natural world. As the first stanza progresses, however, we understand the intensity of the command more fully, for we see that the speaker is actually describing a forest fire:

> Look, the trees
> are turning
> their own bodies
> into pillars
>
> of light,
> are giving off the rich
> fragrance of cinnamon
> and fulfillment,

Oliver's use of the active voice is startling here, for readers are accustomed to thinking of trees as the passive objects of a consuming and destructive forest fire. In the news media, forest fires are never described in this way. Trees do not turn "their own bodies / into pillars / of light"; they are the victims, acted upon and annihilated by fire. But here, "In Blackwater Woods," if we read these lines carefully, noting the alliteration of *t* and *f* sounds, we see that the emphasis is on "trees" and "turning," as well as the "fragrance" of "fulfillment." It seems almost sacrilegious for a dedicated lover of nature like Oliver to be enjoying the smell of a burning forest as though it were incense or potpourri.

In the third stanza, Oliver employs the burning metaphor of a candle to describe "the long tapers / of cattails" as they burst into flames and float "away over / the blue shoulders / of the ponds." The structural syntax in the fourth stanza highlights the destructive power of the fire as Oliver repeats *ponds* and *pond* at the end of the first two lines, creating a lovely rhythm that is carried through the third and fourth lines of stanza 4 and into the first line of stanza 5; "and every pond / no matter what its / name is, is / nameless now." The emphasis is placed on the words *no, name, nameless,* and *now* through the repetition of *name* and through the alliteration of the *n* consonant sound.

As Oliver often does after a presentation of nature via clear imagery, she then turns inward, looking for answers. In this poem, she finds that "everything" she has "ever learned" in her "lifetime / leads back to this: the fires / and the black

river of loss." But more than just a lament, "In Blackwater Woods" is hopeful. Oliver gives her readers a glimpse at the salvation of life in this world, but she insists that we "must be able / to do three things":

> to love what is mortal;
> to hold it
>
> against your bones knowing
> your own life depends on it;
> and, when the time comes to let it go,
> to let it go.

In the final two stanzas, Oliver's melodic lines suggest that we must be able to love, to hold, and to let go if we want to be as fulfilled as the trees and as bursting and joyful as the cattails.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The tendencies toward romanticism in Mary Oliver's "In Blackwater Woods" are especially significant. Discuss whether or not Oliver is participating in a rationalization of nature as she attempts to connect the human experience of loss to the natural occurrence of a forest fire.
2. Read Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art" and compare it to Oliver's "In Blackwater Woods." Both works deal with loss in distinctly different ways. Discuss the differences that you perceive in the two poems; then generate two lists that identify appropriate audiences for each. As you compose your lists, remember that dealing with loss is often a difficult task, and be prepared to defend your choices with evidence from the poems.

"Wild Geese" (1986)

Oliver published her fifth major collection of poetry, *Dream Work,* in 1986, while she was the poet in residence at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. In *Dream Work,* where "Wild Geese" appeared originally, Oliver continues to explore the connection between humanity and the natural world, alternating between the potential joy that such a connection could generate and the doubt that such a connection is attainable.

"Wild Geese" begins by addressing the reader directly, repetitively, with the second-person pronoun *you*. The opening lines are meant to be comforting and reassuring as they address the despair and alienation that are sometimes part of the human condition:

> You do not have to be good.
> You do not have to walk on your knees
> for a hundred miles through the desert,
> repenting.
> You only have to let the soft animal of your
> body
> love what it loves.

As readers are soothed by the repetition and lyrical construction of these lines, we understand that the poet has chosen the second-person pronoun *you* as a plural, and not singular, referent. The poet invites us, all of us, to tell her "about despair, yours," and she promises, "I will tell you mine."

As the poem progresses, Oliver repeats the word *meanwhile* three times to indicate that even while despair and alienation may be consuming us, "the world goes on." By utilizing the metaphor of "the soft animal of your body," she encourages us to reestablish our connection with nature, so that we can be like the wild geese "high in the clean blue air" who are "heading home again."

The final lines return briefly to the despair of alienation but then suggest an alternative. "Whoever you are, no matter how lonely," Oliver insists, "the world offers itself to your imagination." The poet echoes the opening lines by reiterating what we already know about the human condition: that finding our place in the world may not be an easy task. However, she promises that the world

will call to us "like the wild geese," and it will be "harsh and exciting." Ultimately, at least in this poem, Oliver is convinced that we will all be able to find our solace in nature, because the world itself, over and over, will announce our place "in the family of things."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read William Carlos Williams's poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" and compare it to Oliver's "Wild Geese." Analyze the significance of wings and nature in both poems, and consider the themes of alienation and success. Discuss the messages that each poem conveys to the reader.
2. Compare Robert Frost's poem "Birches" to Oliver's "Wild Geese." Both poets often explore the connections between nature and humanity. Discuss each work thematically but look also at the differences in style, tone, and imagery. Consider especially the "use" of nature in each poem.

"Landscape" (1986)

Also published in *Dream Work,* "Landscape" resumes Oliver's work to reconnect humanity with the natural world in a decidedly spiritual way. In this poem, Oliver plays the role of what she has called "the imaginer." Through a self-conscious use of what John Ruskin, a 19th-century writer, called the pathetic fallacy, which attributes human emotion and characteristics to plants, animals, and other elements of nature, Oliver recognizes our inability to reunite with or understand fully a nonhuman world. In the role of "the imaginer," Oliver utilizes personification to employ the pathetic fallacy because, as she explains in *Rules for the Dance,* personification can create "a sense of intimacy" between the poet and any element of the natural world. For Oliver, creating "a sense, however impossible logically, of an operating will" assists both poet and reader in their attempts to understand and relate to nature. She is often careful, however, about assuming that she can speak for the plants and animals because she understands the danger in doing so.

There are three examples of this cautious personification in "Landscape." In the opening lines, Oliver asks, "Isn't it plain the sheets of moss, except that / they have no tongues, could lecture / all day if they wanted about / / spiritual patience?" Oliver admits that she is appropriating nature for her own purposes in her personification of the moss with the two enjambed lines "except that / they have no tongues." The next example immediately follows the first with Oliver's second rhetorical question: "Isn't it clear / the black oaks along the path are standing / as though they were the most fragile of flowers?" In this example, the poet imagines that the trees also have an imagination and are choosing to imitate "the most fragile of flowers."

The third example occurs in the last two stanzas of "Landscape." This time, the poet actually watches "the crows break off from the rest of the darkness / and burst up into the sky—as though / / all night they had thought of what they would like / their lives to be, and imagined / their strong, thick wings." In the final example, Oliver is forthright about the crows' imagination, but she softens the personification with the phrase "as though." This phrase appears twice in the poem, along with the similar *except* signaling the poet's ethical tendency to allow the moss, the trees, and the crows to have their own identity. With this cautiousness, Oliver admits that she might be getting it wrong.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the poem "Landscape," the poet believes that "if the doors of my heart / ever close, I am as good as dead." Discuss this line in relationship to the rest of the poem, considering the personification of nature and Oliver's role as "the imaginer."
2. Oliver's personifications in "Landscape" seem to give "spiritual patience" to the moss and an imagination to the oaks and crows. Approaching

the landscape she depicts from a different perspective, what other attributes could be associated with these elements in nature?

"Goldenrod" (1991)

"Goldenrod," circa 1991, appears under the heading "New Poems" in volume 1 of Oliver's *New and Selected Poems,* which appeared in 1992. Arranged in reverse chronological order, *New and Selected Poems* emphasizes Oliver's more recent poems, commanding her reader's attention before we reread any of our old favorites.

"Goldenrod" begins with four stanzas that move the reader through "fall fields" of goldenrod "in rumpy bunches." As readers we are entranced by these "sneeze-bringers and seed-bearers / full of bees and yellow beads and perfect flowerlets," and we might be surprised to learn that goldenrod is, in fact, a weed. After such frolicking description, Oliver's apparent dismissal of the plant seems unfair when she remarks, "I don't suppose / much notice comes of it," and "I don't suppose anything loves it." Readers realize that Oliver is downplaying the plants when she makes two exceptions: "except for honey, / and how it heartens the heart with its / / blank blaze" and "except, perhaps, / the rocky voids / filled by its dumb dazzle." Oliver's use of alliteration in these lines signals a sense of playfulness that belies any real dismissal of the natural world.

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, Oliver remarks that she "was just passing by, when the wind flared / and the blossoms rustled, / and the glittering pandemonium / / leaned on me." As a human, intent on being in and a part of the natural world, not surprisingly, Oliver, out "minding my own business," is delighted to find herself "on their straw hillsides, / citron and butter-colored." In the seventh stanza, the poet asks her readers directly—"and why not?"—whether there any reasons why she should not be happy in the goldenrod. At this moment of questioning, the poem shifts from the playful alliteration of the consonant *h* used to describe how the goldenrod "heartens the heart" and turns to the more serious combination of the consonant sounds *d* and *l* that ask us to consider deeper implications: "Are not the difficult labors of our lives / full of dark hours?" What could be better than tossing in the wind on "airy backbones"?

Oliver imagines that the goldenrod must have a better life, and there is a hint of jealousy in her descriptions: "They bend as though it was natural and godly to bend, / they rise in a stiff sweetness, / in the pure peace of giving / one's gold away." As the poem concludes, the gentle repetition of the word *bend* and the alliterations of *stiff sweetness* and *pure peace* begin to feel controlled and comforting. In "Goldenrod," the poet and the reader alike are able to find solace in the selfless process of pollination.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry influenced Mary Oliver tremendously. In conjunction with "Goldenrod," read Millay's poem "Weeds" and discuss the similarities or differences in style and theme.
2. Mary Oliver has been compared to William Wordsworth by critics who see them both as romantic nature poets. Compare "Goldenrod" to Wordsworth's "To a Skylark." After researching the characteristics of romantic poetry, discuss the elements of the romantic tradition that you uncover in each of the poems.

"Why I Wake Early" (2004)

"Why I Wake Early," the title poem of Mary Oliver's 2004 collection of poetry, utilizes anaphora, or the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of several successive lines, for emphasis. Traditional romantic poets were masters of this poetic technique, which serves to create a parallelism of language that resembles the litany of religious devotion. Readers will note that "Why I Wake Early" is, in fact, a prayer: of

praise and thanks to the sun. The first stanza begins with two lines that greet and honor the sun in the poet's face. "Hello, sun," the prayer begins; "Hello, you who make the morning / and spread it over the fields / and into the faces of the tulips." In the first four lines, the sun is thanked for the blessing of the morning and a simile is suggested between "the faces of the tulips" and "my face." The *my* in the first line of the poem could refer to the poet or speaker of the poem but is vague enough to invite the reader to insert herself or himself into this prayer of worship. Both flower and poet/reader greet and are warmed by the same sun, a comparison indicative of Oliver's grand theme: the reconnection of the human and natural worlds.

Lines 3 through 7 of "Why I Wake Early" are also anaphoric, repeating the word *and* at the beginning of each line. The emphasis on this first word in each line amplifies the pace and pitch of the poem, repeating again and again the virtues of an early morning. As the poem progresses, the pitch continues to rise toward a rapturous climax but pauses, levels, and regroups in the eighth and final line of the first stanza, where the sun spreads the morning "into the windows of, even, the / miserable and the crotchety—." As the eighth line breaks into the second stanza, a technique called enjambment, Oliver asserts that the sun is the "best preacher that ever was," reaffirming the interpretation of this poem as a prayer of religious devotion.

In the second stanza, the first two lines are followed by four anaphoric lines, beginning with "to be where you are in the universe," a line reminding the reader that the Sun is literally the center of the universe. In a poem that so closely resembles a prayer, the reader begins to appreciate the imagery and themes that a little wordplay suggests. Both the "sun" and the "Son" are heavenly bodies that "keep us from ever-darkness," that "ease us with warm touching" and "hold us in the great hands of light—."

The final line in the second stanza can be interpreted in at least two ways: The speaker/reader of the poem acknowledges the beauty of the morning by calling it "good" or greets the sun politely and with thanks by saying "good morning, good morning, good morning." The fact that this devotional is repeated three times is significant. The number 3 has spiritual significance in many faith traditions. In Christianity alone, the number 3 is evocative of the Holy Trinity, resurrection (Christ rose from the dead on the third day), and completeness. In Judaism, the human condition has three major components: man's relationship to himself and the world of his mind, man's relationship to others in the "real world," and man's relationship with God. The reader/speaker of the poem can conclude that this final repetition signifies the end of the devotional prayer, because after the opening sentence, "Hello, sun in my face," it is the first end-stopped line in the poem. The final couplet in "Why I Wake Early" utilizes internal rhyme to suggest the importance of centering our devotion in a prayerful connection with nature. The poem closes with a peaceful observation: "Watch, now, how I start the day / in happiness, in kindness."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Oliver's poems "Why I Wake Early," "The Sun," and "Mindful." Consider the three poems as themes on spirituality. Discuss your interpretations of Oliver's poetic philosophy.
2. Compare "Why I Wake Early" to the lyrics of the Christian hymn "Morning Has Broken" made famous by the singer Cat Stevens, who brought it to popular attention. Discuss the lyrical quality of both texts.

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON OLIVER AND HER WORK

1. Mary Oliver is often compared to Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Read the first chapter of Emerson's essay *Nature* and compare or contrast each poet's philosophy of nature. Discuss whether or not they appear to

be similar, citing specific examples from each poet's work as evidence.

2. As were Emerson and Thoreau before her, Oliver has been called a transcendentalist poet. After selecting poems by all three authors, discuss the transcendentalist themes and style in each. In a well-developed essay, discuss whether or not you would call Oliver a transcendentalist.
3. Read William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" and compare his poem to Mary Oliver's work. Discuss the differences and similarities in the two poets' writing styles, themes, and tone. Consider the fact that Mary Oliver is a 21st-century American poet and William Blake is an 18th-century English poet, and explore ways in which their historical and geographical differences may have influenced them as writers.

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Maure Smith

Simon J. Ortiz (1941–)

The words are the vision by which we see out and in and around.

(*A Good Journey*)

Simon J. Ortiz has been referred to as the grandfather of Native American literature. His name is often invoked among greats such as Sherman Alexie, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Joy Harjo (his former wife) and writers such as Paula Gunn Allen cite Ortiz as one of their most important influences. Unlike such Native American writers as James Welch, Gerald Vizenor, and Louise Erdrich, Ortiz has the distinction of growing up in a traditional Native American home where his family spoke their native Acoma language, Keresan; although his parents understood English and spoke it well, Ortiz learned English as a second language. Born to Joe Ortiz, a stonemason, and Mamie Torimio Oritz, a potter, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on May 27, 1941, Ortiz grew up in an Acoma village in McCartys (Deetseyamah). His father was an Acoma elder with the responsibility of maintaining Acoma traditions, and his grandfather was a spiritual leader in the village. Ortiz inherited both their leadership qualities and their desire to support their cultural heritage.

The values he learned at home are perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in an anecdote Ortiz tells about his childhood reluctance to speak. In "Always the Stories," Ortiz relays a story told by his family that he "did not speak until [he] was almost four years old" ("Stories" 58). When the matter was called to his grandfather's attention, Ortiz's grandfather retrieved a key from his pocket, saying:

> Nana, you will grow to have a good and useful life. You will learn many things and help teach many things. There is a whole world around us in which we all live. Speech is an important part of knowing that world. You have a tongue and a mouth with which to speak. It is up to you to use them for the benefit of yourself and all things. You will be healthy in your growing, and you will now speak in order to fulfill yourself. You will speak. ("Stories" 58)

Upon saying this, Ortiz's grandfather "turned the key, unlocking language," and Ortiz reports that "sometime later [he] began to speak" ("Stories" 58). The anecdote is representative of Ortiz's preoccupation with language and the lasting and definitive impression it made on his consciousness. Raised in an environment that valued the oral tradition of storytelling, Ortiz viewed stories as an opportunity for bonding with his family, his people, and his heritage and valued them for their ability to provide continuity between the past and the present.

Given the weight Ortiz attributes to language and narration, the striking absence of Native Americans in the stories he read as a child could not be merely incidental in Ortiz's development

as a writer and poet. As Ortiz remarks, "I learned there were no Indians; they were visages of the historical past who rode painted ponies and attacked wagon trains . . . we were expected to identify with white American images of Dick and Jane and Spot and Puff and homes with white picket fences" ("Stories" 64). Feeling alienated by absence of America's Indians from the dominant cultural construct, Ortiz "turned to language": "the stories that always were; they were basic; they were knowledge which would help me . . . I regarded stories as a way I could deal with the world" ("Stories" 64). By telling the stories of American Indians in a language he was coercively made to privilege above his native language, Ortiz effectively uses the language of the colonizer to challenge U.S. cultural imperialism, environmental destruction, and economic injustice.

Ortiz's interest in the politics of language was deeply personal from the beginning since, as a child, he was prohibited from speaking his native language at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school in an era when the U.S. government took an assimilationist approach to schooling Native Americans. Reproached for speaking their native languages, the children were scolded and sometimes smacked with a ruler for greeting others in their native language or for failing to use only English at school. The experience goes a long way toward explaining why Ortiz later felt relief when, in college, he began to write about American Indian culture: "It was a revolutionary thought, at least to me, to write about my culture, history, and heritage, especially since there was nothing, not even a tiny bit of it, from a Native American perspective in previous works of literature" ("Stories" 65). Yet Ortiz helped to change all of that.

Ortiz attended the Bureau of Indian Affairs school until sixth grade, when he enrolled in St. Catherine's Indian School in Sante Fe. A promising student, Ortiz demonstrated glimmers of a future as a writer throughout his school years. By age 11, Ortiz had published his first work, a Mother's Day poem, in the school newspaper. Keeping journals and reading voraciously in high school, Ortiz continued to develop the seeds of a writer's mind. Upon graduating, Ortiz took a job in the uranium mines in 1960. Troubled by the working conditions there, Ortiz would later base a book on his experience with the mining industry. Between 1961 and 1962, Ortiz attended Fort Lewis College. From 1962 to 1965, Ortiz served in the U.S. Army, where he experienced overt racism and was made to utilize the "Colored Only" drinking fountains and restrooms. After these experiences, Ortiz once again sought higher learning at the University of New Mexico, from 1966 to 1968. In 1968 and 1969, Ortiz attended the University of Iowa, where he was a Fellow in the International Writing Program. By this time, Ortiz was becoming recognized as a writer. In 1969, he won the prestigious Discovery Award from the National Endowment for the Arts (which also awarded him a fellowship in 1981), and, in 1971, he published his first work, *Naked in the Wind*.

Emerging during the 1960s and 1970s when the Civil Rights movement was a dominant part of the American political consciousness, Ortiz offered a productive contribution to the themes resonant with the era of social and environmental justice. By the 1980s and 1990s, Ortiz had proved to be a prolific writer. While best known for his poetry, he has also written nonfiction essays, short stories, and songs. As a young student in Skull Valley, in fact, Ortiz wrote poetry and song lyrics influenced by the country-western singers Jimmy Rodgers and Hank Williams. His interest in songs would continue throughout his career. Indeed, as Ortiz explains in the essay "Song/Poetry and Language—Expression and Perception," "There is also something in a song that is actually substantial" (239). More than mere words, songs become tangible when people realize the significance of what something means to them. For Ortiz, "The substance is emotional, but beyond that, spiritual, and it's real and you are present in and part of it. The act of the song which you are experiencing is real, and the reality is its substance" (239–240). In keeping with an

interest in the aspect of the performance of songs and with his aim to continue the oral tradition so integral to Native American culture, much of Ortiz's work is available as video and audio recordings of poetry readings.

Addressing subject matter that ranges from human to environmental exploitation, Ortiz's work often examines themes of alienation, displacement, loss, and journeying. Indeed, throughout Ortiz's wider oeuvre, he is concerned with harmony among culturally diverse societies within biodiverse settings. The strength of Ortiz's contributions stem from his intense focus on the social and political injustices of the 20th-century United States and his ability to write about subjects that speak to all Americans, even as his work is profoundly personal at the same time. Given his concern with ecological well-being, in fact, perhaps now, more than ever, Ortiz's work will be of special interest to those who are concerned with the state of our environmental health.

In addition to his long career as a writer and poet, Ortiz has served a range of communities through his forays into the military, public relations, American Indian government, teaching, speaking, and performing. The recipient of awards such as Honored Poet of the White House Salute to Poetry (1981) and a Humanitarian Award from the New Mexico Humanities Council (1989), Ortiz may be considered a human and civil rights activist as much as an accomplished writer. By 1993, for example, Ortiz had already been honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award for literature at the Returning the Gift Festival of Native American Writers and Storytellers. He has a varied and impressive teaching history, with stints at schools such as San Diego State University; the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona; the College of Marin in Kentfield, California; the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque; Sinte Gleska College in Rosebud, South Dakota; and Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon; he is currently an instructor at the University of Toronto in Canada. He has also been a tribal interpreter and lieutenant governor of the Acoma Pueblo and a consulting editor for Acoma Pueblo Press. In addition to his work as a writer, teacher, activist, humanitarian, and cultural critic, Ortiz is a father of three—Raho Nez, Rainy Dawn, and Sara Marie.

Influenced by the folksy beat of the American musician and poet Bob Dylan, the singer-songwriter Hank Williams, and the American poet Carl Sandburg, Ortiz's work is rooted, in part, in the rootless traveler, and he shares with some of his literary forebears (Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, and Malcolm Lowry) the influence of alcoholism. In *Woven Stone,* in fact, Ortiz explains how alcoholism had always been a part of his life: "As a child I was traumatically afraid of the behavior of my father and others under the influence of alcohol." Ortiz was raised on works by the aforementioned authors as well as writers such as William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; these influences constitute just one dimension of the background informing Ortiz's work. To be sure, the most important influence in Ortiz's long career as a writer has been his heritage as a Native American from the Acoma people. Although Ortiz would later say becoming a writer was not something he had planned from the start, he was increasingly compelled to represent his own experiences and that of the wider community with which he identified. As Ortiz explains, "Personally, I don't know if I ever 'decided' to be a writer and poet, but I know I have felt it was important to participate in the act of helping to carry on the expression of a way of life that I believed in" (Anderson 42).

For Ortiz this way of life was, in many ways, antithetical to the way of living within the U.S. mainstream. In the preface to *From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which Is Our America,* Ortiz introduces the work as "an analysis of myself as an American, which is hemispheric, a U.S. citizen, which is national, and as an Indian, which is spiritual and human" (*From Sand Creek* 7). While he recognizes that none of these boundaries is

"strictly defined and not at all limiting," Ortiz nevertheless is clear about his aims in this collection: "For Indian people, I would like *From Sand Creek* to be a study of that process which they have experienced as victim, subject and expendable resource. For people of European heritage, I want it to be a study, too, but one which looks at motive and mission and their own victimization" (*From Sand Creek* 7). Set in the Veterans Administration Hospital in Fort Lyons, Colorado, *From Sand Creek,* for instance, returns to the site where Ortiz underwent treatment for alcoholism between 1974 and 1975. Named after the geographical location of an 1864 massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho people, *From Sand Creek* is also a return to one of the most historically notorious examples of Native American struggles with the violence of the white colonizer. Winner of the 1981 Pushcart Prize, *From Sand Creek,* as is true of Ortiz's work generally, achieves a rare tenderness. Unapologetic about his fierce criticisms of 20th-century U.S. tendencies toward cultural imperialism, Ortiz manages to offer hope rather than a purely cynical perspective on the often sinister realities his work confronts. The first poem of the collection *From Sand Creek,* for example, orients readers to the wisdom of a poet intent on serving the good news along with the bad: "This America / has been a burden / of steel and mad / death, / but, look now, there are flowers / and new grass / and a spring wind / rising / from Sand Creek" (*From Sand Creek* 9).

Tenacious in its criticism of the colonial and neocolonial efforts to displace Native Americans, Ortiz's poetry is nonetheless as gentle as it is strong. *A Good Journey,* for example, is dedicated to his children, who make appearances throughout the collection. For Ortiz, in fact, "The only way to continue is to tell a story and there is no other way," since "Your children will not survive unless you tell something about them—how they were born, how they came to this certain place, how they continued." In the preface to *A Good Journey,* from which the poems that follow are taken, Ortiz responds to the question "Who do you write for besides yourself?" with the answer "For my children, for my wife, for my mother and my father and my grandparents and then reverse order that way so that I may have a good journey on my way back home." Primarily autobiographical, narrative, and imagistic, the poems explore Ortiz's experiences during the late 1960s and 1970s; as Ortiz describes them in *Woven Stone,* they are based on "the oral voice of stories, song, history, and contemporary experience."

"Speaking" (1977)

"Speaking" exemplifies Ortiz's poetic contributions to the study of language as world building. Appearing in the collection of poems *A Good Journey,* "Speaking" is organized under the section "Notes for My Child," which follows the section "Telling." In the poem, a parent with a child is outside, introducing a newborn to the world around them and the language of "million years old sound." They "listen to the crickets" as ants go by them, and the narrator tells them, "'This is he, my son. / This boy is looking at you. / I am speaking for him.'" As crickets, cicadas, and ants look on, the narrator's son "murmurs infant words, / speaking, small laughter/bubbles from him." While in the first stanza, the narrator says, "I am speaking for him," by the second stanza, he acknowledges that the creatures hear "this boy speaking for me."

As with Ortiz himself, the speaker in "Speaking" must tell a story. In doing so, he discovers that the newborn speaks as well. As the father introduces his son to the natural world, father, son, crickets, and ants join, in one poem, as beings with their own speech and their own story. While the language of each is unique, the stories are accessible to those willing to hear.

"Speaking" represents a moment in the journey to be connected with the world. Resonant with Ortiz's desire to demonstrate the importance of all forms of language, "Speaking" reflects Ortiz's belief that language is not just a human act, but

a "spiritual force" propelled through human reliance on speech and storytelling. Just as there is no division between expression and perception, there is "no division between that within you and that without you" (*A Good Journey* 242). Since for Ortiz, language is the "discovery of one's capabilities and creative thought," when speakers or poets tell stories, those stories are expressions of their perceived experience in and among the world ("Stories" 58). Further, language is "magic in its purest essence" since it can "create, change, rebuild" ("Stories" 58). Insofar as language has the capacity to create, "stories [are] actually the world in a way" ("Stories" 57). For Ortiz, this means that "the child is truly a creator of his world since it is his preoccupations that construct and inhabit his vision, and his vision is his knowledge" ("Stories" 57).

Because language is world building, according to Ortiz's conception of it, in their use of language, all speakers affect others. Indeed, the danger of not speaking is evident in Ortiz's poem "What I Mean" when the speaker recalls, "We didn't talk much." Refuting the idea that "Indians are just like that," the speaker explains that often "we were just plain scared / and we kept our mouths shut." Lamenting that "all that area used to be Indian land—Acoma land," the speaker recalls how the government stole it, saying, "and there was plenty to say / but we didn't say it."

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do father and son affect the world around them through speech? What type of world do they build?
2. Consider the speaker's statement about his son that "I am speaking for him." What does "speaking for" mean in this instance? Does the speaker in "Speaking" suggest that he speaks because of his son or on behalf of his son? How does the ambiguity of "speaking for" inform a fuller interpretation of the poem? What is the significance of the son "speaking for me"?

"Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun" (1977)

Appearing in the collection *A Good Journey*, the poem "Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun" is also organized under the section titled "Notes for My Child." The narrator begins by recounting a day when "near San Ysidro, / on the way to Colorado, / I stopped and looked" (6). Hearing "the sound of a meadowlark / through smell of fresh cut alfalfa," Raho would say, "Look, Dad" (60). Marveling at a hawk "sweeping / its wings / clear through / the blue / of whole and pure / the wind / the sky," father and son listen to "The Bringer. / The Thunderer" as they bask in the sun that falls to earth, "a green plant" (60). It is the day "the Katzina come. / The dancing prayers" (61). Telling his son, "it will not end, / this love," the father enjoins his son to hold his mother's hand and celebrate the "great joy" of this coming. Hand in hand, mother, father, and child listen to "the plants with bells. / The stones with voices," for the earth, rain, plants, and sun are alive and have their own stories.

As in "Speaking," the poem's narrator is overcome with the language of the natural physical world around him. In "Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun," however, the son is now old enough to talk. Read together with "Speaking," then, the poem is a kind of return. Joyfully anticipating the coming of the dancing prayers, the family represents human harmony with the natural world around them. As they await the Katzina, the family's sociability, this custom of dancing prayers, is at one with the world that they, with the plants and sun, inhabit.

Although both father and son appear in the poem to *look* at the world around them, it is clear that looking also involves hearing the story of the hawk, the wind, the sun, and earth all at once. Dennis R. Hoilman has noted that, for Ortiz, "words are the eyes through which people see and know themselves—as well as the world outside and around them" (Hoilman 245). In using sight as a metaphor for the speech act, which

entails both speaking and hearing, "Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun" subverts a dominant pattern in industrialized nations to prioritize the eyes over other modes of perception. Throwing a wrench in the logic that "seeing is believing," Ortiz explodes another dominant belief system by investing the "stones with voices" and personifying the earth and its elements. In doing so, Ortiz suggests that certain belief systems must be upset in order to achieve a more balanced relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Recall Ortiz's statement that writing is a journey. Determine what the phases both "Speaking" and "Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun" seem to represent. Offering a close reading of each poem, outline Ortiz's vision of a "good journey."
2. How does Ortiz complicate traditional thinking concerning binary divisions between humans and animals? Between the living and nonliving? Connect Ortiz's expanded understanding of the "living" with his understanding of language. How integral are his impressions of life and language to his sense of the "good journey"?
3. The father-son trope appears in both "Speaking" and "Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun." Examine representations of family in both. How does Ortiz imagine the son's relationship to his parents? How does he describe the family's relationship to the living and nonliving worlds?

"Vision Shadows" (1977)

Organized under the section "Will Come Forth in Tongues and Fury," Ortiz's poem "Vision Shadows" is more ominous than "Speaking" or "Earth and Rain, the Plants and Sun." Beginning with the line "Wind visions are honest," the narrator immediately invokes the threat of less honest visions. As the eagle soars "into the craggy peaks / of the mind" and "loops into the wind power," allowing him to see "a million miles and more because of it," something is nevertheless amiss. *"But what has happened,"* the narrator asks, interrupting himself midthought to consider the "strange news" of "thallium sulphate" and "ranchers bearing arms in helicopters" before finishing the question *to these visions?* Hearing the "scabs of strange deaths," the narrator records the effects of the bad tidings on the snake, who "hurries through the grass"; the coyote, "befuddled by his own tricks"; and the Bear, who "whimpers pain into the wind" (122). While "poisonous fumes cross our sacred path," Sky, Mountain, and Spirit suffer. Eagles are losing their battle as they "tumble dumbly into shadows / that swallow them with dull thuds," and the sage and jackrabbit cannot breathe for it. Indeed, as the narrator concludes, "It is painful, aiiee, without visions / to soothe dry whimpers / or repair the flight of eagle, our own brother" (122).

Distraught by the destruction to the land and sky, the narrator of "Vision Shadows" is, like the wind, himself a visionary, who, with foreboding, reports on the pillaging path of a human force with the superhuman power to destroy the natural world. Instigating the death of its own kin, this force implicated by the narrator of "Vision Shadows" is never named, but it is clear that by invoking "poisonous fumes," a people who bear "arms in helicopters," and "thallium sulphate" that the narrator has in mind both industrial pollution and police actions taken by a distinctly U.S. force.

In asserting the eagle is "our own brother," Ortiz reimagines the boundaries between humans and nonhumans and offers a revisionist understanding of humanity's family tree, as it were. At the same time, the eagle can be read as a still more figurative symbol, for Ortiz's family belong to the Dyaamih hanoh, or, literally, "Eagle people." In this sense, the poem might be read as a remembrance of Ortiz's own people's loss in their encounters with white colonizers and in the persistence of neoimperial practices such as

those Ortiz encountered in schools whose aims were to assimilate Native Americans into a predominantly white mainstream culture. From this perspective, the speaker's sense that the eagle is "our own brother" may be read as an unwavering criticism of the destructive force preying upon it. Yet the speaker's assertion that the eagle is "our brother" simultaneously suggests that he identifies with that force, even as he identifies with the eagle's struggle against it.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Vision Shadows" tells the story of the far-reaching effects of environmental destruction. How does Ortiz relate the violence done to a people and the violence done to the earth and animals? What, according to Ortiz, are the social implications of human-induced ecological ruin?
2. Outline as thoroughly as possible the definition Ortiz invokes of the environment. How does Ortiz seem to define the environment? How is Ortiz's conception of the environment different from the destructive culture he represents in "Vision Shadows"? What ideals are reflected in a culture's attitudes toward the environment? Acting as the visionary of your own era and culture, elaborate on the forms of environmental injustice evident in your area and within the wider landscape as well.

"Poems from the Veterans Hospital" (1977)

"Poems from the Veterans Hospital" is a series of 10 vignettes, from the section in *A Good Journey* entitled "I Tell You Now." Providing a glimpse into the hospital that "contains men broken / from three American wars," the poems portray men in the aftermath of war, trying to recover from their psychological and physical wounds. These poems hear the stories that remain untold, even as the narrators speak. Overwhelmingly, they are stories of loss. In "Cherry Pie," for example, the dialogue of men rises as they eat a meal of "barbecue beef on buns, / coleslaw with crushed pineapple, / coffee and cherry pie" (154). As the men express their appreciation for different flavors of pie, the narrator notices that "Deanda hasn't been yelling lately. They've been feeding him more. / and better mind silencers lately" (155). When one man's pie falls off his plate onto the floor, "he stands there and everything is gone / from his face except sorrow and loss / and it's hard to lose those" (155). For both Deanda and the man who loses his pie, silence is an indication of still greater suffering. In "Teeth," for example, a man recounts losing his teeth, replacing them, and losing them again when he lends his jacket to a man who volunteered to make an alcohol run but who "sonofagun . . . is still on that run" (156).

In their intense focus on loss, these poems articulate the psychological and social implications of displacement. In "Superchief," for instance, the narrator mourns not having the chance to say good-bye to Superchief, who "left on Friday." Recalling a time when he saw Superchief sitting on a curb and eating oranges out of a sack, the narrator remembers how "His head was wobbling / from side to side" and the way "a white woman watched him" with "contempt and disgust" (157). Wanting to recall the man's Acoma name, the narrator feels "useless" as it occurs to him that he even wished his feelings were "as convenient as that woman's" (157). In "Along the Arkansas River," the narrator walks to the river, where ducks swim away as he approaches. Feeling lonely, the narrator wonders "where Coyote is," deciding that he is "probably in Tulsa by the bridge, sitting on the grassy bank near the University, hoping / she's gonna come along / after her three o'clock class / like she said she would" (158–159). Then, as "a freight train was heading south," the narrator, "lonesome again," realizes "that's probably where Coyote is" (159). Suggesting Coyote is on

a freight train heading south, the narrator simultaneously implies that Coyote is either wherever the narrator is and feels lonesome or wherever there is desire.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Ortiz wrote the series "Poems from the Veterans Hospital" while he was being treated for alcoholism. While alcoholism in the United States is usually treated as a problem with the individual who has experienced trauma at home, consider alcoholism as a form of resistance—albeit ineffectual—to the same social and cultural forces underlying the colonialism and neoimperialism that Ortiz critiques.
2. In "Poems from the Veterans Hospital" Ortiz develops the theme of loss, even as he recovers the stories of men who, living at the margins of society, have been forgotten. Examine Ortiz's concern here with men in particular and with the stories that each of the men he encounters has to tell of loss. What histories are lost to a society that marginalizes broken men? Consider the hospitals in your own town. What stories might there be in the patients who are there?

"Travelling" (1977)

Whereas most of the 10 poems in the series "Poems from the Veterans Hospital" treat displacement as loss, "Travelling" offers a different view of the connection Ortiz weaves between displacement and loss. In "Travelling," in fact, a certain rootlessness is embraced as the poem opens with the image of a man who "has been in the VAH Library all day long" among "maps, the atlas, and the globe," as he finds places—Acapulco, the Bay of Bengal, Antarctica, Madagascar, Rome, Luxembourg—and writes their names on a pad. As the man "hurries" to find a source, is "hurt" when he cannot locate it, and "rushes" back to the globe, "a faraway glee" surfaces "on his face, in his eyes" as he studies Cape Cod; "He is Gaughin, he is Coyote, he is who he is, / travelling, the known and unknown places, / travelling, travelling" (156). Although the poem is suggestive of the type of explorer to whom Native American peoples lost their land, and who remains revered in American mythologies of the frontier, conflicting interpretation is possible as well based on the symbolism of Coyote in Native American literature.

For, as a literary trope in Native American literature and in Ortiz's work in particular, Coyote is a symbol of some ambiguity. Layered with different connotations, Coyote's significance is complexly nuanced. Hoilman points out that often "Ortiz identifies himself with Coyote," who is at once "the trickster, the troublemaker, the constant victim of his own pranks" and a figure who is "ancient, present at the creation of the world" and, still more confounding, "a source of disorder and sorrow" who simultaneously "brings good things to the people" (Hoilman 245). In Patricia Clark Smith's analysis of Ortiz's use of the symbol in "Coyote Ortiz: *Canis iatrans iatrans* in the Poetry of Simon Ortiz," she agrees that "the Ortiz Coyote is no one-dimensional comic," for "in his myriad-mindedness, his actions silly and shrewd, Coyote establishes the range of human possibility" (Smith 194). For Smith, in fact, "he is what we are and what we could be" (Smith 194). More specifically, according to her interpretation, "throughout the body of Ortiz' work, even more so than in the traditional oral tales, the emphasis is unremittingly on Coyote's survival"; as Smith interprets it, "Coyote always gets up and brushes himself off and trots away *within* the narrative itself, perhaps not quite as good as new, but alive, in motion, surviving" (Smith 195). From this perspective, the man in "Travelling" who "is who he is" and who "is Coyote" might be read as a figure whose survival depends upon reclaiming the land after displacement or homelessness in order to accept uprootedness for the potential it offers of the good journey, rather than succumbing to

the threat of being lost, forgotten, or destroyed by it.

For Discussion or Writing

One of the most dominant themes in Ortiz's work is that of the journey. What connotation does *traveling* invoke in light of Ortiz's impression of life as a journey? Discuss the ambiguities and ambivalences apparent in the tensions between journey and traveling given the history of Native Americans displaced after the "discovery" of America by Spanish travelers.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON ORTIZ AND HIS WORK

1. How does Ortiz expand upon traditional definitions of language? Which of his works in particular seems to stretch the boundaries?
2. "Coyote" is a recurring figure in the work of Ortiz as well as other Native American writers and nonnative writers such as Gary Snyder. Yet it is not always clear how Ortiz wants readers to understand Coyote's significance. Trace the symbol in different contexts within Ortiz's writing in order to develop a sense of the complexity with which Coyote is treated. How might the ambivalence with which Coyote is associated indicate Ortiz's ambivalences?

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Kathryn Stevenson

Robert Pinsky (1940–)

> So one great task we have to answer for is the keeping of an art that we did not invent, but were given, so that others who come after us can have it if they want it, as free to choose it and change it as we have been. . . . We must answer for what we see.
>
> ("Responsibilities of the Poet")

The poet Robert Neal Pinsky strives to link his work to the past and the future. As an educator, former poet laureate, and public figure, he advocates for the role of poetry in contemporary society. In his poetry, Pinsky frequently uses verse forms to deal with day-to-day objects, people, experiences, and events. His work is challenging and approachable, interested in exploring real human experience in a unique way. His prose, as well (much of it academic), speaks refreshingly to the reader as a comrade rather than a peon. In his impressive career, Pinsky has thus far published eight books of poetry, five books of criticism, three anthologies, two translations, a biography, and one computerized novel.

Pinsky was born on October 20, 1940, to Simon and Sylvia Pinsky in Long Branch, New Jersey. He says of his childhood, "I couldn't be an absurdist, I was raised that way" (French). Long Branch was a resort community of which he writes, "When I was a child, the town had fallen from both its 19th-century glory and the prosperity of the 1920s, in the '50s still clinging to a fading boardwalk of clambars, kiddy-rides, wheels of fortune, pinball parlors, and taffy stands. Summer resorts are elegiac most of the year, and a resort with its best days behind it is doubly elegiac" ("A Provincial Sense of Time"). His father was an optometrist and an amateur local historian, while his grandfather owned a bar in which Pinsky spent much time and enhanced his early interest in music (French). Much of Pinsky's material is related to his childhood, his parents, and his growing-up years in a "working-class, racially mixed kind of a neighborhood"; he has said that he "doesn't want to be limited to a pose or mode as either a pure street kid or a pure professor. . . . As an ideal, I would like to have it all together" (Thomas 37). As a child, Pinsky played saxophone and dreamed of becoming a jazz musician. A music career did not materialize, but he transformed that love of sound, rhythm, and rhyme into a passion for poetry. Pinsky's attraction to music, especially jazz, is apparent in much of his work.

Pinsky attended Rutgers University, where he wrote his senior thesis on the poet T. S. Eliot. After graduating in 1962, he entered the doctoral program at Stanford University, where he held the Wallace Stegner Fellowship in creative writing. In graduate school, he studied with the poet and critic Yvor Winters and wrote his dissertation on the poetry of Walter Savage Landor. After receiving his Ph.D., Pinsky taught at several academic institutions, including the University of Chicago, the University of California at Berkeley, and Wellesley College. Currently, he is a professor of English at Boston University, where he teaches in the graduate writing program (Thomas 12). Along with his teaching appointments, Pinsky also served as the poetry editor for the *New Republic* and now works as the poetry editor of the online publication *Slate*.

He lives in Massachusetts with his wife, the psychologist Dr. Ellen Pinsky.

Pinsky has been publishing award-wining poetry, essays, and novels since 1968. His first book of poetry, *Sadness and Happiness,* appeared in 1975, followed by *An Explanation of America* (1979); *History of My Heart* (1984); *The Want Bone* (1990); *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966–1996* (1996); *Jersey Rain* (2000); *First Things to Hand* (2006); and *Gulf Music* (2007). *The Figured Wheel* won the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize in 1997 and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize as well. Louise Gluck praises Pinsky's differences from his contemporaries by noting his thoughtful yet passionate verses, saying the contemporary "preference for the heart-on-the-sleeve heart of lyric and rhapsodic poetry mistakes the performative nature of all art, mistakes performance for essence" (Gluck). But she claims that in Pinsky's work, which is personal *and* detached, "for [his] poems to be understood at all they must be apprehended entire, as shapes." In Gluck's estimation, Pinsky focuses more on ideas, moments, objects, and circumstances than on the confessional and concerns himself with the weight of history and the poet's responsibility to future generations, a trait that makes him, in his own estimation, "conservative" ("Responsibilities" 424). As Gluck says, he is "less a synthesizer of data than a student of the great mysteries," marking him as a unique American voice in the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century.

Pinsky does not limit himself to the poetry genre alone. His books of criticism include *Landor's Poetry* (1968); *The Situation of Poetry: Contemporary Poetry and Its Traditions* (1976); *Poetry and the World* (1988); and *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In *The Sounds of Poetry,* he writes an approachable, reader-friendly guide to basic poetic understanding, describing poetry as among the most human things we can do. "Poetry is a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art," he states, claiming that in human speech, "it is almost as if we sing to one another all day" (8, 3).

Alongside his critical works, Pinsky has completed two translations. The first, a book of works by the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, *The Separate Notebooks: Poems by Czeslaw Milosz* (1984), he worked on with Renata Gorczynski, Robert Hass, and Milosz. The second was *The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation* (1994), which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award and the Harold Morton Landon Translation Award. Pinsky said, "I think sometimes that a translation enters so much into the spirit of the new language that by a kind of luck it forms a new aesthetic whole" (Thomas 18). He has also written one novel, *Mindwheel* (1984), a computerized work that Judy Malloy refers to as a "narrative game" (77). In 2005, he published *The Life of David,* a biography of the biblical king. *Publishers Weekly* says he "dispels the conventional image of David as a simple shepherd who slew Goliath and became Israel's greatest king, depicting him realistically with all his failings as an adulterer, assassin and predator. Pinsky also portrays David's stellar achievements, presenting him as a complex character who deserves to be seen in shades of gray" (85).

In 1997, Pinsky became the 39th United States Poet Laureate, a role he took on with such enthusiasm and vigor he was awarded an unprecedented third term, serving until 2000. During his tenure, he founded the Favorite Poem Project, "dedicated to celebrating, documenting, and promoting poetry's role in Americans' lives" (favoritepoem.org/project.html). The project hoped to collect favorite poems from average Americans and record them reading their poems, but Pinsky had no idea how popular it would be. In the first year alone, the project received over 18,000 nominations for favorite poems. As Pinsky said, "To see many Americans of various ages, accents, and professions each saying a poem aloud clarifies the power of poetry and enhances a communal spirit. . . . To some degree, it helps remind us of who we are" (French). Much information on the project, including video of people reading their chosen poems, can be found on the project's Web site, www.favoritepoem.org. The project has also spawned four publications that Pinsky has had a hand in, including three anthologies—*Americans'*

Favorite Poems (1999), *Poems to Read* (2002), and *An Invitation to Poetry* (2004)—as well as a book based on Pinsky's Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, *Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry* (2002). This last work "demonstrates the significance of poetry to contemporary Americans, implicitly questioning some received ideas and stereotypes" (poetry.org/project.html).

Alongside these impressive publications, Pinsky has had poems and prose appear in, among others, the *New Yorker, Modern Philology, Critical Inquiry, Representation,* the *Paris Review, The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry, The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry,* and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* His numerous awards and honors include the National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship (1974), Guggenheim Fellowship (1980), William Carlos Williams Award (1984), American Academy of Arts and Sciences Fellowship (1993), Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America (1996), Harold Washington Literary Award (1999), American Academy of Arts and Sciences Award (1999), Phi Beta Kappa Award (2003), Manhae Foundation Prize (2006), and the National Foundation for Jewish Culture's Jewish Cultural Achievement Award (2006).

With his pop-culture sensibilities and unpretentious attitude, Pinsky challenges previous notions of poets as aloof figures in bifocals and tweeds—not only with the Favorite Poem Project's accessible Web site, but also with appearances as himself on the animated television sitcom *The Simpsons* (2002) and as host of a "Meta-Free-Phor-All" between the comedian Stephen Colbert and the actor Sean Penn on *The Colbert Report* (April 2007). His sense of humor and comfort with technology have set Pinsky apart from many of his peers—in both the academic and the literary worlds.

To say Pinsky is approachable is not to say he is not challenging. Pinsky's subject matter mirrors his genuine character, as he will often pick a seemingly innocuous topic (as seen in the poems "At Pleasure Bay" and "Shirt") and then complicate it beyond expectations. His poems require the reader to be engaged and active in the process of interpreting poetry and, therefore, in the creation of poetry. James McCorkle notes that in Pinsky's estimation, "The poet is the place of transmission and therefore transformation," refuting W. H. Auden's oft-quoted claim that "poetry makes nothing happen" (172). Something does happen in poetry (Pinsky's included) that makes a bridge between the past, the present, and the future, and Pinsky recognizes this unique melding: "We must answer both for preserving [poetry], and for changing it," he writes. "Only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which has not already been made poetic by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive. Put to no use, the art rots" ("Responsibilities" 426).

Critics often note Pinsky's somber or troubling poetic themes or tones, which seem to belie his approachable demeanor. But, again, approachable in Pinsky does not mean easy, and he sees his somber subject matter as indicative of human life. He told an audience at the Library of Congress, "Most every poem I've written is about the same thing: We live in a haunted ruin" (French). Even though his poetry can be challenging to interpret, Pinsky attempts to make poetry more democratic. He has worked hard to topple the ivory tower and acknowledge the very human attraction to poetry. Pinsky illustrates the power of the art, including his own, in an essay for the *New York Times Book Review*:

> Poetry is, among other things, a technology for remembering. . . . But this fact may touch our lives far more profoundly than jingles for remembering how many days there are in June. The buried conduits among memory and emotion and the physical sounds of language may touch our inner life every day. . . . Poetry, a form of language far older than prose, is under our skins. ("A Man Goes into a Bar")

"The Figured Wheel" (1984)

Robert Pinsky's "The Figured Wheel" begins his 1984 volume *History of My Heart;* it also serves

as title for his large collection of poetry *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems, 1966–1996* (1996). The entire poem, constructed of four-line stanzas, suggests an ominous inevitability in human life, without ever explaining, precisely, what this "figured wheel" is. Louise Gluck writes that for Pinsky's poems "to be understood at all they must be apprehended entire, as shapes," advice that certainly serves "The Figured Wheel" with its circular imagery (2). Ultimately, his "wheel" stands in for many things that roll over our lives, gathering and crushing in equal measure.

Pinsky begins by describing how "the figured wheel rolls through shopping malls and prisons, / Over farms, small and immense, and the rotten little downtowns. / Covered with symbols, it mills everything alive and grinds" (lines 1–3). This introduces the notion that the "figured wheel" is a part of all life and creates tension by highlighting its destructive attributes as well, making a paradoxical equation of life = death.

After describing the figured wheel's entanglement with human affairs, the speaker then emphasizes its relation to religion, everything from "the grotesque demi-Gods, Hopi gargoyles and Ibo dryads" to "Jesus oblivious to hurt turning to give words to the unrighteous" (lines 21, 27). The tone returns a 21st-century reader to an earlier time, when human relations with God and religion were darker, more primal, and, potentially, dangerous. Soon the "figured wheel" becomes "festoon[ed]" by "Scientists and artists" with "brilliant / Toys and messages, jokes and zodiacs" (lines 36–37). Now the "figured wheel" becomes something that humans engage with, alter, decorate, and draw meaning from, not merely something that rolls over their lives. Intriguingly, Pinsky includes scientists and artists alongside the religious, who hang meaning upon the wheel.

In the end, he takes the abstraction of the poem full circle by acknowledging its wake in his own life: "it rolls unrelentingly over // . . . / . . . the haunts of Robert Pinsky's mother and father / And wife and children and his sweet self / Which he hereby unwillingly and inexpertly gives up, because it is // There, figured and pre-figured in the nothing-transfiguring wheel" (lines 44–49). By emphasizing his personal engagement, he also includes the reader in the inevitable, perpetual movement of the "figured wheel." Pinsky's paradox is enhanced when the reader realizes the "wheel" crushes *and* creates as it rolls along.

Alfred Corn writes that Pinsky "draws on the Vedic conception of the 'wheel' of existence as an endlessly repeated cycle of pain, trammeled with all sorts of obstacles to salvation (achieved by escape from the wheel, from reincarnation)," noting the poem's emphasis on creation and destruction—religion, art, science, history, culture are all creative/destructive. But Corn sees another, more prosaic, metaphor in Pinsky's wheel as well: his "'figured wheel' is also a trope for figurative writing, for poetry, gobbling up subjects, locales, mythologies, images, and human lives in its unrelenting forward progress." Either way, Pinsky's poem reveals his profound interest in cycles of creation throughout human time. As he writes in "Responsibilities of the Poet": "By practicing an art learned partly from the dead, one keeps it alive for the unborn" (424).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Pinsky use religious mythologies to form a universal human aesthetic? An American aesthetic? You might compare this poem to the first section of Anne Waldman's "Iovis" and Allen Ginsberg's "In Back of the Real" or "Sunflower Sutra."
2. In Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,* the main character, Billy Pilgrim, has become unstuck in time. This idea of fracture and discontinuity became very important to 20th-century writers and artists, particularly after World Wars I and II. Compare and discuss the humanity of creation/destruction evident in both Pinsky and Vonnegut. Both works "name" the author as a character. Why? How does this vague dichotomy contribute to a feeling of fracture? Conversely, Pinsky's wheel gives an impression of completion and fulfillment; does it therefore belie the idea of fracture?

"The Street" (1984)

In "The Street," from the collection *History of My Heart*, Pinsky's speaker (who lives on a street strikingly similar to Pinsky's own childhood neighborhood) contrasts his imaginative world of historical, romantic pretensions against the sordid, slum existence of life on "the street." Pinsky then continues his exploration of class and the way that culture—past and present—shapes our perceptions. As is also common in many of his poems, "The Street" features three-line stanzas and balances complexity with simplicity.

"The Street" begins with a funeral scene, reminiscent of ancient Rome: "The wheeled coffin // Of the dead favorite of the Emperor, / The child's corpse propped seated / On brocade" (lines 6–9). This dramatic sight soon shifts, however, to the bleak street of the speaker's childhood, a place where "Trouble—fights, the police, sickness— / Seemed never to come // For anyone when they were fully dressed. / It was always underwear or dirty pyjamas, / Unseemly stretches // of skin showing through a torn housecoat" (lines 17–22). By way of example, the speaker offers a scene in which a man's wife leaves with another man while he stands broken, in his undershirt, for the whole neighborhood to witness.

As the speaker switches back, from the man to the elaborate funeral, and then back to the street, we see his personal childhood refuge: "It was a small place, and off the center, / But so much a place to itself, I felt / Like a young prince // Or aspirant squire" (lines 40–43). The boy's love of solitude, of a world away from the street, is enhanced by the books he reads when alone, grand tales such as *Ivanhoe* (line 43). But the reading and the solitude are not merely escapist, as the speaker finds in his books recreations of the class and race struggles of his contemporary life, on the "live, dangerous / Gray bark of the street" (lines 53–54). Therefore, the speaker uses his books, intelligence, and difference to get away from his neighborhood, but within those same traits he recognizes his own reality and, thus, the street itself—a metaphor for everyone who lives there and everything that goes on there.

Pinsky's poems, while often dealing with "big" issues and concepts, also frequently focus on the realities of daily life. He said, "I do tend to distrust a poetry that I know is written by someone who in daily life engages shopping centers, cars, drug stores, and such, yet refuses to acknowledge any of these" (Sorkin 4). With "The Street" (and poems like it), Pinsky lends credence to his "big" questions by making them relevant to the real lives of actual people. By revealing and concealing himself, and his own history, within his poems as well, he avoids "navel-gazing" while lending authenticity and passion to the work. "I do have an intuitive sense that what one is surrounded by deserves one's attention, and probably one's attention as an artist," he said. "How much evidence dare we . . . omit? And if we all omit certain evidence, are we perhaps less 'free' than we appear to be?" (Sorkin 4).

For Discussion or Writing

1. May Swenson's "The Centaur" challenges the gendered expectations of her Mormon upbringing; her poem "That the Soul May Wax Plump" describes the death and funeral of a mother. In what ways are Swenson's depictions of childhood, death, and adulthood similar to Pinsky's in "The Street"? What do you imagine Swenson and Pinsky might have in common? How might they differ? Support your answers with citations from the texts.
2. Pinsky wrote, "I do tend to distrust a poetry that I know is written by someone who in daily life engages shopping centers, cars, drug stores, and such, yet refuses to acknowledge any of these." What is Pinsky saying about writing and the writing process in "The Street"? Marianne Moore's poems, on the other hand, often address day-to-day activities, but she frequently uses them as metaphors for writing and poetry, as in "Baseball and Writing" and "Poetry." How might Pinsky have used Moore's poems as a jumping-off point for his own thoughts on poetry?

"A Woman" (1984)

Robert Pinsky writes lyric poetry. According to Louise Gluck, "The glory of the lyric is that it does what life cannot do: this also means that it is less flexibly responsive to life, more defined by the poet's obsessions and associations": the poet's obsessions and associations, yes, but not necessarily the poet's autobiography. Such is true with Pinsky's "A Woman," from *History of My Heart.* Set mainly on the New Jersey shore near his hometown, the poem could too easily be read as a story from his childhood. But, ultimately, unspecified and undefined, "A Woman" tells of the tragic relationship between a child and the broken woman who inadvertently harms him by trying to keep him safe—a tale that moves beyond any individual details of Pinsky's life into the cultural archetypes of America and the world.

"A Woman" takes the reader back 30 years to the mid-1950s, when "an old, fearful woman / Takes a child on a long walk" (lines 2–3). In this world, drenched in the woman's fear, everything in the town and on the beach where they walk appears dangerous: "even the scant landmarks are like / Tokens of risk or rash judgement—drowning, / Sexual assault, fatal or crippling disease" (lines 16–18). Thus what should be a pleasant stroll is overshadowed by the woman's fears, her nightmares, of "a whole family // Sitting in chairs in her own room, corpse-gray, / With throats cut; who were they?" (lines 24–26). As they walk farther and farther—"As far as Port-Au-Peck"—the day becomes overshadowed by the potential destruction of ocean and river roiled by a hurricane, "In a house-cracking exhilaration of water" (lines 32, 42). Later, drinking a milk shake, the child remembers the previous year's Halloween parade, when he, dressed in cowboy gear, was invited to ride on a float of like-dressed children. The poem concludes as he remembers, "Her holding him back with both arms, crying herself, / Frightened at his force, and he vowing never, / Never to forgive her, not as long as he lived" (lines 52–54).

The poem features two instances of looking back—the adult speaker remembering this particular day and his child self remembering the ill-fated parade—and we can see the child who was reassessing not only the woman, but himself as well. As a child, he vowed never to forgive her for his spoiled fun. However, as an adult, he recognizes the sad and frightened existence of his caretaker, and thus she becomes someone deserving of compassion, "a woman"—flawed and tragic—rather than a specific person deliberately hurting him. The child's vow becomes ironic, then, as the adult speaker realizes he has, to some degree, forgiven her after all.

Gluck claims that Pinsky's poems do not have "the look, on the page, of the cutting edge, the experimental: no showy contempt for grammar, no murky lacunae, no cult of illogic. And yet," she writes that "experimental" is exactly what he seems with his expansion of the tones and topics of poetry. In her mind, he enlarges "the definition of the art."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Ted Kooser's "Dishwater" and "Porch Swing in September." How does the grandmother in "Dishwater" differ from Pinsky's "Woman"? Analyze what both of Kooser's poems, in dialogue with Pinsky's, say about childhood. Although Kooser's work may appear less dark than Pinsky's, can you cite examples where you feel the poets are saying similar things? Different things?
2. Read Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room." What does the child Elizabeth find so important about this experience? How is it similar in profundity or memorableness to Pinsky's poem "A Woman"? What would you say if you learned Bishop wrote this completely fictional poem to thwart critics who wanted her to be more confessional? Is Pinsky being confessional? Does it matter?

"Shirt" (1990)

Pinsky's best-known poem, "Shirt," published in *The Want Bone,* takes an everyday article of clothing

and muses on its origins among the working class, the enslaved, the impoverished, the discarded. Balancing history and speculation, "the poem is startlingly explicit about the relationship between the consumer and the worker. The shirt serves as an emblematic article of transaction and as an artifact of our obliviousness of the history of the toil that describes how and who made an object" (McCorkle 175). But Pinsky masterfully balances his political point with a tone of compassion and a detached attention to detail, allowing him "to locate a common object in history, to see it both as a material presence and as a ghostly embodiment of invisible forces and lives" (Gilbert).

"Shirt" begins with the speaker's noting the detailed craftsmanship that went into his shirt but quickly imagines the sweatshop workers who most likely made it, the "Koreans or Malaysians // Gossiping over tea and noodles on their break / Or talking money or politics while one fitted / This armpiece with its overseam to the band" (lines 3–6). The attention to the shirt's creation and the universality of the worker's actions highlight their skilled craftsmanship and their humanity, ensuring that Pinsky never downgrades the workmen and -women into pitiable objects.

The speaker then discusses the historic "infamous blaze // At the Triangle Factory in nineteen–eleven," compassionately imagining the horror and the humanity (lines 9–10). His musings lead him to notices the shirt's print—"clan tartans // Invented by mill-owners inspired by the hoax of Ossian, / To control their savage Scottish workers" (lines 30–32). He continues to imagine all the other people who contributed to the shirt's arrival in his life, including "the planter, the picker, the sorter" and the inspector, "a Black / Lady in South Carolina, her name is Irma / . . . Its color and fit // And feel and its clean smell have satisfied / Both her and me" (lines 37, 40–44). In the end, the speaker returns to describing the shirt in detail—"The buttonholes, the sizing, the facing, the characters"—to emphasize the massive amount of effort, taken from the working poor all over the world and throughout history, employed in the creation of one simple shirt.

Roger Gilbert claims that in "Shirt," Pinsky's goal is "to show us how much history lies behind all the things we touch and see." As well, the musing on the shirt as an object of craftsmanship and beauty asks the reader to be aware of the effort entailed in its creation: "Pinsky is asking us to hold contradictory perspectives in our minds at once: to feel the shirt's historical resonance, including its place in the long story of labor and exploitation, while also recognizing its beauty and elegance as a formal object. . . . History has its own rhymes and chords, its own patterns and symmetries" (Gilbert). This interweaving between musing and reality, countries and periods, and, most importantly, people themselves, makes "Shirt" one of Pinsky's most memorable and compelling poems.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge," from which Pinsky took his allusion to the "Bedlamite, 'shrill shirt ballooning.'" How do you think Crane's poem of a New York suicide inspired Pinsky when he wrote "Shirt"? Why do you think Pinsky starts by discussing Asian factory workers and then compares them to a New Yorker and then Scottish millworkers?
2. Examine the lists in Pinsky's "Shirt." What are the visual and aural effects of listing nouns? How does Pinsky manipulate the lists to inform his poem? Compare the verbs and the adjectives that surround the lists of nouns. How do these words modify the nouns and inform the poem's themes? You might compare "Shirts" to another poem that employs lists, such as Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market."

"At Pleasure Bay" (1990)

"At Pleasure Bay," from *The Want Bone,* looks at a specific location in order to capture the idea of flux—in time, history, culture, life. Pinsky writes that Pleasure Bay "is a real place, part of my home town of Long Branch, New Jersey, where the Shrewsbury River meets the Atlantic Ocean. My father has often pointed out to me where the

chief of police and his lover committed suicide in a car" (*The Figured Wheel* 299). Beginning with "a catbird singing, never the same phrase twice" and then the 1927 suicide of "the Chief of Police / And Mrs. W.," he launches the poem into musings on the spectral impressions left on a place and people, long after they are gone (lines 2, 4–5).

As the poem progresses, it shifts back and forth in time, largely between the 1920s and the present. In the 1920s, lovers commit suicide, boats move along the river (some of them "running whiskey"), and a sad, inspiring tenor sings at Price's Hotel and "unfurls the sorrow gathered / In ruffles at his throat and cuffs" (lines 19, 31–32). But the poem jumps continents and times, to "the daughter of an English lord, in love / With Adolf Hitler . . . She is taking / Possession of the apartment of a couple, / Elderly well-off Jews," and then brings the poem back to Pleasure Bay, when the elderly couple "survive the war / To settle here in the Bay" (lines 39–43).

Throughout it all, the speaker notes the natural setting, in which an unnamed, unknown child notices and hears the resonances of the place, while the catbird, and others, continue singing/talking/doing "never the same" phrase/way twice (lines 2, 25, 38, 86). The similarities between past and present events, such as the boats "chugging under the arches, outward / Unnoticed through Pleasure Bay to the open sea," combined with the presence of actual or metaphorical ghosts, serve to imprint Pleasure Bay with the past even in the present (lines 61–,62). The poem's continual addressing of "you" includes the reader in the history of the place, emphasizing that even when you are gone, you still figure in a place: "Here's where you might have slipped across the water / When you were only a presence, at Pleasure Bay" (lines 90–91). Whether a physical presence unable to disturb the past, or an ephemeral presence mingling with all the other specters, Pleasure Bay both marks and is marked by those who visit there—and those who read the poem.

Pinsky took his inspiration directly from life, while attempting to capture a larger, human truth: "That vague, misty, and unquantified past seems the contrary of dates. But after all dates, too, are notoriously sentimentalized, politically exploited, distorted, spun out into fabrics like pink sugar or concentrated into murderous weapons. The tale of the lovers, the provincial Paolo and Francesca in their convertible, the tale of the couple who survive, the names of the boats, the aria, the theater on the water—all are historical, all come down from dark or brilliant sources upriver from us, all are rooted in our desires and pleasures as well as in what William Shakespeare calls 'death's dateless night'" ("A Provincial Sense of Time"). By allowing the place to remain unfixed in time, Pinsky makes our experiences "At Pleasure Bay" universal, yet profoundly specific and unique as well.

For Discussion or Writing

1. James Dickey's poem "The Leap" appears very autobiographical, much as Pinsky's "At Pleasure Bay" does. In addition, both poems deal with the haunting presence of the past. How do the two poets differ in their approach to the past? What are they doing with shifting periods? Is it acceptable to assume poets are writing autobiographically? Why or why not?
2. Just as the literal past affects the literal Pleasure Bay (in Pinsky's estimation), the literary past affects the literary present (and future). Read one of the following: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter,* Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia,* Anne Frank's *The Diary of Anne Frank,* or John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. Speculate on how these past works might have affected the creation of "At Pleasure Bay."

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON PINSKY AND HIS WORK

1. Pinsky has said, "Only the challenge of what may seem unpoetic, that which has not already been made poetic by the tradition, can keep the art truly pure and alive." What about Pinsky's work is "unpoetic"? How does that make his poetry stronger?

2. Pinsky's work has been heavily influenced by jazz. Examine some of his poems for jazz influences. How these differ from the works of poets with less of a musical sensibility?

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Sarah Stoeckl and Russ Beck

Ishmael Reed (1938–)

The HooDoo stories, the "toasts," and the riddles and other neo-African literary forms constitute the basis for Afro-American oral tradition, traces of which can be found wherever African people settled in this hemisphere.

(*Writin' Is Fightin'* 135)

Regarded as one of the major satirists in recent American literature, Ishmael Reed is also one of the most multifaceted writers of the last half-century. His occupations include novelist, playwright, poet, publisher, literary critic, songwriter, editor, television producer, essayist, translator (of ancient Yoruba texts), and founder of the multicultural group Before Columbus Foundation and There City Cinema. In 1967, he changed the American literary scene when he published *The Free-Lance Pallbearers,* a novel that set the tone and aesthetic for the novels, poems, plays, and essays that followed. Armed with Neo-HooDooism or Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic, a multicultural writing style based on African and Haitian voodoo and religious beliefs that he mixes with elements from other cultural and traditions, Reed has consistently supported multiculturalism and argued for a multicultural society in the United States and the world over. Critics unfamiliar with African and African-American oral traditions have been baffled by Reed's innovative techniques, which include combining several seemingly disparate elements from different cultures and periods into one text. Because his writings emulate jazz and bebop styles, the jazz drummer Max Roach has called Reed "the Charlie Parker of American fiction." Parker, one of the great innovative stylists of jazz, appears in almost all of Reed's novels.

Named after Ishmael Hubbard, his mother's cousin, Ishmael Reed was born on February 22, 1938, in Chattanooga, Tennessee. His father, a college graduate, failed to support Ishmael and his mother, forcing the latter to take care of both a baby and a mother afflicted with schizophrenia. Single motherhood prevented Reed's mother, the brightest in her high school, from attending college. Instead, she left for Buffalo, New York, hoping for a better life. In the meantime, Ishmael was left in the care of Emmett Coleman, his grandmother's brother and a ragtime piano player well known throughout Chattanooga. Emmett Coleman was an early role model of Reed's, as he refused to perform menial jobs and learned tailoring from Ishmael Hubbard, who had learned his craft at the Tuskegee Institute.

Ishmael Reed grew up in Buffalo with Thelma Coleman Reed, his mother, and Bennie Stephen Reed, his stepfather. Reed started writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction in his early teens. In 1950, his mother commissioned him to write a poem to celebrate the birthday of one of her coworkers at Satler's Department Store. As Reed points out in "Boxing on Paper: Thirty-Seven Years Later," an essay collected in *Writin' Is Fightin',* as a young man living in the projects, he also wrote minisermons that he delivered at Saint Luke's Church on Eagle Street.

In 1953, while Reed was walking home from his job at a drugstore on William Street, A. J. Smitherman, editor of the *Empire Star Weekly,* stopped his

car and asked Reed whether he could deliver newspapers for him. Through his work at the *Empire Star Weekly,* Reed met eloquent African Americans such as Smitherman, his son Toussaint, and Mary Crosby. In 1954, Reed started writing columns and jazz articles, from which his jazz writing style gradually developed.

From 1952 to 1954, Reed attended Buffalo Technical High School and stopped working at the *Empire Star Weekly.* Sensing that he had no business being in a technical high school because he lacked technical aptitude, he spent the majority of his time playing second violin and trombone in the band room. His short story "Something Pure" caught the attention of an English teacher, who recommended Reed to the University of Buffalo. From 1956 to 1960, he attended the Millard Fillmore College, the University of Buffalo's night-school division. During this time, Reed performed in *Mooney's Kid Don't Cry* and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone,* alongside the poet Lucille Clifton; Reed returned to *Antigone* in his 1974 novel, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. At the University of Buffalo, Reed studied Yeats, Pound, and Blake, who were later to influence his first poems, especially the way they drew imagery and references from their cultures. Reed had received a four-year scholarship but lost it when his stepfather refused to disclose his assets (as a southern black man, he mistrusted the white man's attempt to learn about his finances). Reed managed to stay in school until his junior year by working at the downtown library and getting loan assistance, but he dropped out around 1960, tired of feeling like a slave to anybody's reading list.

Also in 1960, Reed married Priscilla Rose Thompson and moved to Talbert Mall Project. Their daughter, Timothy Reed, was born later that year (he would have another daughter, Tennessee, with his second wife). After leaving school, he volunteered at the *Empire Star Weekly,* which was then under a new editor, Joe Walker. Reed developed his "Writin' Is Fightin'" style not only by observing Walker's fight against segregated schools on behalf of Black Power, but also by reading the columns Walker wrote to challenge segregation in the schools, police brutality, and corrupt local politics. In his *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), Reed recounts several incidents and problems he had with the police in Buffalo, New York City, Los Angeles, and Berkeley, including when he was writing *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). One time, the police wanted to know if the car he was driving belonged to him, simply because they were suspicious of a black man's owning a nice car. From these incidents with the police, Reed learned that white Americans enjoyed their rights more than any other sector of the American population and that other Americans lived in what amounts to "a police state."

Reed learned about the power of writing at an early age, when a third-grade teacher kept criticizing him for malapropisms. When the teacher assigned reading topics, Reed chose "A Strange Profession" and wrote a fictional essay about a psychologically challenged teacher who lives with her mother and is involved in strange behavior with cats and dogs. The teacher sent Reed to the principal's office, where he was asked whether he knew all the "big words" he had used in the essay. Consequently, Reed decided to carry a dictionary around with him. As with many of his critics today, the teacher and the principal did not know what to do with him or his unusual essay.

In 1962, carrying a blue plastic bag containing his belongings, Reed moved to New York City. Before that, he had visited David Sharpe, an Irish-American poet who had liked a play of his, and been impressed by the city and by the book jackets of authors he had seen at the restaurant Chumley's. For the realization that New York City was the place to be, Reed credits his listening to Blue Note and Prestige records during his teenage years and talking to Wade Legge, a young bebop pianist who played with Charles Mingus and Dizzy Gillespie; in fact, Reed likens his writing style to bebop style, particularly that of Charlie "Bird" Parker. During his visit to New York City, a conversation with Malcolm X had convinced him that it was time to leave Buffalo. Furthermore, a screenwriter he had met,

after reading and liking a play of his, encouraged Reed to write more.

Reed supported himself by working in different places, including hospitals, factories, and the New York State Department of Labor. In 1963, he joined *Umbra* magazine and attended the meetings of the Umbra Society, a group of African-American writers who met every week in Tom Dent's apartment on the Lower East Side. The group included David Henderson, Calvin Hernton, Askia Muhammad Toure, Charles and Raymond Patterson, Lorenzo Thomas, and Norman Pritchard. Occasionally, Reed would find himself in the company of literary luminaries such as James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones), Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes (who helped to publish *The Free-Lance Pallbearers,* Reed's first novel, at Doubleday), Norman Mailer, and John A. Williams. By attending the Umbra workshops, Reed learned various techniques of African-American literary style such as call and response, as well as the art of collage (or putting together ideas from African, African-American, and European cultural traditions). These workshops shaped and launched his literary career, for he wrote some of his first poems under their influence. Reed later developed his technique into Neo-HooDooism or Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic, the hallmark of all of his essays, novels, plays, and poems.

In 1967, Reed left New York for California. After the publication of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers,* he sensed that he might not know how to deal with so much adulation over his work. He spent the summer in Echo Park Canyon, a section of Los Angeles, while working on *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* his second novel. From a literary perspective, the move from New York to California favored Reed's further interest in and research on African-American religious beliefs, particularly Hoodoo, the North American version of Haitian voodoo and African vodoun. Reed lived in Los Angeles for six months. In 1968, he and Carla Blank, his second wife, moved to Berkeley.

Economically, conditions improved for Reed in 1971, when he signed a contract to write three books for Doubleday. This measure of financial stability allowed him and his wife to move to the Berkeley Hills. Berkeley differed from Los Angeles in that "ex-Southerners" did not regard Reed with suspicion. Nonetheless, Reed still experienced racism, segregation, and the fear of the black man, themes that would later permeate his essays, novels, plays, and poems. Because he worked at home while writing his third novel, *Mumbo Jumbo,* people became suspicious that he might be a drug dealer; the police even showed up at his apartment surreptitiously, claiming they had heard that a murder was committed there. In 1974, Reed and his wife moved back to the Berkeley flats on Edith Street, where they lived for two years. They then moved to Jayne Street, where they realized that people were afraid of blacks' moving into white neighborhoods. In 1976, they moved to another house, on Terrace Drive in El Cerrito, only to be told three years later that the house was for sale. Because the price was beyond their means, Reed and his wife soon understood that the houses they could afford were in primarily black neighborhoods in North Oakland. They settled for a termite-ridden 1906 Victorian on Fifty-third Street, where they have lived since 1979. Tennessee Reed, their daughter, is also a publisher, poet, and writer, who teaches creative writing.

Before he retired in 2005, Reed taught at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was awarded tenure in 1988, after unfairly being denied tenure in 1977. He has also taught at several other institutions such as Yale University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, Dartmouth College, Calhoun College, Columbia University, Harvard University, the University of California at Santa Barbara, and the University of Washington. He holds an honorary doctorate from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Reed is a multitalented writer and editor who is also a recording artist (*Conjure I* and *Conjure II*) and television producer. He is the publisher of *Konch,* an electronic magazine that showcases upcoming and well-established writers from around the world. Through Ishmael Reed Publishing

Company, Reed continues his multicultural work by publishing poetry and fiction from around the world. Titles include *25 New Nigerian Poets* (2000) and *Short Stories by 16 Nigerian Women* (2005), both edited by Toyin Adewale-Gabriel.

One can measure Reed's significant and immense contributions to American and world letters by looking at his body of work, the influence he has had on other writers, and the numerous awards he continues to receive. American writers whom Reed has influenced include Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, August Wilson, Reginald Martin, Terry McMillan, and Trey Ellis, to name a few. In 1973, Reed was nominated for two National Book Awards, for *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963–1970,* and a Pulitzer Prize for *Conjure*. He was also nominated that year for the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award. In 1974, he won the Guggenheim Foundation Award for fiction, the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* as "the best non-commercial novel" of that year, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship for creative writing. The following year, Reed received the National Institute of Arts and Letters Award and the Rosenthal Foundation Award for *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. Reed has also received the Sakai Kinu Award from the Osaka Community Foundation (probably for *Japanese by Spring* in 1993) and Literary Excellence from the Morgan State University Alumni in 1994. Also in 1994, the Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks chose Reed to receive the George Kent Award. In 1998, Reed received a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, also known as the "genius grant." In 2001, he received the Chancellor's Award for Community Service from the University of California at Berkeley. In 2003, he won the Otto Award for Political Theater, while in 2004 the *Los Angeles Times* honored him with its Robert Hirsch Award. On February 10, 2006, the Department of English at Howard University dedicated its Heart's Day of 2006 to honor the accomplishments of Ishmael Reed and his immense contributions to American letters.

To date, Reed has written more than 20 books of poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction (essays). His novels include *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), *Flight to Canada* (1976), *The Terrible Twos* (1982), *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), *The Terrible Threes* (1989), and *Japanese by Spring* (1993). Reed has been working on *The Terrible Fours* and what he calls "the Big O. J." novel. His poetry collections include *Catechism of d Neoamerican Hoodoo Church* (1970), *Chattanooga* (1973), *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963–1970* (1973), *A Secretary to the Spirits* (1978), *New and Collected Poems* (1988), *The Reed Reader* (2000) (which contains excerpts from novels, selected poems and essays, and two plays), and *New and Collected Poems, 1964–2006* (2006). His six plays and one libretto are *Mother Hubbard* (1981), *Hubba City* (1988), *Savage Wilds* (1989), *The Preacher and the Rapper* (1994), *C above C above High C* (1997), *Gethsemane Park* (1998), and *Tough Love Game* (2004). The essays and nonfiction works include *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (1978), *God Made Alaska for the Indians: Selected Essays* (1982), *Writin' Is Fightin': Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (1988), *Airing Dirty Laundry* (1993), *Another Day at the Front: Dispatches from the Race War* (2003), and *Blues City: A Walk in Oakland* (2003). Reed has edited or published anthologies such as *Calafia: The California Poetry* (1979), *The Before Columbus Fiction Anthology: Selections from the American Book Awards, 1980–1990* (1992), *The Before Columbus Poetry Anthology: Selections from the American Book Awards, 1980–1990* (1992), *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace* (1997), and *From Totems to Hip-Hop: A Multicultural Anthology of Poetry across the Americas, 1900–2001* (2003).

Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down (1969)

While the earlier *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) views voodoo negatively, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* begins tracing the roots of the North American HooDoo to Haiti and West Africa. Influenced mainly by Voltaire's *Candide, The Free-Lance*

Pallbearers is the story of Bukka Doopeyduck, who wants to be like Harry Sam, the dictator of the country of the same name. But he eventually finds out that he has been duped. In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* Loop Garoo Kid reclaims the American West by using HooDoo and Voodoo forces instead of guns. This novel also becomes Reed's manifesto about writing a novel. When Bo Shmo, a neorealist, tells Loop Garoo, "All art must be for the liberation of the masses," Loop Garoo counters that he can write circuses if he wants to, because "No one says a novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to be, a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumblings of wild men saddled by demons" (36).

Further, the narrative of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* resembles Charlie "Bird" Parker's bebop style. When Drag Gibson asks the Pope what Loop Garou is putting on the town of Yellow Back, the Pope describes Loop Garoo's modus operandi as "scatting arbitrarily, using forms and adding his own. He's blowing like that celebrated musician Charles 'Yardbird' Parker—improvising as he goes along. He's throwing clusters of demon chords at you and you don't know the changes" (154).

In the *Reed Reader,* Reed describes *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and how he wrote it:

> In *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* a black cowboy, whose character is inspired by the Loup Garou legend of Haiti and the Louisiana Bayou, enters a Western town and causes such havoc that the ranchers have to call in the Pope for relief. As I was cutting and pasting characters in those days, the character also recalled a cowboy icon of my youth, Lash Larue, who disciplined his enemies with a whip. In Buffalo, black kids like me learned about good and evil from cowboys like Larue and Roy Rogers. (xv)

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explore the scatological imagery and corruption in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers.* Discuss how these images are conveyed and what they add to the work.
2. Examine the contributions of African Americans to the American West. Locate at least three and discuss what bearing they have on Reed's views of his characters.

"I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" (1970)

Originally published in *Catechism of d Neoamerican HooDoo Church* (1970) and later collected in *Conjure,* "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" is a bebop jazz poem in which a Neo-HooDoo cowboy reclaims the history and the place of African Americans in the American West through references to Egyptian deities—Ra, Osiris, Isis, Anubis, and Ptah—and pharaoh's wife, Nefertiti. "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" is a significant poem in Reed's writing, insofar as it functions as the genesis for *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down,* a HooDoo bebop western novel, in which a werewolf becomes the Loop Garoo Kid.

The epigraph to "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra"—taken from *Rituale Romanum* (1947)—heralds the conflict between HooDoo and Christianity that dominates the last three stanzas of the poem. Further, it announces that the devil must be coerced into revealing any magic potions and charms so they can be burned. The poem also contains references to the American West: a wanted poster, Wells Fargo, and the Chisholm Trail. In the first stanza, the speaker proclaims that he is "a cowboy in the Boat of Ra," whom, when he rode from town, people compared to the "dog-faced man." Further, he announces that he is not like Egyptologists "who do not know their trips" (*New and Collected Poems* 17). A note in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* informs us that Ra is the "Egyptian sun god of Heliopolis; typically represented as a hawk-headed man; father of Osiris, Isis and Set" and that the "dog-faced man" refers to Anubis, "the Egyptian god of the dead, shown typically as a jackal-headed man" (2252). In the next stanza, the cowboy laughs at those who cannot see that the Germans stole Nefertiti, Pharaoh Akenaten's wife, and left a fake chipped Nefertiti.

Here, Reed connects Ra to Sonny Rollins, the jazz saxophonist, with "a long horn winding / its bells thru the Field of Reeds [Reed himself]" (17). In the third stanza, he boasts of having gone to bed with Isis, the goddess of nature and Osiris's sister and wife. In the next four stanzas, the cowboy recounts his escapades in the Old West, where he is biding his time while waiting for Osiris to return. Unlike Set, his brother, Osiris allowed a multiplicity of deities, an asset to Reed's Neo-HooDooism, and loved to dance. In the Osiris-Isis myth, Isis is supposed to gather the limbs of Osiris so that the latter can return.

In the next two stanzas, the cowboy becomes the Loop Garoo Kid, the master of the lash and magic potions. He asks Pope Joan of the Ptah Ra (notice the combination of Catholicism and Egyptian mythology) to give him his HooDoo paraphernalia—this includes the bones of "Ju-Ju snake," a direct reference to Damballah, the West African voodoo deity of fecundity and knowledge, which is represented by a snake—so that he can go after Set, who has murdered and dismembered Osiris, his brother, to usurp the Crown. Through punning ("to sunset Set"), the last sections of the poem reveal that Set is the Egyptian god of sunset. That Loop Garoo Kid requests the help of Pope Joan is pivotal to the poem, because retrieving old cultures and cultural/historical figures, especially those neglected or dismissed by the mainstream Euro-American culture, is the cornerstone of Reed's Neo-HooDooism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Study the link between Loup Garoo Kid of "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" and Loop Garoo Kid of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. What does this relationship contribute to a view of Reed's poetics? Why?
2. Read Reed's "Why I Often Allude to Osiris" and "I Am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" and compare Akenaten to Set. In what ways does the pharaoh differ from the Egyptian deity? How do their differences add to an understanding of Reed's work?

Mumbo Jumbo (1972)

Mumbo Jumbo is Ishmael Reed's best-known and most-studied novel for two reasons: First, critics have been enamored of its experimentation with language and narrative technique. Second, it inspired Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to develop his theory of the Signifyin(g) Monkey in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), a book that continues to influence students and critics of African-American literature.

Like other novels by Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a difficult one to summarize, for it does not follow a conventional plot. With a structure similar to jazz music, it contains several genres, plots, subplots, and a plethora of quotes, footnotes, drawings, photo prints, and bibliography entries (104 titles). Many of the book titles, footnotes, and quotations deal with colonization, Islam, Christianity, epidemic diseases, witchcraft, dance, ragtime, "swingtime," voodoo in Haiti, rock and roll, drumming, and European and American history. As Reed's reading of the 1920s "Jazz Age," *Mumbo Jumbo* traces the origins of African-American oral traditions, especially voodoo, from Africa via Haiti and shows how African Americans such PaPa LaBas, the leader of the Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral, have used African-based traditions to counter racism and monoculturalism. Throughout the novel, PaPa LaBas tries to resurrect voodoo in North America but also battles the Atonists (of the Wallflower Order), who see other cultures as a threat to Western civilization.

Mumbo Jumbo takes its title from Mandingo: "[Mandingo *ma-ma-gyo-mbo,* "magician who makes troubled spirits of ancestors go away": *ma-ma,* grandmother+*gyo,* trouble+*mbo,* to leave]" (7). The story begins in New Orleans, where Jes Grew, a "disease" that makes people dance, is possessing people. The mayor of New Orleans is worried that if Jes Grew becomes pandemic, it will obliterate Western Civilization. As it turns out, however, Jes Grew is not a disease:

> *The foolish Wallflower Order hadn't learned a damned thing. They thought that by fumigating the Place Congo in the 1890s when people were*

> *doing the Bamboula the Chacta the Babouille the Counjaille the Juba the Congo and the Voo-Doo that this would put an end to it. That it was merely a fad. But they did not understand that the Jes Grew epidemic was unlike physical plagues. Actually Jes Grew was an anti-plague. Some plagues caused the body to waste away; Jes Grew enlivened the host. Other plagues were accompanied by bad air (malaria). Jes Grew victims said that the air was as clear as they had ever seen it and that there was the aroma of roses and perfumes which had never before enticed their nostrils. Some plagues arise from decomposing animals, but Jes Grew is electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy. Terrible plagues were due to the wrath of God; but Jes Grew is the delight of the gods.* (6)

This is the gist of the story, compounded by the fact that *Mumbo Jumbo* is also about writing itself, particularly writing the manifold aspects of the African-American story. It is said that because there is not "liturgy without a text," Jes Grew was seeking its words. "Its text" is in the 1920s—the time of the New Negro Renaissance, as the search had failed in the 1890s (6).

Mumbo Jumbo exemplifies Neo-HooDooism, which is characterized by synchronicity and syncretism. Synchronicity allows one to perceive time as circular, not linear; therefore, time past is present and future. Thus in *Mumbo Jumbo,* Reed is able to move from the Middle Ages to 1890s Place Congo to 1920s New Orleans and Harlem and link various stories/plots to 1970s America. Syncretism is similar to the technique of collage, which amounts to an amalgamation of disparate, nonrelated elements in one text. This is one of the characteristics of voodoo traditions in the Americas, whereby voodoo has been able to flourish by blending with Catholicism and absorbing other cultures. Syncretism and synchronicity have allowed Reed to turn his novels, plays, poems, and essays into multicultural and multilingual texts. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a multicultural novel par excellence. Almost every American ethnic group is represented in the novel, and world cultures permeate its text. In "Ishmael Reed—Self-Interview," Reed describes what went into the writing of *Mumbo Jumbo*:

> Intuition, intellect, research, maybe even communicators from the psychic field. I was amazed the number of times I would play my hunches about a particular historical event and then be able to go out and prove it. I wanted to write about a time like the present or use the past to prophesy about the future—a process our ancestors called necromancy. I chose the twenties because they are very similar to what's happening now. This is a valid method and has been used by writers from time immemorial. (130)

For Discussion or Writing

1. *Mumbo Jumbo* is heavily influenced by jazz. How does music inform the novel? How is jazz related to voodoo, according to the novel?
2. Compare Ishmael Reed's take on the New Negro Renaissance (also known as the Harlem Renaissance) to Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. In what ways do they agree? In what ways do they differ? Explain.

The Last Days of Louisiana Red (1974)

Papa LaBas of *Mumbo Jumbo* reappears in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red,* Reed's fourth novel, as a Neo-HooDoo detective who goes to Berkeley, California, to solve the murder of Ed Yellings, owner of the Solid Gumbo Works. Ed Yellings is an Osiris-type HooDoo therapist who is about to get rid of Louisiana Red, a neo–slave mentality that leads African Americans to murder and hold one another down like crabs in a barrel. But the Moochers, a group of militants being manipulated by white corporations, murder Ed Yellings before he is able to finish developing "the Gumbo pill into aural healing" and "experimenting with ways of healing people by manipulating their psychic fields" (143). In his study, PaPa LaBas defines Louisiana Red as

"Crabs in the Barrel. Each crab trying to keep the other from reaching the top" and traces it to Marie Laveau, the 19th-century Voodoo Queen of New Orleans: "'Louisiana Red was a misuse of the Business. It gets hot quick and starts acting sullen—high blood pressure is its official disease. Marie decided that she was going to finish off Doc John. That's when he took her daughter'" (140). *Business* and *Work* are code terms for Neo-HooDoo/Voodoo. Complicating PaPa LaBas's detective work is the fact that Minnie Yellings/Minnie the Moocher is also part of the Moochers, who lead her to set a fire on Solid Gumbo Works, thus destroying his father's Business. Meanwhile, Street Yellings and Wolf Street kill each other, while Wolf Yellings and Sister Yellings, his sister, are trying to help to save Solid Gumbo Works. At the end of the novel, PaPa LaBas saves Minnie from Blue Coal, who was about to rape her.

In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red,* Reed continues to reconnect the African diaspora through Gumbo, a code name for Neo-HooDoo, and shows what *houngans* (priests) and *mambos* (priestesses), such as Doc John and Marie Laveau, respectively, have had to do to ensure the survival of African oral and folkloric traditions in the Americas. In an interview with Robert Gover, Reed has characterized *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* as both "a casual use of the Voodoo esthetic," as opposed to *Mumbo Jumbo,* where voodoo aesthetics is "more formalized," and "the New Testament of Voodoo," in which voodoo is taken "out of the backwoods" and made urban. The difference between the two kinds of voodoo, then, is like "the difference between a tenor player in, say, Duke Ellington's band and the old time country tenor player. It's a very sophisticated urban sound and what I'm trying to do is take the toad's eyes out of it" (13).

As does *Mumbo Jumbo, The Last Days of Louisiana Red* examines many other texts and subjects, including Cab Calloway's song "Minnie the Moocher," Sophocles' Theban plays (*Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus,* and *Antigone*), Kafka's *Metamorphosis,* Richard Wright's *Native Son,* Carl Paine Tobey's *Astrology of Inner Space, The Picayune Creole Cook Book,* the Congolese history of the 1960s, voodoo symbolism and mythology, the history of Doc John and Marie Laveau, and astrology. These intertexts allow Reed to satirize black-on-black crimes, street gangs, Berkeley, radical feminism, and the various stereotypes of the black man in America, making *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* a mixture of satire, allegory, mythology, African and Greek legends, and a comment upon contemporary American society.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast Ed Yellings's "Solid Gumbo Works" to PaPas LaBas's Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral (in *Mumbo Jumbo*). How do they perform the same function in the works?
2. In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), Minnie Yellings/Minnie the Moocher is led to destroy her father's Business, a code name for HooDoo/Voodoo therapy. In Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Minnie Ransom is not only aware of the African and Haitian HooDoo/Voodoo traditions—voodoo deities (loas) such as Oshun, Ogun, Oyo, Damballah, Shango, Legba, Baron Samedi, and the Radas—but also serves, along with Old Wife and the deities, as a healing medium for Velma Henry. Compare Minnie Yellings to Minnie Ransom. Compare also Reed's and Bambara's ways of using Charlie "Bird" Parker and his style in the two novels.

Flight to Canada (1976)

Flight to Canada explores the slave narrative genre and American history, particularly under Abraham Lincoln. In this neo–slave narrative, Reed revisits the time of the Civil War in order to comment on the present of the Bicentennial Year. It is the story of Raven Quickskill—based on the Tlingit myths of the raven—who writes a poem to inform Arthur Swille, his slave master, that he has escaped from his "Camelot" plantation. While the poem leads him to be invited to the White House, it is

also used by slave catchers to track him down. As other slaves' perspectives suggest, Canada is also a mental state.

Like other Reed novels, *Flight to Canada* is a composite of literary and popular texts. Not only does it reread Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King,* and Edgar Allan Poe's stories, but it also contains excerpts from Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin,* the play Abraham Lincoln was watching when John Wilkes Booth shot him.

For Discussion or Writing

Compare Reed's *Flight to Canada* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* also a neo–slave narrative. What does each work have in common with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? How do the modern works differ strategically? Discuss.

"The Reactionary Poet" (1978)

"The Reactionary Poet" first appeared in *A Secretary to the Spirits* and was later collected in *New and Collected Poems.* It seems to be a poetic manifesto against what sound like aesthetic prescriptions for the future. The speaker proclaims that if the addressee is a revolutionary who stands for the future, then he has to be a reactionary and stand for the past. Then the speaker lists items he wants brought back: suspenders, mom, homemade ice cream, the banjo, Krazy Kats, rent parties, and corn liquor, to name a few. In the second stanza, the list includes jazz, dance, literature, and popular culture:

> The syncopation of
> Fletcher Henderson
> The Kiplingesque lines
> of James Weldon Johnson
> Black Eagle
> Mickey Mouse
> . . . (158)

In stark contrast, the addressee's future world bans humor and forces everybody to wear the same caps and odd jackets. What is more, to love and to kiss will become "a crime against the state" and "Duke Ellington will be / Ordered to write more marches / 'For the people'" (159). In the last two stanzas (couplets), the speaker reinforces his manifesto of the first stanza, "If you are what's coming / I must be what's going" (159).

For Discussion or Writing

Examine why syncopation and the music of Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington would appeal to Ishmael Reed. How do these interests contribute to his poetics? Explain.

"Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy" (1978)

Charlie "Bird" Parker (Charles "Yardbird" Parker), the alto saxophonist whose hometown was Kansas City, Kansas, is Reed's favorite jazz musician. Reed loves his innovative techniques and improvisations so much that Charlie Parker appears in almost all of Reed's novels. This has earned accolades from Max Roach, a jazz drummer who played with Bird, and who describes Reed (on a book jacket) as "The Charlie Parker of American fiction." On the back cover of *Conversations with Ishmael Reed,* Reed states, "I think that if anybody is going to compare me to anybody, then compare me to someone like Mingus and Charlie Parker, musicians who have fluidity with the chord structure just as we have with the syntax or the sentence which is our basic unit."

Centering on the primacy of rhythm, "Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy" is a conversation between the speaker (Ishmael Reed) and K. C. Bird (read, Kansas City Bird), a reference to Charlie "Bird" Parker. The time is one morning in 1970. Because Parker died in 1955, we assume that the dialogue is an imagined one. Indeed, the speaker reveals that the Bichot Beaujolais might have spurred the conversation.

As they discuss the importance of rhythm, the speaker declares that everything depends on

rhythm, prompting Bird to proclaim that rhythm is his precious constituent. They then assert that while nature cannot exist without rhythm, rhythm can exist without nature. The poem shifts to Baird Hall, probably the music building at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where a man is conducting rhythm "on Sunday afternoons" (155). In the seventh stanza, the speaker wants to play Bennie Morten's "It's Hard to Laugh or Smile," but the machine will not work (156). The speaker does not mind, because Bird disappears. The poem ends with a steel band entering the room.

Born in Kansas City, Bennie Morten was a jazz pianist and band leader who was instrumental in defining Kansas City jazz style in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He recruited such jazz greats as Count Basie, Jimmy Rushing, and Walter Page. Bennie Morten and his Kansas City Orchestra recorded "It's Hard to Laugh or Smile" in 1928.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Listen to Bennie Morten's "It's Hard to Laugh or Smile" and compare its effect to that of "Poetry Makes Rhythm in Philosophy." How does Reed convey the speaker's mood in this poem?
2. How important is rhythm to poetry and blues or jazz music? What do they have in common? Discuss your answer in light of the poems of Ishmael Reed and Langston Hughes.

The Terrible Twos and The Terrible Threes (1982, 1989)

Based structurally on Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol, The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes* are satires on the Reagan-Bush administration and how its economic and cultural policies affected minorities and third-world countries. The two novels contain fantasy, science and detective fiction, Santa Claus, the myths of Black Peter and Saint Nicholas, feminism, Rastafarianism, Calypso, voodoo, and Obeahism.

In *The Terrible Twos,* Dean Clift is elected president thanks to big corporations, such as Oswald Zumwalt's North Pole Development Corporation. The story begins on Christmas 1980, when the 40th president is being inaugurated, while Ebenezer Scrooge (from *A Christmas Carol*) is towering "above the Washington skyline, rubbing his hands and greedily peering over his spectacles" (4). Dean Clift soon mourns the death of his wife, who is electrocuted while lighting a Christmas tree cut in Alaska despite the objections of Native Americans. Because of the government's racist and antiimmigrant policies and religious intolerance, Saint Nicholas takes Dean Clift to the American underground to see how former presidents live and learn from their mistakes. After the trip, Dean Clift endorses the Bill of Rights, promises to stop robbing Alaska of its beauty, and vows to recognize the contributions of minorities to American history, economy, and culture. No sooner does he deliver the speech than Bob Krantz declares him incapacitated and replaces him with Jesse Hatch.

As a sequel, *The Terrible Threes* explores further the myths of Black Peter and Saint Nicholas. While Saint Nicholas continues to help politicians change or reverse their discriminatory policies, Black Peter helps regular people solve their personal problems. But because everything in America is commercialized, Black Peter's deeds are turned into a best-selling song, "Black Peter Calypso," which begins the novel. Bob Krantz, Jesse Hatch, and Reverend Jones want the "surplus" people to convert to Christianity or leave the country. While the Supreme Court is about to adopt the Conversion Bill, Chief Justice Nola Payne, who is to cast the deciding vote, is visited by Saint Nicholas, who has Judge Taney with him. After acknowledging that he wronged Dred Scott, Judge Taney advises Nola Payne not to vote for a bill that would rid the country of blacks and Jews. Not only does she vote against the Conversion Bill, but she also overrules a lower court and restores the authority of Dean Clift. At the end of the novel, however, Dean Clift and his convoy are kidnapped on their way to the White House.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* influence the structure and themes in *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes*?
2. Why does Reed compare the United States to a two-year-old baby in *The Terrible Twos* and *The Terrible Threes*? What do the two entities have in common? Explain the irony/satire in Reed's titles.

Reckless Eyeballing (1986)

Exploring racism, feminism, white and black anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and Obeahism, *Reckless Eyeballing* is Reed's response to feminists and critics who charged him with misogyny after either misreading or disagreeing with the way some female characters are characterized in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*. Ironically, critics have failed to notice that the seemingly sexist scenes, dialogues, and some characters in *Reckless Eyeballing* are culled from African-American novels by women, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (especially the film), Toni Morrison's *Sula,* Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters,* and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. There are also some quotes or references from novels by Paule Marshall and Charlene Hatcher Polite.

Having been branded as a misogynist after his play *Suzanna,* the character Ian Ball writes *Reckless Eyeballing* so that feminists will take him off the sexist list. For this purpose, he has to cater to the demands of Becky French, whose brand of feminism is likened to nazism, and Tremonisha Smarts, who gets grants from Becky French to write plays that stereotype black males. Based on Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha,* Tremonisha helps Ian Ball improve his play. In Ball's *Reckless Eyeballing,* Ham Hill—based on the biblical Ham and Emmett Till—is exhumed 20 years after his lynching so that he can be condemned anew for raping Cora Mae with his eyes and for ruining her life. Yet Becky French would rather stage a play about Eva Braun than let Ian Ball present his play. Meanwhile, Becky French helps Tremonisha stage her *Wrong-Headed Man,* a composite play that samples African-American women's novels. Consequently, the Flower Phantom, who shaves women and leaves a chrysanthemum flower, is after her for the way she has portrayed black men.

At the end of the novel, it is assumed that Ian Ball is the Flower Phantom. Having been hexed at birth and born two-headed, Ian Ball possesses "'two minds, the one not knowing what the other was up to" (146). When Tremonisha realizes that Becky French has been using her, she and Ian Ball reconcile. While she goes to California to write more books, Ian Ball heads to New Oyo, a fictional country in the West Indies.

For Discussion or Writing

After doing research on Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha,* find out how the story of Reed's Tremonisha differs from that of Joplin's Treemonisha. Discuss the significance of these differences.

Japanese by Spring (1993)

A satire of American orientalism and American universities, *Japanese by Spring* is a milestone in Reed's writing and, in a way, in literature in general. In it Reed achieves the highest degree of multiculturalism. The book is written in the English, Yoruba, and Japanese languages. For this, Reed had been studying Yoruba and Japanese for the preceding 10 years. Moreover, Reed appears in his novel, along with his wife and daughter, to challenge Roland Barthes's, Michel Foucault's, and Jacques Derrida's concept of the death of the author and to counter the views of Benjamin "Chappie" Puttbutt, an African-American professor at Jack London College.

Benjamin "Chappie" Puttbutt, named in honor of three four-star African-American generals—his father, a two-star air force general, expected his son to become a general, but Puttbutt was kicked out of the Air Force Academy—has a hard time getting tenure and spends his time trying to figure out the political ideologies of each group so that he can adjust

to them. At one time, he aligns himself with the feminists but turns against them when he is denied tenure. When a black feminist from the East Coast is about to replace him, Dr. Yamato, his tutor, takes over Jack London College and renames it *Hideki Tojo No Daigaku* (Hideki Tojo was the Japanese prime minister during World War II). Thanks to his Japanese language skills, Puttbutt becomes the second man in command and begins ordering everybody to learn Yoruba and Japanese. Soon, they discover that Dr. Yamato is linked to a Japanese gang that wants to assassinate the emperor. In the epilogue, Puttbutt and his parents are leaving for Japan, where Puttbutt will work as a translator for his father.

In *Japanese by Spring,* Reed criticizes the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the 1990s, challenges monoculturalists (the Miltonists) and those who want to nationalize English, debunks Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism, and evaluates political correctness. More importantly, Reed, now that he is able to read original texts in Yoruba, makes an important statement about African Americans and their need to reconnect to African deities, such as Olódùmarè, the Yoruba god of creation. Ogun Sanyà, Ishmael Reed's Yoruba teacher in the novel, likens the severance from Olódùmarè to losing a phone contact and suggests "the phone contact be repaired so that the diaspora's direct line to Olódùmarè be restored" (222).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How does the term *diaspora* apply to African Americans? What other groups in the United States have created literature out of the struggles of their journey? How does the concept relate to this book?
2. Why does *Japanese by Spring* suggest that Afrocentrism may be comparable to Eurocentrism? How does Reed convey his views in this work?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON REED AND HIS WORK

1. Ishmael Reed has fashioned Neo-HooDooism, his writing style, from voodoo traditions. In *Mumbo Jumbo,* he pays tribute to Zora Neale Hurston, whom he calls "our theoretician." In *The Last Days of Louisiana Red,* he accuses Marie Laveau of having diluted the "Work [HooDoo]," while in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* he credits her with having ensured the survival of Voodoo/Hoodoo in North America. Read Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel about Marie Laveau* and *Voodoo Season*. Compare the use of voodoo and the portrayal of Marie Laveau in the three writers' novels.
2. How important is New Orleans/Louisiana in the survival of African cultures and the development of African-American literature and culture? Consider also the significance of Congo Square and the birth and development of jazz.

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Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure

Adrienne Rich (1929–)

Art is both tough and fragile. It speaks of what we long to hear and what we dread to find. Its source and native impulse, the imagination, may be shackled in early life, yet may find release in conditions offering little else to the spirit.

("Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts")

Born May 16, 1929, in Baltimore, Maryland, Adrienne Cecile Rich is the older of two daughters. Her mother, Helen Jones Rich, was a gifted pianist and composer who left her profession upon marriage to Arnold Rich, a physician and pathology professor at Johns Hopkins University. Rich admits she was lucky to be born "white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged [her] to read and write" but states such encouragement had a price: "I tried for a long time to please him, or rather, not to displease him" ("When We Dead Awaken" 93). The angst Rich suffered trying to conform to the expected roles for females gave her an "obscure, boiling anger" about those whose needs have been defined by others. It is her unwavering belief in what is right and her willingness to discuss difficult matters like rape, the Holocaust, and domestic and foreign clashes so openly and eloquently that allow Adrienne Rich to construct bridges capable of sustaining readers through tough political waters.

In 1951 Rich graduated from Radcliffe Colleges. That same year she received the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Prize for her first book, *A Change of World* (1951). The poet W. H. Auden's praise of Rich's poetry reflects the condescension commonly doled out to women writers of the time: "The poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs" (Gelpi 126). Yet Auden accurately describes Rich's early poetry as detached and formal, based on the traditions of her poetic predecessors. As a young woman in her poetry, as in her life, Rich obediently followed the rules. After graduation she was awarded a Guggenheim Scholarship for travel in Europe and England. During that time she wrote many of the poems that would be included in her second volume of poetry, *The Diamond Cutters* (1955).

Rich reminds us in her essay "When We Dead Awaken," that in the 1950s a "full" life for a woman meant marriage and children. In pursuit of that dream, Rich married the Harvard economist Alfred Conrad at the age of 24 and the couple moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Their first son was born a year later, in 1955, the same month *The Diamond Cutters,* appeared.

Rather than blissful completion, marriage and motherhood led to feelings of frustration and anger. The sustained periods of concentration required to write poetry were no longer guaranteed and Rich began to feel torn between her needs and the needs of her family. This was only compounded by the illusion of housewives in homes all over America who seemed to be content "making careers of domestic perfection." Rich writes: "I had a marriage and a child. If there were doubts, if there were periods of null depression or active despairing, these could only mean that I was ungrateful, insatiable, perhaps

a monster" ("When We Dead Awaken" 95). Despite her despair, Rich soon had two more sons—Paul, born in 1957, and Jacob, born in 1959. Through the despair and the diapers, she kept writing. Yet it would be eight years before Rich would return to the literary forefront with a new collection.

Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963) is set up as 10 sections, or "snapshots," which illustrate women in the roles in which men have cast them and women themselves have accepted. Rich already had an established following by this point, and her readers had learned to expect subtlety in her poetry and obedience to tradition. Yet what Rich delivered in this volume is a "shock of imagery [due] to an accuracy so unsparing that the imagination reacts psychosomatically: muscles tighten and nerves twinge" (Gelpi 134). Gone is any semblance of the modest, quiet poetry for which Auden praised Rich's earliest works. In her third volume Rich seems to have zeroed in on Auden's final requirement of poetry, that it not "fib." And she is clear in her purpose—to "outstare with truthfulness," writing openly about the sexual oppression of women in America.

Much of America was not ready for that type of honesty. Rich had been warned, almost prophetically, by Auden in his 1951 commentary on her first volume, although she had shown no inclination in her early writings to break away from tradition:

> Before . . . revolutionary artists . . . can appear again, there will have to be just such another cultural revolution replacing these attitudes with others. So long as the way in which we regard the world and feel about our existence remains in all essentials the same as that of our predecessors we must follow in their traditions. (Gelpi 126)

Obviously in 1951, Auden could not possibly have predicted that such a cultural revolution would actually occur within Adrienne Rich's lifetime. Nor could Auden have known that she would be called upon to be the voice for millions of women who, in the words of Helen Vendler, "read [Rich's words] in almost disbelieving wonder; someone my age was writing down my life" (Gelpi 160).

Critical reaction to *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* was harsh, objecting to Rich's bitter tone and the emotionality of the piece, so different from the detachment common in the poetry of her male counterparts. Yet more recent criticism of Rich's work celebrates that ability to speak on behalf of the silenced. The critic Albert Gelpi praises the volume as a "rejection of the terms on which society says we must expend our existence and her departure on an inner journey of exploration and discovery" (138). The feminist critic Erica Jong praised Rich's willingness to address the politics of America's patriarchal society.

It is in her third volume that Rich also rebels against the common belief that poetry should exist separately from time. As early as 1954 Rich had taken up the practice of dating each poem, arguing that poetry is shaped and affected by the political and social forces at work within society. In *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* each poem includes the date of its completion as a postscript to the title.

Her next collection, *Necessities of Life* (1966), is filled with elegies. The title is meant "to suggest the awareness of death under everything that we are trying to escape from or that is coloring our response to things, the knowledge that after all time isn't ours" (Gelpi 141). Yet, rather than being about death as the critic Deborah Pope suggests, Gelpi insists the poems are affirmations of the will to persist, citing "Like This Together" as proof:

> Dead winter doesn't die
> it wears away, a piece of carrion
> picked clean at last,
> rained away or burnt dry.
> Our desiring does this,
> make no mistake, I'm speaking
> of fact: through mere indifference
> we could prevent it.
> Only our fierce attention
> gets hyacinths out of those
> hard cerebral lumps,
> unwraps the wet buds down
> the whole length of a stem.

Although Rich continued to pursue a career as a poet and professor, as for many women of her generation Rich's own ambitions were secondary to those of her husband. In 1966 he accepted a post at New York's City College. She took a position in the SEEK program at the same college, working closely with minority and disadvantaged students, some of whom had only recently arrived in America from third world countries. Both Rich and her husband were instantly swept up in the anti–Vietnam War protests; however, Rich's daily exposure to women who faced so many forms of political oppression here on American soil raised issues that she could not ignore.

Leaflets (1969) expresses Rich's frustration at a society that increasingly accepts atrocity while going about routine events:

> I'd rather
> taste blood, yours or mine, flowing
> from a sudden slash, than cut all day
> with blunt scissors on dotted lines
> like the teacher told. ("On Edges," 1968)

Rich's dramatic imagery seeks to pull the reader in, making the experience concrete so that one cannot turn away. Most importantly, though, it is at this point in her career that she becomes determined that her poetry have a political impact. It no longer mattered, she has said, whether her poems were aesthetically pleasing: "I wanted to choose words that even you / would have to be changed by" ("Implosions," 1968). At the same time Rich sought to invoke change in her readers, she was facing dramatic upheaval in her own life. In 1970 she left her marriage, finally admitting her own unhappiness. Later that year her husband Conrad committed suicide.

The title for *A Will To Change* (1971) is from Charles Olson's line "What does not change / is the will to change," to which Adrienne Rich adds, "the moment of change is the only poem." Gelpi describes the poetry included in this collection as a continuation of the techniques begun in the "Ghazals" of *Leaflets*. Much of the poetry has evolved to include techniques common in film artistry, such as jump cuts and collage. Included in the collection is "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," wherein Rich describes "the experience of repetition as death." The death of her husband is depicted as weighing on her in this selection, where Rich's "swirling wants" are forever unanswered by Conrad's "frozen lips."

It would be easy for Rich's poetry to slip into themes of loneliness and depression, and she does allow herself to express those emotions. But Rich also holds herself up as a survivor and model for other women who have lost husbands, children, and so much more on the battlefield of their daily quest for survival. In that mode, she gave readers *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). In this volume she writes with "visionary anger" to describe her new identity:

> I am the androgyne
> I am the living mind you fail to describe
> in your dead language
> the lost noun, the verb surviving
> only in the infinitive
> the letters of my name are written under the
> lids
> of the newborn child ("The Stranger")

The title poem describes a merperson, neither male nor female, possessing a book of myths that contains tales of our long-gone patriarchal culture. Rich suggests that to save our world from destruction, we must put aside the chasm that exists between male and female ways of thinking and embrace a mental sort of "bisexuality."

Diving into the Wreck received instant recognition and was selected to receive the 1974 National Book Award. Adrienne Rich rejected the award as an individual but accepted it in the name of all women "whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world," as she articulated in a statement written with two other nominees, Alice Walker and Audre Lord. More than 20 years later, Rich would again reject national recognition when the office of President Clinton sought to award her the

National Medal for the Arts. Rich responded, "Art means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of the power which holds it hostage."

In 1976, Rich moved in with the writer and editor Michelle Cliff. The same year, she gave an address to the Women's Commission and Gay Caucus, which was later published as "It Is the Lesbian in Us." The piece addresses the "unspeakable" nature of the lesbian relationship, citing the power of literature as a very political force, capable of oppression.

In later years, Rich has defined herself as "a poet of oppositional imagination," as she writes in *Arts of the Possible*: "For more than fifty years I have been writing, tearing up, revising poems, studying poets from every culture and century available to me. I have been a poet of the oppositional imagination, meaning that I don't think my only argument is with myself" (8). She has expressed her hope that poetry will play a role in the national revolution that she believes must occur if we are to create a "society honoring both human individuality and the search for a decent, sustainable common life" (*Arts of the Possible* 146). The society that Rich envisions would be akin to the one that the founders of the United States wanted to create, although perhaps Rich would edit a few words in the Constitution in order to reflect a nation where all are truly created equal.

Rich's poetry spans six decades and is contained in more than 16 volumes. Her latest essays were published in 2009, *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society*. Each piece affirms her role as witness for those whose voices, she feels, would be erased or simply ignored forever by those in power. Rich has continued as dedicated teacher, advocating fiercely for the rights of women, the disadvantaged, and nontraditional students. She has taught at Swarthmore, Columbia, Brandeis, Rutgers, Cornell, San Jose State, and Stanford University and has been the recipient of innumerable awards including the 1999 Lannan Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, the Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Common Wealth Award in Literature, National Book Award, the 1996 Tanning Award for Mastery in the Art of Poetry, the MacArthur Fellowship, and the 2003 Bollingen Prize for Poetry.

"Storm Warnings" (1951)

Rich launched her literary career with this poem, one that seems to be traditional on its surface, yet carries an underlying tension. It follows in the footsteps of its forefathers, describing in the words of W. H. Auden, "historical apprehension." Yet Albert Gelpi argues as early as 1973 that this early poem from Rich was more complex than Auden acknowledged: "Rich's reflex is consistent throughout: she seeks shelter as self-preservation" (131). The complex subtextual import of Rich's poems would continue to be her hallmark throughout the decades.

While many today idealize the 1950s as a time of peace in America and may therefore misinterpret "Storm Warnings" as a poem about one woman's handwringing over her inability to control the weather, in reality World War II had recently ended and America was in the midst of the cold war. The aftermath of the second world war was complicated especially for people of Jewish ancestry, such as Rich, who found themselves powerless as Hitler's forces committed acts of mass genocide against the Jewish people in Europe.

Rich herself tells us in the 1993 foreword to her collected works that "Storm Warnings" is "a poem about powerlessness—about a force so much greater than our human powers that while it can be measured and even predicted, it is beyond human control. All 'we' can do is create an interior space against the storm, an enclave of self-protection, though the winds of change still penetrate keyholes and 'unsealed apertures'" (*Collected Early Poems* xix).

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Storm Warnings" was published in 1951. Imagine a woman, alone, turning on the news to a broadcast today. Of what might she be forewarned? How might she prepare? Must she be

content with "a silent core of waiting," or does the woman of today have different choices available to her? Explain.
2. Examine the poems within *A Change of World* for their interconnectedness. What binds them together? To what degree do they signify the change of world implied by the collection's title? Support your answer with textual references.
3. What imagery is employed by Rich within "Storm Warnings"? How does she use each item to build a sense of normalcy even while foreshadowing impending doom? Discuss your answer.

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (1951)

In her essay "When We Dead Awaken," Rich tells readers that "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" looks with "deliberate detachment" at the split between "the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men" (Gelpi 94). Yet when Rich wrote "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," she was only 21 years old, much too young, perhaps, to examine her life objectively and to recognize the forces at work within it. She goes on to admit surprise at the resemblance between her and Aunt Jennifer. In "When We Dead Awaken" Rich professes to have believed she was writing about an entirely fictional character, rather than exploring her inner self: "It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible—distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone—even by putting the women in a different generation" (Gelpi 94). However, the similarities between Rich and this older, fictional character were a result of techniques Rich had developed to cope with the split she felt was necessary in order to be successful as a woman in the academic world. She constantly held herself back, refraining from putting too much of herself in her work, lest she be criticized for sentimentality. Rich states, "In those years formalism was part of the strategy—like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded" (Gelpi 94).

Helen Dennis suggests that Aunt Jennifer's screen projects "an image of her psyche as wild, free unafraid—a creature that terrorizes men [. . . yet] which contains the woman within the domestic realm [. . . . and is] produced at a cost—the cost is a woman's life-energies" (182). Aunt Jennifer may have been such a creature at one time, but now she is as frozen in her marriage as the tigers are on the canvas.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Aunt Jennifer to her tigers. What qualities does each have that the other lacks? Who is the freer of the two? Justify your answer.
2. What sort of person must Aunt Jennifer be? Why would it be important to Rich as a young poet that Aunt Jennifer be "a person as distinct from myself as possible"?
3. Examine "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" from a feminist point of view and from a patriarchal point of view. How might each interpret the poem and its symbolism?

"Living in Sin" (1955)

Rich writes of the 1950s as a time when "life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage . . . women didn't talk to each other very much in the fifties—not about their secret emptinesses, their frustrations" ("When We Dead Awaken" 95). Rich believed that poetry could help women deal with that isolation.

"Living In Sin" offers readers a glimpse through the keyhole of one woman's illicit relationship. The reader sees not as voyeur, but as kindred spirit, as a woman who has longed to be loved and waited for the moment when a man would choose her, only to be saddened by how quickly he tires of her.

The poem describes the passivity inherent in being a woman who has accepted the romantic dream: "She thought the studio would keep itself; / no dust upon the furniture of love." As

the woman soon discovers, love does not care for itself. The man in the couple yawns, plays a few notes on the piano, and goes out for cigarettes. The woman is effectively trapped by domesticity, symbolically threatened by a cockroach that crawls out of the cabinet, leaving numberless others behind it, ominously waiting to appear. She dusts, makes the bed, and in frustration with her yet-to-return lover, lets the coffee pot boil over. Still, by evening she is "back in love again, / though not so wholly." The romantic dream thus triumphs over reality.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How do the activities of the man and woman reflect society's roles for them? Cite from the text to support your answer.
2. Rewrite the poem from the point of view of each of the characters. Be sure to remain true to the poem's setting and period, considering cultural and societal expectations for each gender.
3. What factors contribute to the disillusionment experienced by the woman in this poem? Compare her situation to that of women today.

"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" (1963)

Adrienne Rich may have been schooled in poetic traditions, but nothing she learned at Radcliffe could prepare her for the difficulty of writing poetry while raising three young sons. Nor could it forewarn her of the condescension she would face from her male colleagues, who called her poetry "sweet." Add to that the turbulence of America during the 1960s, and it only makes sense that Rich's poetry would evolve to reflect her changing identity.

This new poetry, different in form and substance, reflected a keener awareness of woman's role in the patriarchal society that is America. The 10-part poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law" pictures mythic, historical, and literary women, such as Emily Dickinson, Corinna, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Shelley to illustrate how women are defined in terms of their relationships to men. Even the title of the collection fails to allow the woman her own identity. She is not named specifically, or even called the woman or the girl, but labeled in relation to another because of her marriage to a man. She is simply a daughter-in-law, not an individual.

Rich expertly weaves quotes from many men throughout the poem, interspersing them without explanation as examples of how women have been discounted throughout history. It would be easy for the casual reader to miss their importance. In some ways the poetry of Adrienne Rich could be likened to the quilt codes of the Underground Railroad—a map for the oppressed so that they may be guided to freedom. Women who read carefully could see in the lines "Not that it is done well, but / that it is done at all?" an echo from a quotation by Dr. Samuel Johnson, who compared a woman preaching to a dog walking on its hind legs. A later line: "You all die at fifteen," said Diderot, voices a male prejudice of the 1950s, implying that women are worthless without their virginity.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Rich has layered the poem with allusions to famous real and fictional characters. How do these references add depth to her work? Is there any pattern in the characters she chooses?
2. Part 4 begins, "Knowing themselves too well in one another." How does this line reflect the way women interact in society? In families? In the business arena? Explain.
3. What are the monsters with which a thinking woman sleeps? How do you think Rich would define a "thinking woman"? Does a thinking man also sleep with monsters?

"I Am in Danger—Sir—" (1966)

"I Am in Danger—Sir—" is a tribute to Emily Dickinson, a poet of whom Rich writes, "I have been surprised at how narrowly her work, still, is

known by women who are writing poetry, how much her legend has gotten in the way of her being repossessed, as a source and a foremother" (*On Lies* 167). In an essay entitled "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," Rich informs readers of key components in that legend. Emily Dickinson composed nearly 2,000 poems, to see only seven published within her lifetime. Rich writes of the dedication it must have taken for a woman to devote her life to writing in the 19th century when the "corseting of women's bodies, choices, and sexuality could spell insanity to a woman genius" (*On Lies* 161).

In fact, Dickinson's writing earned her the label of "half-cracked" by the magazine editor whom she most admired, Thomas Higginson. In "I Am in Danger—Sir—" Rich quotes Dickinson's poem # 488: "Myself was formed—a Carpenter— / An unpretending time / My plane—and I, together wrought / Before a Builder came" as evidence that Dickinson knew her "measure, regardless of the judgments of others" (171). Still she could not help but be affected by their opinions, which "battered" at her

> till the air buzzing with soiled language
> sang in your ears
> of Perjury
> ("I Am in Danger—Sir—")

Erkkila suggests that this song of perjury results from years of watching women falsify themselves in attempts to please men in a patriarchal society (Langdell 85). Knowing that she was formed in an "unpretending time" Dickinson has a clear choice: She must conform to the standards of the time or know that she will not be accepted by her peers. Withdrawing from society was a matter of survival for Dickinson, as is suggested in the final lines of Rich's poem:

> and in your half-cracked way you chose
> silence for entertainment,
> chose to have it out at last
> on your own premises.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare the life of Emily Dickinson to that of Adrienne Rich. Why might Dickinson serve as a kindred spirit for Rich? Study the writers described in this anthology for someone with whom you could identify. Describe the ways in which you connect on a personal level to that person's writings.
2. In her essay "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson," Rich describes the dismissive manner with which editors handled Dickinson's work. How is the work of women perceived today? Why do you feel that is so? Explain your answer.

"The Observer" (1969)

As in other poems where she has illuminated the lives of women, in "The Observer" Rich again seeks to show readers an unconventional side of women. Dian Fossey, the subject of the poem, was born in 1932 in California. Having chosen a career in animal research over marriage and motherhood, Fossey joined a team of researchers in Africa to study the behavior of gorillas. Fossey soon realized that in order to make any new discoveries regarding gorillas, she would have to establish her own research center. She logged thousands of hours of observations, eventually becoming so embedded in the gorillas' social structure that they grew to trust her. Unfortunately poaching is a profitable industry in Africa, and Fossey was murdered in 1985, possibly as a result of her antipoaching activism.

Yet, the transitional line "When I lay me down to sleep" warns readers that the poem is more than a tribute to an outstanding woman. Rich compares the solitude and protection afforded Fossey to the "panicky life-cycle" of her own tribe. She envies the simplicity of the life Fossey has chosen, studying these strange beasts that humans might label as savage, and slips in the irony that it is our culture that has its "daily executions" in which she must live.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare "The Observer" to Rich's other poems about identifiable women. What techniques does she use to ensure readers will know the identity of the poem's inspiration? Choose a famous person who has inspired you in some way and create a poem that employs some of Rich's techniques of embedded identity markers.
2. What are "the laws [Rich] cannot subscribe to"? What do you think are the laws she can subscribe to?
3. Rich wrote "The Observer" in 1968 (published in 1969), 17 years before Dian Fossey was murdered in her cabin. How might the poem change if Rich had written with the knowledge of poaching and its effects on Fossey's life?

"When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971)

In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Adrienne Rich celebrates the 1970s as a time of "awakening consciousness" for women. The title is from Henrik Ibsen's 1899 play that examines the life of women as the subject matter for male artists in their creation of culture. Rich contends that women have long slumbered while their lives were put to men's purposes, and the few women who did dare to question inequities or seek for themselves a different sort of life were thought defective in some way. But Rich describes the awakening that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s as a "collective reality" that made it "no longer such a lonely thing to open one's eyes" (Gelpi 90).

Continuing her analogy to slumber, Rich describes the confusion and disorientation that accompany the sudden awakening of the female consciousness. She challenges women and female writers in particular to acquaint themselves with the writing of the past, so that they may "know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on tradition but to break its hold over us."

Of particular interest is Rich's discussion exploring the difference between the male and female creative processes and the way society is set up to sabotage one while supporting the other. Men have long been afforded periods of sustained silence: time to think and write, absolute necessities, according to Rich, if one is to harness the "subversive function of the imagination." Women, with their traditional responsibilities of child rearing and household tasks, are constantly multitasking, so that even if they do hold full-time jobs, it is usually they who must constantly juggle the children and the home instead of sharing in a partnership, as would seem to make sense. As a result, women never have those periods of sustained silence when a poem may coalesce or a character may take shape. Rich concludes in her essay that "to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination" (Gelpi 96).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read the original play that inspired Rich's essay, Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken,* which examines the use that male artists have made of women and women's gradual awakening to the hijacking of their lives. Discuss the relevance of Ibsen's play to today's society, and its connection to Rich's essay.
2. Rich states that her style was "formed first by male poets: by the men [she] was reading as an undergraduate—Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden" (Gelpi 94). Has poetry instruction changed since Rich's time, or are the styles of today's poets still formed first and mainly by male poets? If they are, is there any reason to consider a change? Support your position with points from this and other texts.
3. Survey the required reading lists of your high school or college. What percentage of the authors are minorities? What percentage are women? How does that compare to the racial/gender makeup of your school? How do you interpret your findings? What would writers

such as Maya Angelou, Adrienne Rich, Jimmy Santiago Baca say about your findings?

"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"
(From *A Will To Change,* 1971)

The title for this poem is from a 17th-century poem by the London poet John Donne. Donne's poem is a farewell from one soul to another but suggests that though these lovers separate, they "endure not yet / A breach, but an expansion, / Like gold to an aery thinness beat."

In her essay "When We Dead Awaken," Rich admits feeling a sense of despair during her marriage, torn between "love—womanly, maternal love, altruistic love—a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism—a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others" (Gelpi 97). A year after she left her husband, he committed suicide, an act that must have compounded the feelings of guilt she already felt simply by standing up for her own needs, by doing "something very common, in [her] own way."

"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" is part elegy, then. It is part admission that Conrad's death has harmed her, left her feeling guilty for her "swirling wants" ignored once more by his "frozen lips." The weight of her guilt turns her own skills against her, so that all she has longed to accomplish as a writer becomes nearly impossible under the mountains that have lost their meaning. Even grammar "turned and attacked."

This notion of language turned inside out results in part from Rich's belief that in order for women to break free of traditional roles within the patriarchal society, there must be a new way of looking at not only women, but men, and the roles both genders accept for themselves so that neither is typecast into a position that will cause frustration and resentment.

Despite the speaker's muddled writings, she does managed one last shot at the departed before releasing his spirit to its final repose, something he must hear now because he never heard it in his life: that the daily repetition of her life was as much a death to her as the finality of his own suicide.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is Rich's poem a tribute to or indictment of her dead husband? In terms of the images Rich uses in the poem, what impression do you have of the relationship between her and Conrad?
2. Compare Rich's poem with Donne's in style and meaning. Which techniques are common to both poems?
3. The critic Cheri Langdell suggests that Rich's use of the word *common* in the final line is synonymous with *vulgar* (111). If that is true, how might the meaning of the poem change?

"Power" (1974)

Rich accepted the National Book Award in the name of all the women "whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture, often at great cost and in great pain" (Gelpi 204). In "Power" Rich writes of another woman who served in such capacity, Marie Curie.

The poem begins with the innocent unearthing of an amber bottle, "living in the earth-deposits of our history." The implication is that the bottle has outlived the people who purchased the cure it supposedly contained. The voice of the poem then goes on to say she read of Marie Curie, describing Curie's illness from radiation poisoning in her attempt to purify the element. Although there is no direct link between the bottle and Curie, one could conclude that the bottle is symbolic of Curie, a woman of great intelligence who was determined to succeed and ultimately killed by her singular quest for success. She succeeds in her scientific pursuit but is left an empty shell, with "cataracts on her eyes / the cracked and suppurating skin of her finger-ends / till she could no longer hold a test-tube or a pencil."

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is the significance of the bottle unearthed? How does it relate to the themes of the poem? Compare the symbol of the bottle to other symbols within Rich's poetry.
2. Explore the possible implications of the title "Power." To what types of power could the title refer? Who holds the power? When is denial a form of power?
3. What impact does Rich's use of physical space and punctuation have on the meaning of the poem? Discuss several examples, citing from the text to support your response.
4. Whom does Rich ultimately hold accountable for Marie Curie's death? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

"If Not with Others, How?" (1985)

Rich was the elder of two daughters born to affluent parents for whom education was the foremost priority. Her father taught her "to hold reading and writing sacred" (*Arts of the Possible* 104). Although he was Jewish, he never introduced her to any of the traditions of his faith. During her time at Radcliffe College, Rich explored her Jewish heritage, finding acceptance and belonging in her newfound cultural identity for which she had been longing. Rich later quipped that though she was raised a "heterosexual gentile," she would become a "Jewish lesbian" (Langdell 12).

When Rich initially sought to utilize her education in order to effect social change, she was held back by the limits of a patriarchal society. In her essay "If Not with Others, How?" Rich looks at the dual exclusion faced by Jewish women and argues that the discrimination they have endured should serve to unite them into a powerful political coalition.

Rich opposes the type of hypocrisy that allows Americans to oppose South African apartheid, while ignoring racism on our own soil in its many malignant systemic forms. She insists that the success of the work depends on an understanding of our history as a country that "has used skin color as the prime motive for persecution and genocide." Only once we have a clear notion of what it is that we must overcome can we move past that to affirm life in its many forms.

The essay ends by returning to the central question, extrapolated from the story of Hillel's three questions:

> If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
> If I am only for myself, what am I?
> If not now, when?

Hillel's questions reflect the classic Hebrew philosophy of a conscious effort to balance the pursuit of self-interest with service to others. Rich adds her own question, "If Not with Others, How?" implying that the goals toward which we work are best sought collectively.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Rich cites the medieval philosopher Judah ha-Levi as identifying "a hierarchy of all species, places on earth, races, families, and even languages." Rich goes on to say that, as a woman, she rejects "all such hierarchies." How do you feel about such hierarchies? What messages (subliminal and blatant) does our society send about its hierarchy of values?
2. Rich describes pride as follows: "Pride is often born in the place where we refuse to be victims, where we experience our own humanity under pressure, where we understand that we are not the hateful projections of others but intrinsically ourselves" ("If Not with Others, How?"). Then she asks readers whether perhaps she has not just defined love. What is the difference between pride and love? When is it possible for one to exist without the other? When might one interfere with the other? Define the terms using poems by Rich and other authors included in this text.
3. Respond to Rich's claim that America has never "mourned or desisted in or even acknowledged the original, deliberate, continuing genocide of the indigenous American people now called

the Indians." What do Native American writers have to say on the subject?

"Transcendental Etude" (1977)

Dedicated to her life partner, Michelle Cliff, "Transcendental Etude" celebrates the beginning of a new knowledge for women, a time when they may learn how to exist without the prescribed gender roles of the patriarchal society of the past. But there is a sadness to the poem, too, a worry that the work may be hard: "No one ever told us we had to study our lives, / make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history / or music, that we should begin / with the simple exercises first / and slowly go on trying the hard ones." Yet that learning is what we are here to do, and Rich tells us there is a time when we "have to take ourselves more seriously or die."

Central to the poem is the image of woman born of woman, of being pulled from all we have known, cord cut, pitched into "utter loneliness." Rich has written at length about woman's need to remember her roots, to be (metaphorical) midwife for herself, and society's insistence that such love for self is unnatural. The next lines of the poem describe in perfect eloquence the "homesickness for a woman, for ourselves" that Rich attributes to women. The speaker reclaims her birthright through love for another woman, finding "a whole new poetry beginning here."

The image of woman as creator is furthered in the final stanza. She leaves the room when an argument erupts so that she may go to her art—a creative piece that incorporates myriad everyday items in an exotic arrangement. In essence she creates her own world from the discarded fragments of others'. Yet she is humble enough to believe that her work has "nothing to do with eternity."

Rich has written openly about being a lesbian, and "Transcendental Etude" certainly addresses lesbian love. But to limit a reading to that interpretation, or to discount the homesickness Rich describes as applicable only to lesbians, would be a disservice. Before Rich began to write about lesbianism, she was a leading proponent of feminism.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What does the title of the poem mean? How does it relate to the body of Rich's poetry and the messages she has tried to communicate throughout her life's work?
2. What is the significance of the woman who walks away from the argument to create art? What do the items in her composition represent?
3. Compare the composition that "has nothing to do with eternity" in this poem with the use of quilts in Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use." How does each writer use language to illustrate the value of artistry within a culture? How has the role of artistry continued to play a vital role in today's culture?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON RICH AND HER WORK

1. W. H. Auden praised Rich's first collection of poetry for its "detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible" (Gelpi 126). Erica Jong praised Rich's *Diving into the Wreck* for its empathy, stating, "Empathy is the essential tool of the poet" (Gelpi 171). Align yourself with either stance and, using selections from this and other texts, defend your opinion.
2. Discuss the cause/effect relationship between the arts and politics in the poetry of Adrienne Rich. Which has the greater ability to influence the other?
3. Discuss Rich's assertion that "poetry has been charged with aestheticizing, thus being complicit in, the violent realties of power, of practices like collective punishment, torture, rape, and genocide" (*Poetry and Commitment* 22). Is it impossible, as Adorno has suggested, to write lyric poetry after the Holocaust? What of Carolyn Forché's poetry of witness? Can this be a response to Adorno's statement? To Rich's? In what way?
4. Rich borrowed titles for many of her poems from other poems. Compare the poems and the possible reasons for Rich's choices.

5. "If Not with Others, How?" mentions an America "whose history is Disneyland, whose only legitimized passion is white male violence, whose people are starving for literal food and also for intangible sustenance they cannot always name, whose opiate is denial." How does Rich's own poetry both support and challenge this proposition?

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Kathy Higgs-Coulthard

Leslie Marmon Silko (1948–)

What I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being.

(quoted in Rosen 176)

Driving along New Mexico's Interstate 40, one might encounter a string of wonders: a herd of pronghorn antelope bounding through high desert grasses, a mare and colt grazing beneath a wind-twisted pine, a Santa Fe locomotive like a Christmas toy crawling along the base of a great red rock. Not far north are the undulating mounds and eroded rocks of the Bisti badlands; south is the cinder cone of the Bandera volcano, and under the ancient lava flows lie ice caves that have remained frozen for thousands of years. Midway between Gallup and Albuquerque is Mount Taylor, the "Turquoise Mountain" jutting skyward from the southwestern part of the San Mateo Mountains. In Navajo legend, the sacred Turquoise Mountain was fashioned from the sky with a great flint knife and decorated with turquoise, rain, dark mist, and all the species of animals and birds. It is the home of the mythic Turquoise Boy (Dootl'izhii 'Ashkii) and Yellow Corn Girl (Naadá'áltsoii 'Át'ééd).

This is the land where the Native American novelist, short-story writer, and poet Leslie Marmon Silko grew up, and it is also the setting for many of her creative works. Silko writes primarily about relations between people, between cultures, and between humans and the natural world. Of mixed ancestry herself—Laguna Pueblo, Plains Indian, Anglo, and Mexican—she writes from the intersection of cultural traditions.

Born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on March 5, 1948, to Leland Howard Marmon, a photographer, and Mary Virginia Leslie, Silko was raised at Old Laguna, a picturesque village about 45 miles west of Albuquerque, just north of Interstate 40. In 1948, her father, just out of the army, was managing the Marmon Trading Post in Old Laguna and just beginning his career as a professional photographer.

Leslie Marmon Silko grew up in the house where her father was born, on the southeast edge of Old Laguna—not in the village, but not outside it either. Built in the 1880s out of rock and adobe, it stood beside the house of Silko's great-grandmother, who had married a white man. In some ways like Silko herself, her ancestral home stood between the Indian world, represented by the village proper, and the Anglo world, represented by the busy highway, with its tourists and travelers and 18-wheelers.

The house was situated near the Rio San José, which runs along the south and southeast sides of the village—the border separating the village from the land along Interstate 40. In several of Silko's stories, this part of the river becomes a "contact zone" where different races and different genders meet (Nelson 16). It is also the place where the spirits of the Ka't'sinas gather once a year. Ka't'sinas, supernatural entities who influence the natural world, act as intermediaries

between humans and the gods. In these yearly ceremonies, just before dawn on a given day in November, the Ka't'sinas gather at the river crossing on their way into the village and take on the bodies of the masked dancers. This is the transforming event that Tayo, the protagonist of Silko's novel *Ceremony,* recalls when he watches the dawn spread across the sky:

> He remembered the sound of the bells in late November, when the air carried the jingling like snowflakes in the wind. Before dawn, southeast of the village, the bells would announce their approach, the sound shimmering across the sand hills, followed by the clacking of turtle-shell rattles—all these sounds gathering with the dawn. Coming closer to the river, faintly at first, faint as the pale yellow light emerging across the southeast horizon, the sounds gathered intensity from the swelling colors of the dawn. And at the moment the sun came over the edge of the horizon, they suddenly appeared on the riverbank, the Ka't'sina approaching the river crossing. (181–182)

Robert Nelson suggests that Silko's affinity for this place, this river crossing, perhaps reflects what she feels is her own position, occupying an intersectional space with respect to both Laguna "within" and the dominant Anglo mainstream "out there" (15–16). In a biographical note at the end of *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit,* Silko says, "I suppose at the core of my writing is the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed, or mixed-blooded person; what it is to grow up neither white nor fully traditional Indian. It is for this reason that I hesitate to say that I am representative of Indian poets or Indian people. I am only one human being, one Laguna woman" ("Old and New Biographical Notes" 197).

Her great-grandfather Robert went to Laguna as a surveyor from Ohio, just after the Civil War. He married Marie Anaya, referred to as Grandma A'mooh in *Storyteller,* and they had two sons, Kenneth and Henry. Her great-grandfather "never seemed much interested in returning to Ohio," Silko writes in *Storyteller*:

> He had learned to speak Laguna
> and Grandpa Hank said when great-grandpa
> went away from
> Laguna
> white people who knew
> sometimes called him "Squaw Man." (16)

She also tells a story about when Grandpa Hank and Kenneth were little boys, and their father took them along on one of his trips to Albuquerque:

> The boys got hungry
> so great-grandpa started to take them
> through the lobby of the only hotel in
> Albuquerque
> at that time.
> Grandpa Hank said that when the hotel
> manager
> spotted him and Kenneth
> the manager stopped them.
> He told Grandpa Marmon that he was always
> welcome
> when he was alone
> but when he had Indians with him
> he should use the back entrance to reach the café.
> My great-grandfather said,
> "These are my sons."
> He walked out of the hotel
> And never would set foot in that hotel again
> not even years later
> when they began to allow Indians inside. (17)

Silko's great-grandmother Marie had attended the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, and she and Robert sent their son Henry, Silko's paternal grandfather, to the Sherman Institute in California. Her great-aunt Susie had also attended both the Carlisle School and Dickinson College and taught school at Laguna upon her return. "Not surprisingly, given such a heritage," writes Robert Nelson, "Leslie Marmon Silko grew up in a house full of books and stories, part of an extended family whose members have

always been prominent in Laguna's history of contact with Euro-American social, political, economic, and educational forces. The story of the Marmon family at Laguna is a story of outsiders who became insiders and of insiders who became outsiders—a story about the arts of cultural mediation, from both sides of the imaginary borderline" (17).

Two women in particular, her grandmother Lilly and her aunt Susie, made young Leslie familiar with the cultural folklore of the Laguna and Keres people through stories of her father's people and their shared history. She was in fact raised in that borderline between the oral and written traditions. Of her aunt Susie, Silko writes in *Storyteller* that she "had come to believe very much in books and in schooling." But at the same time, she was

> of a generation,
> the last generation here at Laguna,
> that passed down an entire culture
> by word of mouth
> an entire history
> an entire vision of the world
> which depended upon memory
> and retelling by subsequent generations. (5–6)

And the wonder and value of storytelling in the oral tradition is that it

> depends upon each person
> listening and remembering a portion
> and it is together—
> all of us remembering what we have heard
> together—
> that creates the whole story
> the long story of the people.
> I remember only a small part.
> This is what I remember. (*Storyteller* 6–7)

Silko attended Laguna Day School until the fifth grade. At school, she was at first prohibited from speaking the Keresan language that her aunts and grandmothers used in storytelling. After the fifth grade, she commuted to Albuquerque to attend a Catholic school. In interviews, Silko has revealed that living in Laguna society as a mixed blood was at times painful. She was made aware that she was different from, and not fully accepted by, both full-blooded Native Americans and white people. Yet despite the isolation and loneliness this caused her, Silko was able to overcome the initial lack of acceptance and to identify with Laguna culture. Though keenly aware of the equivocal position of mixed bloods in Laguna society, she considers herself Laguna: "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being" (Rosen 176).

In 1966, she married Richard C. Chapman, and they had one son, Robert William Chapman. She attended the University of New Mexico and earned a bachelor of arts degree in English in 1969. During her senior year, she published "Tony's Story" in *Thunderbird,* the university's literary magazine. More importantly, she published "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" in *New Mexico Quarterly.* Both stories have since been reprinted in various publications. That same year, 1969, she divorced Richard Chapman and entered law school at the University of New Mexico under the American Indian Law School Fellowship Program, determined to use the legal profession to obtain justice for her people.

In 1971, she was awarded the Discovery Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. She left law school and began taking graduate classes in English. She also began teaching at Navajo Community College on the Navajo reservation at Tsaile, Arizona. She married her second husband, John Silko, and later taught creative writing and a course in oral tradition at the University of New Mexico.

In 1972, her second son, Cazimir Silko, was born, and she moved with her husband and children to Ketchikan, Alaska. Although 1973 was self-admittedly a difficult year for her, with emotional turmoil and the endless rain of the Alaskan coast, 1974 proved to be a banner year for publications. Ken Rosen published his anthology *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* which included not only Silko's title story but also her "Bravura," "Humaweepi, the Warrior Priest," and four other stories. The *Chicago Review* published "Lullaby,"

and the Greenfield Review Press published *Laguna Woman: Poems by Leslie Silko.*

She returned briefly to the Laguna Pueblo reservation in 1976, holding academic appointments first at the University of New Mexico and then the University of Arizona, and the following year was awarded the Pushcart Prize for poetry. In 1977, she published her novel *Ceremony,* which has been almost universally acclaimed. In 1978, she moved to Tucson and began teaching at the University of Arizona. It was here that she began her friendship and correspondence with the poet James Wright, which resulted in the book *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace: Letters Between Leslie Marmon Silko and James Wright* (1986).

In 1981, she was awarded the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, also known as the "genius grant," which would allow her to devote herself to writing full time, and published *Storyteller,* a collection of stories, photographs, reminiscences, and poems. In 1988, she was named a Living Cultural Treasure by the New Mexico Council for the Humanities. In 1991, she published her long-awaited novel *Almanac of the Dead* to mixed reviews.

Today Silko lives near Tucson, Arizona, and continues to write and to receive awards. In 1994, she received the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas Lifetime Achievement Award, an honor she shares with N. Scott Momaday, Simon J. Ortiz, and Joy Harjo. In 1996, Simon & Schuster published *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today.* Silko's third novel, *Garden in the Dunes* (1999), takes place in the late 19th century and explores the relationship between myth and history.

"The Man to Send Rain Clouds" (1969)

Silko's first published story, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," which appeared in *New Mexico Quarterly* in 1969, is the deceptively simple tale of the more or less traditional burial of an old Pueblo shepherd named Teofilo. The Catholic priest, committed to converting the Pueblo people to Christianity, protests that the old man will not be given last rites or even a funeral mass. Yet the priest is talked into sprinkling holy water on the body, as the departed's granddaughter requested, "so he won't be thirsty," and the story ends with Teofilo's grandson Leon's feeling happy about the sprinkling of the holy water because "now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure" (*Storyteller* 186).

As Silko's novel *Ceremony* makes clear, tribal traditions and rituals are not diluted but made strong through their ability to incorporate new elements and to adapt to changing circumstances. The ability of the people to incorporate even traditions that are meant to negate them, and to change them for their own purposes, is dramatically shown in this early story. "The essential activity is to maintain and create the stories that show others how to survive," writes Alanna Kathleen Brown. "The stories are the on-going process that repudiates cultural genocide" (176).

As Helen Jaskoski points out, the story can be seen as a critique of "single-minded quests for authenticity and the pursuit of cultural survival through avoidance of contamination." Using characters from the story "Storyteller" as examples, she contrasts the assimilated Eskimo jailer, who wants to speak only English, with the protagonist, who feels she must protect her identity from any cultural contamination. In between these two examples, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" offers "a sense of culture not as a monologue whose purity must be maintained regardless of the cost, but as a dynamic process, a matter of strategic negotiations, respectful deliberation and consultation, a sensitivity to nuances of communication, and above all a sense of proportion regarding which things are matters of principles and must be maintained and which are secondary means that may be adjusted to suit the occasion" (94).

For Discussion or Writing

1. How is the detached, multiple point of view appropriate to the meaning of the story? Would a more conventional point of view be effective?

2. Did the priest do the right thing in agreeing to Leon's request to sprinkle holy water on Teofilo's body? What else could he have done?

"Lullaby" (1974)

"Lullaby," first published in the *Chicago Review* in 1974, is a painful story about senseless loss, but also about the processes of both grief and making peace. The main character is an old Navajo woman, Ayah, who has lost her eldest son, Jimmie, in a war and had her remaining two children taken away—apparently because of their tuberculosis but possibly because of a government relocation program. Most of the story's action takes place in her memories as she waits outside a bar for her husband, who has given in to despair.

Ayah's losses are nearly overwhelming. The old wool army blanket she wraps herself up in reminds her at first of her son Jimmie, but the loss is too painful for her to dwell on because he died in the war when his helicopter crashed and burned, and his body was never returned. He is gone, but she cannot even grieve properly because she has no place to do it. "It wasn't like Jimmie died," she laments. "He just never came back" (*Storyteller* 44). Her other two children, Danny and Ella, were taken from her probably because of a 1950s government policy designed to remove Native Americans from reservations and relocate them in urban environments, although the white doctors and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) police indicated her children had tuberculosis. Ayah's husband, Chato, had taught her to sign her name, but he had not taught her English; without knowing the content of the documents thrust at her, she had signed the papers that tore her children from her. "It was worse than if they had died," she thinks, "to lose the children and to know that somewhere, in a place called Colorado, in a place full of sick and dying strangers, her children were without her" (47).

And yet the story is also about recovery and making peace. When Ayah is troubled or pained by her memories, she often restores her balance and harmony by focusing on the natural world around her. When troubled by the loss of Jimmie, she remembers his birth, the natural process of life, the smell of the bee flowers growing at the springs. When she sees the fraying edges of the government-issue army blanket, Ayah recalls her mother weaving traditional blankets and the comfort they gave her. At the end of the story, Ayah remembers a song that her mother and her grandmother used to sing to their babies, a song whose words describe a natural harmony and unity with the people. Though she cannot remember whether she ever sang it for her children, she sings it now, finally, for Chato, as he is dying:

> The earth is your mother
> she holds you.
> The sky is your father
> he protects you.
> Sleep,
> sleep.
> Rainbow is your sister,
> she loves you
> The winds are your brothers
> they sing to you.
> Sleep,
> sleep.
> We are together always
> We are together always
> There never was a time
> when this
> was not so.

For Discussion or Writing

Native American fiction is sometimes said to have a more "cyclic" structure than Western-style fiction. Is that true of this work? How does the structure affect its meaning?

"Yellow Woman" (1974)

In the beginning of Silko's "Yellow Woman," from *The Man to Send Rain Clouds,* a young Pueblo woman tries to awaken the stranger she

has spent the night with beside a river. He tells her he is a ka'tsina spirit, calls her Yellow Woman, and compels her to go with him to his mountain home. She does not believe he is a ka'tsina, but she goes anyway, wondering about him, about herself, and about their relation to the old stories. After the stranger is caught rustling cattle, the young woman walks back to her family, sad to leave him and hoping he seeks her out again.

Paula Gunn Allen tells us that in their earliest forms, Yellow Woman stories were associated with the rituals featuring the Corn Mother (*Sacred Hoop* 226). Traditional Yellow Woman stories "are about daily life, not merely because they speak to the concerns of loss, persecution, rescue, and the relation of these to the sacred, but because the Yellow Women stolen are Irriaku—sacred ears of corn that link persons to our Mother, Iyatiku. The loss of these Yellow Women portends loss of rain, of livelihood, and of connection between the people and the sacred place where Iyatiku lives, Shipap" (*Spider Woman's Granddaughters* 210).

The style of Silko's story juxtaposes bits and pieces of these ancient Yellow Woman tales from the mythological world with the sharp and vivid details the narrator gives us of her world:

> The small brown water birds came to the river and hopped across the mud, leaving brown scratches in the alkali-white crust. They bathed in the river silently. I could hear the water, almost at our feet where the narrow fast channel bubbled and washed green ragged moss and fern leaves. (*Storyteller* 54)

Storyteller contains six Yellow Woman stories, including one in which she is kidnapped by Buffalo Man, is rescued by Arrow Boy, and then reveals their hiding place while they are trying to escape. Arrow Boy shoots her dead with an arrow because he realizes she is in love with Buffalo Man, and this is the start of the Laguna people's hunting buffalo. Now, we are told, nobody will go hungry "because / one time long ago / our daughter, our sister Kochinninako / went away with them" (*Storyteller* 76). Another version starts, "You should understand / the way it was / back then, / because it is the same / even now." When Yellow Woman finally goes back home, her husband tells her she had better have a good story for the 10 months she has been gone and for those twin baby boys. The poem ends, "My husband / left / after he heard the story / and moved back in with his mother. / It was my fault and / I don't blame him either. / I could have told / the story / better than I did" (94–98).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What do you think is the significance of the narrator's romance with Silva? What does the *narrator* think is the significance of her romance with Silva?
2. How are the stories about Yellow Woman and the Mountain Ka't'sina relevant to this story?

Ceremony (1977)

Ceremony, published in 1977, tells the story of a mixed-blood Indian, Tayo, who undergoes a remarkable ceremony to heal himself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. A survivor of both combat and captivity in World War II, he is suffering from traumatic stress disorder made worse by white medicine and psychoanalysis. Eventually, an unusual medicine man named Betonie, a woman named Montano, and a quest to find his uncle Josiah's lost cattle help Tayo to see the convergence and interconnectedness of all life and finally to understand and accept himself as he gives meaning to the events that he has experienced.

The style of the novel reinforces these primary concerns and perfectly reflects the emotional tenor of the story. The novel's beginning is as disjointed and fragmentary as Tayo's mental condition. Time is undone as Tayo finds himself adrift in psychic disorder: "He cried at how the world had come undone. . . . Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time" (18).

The hybrid form of the novel also helps create this initial sense of chaos and disorder. The work combines not only past and present but also poetry and prose, English and Keresan (the language spoken by many Pueblo people). Traditional novel form is juxtaposed with Laguna Pueblo oral traditions and stories in such a way that they mutually transform each other. Memories, flashbacks of the war, and visions all contribute to the reader's feeling of disruption; this makes Tayo's task difficult—as well as the reader's—to gather the fragments into a coherent whole, to find a pattern of meaning.

"What differentiates Silko's style from that of most Anglo-American novelists," notes Kristin Herzog, "is her use of oral traditions which are intricately woven into the narrative in the form of poems, ritual prayers, stories, and tribal rumors." Herzog sees the more linear, novelistic narrative as a "masculine" element of style, while the interwoven "free associations of tribal rumors, fragments of history, and ritual songs" are more feminine, thereby creating balance and vitality of expression (Herzog 26). Early in the novel, in fact, we encounter a poem about an old man "pregnant" with stories like a woman with child: "See, it is moving. / There is life here / for the people" (2). Silko's style of "blending mythical and rational, circular and linear elements correspond to the balance of male and female traits in her characters, and they challenge the reader to question Western ways of portraying gender" (Herzog 26–27).

But not everyone approves of Silko's use of tribal narratives. Another writer from Laguna Pueblo, Paula Gunn Allen, argues that "Tayo" is in fact the name of a well-known mythical figure in their tribal traditions, and the tribal narrative Silko tells within the novel "is a clan story, and is not to be told outside of the clan." She claims that previous "security breaches" of information about Pueblo religion and social culture resulted in drought—the same drought depicted in the novel—as well as the disastrous discovery of uranium on the reservation and its subsequent mining and use in the World War II atomic bomb. Silko "is aware of the discovery of the uranium used to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, she is aware of the devastating drought, the loss of self that the entire Pueblo suffered in those years, yet she is unaware of one small but essential bit of information: the information that telling the old stories, revealing the old ways can only lead to disaster" ("Special Problems" 384).

From the beginning of *Ceremony,* however, Silko seems to be deliberately depicting bits of ancient ritual not merely to reveal them but to provide the authentic foundation for a contemporary healing ceremony. First we are given a curious tribal narrative about Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, who is also Grandmother Spider. Whatever she thinks about appears, we are told, and with the help of her sisters, together they created the universe.

> Thought-Woman, the spider,
> named things and
> as she named them
> they appeared.
> She is sitting in her room
> thinking of a story now
>
> I'm telling you the story
> she is thinking. (1)

This seems to suggest, among other implications, that the ceremony within the story is also being thought by Grandmother Spider, that as time turns the story evolves and the ceremonies are created anew. The metaphor of the web is especially appropriate for this novel because of the random yet cyclic pattern of the web, its simultaneous strength and fragility. In *Ceremony,* Tayo's healing begins when he learns "to bring a conscious, intuitive care to the balancing of a delicate universe" (Brown 172).

As Betonie, the part Mexican, part Navajo medicine man, explains to Tayo, "In many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing . . . at one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. . . . The people mistrust this

greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong" (126). Betonie's home, on a hillside on the border between the Navajo reservation and the white town of Gallup, contains not only traditional medicine bundles, painted gourd rattles, and deer-hoof clackers, but also telephone books from distant cities, Santa Fe Railroad calendars, and Coke bottles, "the embodiment of a process of cultural transformation and innovation that sustains creative survival rather than the more familiar narratives of psychological and social disintegration of Native American cultures in the face of Western colonization" (Zamir 396).

By using the traditional name of Tayo, Silko creates a link to a traditional ritual in order to connect her work—and her readers—to the world around them. "In the end, Tayo's story, through the agency of the narrator, becomes for us our ceremony of reading and, in restoring some of our shared humanity despite our cultural differences, offers us a healing equal to Tayo's" (Wiget 89–90).

One of the most powerful themes in *Ceremony* explores the connections among uranium mining on the reservation, the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, the loss and recovery of Indian lands, and Tayo's own confusion of Native American and Japanese faces during his war service in the Pacific:

> He had been so close to it, caught up in it for so long that its simplicity struck him deep inside his chest: Trinity site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on land the Government took from Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos, only a hundred miles northeast of him now. . . . There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. (245–246)

As in her other works, in *Ceremony* Silko blurs the boundary between myth and reality, between the spiritual and the human worlds, but also between the people and the land itself. At the beginning of the novel, the land is suffering from a long and devastating drought, and Tayo is suffering a physical and psychological crisis:

> The pain was solid and constant as the beating of his own heart. The old man only made him certain of something he had feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of the sun into the sand, and the fragile world would be injured. (38)

The novel creates a narrative structure that requires the reader to integrate an initially fragmented presentation into a coherent, linear narrative, as it depicts Tayo's efforts to do the same. By the end of the novel, Tayo discovers his connection to the land and to ancient rituals and so recovers himself. He finds peace by "finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told." As it takes only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, it takes only one to begin to repair the damage done. Tayo's healing offers hope for our own healing, hope for the redemption of tribal cultures and for our world.

For Discussion or Writing

1. What is wrong with Tayo at the beginning of the novel? Why does Ku'oosh's ceremony not work for Tayo? What finally does work for Tayo? How has he changed by the end of the novel?
2. What is the point of the story of Kaup'a'ta the gambler? How does it fit in with the larger concerns of the novel?
3. In what sense is the novel a "ceremony" for the reader as well as for Tayo? How might Native American readers and Americans of European heritage respond differently to this book? What about readers of African or Asian heritages?
4. What is the role of Ts'eh in the novel? Compare her to other female characters. Does it matter

that the main character of *Ceremony* is a man? How might the novel be different if the main character were a woman?

Storyteller (1981)

Silko's *Storyteller,* published in 1981, comprises original short stories and poems, tribal narratives, personal anecdotes, memoirs, family reminiscences, and photographs, many of which were taken by her father, Lee H. Marmon, and her grandfather, Henry C. Marmon. The stories include some of Silko's best, such as "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," "Lullaby," and "Yellow Woman." *Storyteller* is a successful cross-cultural text in which traditional Laguna stories are juxtaposed with traditional Western narratives and a highly personal poetry.

Though many of the stories and poems had been published previously, this is much more than an anthology or a collection. The lack of formal demarcation, such as titles and dates of publication, helps create a seamless whole. *Storyteller* is a distinctively 'readerly' text," writes Linda Krumholz: "The many stories, poems, and photographs are gathered into an apparently random 'scrapbook' form, and it is left to the reader to construct connections between them" (64–65).

Readers' first encounter in *Storyteller* is a poem about a Hopi basket with a figure woven into it "which might be a Grasshopper or a Hummingbird Man." Inside the basket are hundreds of photographs taken in and around Laguna. It was while writing this book, Silko tells us, that she began to realize they had a special relationship to the stories. "The photographs are here because they are part of many of the stories // and because many of the stories can be traced in the photographs" (1). The Hopi basket, with old photographs described in words, some of the narratives framed by the images themselves, of Silko herself as a little girl, of family members, of Old Laguna, becomes a metaphor for the book itself.

As *Storyteller* attempts to integrate the world of the visual image and the written word, it attempts as well to negotiate—if not a common ground, at least a meeting—between the published work and the oral tradition that informs it.

> As with any generation
> the oral tradition depends upon each person
> listening and remembering a portion
> and it is together—
> all of us remembering what we have heard
> together—
> that creates the whole story
> the long story of the people.
>
> I remember only a small part.
> But this is what I remember. (*Storyteller* 6–7)

For Discussion or Writing

1. This book, entitled *Storyteller,* contains a story that is also called "Storyteller." What is the relationship between the story and the book?
2. In this work, Silko is attempting to merge the oral tradition and her own written form. This requires, among other things, an alteration in the structure of traditional narrative to make a Western form express Native American concepts. How successful is she, in your estimation?

Almanac of the Dead (1991)

Almanac of the Dead (1991) is a dystopian novel that depicts an American wasteland of violence, cruelty, self-absorption, and abuse. Silko herself describes *Almanac* as a "763-page indictment for five hundred years of theft, murder, pillage, and rape" (Perry 327), and that is precisely how it reads: As an indictment, it lists few if any admirable characters. As an almanac, it reads like a compendium of discontinuous happenings and stray bits of information rather than linear narratives, but it is unified in its insistence that the traditions of Western liberal individualism will result in "an utterly amoral and atomized society in which each isolated member is indifferent to anything but the

gratifications of his own enervated passions" (St. Clair 141).

"If Almanac's subject matter is not for the squeamish or faint hearted," notes one positive review, "neither are [*sic*] its cast of characters" (Jaimes, Review 57). Among the unlifelike and undeveloped array of characters is Beaufrey, an international broker in snuff films whose "violent, phallocentric self-absorption" and inability to love or even feel anything remotely human are typical of "every so called 'successful' man in Silko's novel" (St. Clair 142). There is also the corrupt Federal District Court judge Arne, who, when he is not enjoying bestiality, enjoys physically injuring women during intimate moments. No one escapes. Women characters are equally incapable of love; even Native American women have been "likewise victimized and perverted by male aggression and oppression" (St. Claire 148). The 70-member cast of characters is rounded out by the revolutionary activist Angelita La Escapia, alias "The Meat Hook," as well as drug- and gun-running mestizas, illegal human organ dealers, drug addicts, alcoholics, strippers, failed mothers, murdered children, and a psychic corpse finder. Silko has said in an interview that in *Almanac* she wished to give "history a character" rather than to focus on conventional character development (Regier 186).

She has also said that both *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* were written to counterbalance historical inaccuracies about Native peoples. Both books reflect experimentation with the form of the novel: *Ceremony* by combining English with Keresan, poetry with prose, hero quests with tribal stories, visions, dreams, and ritual prayers; *Almanac* by building a novel structure eliciting narratives that emerge not from character development but "from the otherwise silent artifacts of the anthropological past and from contemporary objects as diverse as kitchen utensils and computers" (Regier 186).

But the disconnected tales of perverse and broken people are apposed to the gradual but inexorable movement of the indigenous people north in fulfillment of a prophecy that the people and their allies will reclaim the land. Many of these groups, including an "army of the homeless" and eco-warriors who make human bombs out of the terminally ill, converge with "German root doctors," "Celtic leech handlers," and "new-age spiritualists" at the International Holistic Healers Convention in the novel's apocalyptic ending.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why might Silko have rejected a more traditional novel structure in favor of the fragmented and disjointed form of an almanac to tell this story?
2. What is the effect of the flat, undeveloped characters? What might be Silko's point about these people?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON SILKO AND HER WORK

1. Silko is known for her work in many different media, including fiction, poetry, memoir, and even photography. Do you believe she is most effective in any particular medium or when mixing them together? Why or why not?
2. Compare Silko's work to that of other important Native American authors, including Joy Harjo, Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, and Simon J. Ortiz. What if anything do they have in common? Are their differences more striking than their similarities?

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Curtis Yehnert

Gary Snyder (1930–)

How rare to be born a human being!

("Hunting")

Born in San Francisco on May 8, 1930, Gary Snyder moved with his family to Washington when he was two years old, as a result of financial pressures brought on by the Great Depression. There they eked out a living managing a dairy farm and making cedar-wood shingles. Ten years later, they moved to Oregon. When Snyder was seven years old, he had to stay in bed for four months after a serious accident. This recovery time became a turning point in his life when his parents gave him piles of books from the public library, which he read eagerly. From that point on, he developed a voracious reading habit.

But Snyder also worked on his parents' farm and spent significant time in the woods. He became interested in native peoples and, in particular, the Coast Salish tribe and their relationship with nature based on traditional practices. After Snyder's parents separated, his mother, Lois, a newspaper journalist, raised him and his sister. He worked as both a newspaper copy boy and a camp counselor; he also began mountain climbing with a youth group and continued climbing during his twenties and thirties.

Snyder entered Reed College in 1947, on scholarship, and met two other students who would later achieve prominence in West Coast poetry circles, Lew Welch and Philip Whalen. The three became roommates for a time. Snyder studied literature and anthropology and published his first poems in a student literary journal. One summer, he worked as a merchant seaman, a job that gave him contact with other cultures in foreign ports of call and expanded his awareness of our ocean environments. During his undergraduate years, he married Alison Gass. He wrote a senior thesis entitled "The Dimensions of a Haida Myth."

After graduating from Reed, he spent the summer working as a timber scaler at Warm Springs Indian Reservation near Portland, Oregon, and the following year as a fire lookout at Desolation Peak in the North Cascades of Washington. These experiences found their way into his early poems and subsequently appeared in his book *The Back Country*. During this time, Snyder developed an interest in Buddhism and related traditional views of nature associated with the Far East. He also practiced self-taught Zen meditation.

Snyder then attended Indiana University in Bloomington to study anthropology, but stayed for only one semester before moving to San Francisco in 1952. He first stayed with Whalen, who shared his interest in Zen Buddhism. In 1953, after his divorce from Alison Gass, he enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley to study Asian culture and languages. The small cottage he rented in Berkeley, located near the Young Buddhist Association, became a hangout for writers of the fledgling Beat movement. He continued summer work as a forest lookout, on Sourdough Mountain at Mount

Baker National Forest, and worked as a trail builder in Yosemite.

Allen Ginsberg sought out Snyder on the recommendation of Kenneth Rexroth, who introduced Snyder to other members of the Beat movement. Snyder soon met Jack Kerouac, with whom he shared a cabin in Mill Valley, California, for some months in 1955. He and Kerouac climbed Yosemite's 12,000-foot Matterhorn Mountain, an experience that Kerouac enshrined in his novel *Dharma Bums,* whose character Japhy Ryder was modeled after Snyder. Snyder also attended the American Academy of Asian Studies, where, at the time, both Saburo Hasegawa and Alan Watts were teaching.

In October 1955, Snyder read his poem "A Berry Feast" at the now-famous Six Gallery event in San Francisco, the same night Ginsberg first read his poem "Howl." Still, Snyder did not have the urban background typical of Beat members, who regarded him as exotic given his rural origins, wilderness experiences, and history of manual labor. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who published Ginsberg's "Howl" and works of other Beat poets, referred to Snyder as "the Thoreau of the Beat Generation." Snyder's reputation in Beat circles was further enhanced by Alan Watts's positive depiction of him in his influential book *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen,* published in 1959. "Snyder is, in the best sense, a bum," Watts wrote. "His manner of life is a quietly individualistic deviation from everything expected of a 'good consumer.'"

Explaining the Beats' cultural influence in an oral history of Kerouac called *Jack's Book,* Snyder describes the sort of cultural composting the Beats engaged in, which contributed to a cultural shift. "The Beat Generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that existed heretofore, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American Bum. We put them together and opened them out again, and it becomes a literary motif, and then we add some Buddhism to it. The vision of the fifties and sixties taps a deep archetypal vein in the American consciousness."

In 1957, Snyder moved to Japan and, for the next 12 years, lived mainly in Kyoto, studying and meditating at the Daitoku-ji Zen monastery. While there, he translated texts with his collaborator Ruth Fuller Sasaki; his knowledge of written Chinese prepared him for other professional projects as well. For a few years he was married to the American poet Joanne Kyger, who lived with him in Japan. His first book of poetry, *Riprap,* drawing on forest lookout work and his trail-crew experiences in Yosemite, was published in 1959; it was later expanded and published as *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* in 1969.

Snyder published a collection of poems entitled *Myths and Texts* in 1960, followed by *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers without End* in 1965. *Six Sections* was the start of a writing project that was to continue into the late 1990s. In the early 1960s, Snyder traveled through India for several months with his wife, Joanne, and Allen Ginsberg, and met the Dalai Lama. The couple separated soon after the trip and later divorced.

His self-studies continued with initiation into Shugendo, a type of ancient Japanese animism, and geomorphology and forestry. These interests, along with insights from his work as logger, carpenter, fire lookout, and steam freighter crew member, are all reflected in his poetry. Toward the end of his sojourn in Japan, he moved to Suwanose, a small volcanic island in the East China Sea, to practice communal living with a group of like-minded Japanese. Their back-to-the-land lifestyle included gathering edible plants, fishing, and beachcombing. On Suwanose, he married Masa Uehara, with whom he had two sons.

Readers will find useful connections between Snyder's Buddhist beliefs and his environmental views. The Buddhist belief in reincarnation leads to a different view of stewardship of the earth compared to the typically Western, short-term outlook. If one embraces, even philosophically, the idea that one may have lived past lives and may live future lives, sometimes as animal as sometimes as human, that idea leads to the belief that people and animals deserve equal respect and consideration. These ideas illuminate Snyder's concern for human beings and their physical and spiritual connections to the natural world. They also tie in to his interest in

community as a force in both natural and human relationships.

In the late 1960s, Snyder and his wife moved to San Francisco, where he participated in countercultural events such as the 1967 Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park and appeared at various rallies with Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Alan Watts. In 1968, he published *The Back Country,* poems collected over the previous 15 years, which included sections of his translations of poetry by Kenji Miyazawa. Snyder found that he already enjoyed a growing popularity and influence in the expanding popular evolution linking Beat culture to the wider 1960s movements. His emphasis on spiritual quietude, and his advocacy of a simple life lived in the wilds of nature, resonated among those who were dropping out of society to seek a simpler existence. People starting communes, living in teepees in the mountains, or seeking inspiration in the wilds all looked to Snyder's poetry for inspiration and guidance. As he recalled in an interview for *Shambhala Sun* in May 1996:

> We were able to choose and learn other tricks for not being totally engaged with consumer culture. We learned how to live simply and were very good at it in my generation. That was what probably helped shape our sense of community. We not only knew each other, we depended on each other. We shared with each other. And there is a new simple-living movement coming back now, I understand, where people are getting together, comparing notes about how to live on less money, how to share, living simply. (Carolan)

In 1970, Snyder published *Regarding Wave,* which contained more lyrical and family-oriented poems. By the early 1970s, he and his family were homesteading on San Juan Ridge in the Sierra Nevada foothills of northern California, where they built a Japanese-style house, called Kitkitdizze, and established another small community of like-minded friends, ecologically aware Buddhist practitioners. His move to the former "Gold Country" galvanized an interest in the unique character of a wild place, particularly in a region ravaged by hydraulic gold mining in the late 1880s. The poetry he published in the 1970s reflected his renewed immersion in American culture and reinvolvement in the back-to-the-land movement. Establishing community roots in this place, he became an outspoken advocate of watershed politics and an evangelist of bioregionalism. Both have remained major transformational efforts in Snyder's work.

Snyder's ideas began to see wider circulation in such forums as a taped roundtable discussion published in the *San Francisco Oracle,* which took up questions on pressures of the world-population explosion and the developing leisure society of the West. Snyder also understood early on the implications of the Hubbert "peak oil" theory, which found its way into public-policy discussions in the 1970s. Snyder maintained that our "fossil-fuel subsidy" of cheap oil and coal affected a large spectrum of societal relationships, including farming, food distribution, suburban life, and wealth and poverty.

In 1974, his book *Turtle Island,* the title of which refers to a Native American name for the North American continent, won a Pulitzer Prize. The following year, 1975, Governor-elect Jerry Brown appointed him chair of a new California Arts Council, made up primarily of working artists. Snyder's views on culture and society, religions, natural history and the environment, and spirituality also found outlets in essays he published in such volumes as *Earth House Hold* (1969), *The Old Ways* (1977), *The Real Work* (1980), *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), *A Place in Space* (1995), and the *Gary Snyder Reader* (1999). He also published an account of his travels in India in *Passage through India* (1983).

In the mid-1980s, Snyder became a professor at the University of California, Davis, teaching ethnopoetics, creative writing, and the literature of wilderness. Through his teaching, he was able to spread his interest in Far East studies to numerous younger writers. Snyder is now professor emeritus. In 1988, Snyder and Masa Uehara separated, and he was joined at Kitkitdizze by Carole Koda, whom he married in 1991, enlarging his family to two sons (by Uehara) and two young stepdaughters.

Among Snyder's numerous honors and awards are the Bess Hokin Prize (1964) and the Levinson

Prize (1968) from *Poetry* magazine; the American Book Award, for *Axe Handles* (1983); the Poetry Society of America's Shelley Memorial Award (1985/1986); membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1987); the Orion Society's John Hay Award for Nature Writing (1997); the Mountains and Plains Independent Booksellers Association's Regional Book Award (1997), for *Mountains and Rivers without End;* and the Bollingen Prize (1997), whose past recipients have included such distinguished poets as Wallace Stevens, Maryanne Moore, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, and Richard Wilbur. In 1995, *Utne Reader* featured Snyder as one of 100 visionaries who could change your life, while the following year he was recognized with the Robert Kirsch Award for lifetime achievement from the *Los Angeles Times.*

In 1998, Snyder became the first American to receive the Buddhism Transmission Award from the Japanese Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai Foundation, for his distinctive contributions in linking Zen thought and respect for the natural world across a lifelong body of poetry and prose. His most recent publications include *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), a masterwork written over a 40-year time span that has been translated into Japanese and French, and a collection of new poems entitled *Danger on Peaks* (2004). Snyder's active mountain climbing continues even in his sixties: Recently he spent three weeks with a group of family and friends hiking in the Himalayas and trekking up to base camp at Mount Everest.

"Milton by Firelight" (1955)

One of Snyder's early published poems from 1955, and later included in the collection *Riprap,* this is a poem of contrasts. The practical is contrasted with the literary: The "old Singlejack Miner" who can "blast granite" and "build switchbacks" stands in opposition to the "silly story" written by the great English poet John Milton (in his classic 17th-century epic *Paradise Lost,* centered around Adam and Eve) so long ago. Another telling contrast is between the Indian, representing the native inhabitants and caretakers of the land for 14,000 years, and "the chainsaw boy," whose work it is to cut down the natural heritage of old trees. Yet another contrast is between the Sierra mountains of the present and what they will be in Snyder's apocalyptic vision of their future as "dry and dead, home of the scorpion."

The speaker addresses Milton, asking of what use is the story of our "lost generational parents / eaters of fruit." This biblical reference to Adam and Eve ties in with the later phrase "no paradise, no fall," which combines with images of Satan and hell to form the speaker's prediction of a bleak future for our natural world.

"Man, with his Satan" refers to the biblical Satan, who is also a central figure and character in Milton's epic poems; the phrasing here suggests that humans invented this personification of evil. That Satan is "scouring the chaos of the mind" indicates that our behavior, in destroying nature, results from our own mental disorientation and implies that if we can reclaim our proper relationship with nature, we might not doom ourselves. Both Indian and chainsaw boy ride together, perhaps signaling that there are at least two possibilities, always presented together: Will we be caretakers of the land and our natural environment or its destroyers?

The poem ends with an image of trying to gain sure footing: the "bell-mare," "scrambling through loose rocks / on an old trail," as a metaphor for our own modern situation, in which we seem to be confusedly stumbling about trying to find a sensible path into our own future, which is itself but a continuation of the "old trail" of human activity in, and indeed as part of, nature.

For Snyder the poet, the myth or "silly story" told in poems is not really silly at all, but a perhaps prophetic tale of the eventual fall of humankind that is directly evidenced in the "weathering land" and man's "scouring" of the landscape. The poem draws parallels among specific activities in the Sierras, the natural world, and the trajectory in Milton's great poem of paradise and fall, which itself retells the biblical myth of creation and man's self-imposed expulsion from paradise.

A constant theme in Snyder's poetry is evident here: that what goes on in the mind is the key to

understanding, and perhaps changing, what goes on in the physical world. So the answer to the rhetorical question—"What use" is Milton's silly story?—lies in how our own inner reflection on the future we are possibly creating can serve to steer us toward saving paradise, rather than toward experiencing some inevitable fall.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Why does the speaker call on John Milton in particular? Research Milton and read some of the famous passages in his great works *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. To what purpose does Snyder use the words and images of Milton's poems? Do you agree with Snyder's interpretation of the relationship between man and Satan?
2. In the third stanza, Snyder talks more abstractly about the distant future. How does he speak about it? Why does he leave the present so lackadaisically? What does that say about his attitude toward the past? The present?
3. The speaker refers to "no paradise, no fall." What does he mean by this?
4. Snyder's reverence for physical labor aligns him with Robert Frost. Compare Snyder's "Milton by Firelight" to Frost's "Mowing" or "After Apple-Picking." What do these poets share in technique and theme? Where do they diverge? How does this respect for work and the outdoors connect to the American identity?

"Riprap" (1959)

According to a note on the title page of *Riprap* (the book), a riprap is "a cobble of stone laid on steep slick rock to make a trail for horses in the mountains." In this poem, the pattern of words on the page visually mimics the arrangement of riprap stone on a trail, hence riprapping becomes a metaphor for poem making. Poetry is to metaphysics as riprap is to slick rock.

The imagery expands from the specific instances of "bark, leaf, or wall" to include the entire universe—"milky way" and "straying planets"—indicating that poetry itself captures relationships among all elements and dimensions of the cosmos. "These poems" are part of the overall structure of things; therefore, the structural arrangement goes beyond the three dimensions of our physical world to include "worlds like an endless / four-dimensional / Game of *Go,*" referring to the Japanese game of unit structure (similar to checkers), in which a rock or heavy object is thrown to determine the possibility and order of movement.

The theme of the structure of poem making is further illuminated with the lines "each rock a word / a creek-washed stone / Granite:ingrained." Granite is both rock and word, and the word *granite* derives from the Latin term for ingrained. Individual words are, of course, ingrained in poems. Geologically, granite results from a process in which molten magma is forced upward through the earth's crust. Granite is therefore shaped by "torment of fire and weight," similar to the process of thought and creation in the mental sphere. The mental world and the objective world are places of never-ending change, a process of flux and "torment." While geologic change can be episodic and stretch out over eons, it is nevertheless typical of Snyder's poetry to refer to and to notice evidence of such change over time in the way nature appears to us now. Likewise, poetic creation itself is not static, but a "trail" of cobbled words leading to a higher spiritual state. The art of poetry achieves a footing in the existential world, the result of experience under pressure in our world of time and change. In parallel to the way "torment of fire and . . . / Crystal and sediment linked hot" has resulted in solid stone, the heat of emotions rendered into language and then refined into poetic form results in the firm set shape of this poem. In this way, poetry provides a philosophy and foundation for living.

The aim of art, in Snyder's universe, is to create an inner harmony equal to the external harmony and flow of nature, which is also the core aim of Buddhism, the religious philosophy to which Snyder has been so strongly attracted. In turn, nature, if observed rather than exploited, can provide lessons and inspiration for understanding and developing higher mental processes. Snyder writes in the afterword to the 1990 edition of *Riprap and Cold*

Mountain Poems: "The title . . . celebrates the work of hands, the placing of rock, and my first glimpse of the whole universe as interconnected, interpenetrating, mutually reflecting, and mutually embracing."

For Discussion or Writing

1. Explore further the etymology of the word *granite*. What do some of the word's origins and derivations tell us about the meaning of "Riprap"?
2. What do you make of the lines "These poems, people, / lost ponies with / Dragging saddles—"? What is the possible relationship of these various elements? What is Snyder saying about poetry and the act of creating poems?

"Straight-Creek—Great Burn" (1974)

This poem is from Snyder's book *Turtle Island,* which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. Two distinct points of view are presented here. The first part describes a landscape without inhabitants or witnesses. Movement is emphasized. What is observed moves from ground to sky, and from past to eternal. The past includes "last fall's seeds," but also the evidence of a past avalanche piled up and the "flow-wear lines" in creek boulders and the "tumbled talus rock" that used to lie on a "sea bottom" very long ago. The vision moves upward into "changing clouds" and finally the "eternal azure" of the infinite sky.

Mention of human beholders of that mythic realm comprises the second point of view: "Us resting on dry fern and watching." In observing the flight of birds, the poet tries to identify with (or merge with) the "empty / dancing mind" of the birds, who seem to move all at once as if sharing one consciousness, instinctually and without any leader. In this way, the flock moves like a school of fish, or falling leaves in the wind. The poetic mind is basically passive here, trying to see itself as part of nature rather than antagonistic or in opposition to it. Indeed, the earlier metaphorical comparison between water wearing on boulders and blood shaping heart valves emphasizes this melding of people and nature. The poem ends as the birds alight—another indicator of the melding of the mind of the poet and elements of nature.

The reference to the "warm sea bottom" of another age demonstrates a thematic recurrence in Snyder of seeing nature not only as it appears in the present, but also with an appreciation of the change/flux of nature over eons, as if one should notice or understand those long-term shifts by paying attention to details or evidence in the present. The evidence is there, he suggests, to those who read the landscape and know what to look for. From the perspective of Buddhism, this refers to the "eternal mind" and awareness of the ever-changing nature of things. Throughout the poem there is movement and change: the change of seasons from winter to spring, the movement of water and evidence of past movement in avalanche and "flow-wear lines," the "changing clouds," "shapes on glowing sun ball writhing," movement of the flock of birds, and even the "empty dancing mind." "Empty" in Snyder's spiritual view does not mean dumb or thoughtless. Rather, it can be understood as the kind of empty mind one strives for in meditation: open to the cosmic sense of being, aware of all things, letting the deepest natural vibrations flow through it.

The poem also uses the tension between the wish for material that "says itself" and the unavoidable knowledge that the poet is an interpreter speaking for silent things. The details of the natural landscape are self-evident in what they signify. Yet the "us" in the poem draws readers in as both observers and participants, and the description of the flight of the birds causes us to reflect on our own mental processes as the poet describes their harmonious and spontaneous movement together.

For Discussion or Writing

1. This poem appears in the collection entitled *Turtle Island*. Turtle Island is also a Native American term for the North American continent. How is this significant in terms of the content and theme of this poem? Does knowing the title of the collection change the way you view the poem?
2. Look up terms such as *lichen, talus rock,* and *geosyncline*. Why did Snyder choose them for

this poem? How do they fit in with other imagery in the poem?

"The Blue Sky" (1996)

This poem, part of *Mountains and Rivers without End* (1996), combines definitions, folktales, Buddhist chants, and a dream that delivers a Zen lesson, all to conjure up a realm of azure heaven that promises some kind of enlightenment. As the author has stated:

> If someone asked for a description of "The Blue Sky," I would have to say that it is a poem dealing with the lore of healing from Asian and Native American cultures, which pivots around the figure of the cosmological "Healing Buddha" of Mahayana Buddhism. Shamanism, Buddhism, the lore and psychology of healing, and some of the historical figures of Buddhism are invoked here. ("The Blue Sky," *Literature and Medicine*)

"The Blue Sky" employs the metaphor of the journey, as well as repeated references to directional movement. The opening suggests movement in "twelve thousand summer vacations / driving a car east all day every day" to reach the "realm of / Medicine Old Man Buddha."

Following are several definitions and a Buddhist chant featuring the word *tathagata,* the name the historical Buddha Sakyamuni used to refer to himself, signifying the status of a fully enlightened being. In Sanskrit, *Tathāgata* means "one who comes and goes," which fits the poem's journey metaphor.

The first definitions here explore the words *blue* and *sky.* Though the name Bhaishajyaguru appears toward the end of the poem, it means "Supreme Healer" and is a figure characteristically portrayed in the color blue. Befittingly he is titled Lord of Lapis Lazuli, the stone whose color adorns him. This precious gemstone was an important ingredient in the medications he prescribed. According to lore, the Buddha emanated as Bhaishajyaguru, or Medicine Buddha, thousands of years ago and established the Tibetan medical tradition. He offers medicine to people suffering from illness and grants nourishment to the mind and body. The English word *azure* links to the term *lapis lazuli,* which means "stone of azure." In Sanskrit, Bhaisajyaguru is the Lord of the Pure Land of Bliss in the Eastern Quarter of Heaven, the Pure Land of Lapis-Lazuli. So the color blue, woven throughout the poem, is directly identified with this central Buddhist healer.

The story of Ono-no-Komachi, who "took ill" and saw the "medicine master in a dream," refers to a Japanese poet who lived from about 833 to 857. Celebrated for her beauty and erotically charged poetry, she ranked among the most prominent poets of her day. It is helpful to note that romantic love involves a kind of sickness of the spirit—that is, being "lovesick"—as well as various cures and even suggests a path to enlightenment.

In a discussion of "Doctors and Nurses," the poet and his friends agree that modern medical professionals should wear less authoritarian clothing, perhaps "masks and feathers," the costume of traditional medicine men and healers. The poem then presents the Ramana Maharshi Dream. Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950) was probably the most famous Indian sage of the 20th century, renowned for his saintly life, for the fullness of his self-realization, and for the feelings of deep peace that visitors experienced in his presence. The old man who appears in the dream is probably a version of Maharshi.

After definitions of the terms *medicine* and *celestial* are references to Kama, God of Love, from the Hindu god Kāmadeva. *Kāma* can be translated as "desire," which links this passage to the legend of the 17-year-old poet mentioned earlier. The name *Shakyamuni* refers to the founder of Buddhism, born Prince Siddhartha around 563 B.C. in the southern foothills of the Himalayas, son of King Shuddhodana Gautama and Queen Maya (hence Snyder's listing "Son of Maya"). The Buddha once summarized his entire teachings in one sentence: "I teach about suffering and the way to end it."

Following this line of thought, Snyder's poem probing "illness" can refer to the more general situation of our unenlightenment—that we *all* suffer from our spiritual shortcomings. But "Sakyamuni"

is also a reference to Dōgen Zenji, a Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher and founder of the Soto school of Zen in Japan, who at the age of 24 made a risky ocean passage to China. Dōgen has been portrayed as a time traveler, wandering through the records of the past, from the Western Heavens, as he called the ancient land of Sakyamuni, to the Eastern Earth, the land to which Bodhidharma took Zen from the west. This movement is precisely echoed in Snyder's poem, with movement from the "western paradise" as the "planet ball" forward turns into the "east." "Thinking on Amitābha in the setting sun" recalls a celestial Buddha described in the Scriptures of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Amitābha is a Buddha possessing infinite merits resulting from good deeds over countless past lives as a bodhisattva. He lives in a "Pure Land" situated in the uttermost west. By the power of his vows, Amitābha has made it possible for all who call upon him to be reborn into this land, there to undergo instruction by him in the dharma and ultimately become bodhisattvas themselves (the ultimate goal of Mahāyāna Buddhism).

In contrast to Amitagha, Yakushi Nyorai, listed with Bhaisbajyaguru, is the Buddha who grants practical benefits in this life as the Lord of the Eastern Pure Land. Nyorai is a Japanese Buddha of Medicine and Healing. The other name in this last group is Yao-Shih Fo, a Medicine Buddha who resides in the Eastern Paradise. Apart from curing illness, this deity wards off such calamities as famine, drought, and plague.

Snyder interweaves references to the color blue to combine these symbols of healing with the typical landscape of the American West under blue skies, "where the eagle flies." So the "Blue Sky" of this poem serves as a symbol for both the sacred healing tradition and the western skies of the United States, the place Snyder was born and raised and to which he returned after his studies in Japan to establish a real-world location for his philosophy of bioregionalism and practice of community of place.

"The Blue Sky" invokes the names of healing deities, which when defined unlock the symbolism of the azure sky. That symbolism expands to include not only physical illness, but also the greater spiritual malaise of our current time. In Snyder's universe, a reverence for nature, along with the higher potentials of one's spiritual self, are the pathways toward a cure, or movement in the right direction.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "The Blue Sky" seems to unite Snyder's interest in Buddhism, India, and Native American culture. What is the effect of blending all these disparate influences? How do the unconventional line breaks affect the meaning of the poem?
2. Consider differences in approaches of Western "scientific" medicine and the tradition of Buddhist spiritual healing. How is the Buddhist tradition linked to larger considerations about our social condition and our relationship to nature?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON SNYDER AND HIS WORK

1. How would you describe Snyder's treatment of nature in his work? How does he broaden our concept of the American landscape?
2. Snyder's poetry rarely confronts political and social issues such as the Vietnam War or civil rights. Why do you think he chooses to avoid such hot-button issues? Are there ways in which his poetry could be described as politically and socially radical? Why or why not?
3. Snyder's interest in the Far East, particularly Zen Buddhism, along with his knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, connects him to the high modernists, particularly Ezra Pound. Snyder's concrete, economical imagery is also reminiscent of imagism. How is Snyder's work both a continuation and a revision of the central themes of modernist poetry?
4. What is the goal of meditation? What are the aims of Buddhism? How do these apply to Snyder's work?
5. How do you read Snyder's poems in light of the author's background as a Beat Buddhist? In what ways do they reflect Beat values and/or the Buddhist tradition?
6. Investigate some of the work of other Beat poets such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg,

Philip Whalen, and Jack Kerouac. What common themes or interests can you identify? How is Snyder distinctly different in terms of subject matter and direction?

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Bruce Henderson

Gary Soto (1952–)

How strange that we can begin at any time. / With two feet we get down the street. / With a hand we undo the rose.

("Looking Around, Believing")

Gary Soto, one of America's best-loved poets, hated reading when he was in school. A third-generation Mexican American, Soto grew up being warned by his mother to get an education lest he end up a field worker with no hope of getting ahead. Although he has earned unprecedented fame as a poet, essayist, novelist, and playwright, Gary Soto is no stranger to the pains of migrant labor and the culture of poverty.

Born on April 12, 1952, in Fresno, California, Soto has deep family roots in the San Joaquin Valley. It was in Fresno that his paternal grandfather, Frank Soto, an immigrant from Mexico, met and married Paola, who had entered the United States from Mexico years before him. To support their growing family, the two worked with their children in the agricultural fields of Fresno. Gary's father, Manuel, is said to have been "a charming and intelligent boy with elegant good looks and glimmering brown eyes" (Ganz 426). It is no wonder that Angie Trevino, Gary's mother, married Manuel when both were just 18 years old. Together the couple dropped out of high school and began working for local packing houses. In 1950, Angie gave birth to her first son, Rick. Gary followed two years later and their sister, Debra, joined the family merely nine months after that.

When Soto was only six years old, within a week of his family's settling into a new home, his father died of a neck injury incurred at work. Soto recalls that at the funeral he felt very little emotion at all. After the burial, Soto's family never again spoke of the accident or his father, and all associations to that time were severed. It was not until his adult years, as a successful poet, that Soto began to explore his feelings about his father's death, including those toward the man most responsible for it. On paper he wonders why this man took such obvious steps to avoid his responsibilities to Soto's family. Remembering a sighting of the man years later, Soto recalls he was

> large, his girth like a tree: I like to think he was eating for two, himself and father, who was inside like a worm taking his share; that after all those years he still thought of Manuel and the afternoon when he climbed that ladder with a tray of nails on his shoulder, lost his balance, and fell. "This is my hope, for my sake and this man's, because we should remember the dead, call them back in memory to feel their worth." ("This Man (1)" 68)

This tragedy, Soto writes, was the catalyst for years of incessant worrying over loss and never having enough. The only escape he knew from such anxiety occurred when he lashed out at something bigger and stronger than he was, which proved to have a "calming" effect (Soto, "The Childhood Worries" 6).

After Soto's mother remarried—this time to a white man—the family relocated to a predominately white neighborhood, but, as Soto notes, poverty was just as prevalent there. During his school years, Soto struggled with the questions of identity that emerged from social class distinctions, family conflict, and racism. His frequent playground brawls earned him the reputation of a troublemaker; many of his teachers and schoolmates predicted he would achieve very little in life. In fact, at a junior high school reunion years later, his peers were more shocked by his success as an author and professor than by the large number of their classmates who had been murdered or incarcerated (Lee 189). For a time, even Soto believed in the inevitability of his failure:

> They said I'd work like a donkey and marry the first Mexican girl that came along. I was reminded so often, verbally and in the way I was treated at home, that I began to believe that chopping cotton might be a lifetime job for me. If not chopping cotton, then I might get lucky and find myself in a car wash or restaurant or junkyard. But it was clear; I'd work, and work hard. ("One Last Time" 110)

Motivated by his encounters with hard labor and his mother's pleas that he and his brother finish school, Soto managed to graduate from high school in 1970 with a D average. Although he remained uninterested in academics, he enrolled at Fresno City College to avoid the draft. As a child, Soto had entertained whims of being a priest, a paleontologist, and even a hobo, but when it was time to choose a major, he decided on geography, hoping he could "just look at maps, study some rivers, take multiple-choice tests, and that'd be that. Being semi-illiterate, I didn't want to be forced to write anything" (quoted in Lee 190).

But Soto did not stick with this decision for long. One day, while researching a paper on continental drift, he spotted a copy of the *New American Poetry 1945–1960.* Eager to avoid his "real" work, he began reading. Soto became enthralled with the irreverence of those so often associated with the Beat movement: Gregory Corso, Kenneth Koch, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, among others. He was surprised by their bold "audacity to shrug off the world" and felt, as he later described, that their "wildness should stampede through [his] own hometown, Fresno" ("Sizing" 1). The poem "Unwanted," by the post–World War II poet Edward Field, had a particularly strong impact on Soto because it resonated with his own feelings of alienation and helped him see the universal value of his individual experiences.

When Soto transferred to what is now California State University (CSU), Fresno, less than two years later, he wasted no time registering for creative writing classes taught by the noted poet Philip Levine. Levine, a "brilliant man with a clever wit" who "wouldn't spare you if you turned in insipid and poorly wrought poetry," became a major influence in Soto's work ("Gary Soto and Ernesto Trejo" 26). While studying poetry at CSU Fresno, Soto met and befriended other now-well-known poets, namely, Ernesto Trejo, Jon Veinberg, and Christopher Buckley. The group became known as the Fresno school, noted for their works' "short lines, a denuded vocabulary, [and] an enumeration of small objects seen not as symbols but as presences which build the speaker's situation" (Cooley 305).

In retrospect, Soto recognizes that he knew very little of the canonical poetic dialogue to which he was contributing. But he was voraciously learning. While at CSU Fresno, Soto discovered and fell in love with the writings of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Soto remembers being in awe of "what must have been the godly permission this poet received to write so strangely. I wanted such permission, too. There was nothing to match Neruda's marvelous vision" ("Sizing" 2). Even now, Soto considers himself first and foremost an imagist—"one who tries to provide a really stark, quick image"—and credits Neruda's influence (Copeland 94).

In 1974, Soto graduated magna cum laude with a degree in English and headed south to attend graduate school at the University of California, Irvine. While there, he married Carolyn Oda, a native of Fresno. Soto met with remarkable success during his years at UC Irvine, winning the Academy of American Poets prize in 1975. He completed his graduate work in 1976, earning an M.F.A. in creative writ-

ing. His thesis, *The Elements of San Joaquin,* won Soto the International Poetry Forum's United States Award. It was published in 1977 as his first book of poetry, for which he received the Bess Hokin Prize.

Reactions to Soto's first publication were mixed. While many activists criticized Soto for not employing a culturally political rhetoric, scholars praised his work for its very lack of an activist agenda. Even at that early stage of his writing, Soto "knew that the more personal he was in his work, concentrating solely on his individual experiences, the more universality he could attain" (Lee 190). Closer to home, friends and family were at a loss for how to treat Soto's success. When he presented his illiterate grandmother with a copy of the work, she immediately framed it and placed it as the centerpiece in her living room, affectionately referred to by Soto as the "museum of bad taste" ("Who Is Your Reader?" 196). Soto began to wonder whether this would be a common reception for his writing.

After graduation, Soto continued to write and took a variety of faculty positions within the University of California system. He has been the recipient of countless awards, including the 1979 Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed Soto, his wife, and their young daughter, Mariko, to spend a year in Mexico; *Poetry* magazine's highly regarded Levinson Award; the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award; the Andrew Carnegie Medal; the Literature Award from the Hispanic Heritage Foundation; and *Skipping Stones* magazine's Honor Award.

In 1978, Soto published *The Tale of Sunlight,* a collection of poetry that received laudatory reviews. In the years that followed, Soto's style and tone began to change. *Where Sparrows Work Hard,* published in 1981, features a more personal, even intimate voice than that heard in Soto's previous works. As Theresa Melendez writes, "Situations that earlier might have been framed by the poet's anger . . . are now expressed through cynical wit" (77). *Living up the Street: Narrative Recollections,* published in 1985, marks a shift in his writing away from poetry and toward prose. Addressing this change, Soto explains, "I felt I could be louder, more direct, also sloppier, whereas with poetry, I believed you had to control your statement, not be so obvious" (quoted in Lee 190).

After the publication of *Living up the Street,* Soto, to his surprise, began receiving fan mail from Mexican-American teenagers reading his work. Their praise and reported connections to his writing encouraged him to write more intentionally for a teenage audience: "I began to feel like I was doing something valuable. . . . I thought I might be able to make readers and writers out of this group of kids" (quoted in Lee 191). With this new audience in mind, in 1990 Soto published *A Fire in My Hands* and *Baseball in April,* the latter winning him the California Library Association's John and Patricia Beatty Award.

Since that time, Soto has continued to write prolifically, producing multiple works each year. Although he continues to write to an adult audience—with books such as *Who Will Know Us?* (1990), *Home Course in Religion* (1992), *New and Selected Poems* (1995), and *Junior College* (1997)—he has stuck to his resolution to write for the future writers of the world. In addition to those titles mentioned previously, Soto's junior fiction includes *Taking Sides* (1991), *Too Many Tamales* (1993), *Jesse* (1994), *Chato's Kitchen* (1995), *Buried Onions* (1997), *Petty Crimes* (1998), *Nerdlandia* (1999), and, most recently, *The Afterlife* (2003), among many others. He has also written, produced, and directed juvenile films, including *The Bike* (1991), *The Pool Party* (1993), and *Novio Boy* (1994).

Among the various praise given Soto's works, often commended are his gift of memory and the simple, even pure, language he uses to recreate these memories. As is French novelist Marcel Proust, Soto is credited for his ability to revive the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds of his childhood. Even in his prose, Soto's efforts as an imagist create for readers a universal "language [that] is straightforward enough to be accessible to students who have little experience and yet rich and subtle enough to reward even the most sophisticated reader" (Romero and Zancanella 27). Ever the Mexican-American boy from Fresno, Soto says the greatest reward he can receive for his work is for a reader to tell him, "'I can see your stories.' This is what I'm always working for, a story that becomes alive and meaningful in the reader's

mind. That's why I write so much about growing up in the barrio. It allows me to use specific memories that are vivid for me" ("Gary Soto's Biography").

"The Elements of San Joaquin" (1977)

This poem was written as part of Soto's graduate thesis shortly after attending a writing workshop in Wisconsin. In what was his first trip outside California, Soto recalls surreal feelings of alienation—as if his "life had been severed from the past" ("Gary Soto and Ernesto Trejo" 25). This experience gave him the distance he needed to see the San Joaquin Valley not just for its "tragic nature," but also with a sense of its beauty ("Gary Soto and Ernesto Trejo" 25). In what is hard to describe as anything other than haunting, "Elements" offers a bleak panorama of the valley's landscape from the perspective of the migrant laborer, "who reaps nothing for himself except an awareness of destitution" and his own insignificance (Melendez 76).

Without affectation, Soto describes the apocalyptic threat to the inhabitants of the valley, who are at the mercy of the natural elements. In "Field," instead of the farmworker's gleaning sustenance from the land, the land seems to be devouring him: "Already I am becoming the valley, / A soil that sprouts nothing" (lines 10–11). The wind makes its own threat of consumption, mocking life's ephemeral nature, as it turns bones to dust and denies man's toils, covering the "spiked tracks of beetles, / Of tumbleweed, of sparrows / That pecked the ground for insects" (lines 20–22). Similar scenes of nature's contempt toward the insignificant farmworker occur throughout the poem: The rain prevents work and causes "the skin of [his] belly" to "tighten like a belt" (line 68); the fog swallows all signs of life so that "one hundred years from now / There should be no reason to believe / I lived" (lines 91–93).

What saves this migrant farmworker and those like him from extinction lies somewhere between the occasional reprieve of the elements and the ambiguity of the poem. For example, in "Wind," where the wind "strokes / The skulls and spines of cattle," the word *stroke* eludes interpretation (lines 17–18). Whether it indicates violence or affection depends on a context that is itself largely ambiguous. Likewise, in "Sun," the dubious image of a couple's shadow "deep against the water" prevents us from knowing whether the water exists for the couple or the couple exists for the water (line 52). Patricia de la Fuentes believes Soto intentionally uses ambiguous language to "substantially reduce the terror and finality of annihilation by implying a capacity in man to survive and overcome the limitations of his destiny ("Ambiguity" 38).

In "Daybreak," the final section of the poem, the farmworker's perseverance is firmly vocalized as the speaker offers his labor as proof of his continued existence and significance. Confidently, he reminds us that

> When the season ends,
> And the onions are unplugged from their sleep
> We won't forget what you failed to see,
> And nothing will heal
> Under the rain's broken fingers. (lines 109–113)

In these closing lines, Soto asks readers to acknowledge the injustices to the migrant workers of California while stressing the growing need of labor unions to protect workers from harsh conditions.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his review of *The Elements of San Joaquin,* Jerry Bradley concludes that the characters in the collection "rise above the meanness of their appearance, not as unscarred ideologues or saints or rhetoricians, but as humans—frail and impoverished—whose heritage is simply and redemptively the earth" (74). Do you agree with Bradley's analysis? If so, compare the speakers/characters in the collection and explain how the earth is their "heritage." If not, what is their role and relationship to the earth?
2. Research the United Farm Workers of America. How effective do you think the union has been in calling laborers' hardships to the attention of the general public? Explain your answer. What more can be done? How has this poem affected your view of the question?

"Mexicans Begin Jogging" (1981)

This comical poem is a retelling of a much darker time in Soto's life (as later described in the short story "Black Hair"). At odds with his mother and stepfather, Soto had run away from home and, while living on the streets, found employment at the Valley Tire Factory. In other accounts, this experience is a raw, dismal one that proved to Soto "there was something worse than field work" ("Black Hair" 123). But as told here, the memory unfolds with the kind of dry humor typical of Soto's later work.

"Mexicans Begin Jogging" describes the unnecessary escape of an American citizen from a border patrol raid in the factory where he works. Because his skin is brown, his boss assumes he is illegal and urges him to run with the others. When the speaker tries to explain he is an American, his boss stifles his words, telling him there is "No time for lies" (line 8). It is not until his boss presses a dollar into his hand that the speaker figures he will oblige, reasoning that he can just as easily run for his hourly wage as he can prepare tires for resale.

The comedic element of this poem lies in the title. As Julian Olivares observes, jogging is an activity reserved for white middle-class Americans; hard laborers find very little need for additional exertion. The speaker's jogging while on the clock parodies this point. Further, the image becomes more entertaining as the reader imagines grown men trying to escape the reach of the border patrol, all the while maintaining the slow, casual pace of a jog. As Soto portrays them, the illegal workers choose to elude the border patrol via an apt show of assimilation into the American mainstream rather than a high-speed chase.

In the latter half of the poem, the speaker's tone shifts from that of a boy caught up in a funny anecdote to that of a Mexican American increasingly aware of his limited value as a statistic of assimilation. Running through industrial streets into the neighborhoods of white middle-class America, the speaker becomes aware of the discomfort his presence is causing the street's residents. In an impulsive effort to assuage their fear and testify to his "American-ness," he cheers *"vivas"*

> To baseball, milkshakes, and those sociologists
> Who would clock me
> As I jog into the next century
> On the power of a great, silly grin. (lines 18–21)

The cheer lacks substance, however, and ends as a pathetic attempt to identify with meaningless icons of "America."

Those final lines create a moving image of the "landless" Mexican American. Different from the illegal Mexicans with whom he works—in the story "Black Hair," Soto tells us that his Mexican coworkers would laugh at him because he was "a *pocho* who spoke bad Spanish"—and still not a part of mainstream America thanks to his brown skin and low social class, Soto uses the street "to create a cultural space which the alienated Chicano can call his own" (Soto 119, Olivares 46). Although the runner in Soto's poem had not wanted to run from the factory, while out, he discovers a trope for personal and cultural space.

For Discussion or Writing

Read Soto's short story "Black Hair." How do the different narrative tones in the poem and the story affect the way you read the account? What does each genre offer that the other one does not?

Living up the Street: Narrative Recollections (1985)

This collection of autobiographical sketches tells the story of Soto's formative years in Fresno, California. They are the stories of Soto's life as he is scheming his way into another, better one, and they delve into the world of the son of a widowed Chicana laborer who is, consequently, left to his own devices. But there is little in these stories that is exclusive to the Chicano experience. Soto's tales are filled with sibling rivalry, efforts to fit in with his playground peers, schemes to get ahead in life, and, most especially, the failures that are inevitable when reaching for something. These failures add a sublime element to Soto's storytelling—rather than defeating a young man who seems to have ended

up with the short end of the stick, failure becomes his motivation to write.

When we first meet Soto, he is five years old, his father is mere pages from an accidental death, and he is already enthusiastically "looking for trouble" on the streets (3). In "Being Mean," he describes his and his brother's disposition as "polite as only Mexicans can be polite, [but] we had a streak of orneriness that we imagined to be normal play" (2). This "orneriness," as Soto terms it, is startling at times, leading him into brutal fights with his brother, the neighborhood kids, and eventually his entire kindergarten class. But these unsettling disturbances are offset by his confessions of wrongdoing, his efforts at reconciliation, and, in particular, the vulnerability he displays as he shares with readers the common frustration of failed ambitions.

In "Looking for Work," Soto tells of the influence of television shows—such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*—on the way he gauged the worth of his home life. More often than not, his attempts at betterment were met with ridicule. His brother, Rick, for example, answered Soto's request for a more formal dinner by showing up in his bathing suit, and his mother scoffed at his request for turtle soup, calling him a "crazy Mexican" (29).

As the sketches progress, we watch Soto mature and his struggles evolve toward a more serious nature. There is less humor in these later tales—perhaps the result of his growing awareness that what he has for so long described as his own "evilness" can now be interpreted as a very natural reaction to an unrelenting, hard-knock life.

In the last few sketches of the collection, we meet the older Soto, with wife and child. To the reader, Soto's experiences—whether of poverty, employment lines, or losing his jacket and wallet to the Mexican police—seem to happen for the sole purpose of later being told. Perhaps this is why Soto chooses to tell his wife what happened on the day before she left him in Mexico in a letter, written after she is gone: With a little reflection, life turns into a story.

For Discussion or Writing

1. A myth is a story or belief common to a certain group that helps individuals within that group make decisions and create judgments. In the United States, there is a myth that the 1950s were a golden age in America. How is this challenged by *Living up the Street*?
2. This collection of vignettes is often compared to Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* because both authors tell autobiographical stories of their childhood barrios. Read *The House on Mango Street* and compare and contrast the adventures of the authors. How is the tone in which they tell their stories similar or different? How does each author cope with life's challenges and rise above them? Is it possible to extrapolate a common or shared Latino experience from these stories?

"Like Mexicans" (1985)

In this autobiographical essay, Soto tells his readers about his surprise that he married an Asian-American girl instead of a Mexican, as everyone has encouraged him to do. Underlying this story is an exploration of the racism that ruled his multiethnic neighborhood.

When he was a young teenager, Soto's grandmother made it very clear that he should not marry an Asian, black, or "Okie," a term that in California in the 1950s and 1960s pejoratively described very poor people of white and Native American descent who had been driven from Oklahoma during the Great Depression. For his grandmother, it included anyone of European descent. She drew her conclusions from a calendar "depicting the important races of the world" and a cantankerous "Okie" daughter-in-law (211). If Soto would marry a Mexican, she promised, he would be happy.

This early lesson in ethnocentricity is reiterated in a subsequent conversation with his best friend, Scott. Just as casually as they discuss school or music, each assures the other of his culturally driven choice for a wife. Soto is the first to make clear that he will never marry an "Okie"; Scott quickly reassures him that he will never marry a Mexican. Significantly, these offensive attitudes make no dent in their relationship because each boy has his own mental picture of the

right kind of girl, and their "vision was the same; to marry, get jobs, buy cars and maybe a house if we had money left over" (212). The boys prove to have enough in common to welcome the clarity these differences offer their friendship. At the mall, they sit side by side in a noncompetitive game of "claiming" girls as they walk by, both agreeing that "they couldn't wait to be men and lift [the girls] on to our laps" (213).

Despite his intentions to follow instructions and find a Mexican girl, Soto falls in love with the Japanese-American girl he will one day marry. But even after he has decided to love her, his resolve is regularly interrupted by familial concern and self-doubt. When he tells his grandmother about Carolyn for the first time, she asks him to give her the "calendar of important races of the world" again so that she can graphically support her reaction to the match (213). After looking at Carolyn's picture (because Soto had long since disposed of the calendar), she guesses the girl must be Chinese, communicating to Soto and the reader that race- and ethnicity-based generalizations have more to do with limitations of the imagination than with understood differences.

After constantly replaying these conversations in his mind, it finally hits Soto "like a baseball in the back" that what his mother and relatives want more than for him to marry a Mexican is to "marry someone of my own social class" (213). Consequently, it is the evidence of poverty in her family's life that reassures Soto that Carolyn is the one for him. After sitting in the Oda family's kitchen with Carolyn and her mother, Soto realizes that Carolyn does not have to be Mexican to be like him; their paradigms—their expectations for happiness—are the same.

For Discussion or Writing

1. In his essay, Soto uses socioeconomic classification rather than ethnic classification to determine sameness. Why do you think he does this? How do social institutions tend to categorize different groups of people? Do you believe this thinking has shifted over time or become more entrenched? What does Soto appear to believe?
2. Compare Soto's account of reconciling his old family with his new one to Joan Didion's autobiographical essay "On Going Home." How has choosing a spouse influenced the way each writer sees him- or herself? How does each writer define family and home?

"Oranges" (1985)

First appearing in *Black Hair* (1985), this narrative poem pays homage to the flickering ardor of young romance. The speaker, presumably an adult now, recollects an evening spent walking with a girl with whom he is quite taken. Eager to impress "his girl"—as he later calls her—he tells her at the five-and-dime store that she can have the candy of her choice. When he realizes her selection costs twice as much as the sole nickel he has in his pocket, he barters one of his oranges, which is graciously accepted by the sales clerk. The evening ends with the young boy gleaming with satisfaction over his ability to please his date.

Published after Soto's shift into dark humor, in which he freely pokes fun at his childhood perceptions, anxieties, and ambitions, this poem uniquely reveres the delicate transactions of first love. The youths' fragile attempts to perform the roles of men and women are unscathed by mockery: Her apparently overrouged cheeks are not ridiculed; his unconventional substitution of an orange for money is routinely accepted.

Spared the jaded commentary of an experienced adult, the story is remarkably simple. The plot of the poem is little more than a string of images, occasionally connected by hanging verbs or an adjective. Because of this, the poem appears deceptively long. In the partial stanza that follows, the lone word *outside* sets an empty stage on which each image can position itself:

> Outside,
> A few cars hissing past,
> Fog hanging like old
> Coats between the trees.
> I took my girl's hand
> In mine for two blocks,
> Then released it to let
> Her unwrap the chocolate. (lines 42–49)

According to Julianne White, the simultaneous longevity and brevity of the poem signifies the paradox of the adolescent experience that "seems drawn out while one is enduring it, but in reality disappears all too soon" (122).

Artistically Soto recreates the emotions of the evening in his symbolic descriptions of the setting and use of motifs. Like the crisp winter night, there is an awkward chill between them as the boy and girl set out on their walk. This coolness mutates into tension felt in the cramped quarters created by the "narrow aisle of goods" at the five-and-dime (line 24). Readers familiar with Soto's work will recognize oranges as a recurring motif in his poetry and prose. Often oranges appear as a temporary reprieve from a grueling day or a difficult task. Here the oranges seem to hold both literal and figurative significance in the burgeoning relationship. As he is approaching his date's house, the weight of the oranges in his coat pocket symbolizes the figurative weight of the importance and the pressure to impress his date the young man feels. Once in the store, the oranges become a means of achieving a "seemingly unreachable goal" represented by the chocolate (White 123). It is through this transaction that the couple reaffirms and accepts their expected roles in the relationship. The previous chill is now gone, and the remaining orange shines "bright against / The gray of December" (lines 51–52).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In the last line of the poem, Soto describes his feelings of affection as "a fire in my hands." Why is this metaphor appropriate? How else could his affection have been described?
2. In this poem, as in "Mexicans Begin Jogging," Soto uses travel to create a narrative structure that will show a development in the speaker's self-awareness. Compare the two poems, discussing the similarities and differences of each "journey."

Baseball in April (1990)

Published in 1990, this collection marks Soto's move into young-adult literature. Although the characters in these vignettes are fictional, their situations echo those in the autobiographical pieces of *Living up the Street*. About teenagers and for teenagers, these stories tell of their awkward transformation "into facsimiles of adults"—specifically Anglo adults (Echevarría BR45).

More often than not, the individuals these children turn to for models are one-dimensional pop-culture icons who quickly prove their unsustainability in real, everyday living. The stories are thus primarily about the hardships and disenchantment these youths face as they learn to reconcile their sense of self with family and culture.

This reliance on family is perhaps most evident in the sketch "The No-Guitar Blues," in which Fausto deceptively finds a way to make money in order to buy a guitar that will enable him to play like Los Lobos. Knowing that the cost of a guitar would be a hardship his parents are not willing to accept, Fausto makes a plan to return a stray dog to its rich owners, with the lie that he rescued it from danger. The plan works like a charm, and he receives $20 for his good deed. But his dishonesty haunts him, and finally he puts the money into the collection basket in church the next day. Fortunately, fate rewards his honesty and, in a deus ex machina, his mother remembers that his grandfather has an old bass guitarron—"the same kind the guy in Los Lobos played" (50)—that Fausto can have, along with lessons from his grandfather. We see this same improbable resolution through saving grace in the story "Broken Chain," in which Alfonso is rescued from a string of bad luck by his brother's uncharacteristic charity. In each case, the lesson learned is that family will come through.

But just as often, resolution occurs when an individual reconsiders the payoff of his or her own ambitions. In "The Karate Kid," Gilbert finds that what he thinks he wants is not so desirable after all. Inspired by Ralph Macchio in the 1980s classic movie of the same name, Gilbert is determined to be the neighborhood karate kid. Not long after he convinces his mother to pay for his lessons, he realizes his dream requires a bit more perseverance than he cares to give and a lot more talent than his neighborhood has to offer. In the end, Gilbert gladly settles

for comic-book superheroes that are "more real than karate. And they didn't hurt him" (80).

Characteristically of Soto's writing, strings of bad luck can be peppered with occasional good luck. This collection is no exception, as some resolutions come about simply because a kid gets lucky. In "La Bamba," when the audience of the school talent show believes Manuel's bumbling to a skipping record player is part of his planned comedy show, Manuel becomes the star of the night. When asked how he did it, he replies, "It just happened" (88). The simplicity of this answer carries the wisdom Soto seems to want to pass on to his readers.

For Discussion or Writing

1. These stories chronicle a neighborhood of children's coming-of-age experiences, including first love, dreams of becoming rich and famous, and the evolution of family relationships. What kind of external factors determine how one comes of age in a community—specifically in Soto's community?
2. In this collection, traditional relationships between children and parental figures (parents, grandparents, older siblings, etc.) are often reconsidered as a child better understands him- or herself. Read Nikki Grimes's *Jazmin's Notebook,* set in Harlem in the 1960s, and compare these relationship constructions. How do the different characters redefine such relationships? What supportive or destructive role do parental and authority figures play in each book? Do you agree with the lessons imparted by each author?

"Home Course in Religion" (1991)

As do the other poems in this collection of the same title, "Home Course in Religion" describes one instance in Soto's ongoing struggle to reconcile religion, specifically Catholicism, with the realities of his life. Although some pieces in the collection carry a more serious tone, the speaker of this poem is simple-minded to an extreme degree. His affected simplicity accentuates the inaccessibility of the theology and philosophy he is struggling to comprehend and persuades the reader to prefer the more fulfilling "line of belief" to which he has reconciled himself by the end of the poem: visceral pleasure (line 147).

On their own, the examples of sophisticated writings shared in this poem are less than tantalizing. The reader may find them as sleep-inducing as the speaker does while reading excerpts from unidentified but supposedly highly acclaimed books: "The notion of 'project' is an ambiguous substitute for the notion of quiddity" (lines 3–4) and "Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call" (line 21) and "Oderunt peccare mali formidine ponae" (line 73). These words seem even less appealing when juxtaposed with Soto's alternative activities: shooting hoops "to get air / Back into my brain so I wouldn't feel so sleepy" (lines 17–18), eating, sleeping, practicing karate, and getting to third base with his girlfriend. Each of these activities becomes more desirable than metaphysical pursuits because it offers immediate satisfaction in proportion to the amount of effort involved. The speaker even appreciates the welts on his body from his karate lesson because they validate his feelings and document the experience. In comparison to such experience, the loftier philosophies in books seem to hold no value in the everyday world.

The speaker's opinion of the absurdity of these readings is most blatant when he and his roommates tape, and thus document, their own thoughts of the world around them :

> Nixon won't confess
> About the submarines or the money. Did you see how
> He picked up that dog by its ears. No that
> Was Johnson. That's not the point. The certainty
> Of life comes to an end. That Nixon!
> People with big cars don't know how much it hurts.
> Furthermore, if you realize the predicament
> Then what's there to say, etc. (lines 32–37)

It is no coincidence that their ramblings make just as much sense as the books that have been putting the speaker to sleep. There is no linear progression to their discussion; nor is there any overlap in what each

deems important enough to talk about. The speaker offers this same pointless reasoning to his girlfriend, suggesting that to avoid her human feelings of loneliness when he is not around, she should "just be mellow; just think of / [herself] as a flower, etc."

What the speaker wants readers to see is that pursuits beyond sensory satisfaction—whether reading high-brow theology books, philosophizing with roommates, or striving for Zen contentment—all fall short of his expectations for life. Life is best lived while eating cereal from a Top Ramen bowl.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Research Zen Buddhism. Discuss what aspects of this religion would have been appealing to college students during the 1960s and to the speaker of this poem.
2. In the final stanza of the poem, Soto writes, "Thomas was not around when Jesus walked through the wall" (114). Why does Soto include this line? What does the meaning of this line add to the overall theme of the poem?

"Bodily Responses to High Mass" (1997)

This poem, like many of those first appearing in *Junior College,* is an attempt narratively, if not philosophically, to reconcile the teachings of Catholicism with a young man's earth-bound life experiences. This imaginative construct, typically categorized as magical realism, occurs repeatedly in Soto's poetry and can be attributed to the influence of writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Pablo Neruda. Magical realism depicts quotidian activity incorporated with the magical, or even impossible, but treats both with the same nonchalance. In "Bodily Responses," Soto uses this style of writing to reconfigure the relationship between the real and imagined and to redistribute the powers of creation.

Although the speaker's early experience of worship is typical of an unconverted but obedient youth, it quickly becomes exaggerated by his imagination. His tongue-in-cheek "conversion" suggests that the difference between a spiritual experience and an imaginative one is virtually unrecognizable. The speaker begins by describing the rote nature of his worship: He dresses in shirt and tie, sits in a designated pew of the chapel, listens distractedly to the sermon, and decides Jesus's walking on water has nothing to do with him.

But as he yawns, he suddenly realizes he is wrong, and that miraculous elements usually reserved for sermons have somehow become part of his less-than-holy self-entertainment. What might otherwise seem like a young boy's distractions have now become divine actions: The lines he traces in the palms of his hands begin to look uncannily like the sign of the cross; a twitch in his loins brought about by kneeling in worship draws attention to his procreative power; his breathing suggests the rise and fall of empires. Traces of the primitive urge driving perceptions are most blatant as the stuffiness of the chapel turns him into "a jungle of pagan smells" (line 20). The sermon is only half over, but the speaker has already lived ages, made visible by the yellowing of his clothes and the lap-length beard he has grown.

The similarity between this final image of the speaker and that of a long-term prisoner is no coincidence. The speaker is at the mercy of the priest—as is Jesus, who must again be "set" back on the water so that the priest can teach the capriciousness of sin. This indirect affront to religious authority seems to be the impetus behind the poem. Soto, a once-Catholic-now-agnostic, finishes the poem with what could be interpreted as his dissent or "descent" from the church. When the sermon ends, so has the speaker's innocence, noted by his long-lost youth: "My youth passed. I shrunk like a mushroom, / And blue veins appeared on my arm" (lines 32–33). Upon leaving the chapel, he heads directly down—the presumed location of hell—to the basement, where "white powdery donuts, those stacked halos" await him as the suitable reward for his life's work (line 38).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Read Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis.* It is often considered a classic example of magical realism. What similarities and differences do you see between these two pieces of literature?

How does each author use magical realism to raise questions about society, and which is more subversive? Is the magical realism in each work liberating or oppressive?

2. After reading the other poems in the collection *Junior College,* how would you explain the way Soto went about exploring religion in his early twenties? To which, if any, "truths" did Soto hold fast?

"Teaching English from an Old Composition Book" (1999)

This poem appears in one of Soto's more recent collections, *A Natural Man*. Recalling a night of English as a second language (ESL) teaching early in his career, Soto describes in great detail the mood and activities of the night. Although these details are not unusual in his writing, here they seem to serve a unique purpose of naming and perhaps even limiting the experiences of the students outside as well as inside the classroom.

As the narrator reports, the classroom and its students create a less than ideal learning situation, as they are all "exhausted from keeping up" (line 10). With a coffee machine and broken piano as its focal points, the room offers a stale mood for education. The pathetic remnant of a chalk stick is now "no longer than a chip of fingernail" (line 1) and serves as a relic or the "dust of some educational bone" (line 13). In front of tired students who are "knuckle-wrapped from work as roofers" and "sour from scrubbing toilets and pedestal sinks" (lines 5–6), the speaker acts out daily activities such as drinking coffee and putting on shoes. His disparaging self-evaluation as a teacher is noted in his comparison between himself and the Mexican comedian Cantiflas, famous for his trivial chatter.

As the lesson continues, students take turns practicing the "pantomime of sumptuous living" modeled by their teacher. The wry sarcasm in this line makes the reader aware, as the narrator is, of the unlikelihood of these individuals' drinking soda and beer or eating steak on any regular basis. There seems to be a vast difference between the lifestyle they are learning to speak and the one they are actually living. Soto's description of the class's coming "alive" during this imitative exercise asks readers to reconsider what exactly it means to be "alive" in America and, in particular, the role that pantomiming American values plays in assimilation.

When the lesson moves on to prepositions, the teacher dryly jokes that *under, over,* and *between* constitute a more practical education for these students because these are "useful words" they will need when "la migra," or the border patrol, arrive looking for them to hustle them back to a world where English no longer matters.

The humorous relief of the evening occurs during the cookie break, when Augustine asks his teacher the meaning of "tally-ho," an outdated British saying included in the students' outdated composition book. The teacher finds himself at a loss for words, but eventually draws a comparison to the Spanish exclamation *adelante,* which means to "move forward" or "look ahead" to something. Augustine and his friend are quite pleased with this translation, "now smarter by one word" (line 31). When class finally ends, seemingly just because they are all ready for it to, the teacher offers a final *adelante*, to which the students reply, "Tally-ho!" This closing image of Mexican laborers speaking highbrow British English offers a moment of laughter in an otherwise trying process of assimilation.

For Discussion or Writing

1. After reading Pat Mora's poem "Immigrants," compare and contrast the pictures each poet draws of assimilation in America. What roles do words and language play in the steps immigrants take to assimilate? Is language limiting or empowering to these immigrants?
2. Analyze how Soto uses humor in both this poem and an earlier work, "Mexicans Begin Jogging." How do the poems approach assimilation? Is there a difference between adopting American values and pantomiming American values?

Nerdlandia (1999)

Commissioned by the Los Angeles Opera, this libretto was first performed in 1999 by children in schools across Los Angeles County and continues to be read and performed in schools across the nation. A far cry from the mystical and earthy poetry by which Soto initially made a name for himself, this one-act play incorporates a playful interest in and respect for juvenile issues of love, acceptance, ambition, and change that have endeared his later works to readers.

Nerdlandia has won national acclaim for its universality and adaptability. The characters of the play are Mexican Americans dealing with issues of identity that are specific to Chicano culture: In order to catch Ceci's eye, Martin believes he must take on "a certified corazón de Aztlán"; in order to be worthy of Martin's love, Ceci must work at "tak[ing] el barrio out of la chola" (46, 49). But even if the cultural setting seems regionally and/or ethnically exclusive, the message is quite universal: Those who are brave enough to change who they are—and what their friends think of them—will be rewarded. Furthering this universal theme are Soto's frequent parenthetical permissions to adjust references in the play in order to make it more regionally specific to the students performing the work.

Although this theme of "clique traversing" is commonly seen in teen genres (in *Grease* it is the squares and the greasers; in *She's All That* it is the artists and the jocks), its repetition seems valuable if for no other reason than to testify to its universality. In the play, both Martin's and Ceci's groups of friends have difficulty comprehending why and how someone steps out of his or her established identity. Just as Ceci persuades her girlfriends to admit their dreams of looking like a "brown Barbie" or singing like Selena (30–31), Martin encourages the audience to embrace its own ambitions. In the same monologue, he counsels audience members to ignore the friends who will laugh at their ambitions: "It's like Halloween, like when you put on a mask and go door-to-door with your new identity. It's about putting on another face" (50).

But this is only half of the message. Before the end of the play, Martin will learn that appearance is not enough: You need not only to look the part, but also to *be* the part. Even in *vato* clothes, Martin still wears his pants too high, listens to classical music, and speaks Spanish the way a non-Mexican does. Likewise, Ceci's shopping trip to "Nerdstrom's" has no effect on the way she sounds, walks, or behaves. For Martin, a change of heart is required; for Ceci, a little time spent in serious studying does the trick.

By the play's close, Martin and Ceci are together thanks to their willingness to appreciate and take on what is important to the other. Those actors remaining on stage also couple off on the basis of their efforts to change. Each pair finds its way offstage, singing a phrase from the nerd anthem, "Molecules, fluctuating molecules," thus demonstrating that satisfaction is gained when we agree to try something new.

For Discussion or Writing

In the closing scene of the play, Martin tells the audience that Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* "ain't nothing compared to us. We're the real thing" (82). Compare and contrast the moves Romeo/Juliet and Martin/Ceci make to be together. Which would you argue is more of the "real thing"?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON SOTO AND HIS WORK

1. Many of Gary Soto's poems, stories, and essays play with stereotypical images of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. How do Soto and other Latino writers, such as Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez, explore cultural stereotypes? Do they manage to refute or redefine such stereotypes, or do they further perpetuate them?
2. When Soto's first poems were published, they were criticized by activists—yet praised by scholars—for "not overtly addressing the socioeconomic aspects of Mexican American life."

Soto "knew that the more personal he was in his work, concentrating solely on his individual experiences, the more universality he could attain" (Lee 190). Thinking of examples from all of Soto's career, how has he made the personal political? Would you categorize him as an "activist" writer? Explain why or why not.

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Carey Emmons Crockett

Amy Tan (1952–)

Placing on writers the responsibility to represent a culture is an onerous burden. Someone who writes fiction is not necessarily writing a depiction of any generalized group, they're writing a very specific story.

(interview with Salon.com)

Amy Tan's novels and stories are about mothers and daughters and the relationships between them. To be even more specific, Tan's novels explore the relationships between Chinese-born mothers (or mother figures) and Chinese-American "daughters." Such stories are very personal to Tan—emotionally and autobiographically—as she has struggled her whole life to understand her own Chinese-born mother while also trying to acquire an American identity. Tan is well aware that her books do not, and cannot, represent all of Chinese or Chinese American immigrant experience. However, they do recreate snapshots of lives lived in the in-between places, the cultural borderlands occupied by numerous Americans of multiple heritages. More importantly, Tan's writing stands as satisfying and popular literary work in its own right: "For Tan, the true keeper of memory is language" (Willard 1).

Tan was born on February 19, 1952, in Oakland, California, and dubbed An-mei Ruth "Amy" Tan. Her mother, Daisy Tan, insisted the family move often to escape evil or troublesome spirits. Moving between Oakland, Hayward, Santa Rosa, Palo Alto, Sunnyvale, and Santa Clara placed Tan in 11 school districts before the end of high school. Of the constant change, Tan writes, "I understood I had to be a chameleon to survive, that I should fit in quietly, and watch. In hindsight, I see that this was excellent training for a budding writer. It sharpened my skills of observation" ("CliffsNotes" 22).

John Tan, Amy's father, worked as a Baptist minister, an entrepreneur, and an engineer. His faith in God permeated the Tan home, and he was, according to Tan, "easygoing . . . and not easily riled. He told multilingual jokes and roused friends into singing after dinner" ("CliffsNotes" 21). Her mother, however, was much more complicated, often threatening suicide, turning the house upside down with her tantrums, and believing Amy had a preternatural ability for speaking with ghosts ("CliffsNotes" 18–20). Daisy's moods placed her daughter in a state of near-perpetual anxiety, torment, and, eventually, rebellion. Even Tan's father, "smart and strong as he was, . . . always gave in to [Daisy's] demands" ("CliffsNotes" 21). Tan grew up living the dual life faced by many children of immigrants. At school, she tried to be a typical American, while at night, she clipped a clothespin to her nose in an effort to make it look more White. At home, Amy Tan, her two brothers, and their parents spoke Chinese or broken English, ate Chinese food, and practiced many Chinese customs. Tan discovered a love of books, as well, and snuck in the forbidden *The Catcher in the Rye* among others (Snodgrass 10). Despite Amy's affinity for literature, her mother was determined she become a doctor.

Even in Tan's earliest memories, her mother spoke of death, dying, and ghosts, giving her daughter a heightened awareness of death and not a little morbidity. Tan focused a lot of energy on thinking about ghosts, and Daisy believed Tan was able to communicate with them:

> In our house we had two kinds [of ghosts]. First, there was the one we could talk about in front of others; that would be the Holy Ghost. . . . The second kind of ghost belonged to my mother. These ghosts were Chinese. We were not supposed to talk about them, because they were bad, of a different religion, and were specifically banned by the laws of the Holy Ghost. Yet . . . I could sense them. My mother told me I could. ("CliffsNotes" 19)

This preoccupation with death and ghosts is often manifested in Tan's novels, and Tan has also admitted a certain level of uncertainty regarding ghosts and their effects on the living.

Tragedy and death struck the Tan family in 1967 and 1968. Tan's older brother Peter, at age 16, lapsed into a coma, dying of a brain tumor two months later. A few months later, John Tan became paralyzed on one side of his body and also died of a brain tumor, at the age of 54. Amy Tan was 15. Compounding the strangeness, years later the family discovered a benign brain tumor in Daisy, apparently acquired around the same time. After the deaths, Daisy rejected Christianity and returned instead to Chinese religious beliefs. "After my father died, my mother no longer prayed to God," Tan said. "At times, my mother would go into obsessive monologues about our tragedies, about the curse. . . . To counter the curse, my mother began to call openly on the ghosts of her past" ("CliffsNotes" 24, 25). Daisy prayed to ancestors, hired people to inspect the house's feng shui, forced Amy to ask questions of the dead using a Ouija board, and looked for signs of haunting or bad karma. She finally decided the neighborhood was cursed, frequently recounting all the disasters that had occurred.

In August 1968, Tan watched Daisy "pick up a can of Old Dutch cleanser and stare at it as if it possessed the lucidity of a crystal ball. 'Holland,' she announced to us. 'Holland is clean. We moving to Holland'" ("CliffsNotes" 27). Daisy sold everything, hustled her daughter and remaining son, John, onto the SS *Rotterdam,* and bundled them off to Europe. They spent several weeks looking for a spot to settle, finally stopping in Switzerland, where Amy and John enrolled in the Institut Monte Rosa Internationale, a private boarding school. Here Tan found herself in a new situation, not only surrounded by the very privileged but also an object of envy herself. "In America, I had been a dateless dork," Tan writes. "In Switzerland, I was an *exotique*" ("CliffsNotes" 30).

Growing into a confused, rebellious teen, Tan also acquired her first boyfriend, a man Tan discovers was described as "an older German man, who had close contacts with drug dealers and organized crime," in the CliffsNotes for *The Joy Luck Club.* With humor, Tan responds, "Could this possibly be describing *my* Franz? True, he was older than I was, twenty-two years to my sixteen. . . . And yes, he was friends with a couple of Canadian hippies who sold hashish, but I don't remember them being *that* organized about it" ("CliffsNotes" 9). Ultimately, the lovers' plans to run away together were thwarted at the train station by Daisy, with the aid of the police, and led to "the biggest drug bust in Montreux's history," consisting of a small stash of psychedelic mushrooms discovered in the aforementioned hippies' Volkswagen van. This forced Tan into good behavior, and the next year she returned to the United States and enrolled at a Baptist school, Linfield College, in Oregon.

In college, Tan met her future husband, Louis DeMattei, an Italian-American law student who "offered her stability and affection" (Snodgrass 12). In 1972, Tan transferred to San Jose City College and switched majors from medicine to English and linguistics. Daisy was so angry when Tan gave up the possibility of a medical degree, the two did not speak to each other for nearly a year. Tan ultimately

received bachelor's and master's degrees from San Jose State University and began doctoral work in linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley. On her 24th birthday, Tan and DeMattei's good friend, Pete, was strangled in his apartment during a burglary. Tan, who decided to abandon her Ph.D. work after Pete's murder, saw this as a period of great change and upheaval. "Hours after my twenty-fourth birthday," Tan writes, "my life began to change with strangely aligned events that today make me wonder whether they did not spring from the fictional leanings of my mind" ("A Question of Fate" 41).

Tan and DeMattei settled in San Francisco. She suffered bouts of depression and anxiety, ultimately accepting her need to use antidepressants and choosing not to risk passing on a legacy of mental illness and suicide to any children. Tan began work as a speech pathologist for mentally disabled children in 1978, transitioning in 1983 to a lucrative career as a technical speechwriter for executives. In 1985, Daisy suffered a small heart attack, an event that showed Tan her mother's vulnerability and inspired her to make a commitment to be a better daughter. She bought Daisy a home and promised a trip to China together. In 1987, Tan began to move away from her incredibly taxing job, accepting that success did not mean happiness. She read profusely and enrolled at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers workshop, where she found much encouragement from peers and mentors. Soon afterward, her short stories began to appear in popular magazines (Snodgrass 13–15).

In 1987, Tan and Daisy made their trip to China, where, despite her fears and her very American presence, Tan felt instantly at home. She also met, for the first time, three half sisters from her mother's earlier marriage. On their return, Tan began absorbing her mother's stories, pumping Daisy for more and more information. Tan's agent also surprised her with a contract to publish some of her stories in a collection under the working title *Wind and Water*. Tan officially ended her freelance business and began working on what became *The Joy Luck Club*.

The year 1989 introduced *The Joy Luck Club,* an interconnected group of stories, each told by a mother or daughter of Chinese descent who lives in San Francisco. Tan "later acknowledged that . . . the four daughters at the heart of the novel, reflect elements of her own personality and experience" (Snodgrass 16). The book was a huge success, praised by critics, readers, and feminists. It had poor sales in China, however (to Tan's surprise), and has been the subject of vicious attacks by certain critics who say Tan recreates stereotypes or overemphasizes Chinese misogyny in order to pander to white American readers and white American dollars. But Elaine H. Kim says, "*The Joy Luck Club* is the story of how women's lives flow through each other," notably not overemphasizing the novel's Chinese influence and suggesting that "the lines between 'Chinese' and 'Chinese American' are blurred" (83). In 1993, a popular movie version, directed by Wayne Wang, was released.

In 1991, *The Joy Luck Club* was followed by *The Kitchen God's Wife,* a novel that largely recreates Tan's mother's life in China, including her marriage to the Kuomintang pilot Wang Zo and subsequent romance with John Tan. The novel also features a strong historical element, much of it set during the Sino-Japanese War, a style Tan dabbled in with *The Joy Luck Club* and continued to employ in her following two novels. *The Kitchen God's Wife* features a Chinese-American woman named Pearl who has been hiding her multiple sclerosis from her mother. Winnie Louie/Jiang Weili, Pearl's mother, also has a secret from her daughter—a horrific history left behind in China, and the possibility that Winnie's evil former husband, Wen Fu, actually fathered Pearl. Determined to end the secrets between Pearl and Winnie is "Aunt" Helen, Winnie's friend and business partner. Helen's meddling prompts Winnie to relate her past to Pearl, making the two closer. In "Angst and the Second Book," Tan admits that *The Kitchen God's Wife* "is [her] favorite" and this "regardless of what others may think." "How could it not be?" she goes on to say. "I had to fight for every single character, every image, every word" (333).

And despite Tan's angst, *The Kitchen God's Wife* became a national best seller, a book compared to *Gone with the Wind* and sweeping Tolstoy epics and even, occasionally, dubbed "her best writing" (Snodgrass 94).

The Hundred Secret Senses, published in 1995, is, according to E. D. Huntley, "a novel of contrasts—the story of two sisters, two cultures, two lives, two centuries linked by loyalties and betrayals, love and loss, life and death" (114). With *Secret Senses,* Tan took a turn from her previous works, focusing on the relationship between half sisters—the much older, Chinese-born Kwan and the younger, American-born Olivia. Olivia struggles to be very American and modern, disdaining Kwan's worldview, only to need Kwan's psychic expertise and a return to China in order to mend her marriage. *The Hundred Secret Senses* has received the most mixed reviews of any of Tan's works. It contains a heavy emphasis on ghosts, karma, reincarnation, and the spiritual, much of it from Tan's imagination (as in Kwan's insistence that she has "*yin* eyes" and sees "*yin* people"), perhaps an ironic nod to those who seek the key to Chinese culture in her novels. Kwan is also "one of Tan's most original and best character creations," a fun and funny agent for Olivia—and herself. Ultimately, "the act of retrieving a hidden past . . . restores a wholeness of spirit that strengthens and affirms [the characters]" (Snodgrass 78).

Tan's next novel, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), returns to a mother-daughter dynamic, again featuring a mother relating her hidden past. Ruth, a professional "book doctor," is foundering in her life, most especially in her long-term relationship with Art. When Ruth discovers her mother's mind degenerating from Alzheimer's, Ruth begins to take an active interest in caring for LuLing and for herself. Part of this involves reading her mother's memoir, a sweeping tale of love, suicide, family, history, and war. "*The Bonesetter's Daughter* is essentially about writing and the act of writing . . . it is about how we, as women, creatively express ourselves via language" (Hull 1). *The Bonesetter's Daughter* also proved very personal for Tan, as she wrote it in direct response to Daisy's Alzheimer's diagnosis. Mothers have long been the heart of Tan's novels, their voices the most eloquent, their stories the most profound; *Bonesetter's* is no exception. In the future, Akasha Hull hopes to see Tan "do for the *daughters* what she has so eloquently done for the mothers: make them heroic and sympathetic women with fiery stories of their own that they themselves passionately tell" (1).

A subsequent, somewhat more lighthearted novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005), is about the disappearance of a group of American tourists in the Himalayan foothills. It received mixed reviews.

Since becoming a novelist, Tan has enjoyed much success, becoming one of America's most popular and critically acclaimed writers. In recent years, she has joined the Rock Bottom Remainders, a rock group with a rotating membership that includes other contemporary authors such as Stephen King, Dave Barry, and Barbara Kingsolver. Tan's signature contribution to the group is a rendition of Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walking" performed in dominatrix gear. She is also the kind of woman who buys cheap crystal wine glasses on eBay out of fear of breaking nice ones. When Paul Gray and Andrea Sachs asked why "this high-stepping, whip-cracking woman worries about breaking crystal wineglasses," Tan replied, "I am . . . my mother's daughter" (3). And without her mother, it seems unlikely Tan would be the writer she is. She admits to drawing heavily from her own life experiences for her writing, especially with regard to Daisy, but asserts that "what [she] draw[s] from is not a photographic memory, but an emotional one." She goes on to conclude that the difference between memory and imagination, memoir and fiction, becomes blurred: "When I place that memory of feeling within a fictive home, it becomes imagination. . . . The possibilities are endless, but one is chosen. And as I write that possibility, it becomes a part of me. It has the power to change my memory of the way things really happened" ("Thinly Disguised Memoir" 109).

The Joy Luck Club (1989)

Amy Tan's first novel, *The Joy Luck Club,* focuses on the relationships between mothers and daughters, the stories they tell about themselves, and the ways they view each other. The novel is bookended by narratives from Jing-mei/June Woo, whose voice stands in for the first of the "Joy Luck aunties" to have died, her mother, Suyuan. In this way, Tan sets up the idea of continuity between the generations, of the importance of sharing emotional heritages, and "suggest[s] strongly a journey of maturity, ethnic awakening, and return-to-home, not just for Jing-mei Woo, but metaphorically for all the daughters in the book" (Xu 55).

The Joy Luck Club also begins Tan's tradition of using "talk-story" as the main conveyance of narrative in her novels. Mary Ellen Snodgrass describes talk-story as "the tradition of passing family anecdotes, subjective narratives, testimonies, morality tales, and fables from parent to child" and includes Tan among a list of contemporary female authors who have "recovered the talk-story culture as a means of reclaiming women's history" (164). In other words, talk-story involves informal narratives, often in the voices of women or other subjugated peoples, as a means of explaining a particular worldview. In the case of fiction, talk-story gives a voice to people who may not have traditionally had one (including women, minorities, homosexuals, and the poor), while also allowing for explorations about the nature of truth, memory, history, and life. And with *The Joy Luck Club,* all of "these women need to maintain a psychological continuity, a coherent picture of life-world, and a continuity of self. Such a need requires the assuring structure of memory. . . . Memory is for them a socializing, ego-forming expression of anxieties, hopes, and survival instincts" (Xu 46).

While the functions of talk-story apply across the board between the Joy Luck aunties and their various daughters/"nieces" (most notably Jing-mei, sent on a mission to China by the aunties), this analysis will focus mainly on the narrative flows between the mothers and their daughters. *Joy Luck* is more a loosely connected group of stories than a novel with a central climax, featuring two narratives from each character with the exception of Jing-mei, whose opening and closing chapters fill in for her dead mother's voice. It is easy to become confused, as well, remembering which mother's story precedes which daughter's, and whose history matches up where. This discontinuity, however, may give the reader a glimmer of the confusion ethnic minorities in the United States feel, or perhaps a sense of the disconnection between these families.

A matching look at the life stories of the Joy Luck mothers and daughters reveals the masterful way Tan has joined, and separated, her fictional generations. Witness the opening of the book, told in a folktale style:

> *Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, "This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions." And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.* (3–4)

Lindo and Waverly Jong embody the novel's most dualistic pair. When Lindo is a child, her grandmother tells her that her "character could lead to good and bad circumstances" and Lindo sees these same traits in Waverly, although Lindo talks about her Chinese face and her American face, while Waverly sees two-facedness as good "if you get what you want" (292, 304). In this way, we are equally impressed by Lindo's cleverness, when she escapes a bad marriage to a spoiled child, and irritated by the snide remarks she makes to Suyuan and Jing-mei ("The Red Candle," etc.). Likewise, Waverly holds our attention as a chess prodigy; tugs our heartstrings with her uncertain love for Rich, who is white; and enrages with her vanity and cruel jibes at Jing-mei ("Rules of the Game,"

"Four Directions," etc.). While Lindo and Waverly's characters are often ambiguous, their tenacity in clinging to their own selves is also undeniably admirable.

An-mei Hsu and Rose Hsu Jordan share a link of having things done for them. As a child, An-mei goes to live with her mother and discovers how her mother, an honored widow, was raped by a rich man and forced to be his third wife. An-mei's mother kills herself soon after, to ensure An-mei's future, as the family, afraid of the ghost, will do anything for her child ("Magpies"). (Notably, the story of An-mei's mother is incredibly similar to that of Tan's grandmother, including details Daisy Tan did not reveal as facts until after the book was published.) Rose suffers from a lack of will, allowing Ted, her husband, to make all decisions for them (including marriage against his family's wishes). After years of marriage, Ted tires of Rose and leaves her ("Half and Half"). An-mei tells Rose to keep trying amid tragedy, reminding Rose of her brother's death. "This is not hope," An-mei says. "Not reason. This is your fate. This is your life, what you must do" (139). Rose does not reconcile her marriage, but she does find her self and insists to Ted she is keeping their home because, as she tells him, "You can't just pull me out of your life and throw me away" (219). Buoyed by the hopes of both their mothers, An-mei and Rose find ways to remain whole people.

The stories between Ying-Ying and Lena St. Clair are unique because one of each of theirs focuses on the other, and even though they have grown apart (as all the mothers and daughters have), they share a special understanding. Unlike the other Joy Luck aunties, Ying-Ying is from a wealthy family, and her childhood story involves being lost during the Moon Festival and feeling wonder at the sight of an actress play the "Moon Lady" ("The Moon Lady"). Lena's childhood, however, was overrun by her mother's fears and exoticness in the face of her white father's ineptitude in understanding his Chinese wife. When Lena's brother dies shortly after birth, Ying-Ying withdraws into herself ("The Voice from the Wall"). Perhaps the strange inequality of her parents' marriage has led Lena to her husband, Harold. Their relationship is so much based on "equality"—splitting of finances, unfailing "fairness"—that it has become dead, devoid of caring ("Rice Husband"). Ying-Ying, remembering her troubled past, recognizes her daughter's unhappiness and the tiger spirit they share. She determines what to do: "I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because that is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter" (286).

The book's final mother-daughter pairing is between Jing-mei/June and Suyuan Woo, a difficult narrative match since Suyuan has recently died and appears only in the other's memories. Thus, all of Jing-mei's stories center around her mother—her expectations, her history, her love for and meaning to Jing-mei. She remembers her failed attempt to be a piano prodigy (at her mother's urging) and Suyuan's understanding in the face of Lindo and Waverly's nastiness ("Two Kinds," "Best Quality"). But looking back, she concludes, "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more" (27).

Ultimately, Jing-mei's bookending chapters, placed in sections in which the other aunties are voiced, give meaning to Suyuan's life beyond Jing-mei. Her journey to China to find her sisters (the twin daughters Suyuan was forced to abandon during the Sino-Japanese War) connects Jing-mei to her mother and her Chinese heritage in ways she never imagined ("A Pair of Tickets"). But it is the scheming of the Joy Luck aunties, and their insistence that Jing-mei take her mother's place at the mah-jongg table, that foreshadow all the book's connections and subtexts ("The Joy Luck Club"). In Ben Xu's estimation, "Just as the mah jong table is a linkage between the past and present for the Club Aunties, Jing-mei Woo, taking her mother's seat at the table, becomes the frame narrator linking the two generations of American Chinese,

who are separated by age and cultural gaps and yet bound together by family ties and a continuity of ethnic heritage" (55). As Jing-mei steps into her mother's place in the United States and China, she affirms the unbreakable connection between these mothers and daughters. In the end, "We learn just how vital it is for mothers and daughters to continually talk-story—not to wait, for instance, to speak only until spoken to or given authority to do so or till one can speak perfect American English" (Ho 106). Each of the *Joy Luck* characters becomes able to recognize her self reflected in the face of her mother or daughter.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Watch the film version of *The Joy Luck Club*. Which stories have been altered significantly? Which have been left out? Speculate on why. How are most men portrayed in the film? What is the difference between American and Chinese men? How do racism and sexism contrast in the United States and China? How do they contrast with depictions in the book? Compare this film to to others such as *Dim Sum* or *Saving Face*.
2. Read Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. In what ways does Kingston incorporate "talk-story" in her book? How are the two works different or similar? In what ways does Kingston's portrayal of Chinese Americans differ from Tan's? How do gender and sexism function in both books? Comment on the unorthodox flow between chapters and stories in each.

"Two Kinds" (1989)

"Two Kinds," from *The Joy Luck Club,* relates the story of Jing-mei/June Woo and her struggles against her mother's determination that June will be distinguished, a child prodigy. It highlights the differences between a Chinese-born mother who "believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America" and an American-born daughter who says, "I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me" (141, 154). But while Tan makes clear that her characters bear a Chinese ethnicity, their story beckons to all with its universal themes about parent-child tensions and the dreams we harbor for ourselves and for the ones we love.

Suyuan's ambitions for her daughter revolve solely around June's displaying some sort of genius, something that will make her instantly rich and famous. Tan treats this initial situation with a light touch as Suyuan fishes for her child's hidden genius and June, filled with visions of grandeur, plays along. "We'd watch Shirley [Temple's] old movies on TV as though they were training films," June says, and when that does not work, "Every night after dinner, my mother and I would sit at the Formica table. She would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children she had read in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*" (142, 143). But as June fails each exam, she says, "After seeing my mother's disappointed face once again, something inside me began to die" (144). Confronting herself in the mirror, June sees the prodigy side of herself, but not in the way her mother expects: "The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. . . . I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not" (144). In this way, the stereotypes of Chinese ambition and hard work collide with the stereotype of American individualism.

In the end, Suyuan decides June must learn to play the piano; thus the family scrimps for an instrument to practice on and lessons from Mr. Chong. Old Chong's deafness allows June willfully to disregard the playing, leading to her disastrous performance of Schumann's *Pleading Child*. When, two days later, Suyuan orders June to practice piano, as if nothing has happened, June's rebellion overflows. "I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!" June yells, followed by Suyuan's "Only two kinds of daughters. . . . Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind" (153). June's subsequent wish that she were "dead! Like them" (her sisters, whom Suyuan was forced to abandon in China) ends the argument: "[Suyuan's]

face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless" (153).

Looking back on the incident as an adult, June puzzles over "why [my mother] hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable. And even worse, I never asked her. . . . Why had she given up hope?" (154). June reflects on her disappointing life and, after Suyuan's death, touches the piano for the first time in decades. Looking at the music for *Pleading Child,* she sees the song next to it, *Contented Child,* and realizes "they were two halves to the same song" (155). June understands, in the words of Catherine Romagnolo, that "because culture is always hybrid, any project that asserts purity must necessarily be 'fake.' This 'fakeness' should not, however, be read as inauthenticity, but as a deconstruction of the very concept of authenticity" (92). In other words, Suyuan believed June capable of anything and that the limits placed on her by, say, her gender, ethnicity, or her own self were meaningless in the face of self-creation. With this realization, June, ever the "pleading child" seeking understanding, transforms into the "contented child," now aware that understanding was there all along.

For Discussion or Writing

Read "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior.* Compare Kingston's reaction to Brave Orchid's perceived expectations and June's in "Two Kinds." How are these portrayals of Chinese-American mother-daughter conflicts similar? How are they different? How are they similar to or different from mother-daughter conflicts everywhere?

"A Pair of Tickets" (1989)

This story, which also functions as the final chapter of *The Joy Luck Club,* takes us back to the story of Jing-mei/June Woo. While all the Joy Luck daughters display confusion over identity and their place in the world, Jing-mei/June embodies a life in complete limbo, unsure of who she is or how she fits into either Chinese or American culture. In "A Pair of Tickets," June visits China for the first time, accompanied by her father. Their mission is to meet the twin daughters June's mother, Suyuan, was forced to abandon as babies decades before. June and Canning Woo are performing this task alone because Suyuan has died mere months before, unaware her daughters from another life are still alive.

In China June rejects her American name and becomes solely Jing-mei, a transformation represented physically, too, as China's heat forces Jing-mei to abandon the fancy American hair and makeup products she relies on in the United States Jing-mei says, "The minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzen, China, I feel different. . . . My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese" (306). She recognizes her own change in China's alterations: "It seems all the cities I have heard of, except Shanghai, have changed their spellings. I think they are saying China has changed in other ways as well" (307). Intriguingly, Jing-mei is meeting her sisters in Shanghai, indicative of both her (and their) difference and sameness. Indeed, despite her feelings of "becoming Chinese," Jing-mei still stands out as an American, towering over her father's family. But Tan continues to complicate notions of recognizable identity (and stereotypes) as Jing-mei remembers her mother's saying Jing-mei's height was from her grandfather, who was "a northerner, and may have even had some Mongol blood" (312).

Jing-mei's state of limbo continues until her father relates the story of the twins' abandonment. Suyuan's version, usually perfunctory, also varied, and Jing-mei was never certain of the truth. The real tale, however, absolves Suyuan of any wrongdoing and highlights her lifelong attempts to find her lost daughters. Hearing her mother's story forces Jing-mei to recognize Suyuan's tragedy, and her love, especially when Canning tells Jing-mei her name means "long cherished wish . . . the younger sister who was supposed to be the essence of the others" (323). Jing-mei's personal

and cultural uncertainty aligns with Catherine Romagnolo's reading:

> The quests embarked upon by these women . . . repudiate the ability to recover any type of static identity which might solidify exclusionary conceptions of gendered and racialized subjectivity; at the same time, however, they stress the importance of the histories of these characters to their ongoing sense of agency, highlighting an idea of history as not completely knowable, but nevertheless significant to the discursive construction of identity. (93–94)

In the end, the meeting of Jing-mei and her sisters reconciles her personal angst. She thinks, "I look at their faces again and I see no trace of my mother in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. . . . It is my family. It is in our blood" (331). This realization reflects on all the Joy Luck mothers and daughters and, indeed, family everywhere. As Wendy Ho suggests, "There is an impending change of guard at the end of the book which suggests the potential for continuity and transformation of mother-and-daughter bonding" (101). In the end, "A Pair of Tickets" and the whole of *The Joy Luck Club* eloquently display that the bonds between people have more relation to love than to nationality.

For Discussion or Writing

Tan has often been criticized for concluding her stories too neatly and too happily. Discuss whether you think this is true (or not true) in relation to "A Pair of Tickets." Is the ending dealt with too simply? Is it believable that the twin daughters survived? What are your thoughts on Jing-mei's reaction to being in China?

The Kitchen God's Wife (1991)

"First I told my daughter I no longer had a pain in my heart," says Winnie Louie as she begins to recount her secrets to her daughter Pearl in *The Kitchen God's Wife* (87). Claiming heart pain was the ploy Winnie used to persuade Pearl to visit her, but the sentence is striking when one considers the horrific tale of war and abuse that follows. With time, and with the telling, Winnie truly "no longer [has] a pain in [her] heart."

The Kitchen God's Wife was a particularly difficult novel for Tan to write. Not only did Tan set high standards for her work after *The Joy Luck Club*—"Each of my books . . . would outdo its predecessor, increasing in scope, depth, precision of language, intelligence of form"—but she also absorbed everyone's advice that "the Second Book's doomed no matter what you do" ("Angst" 324–325). In the end, Tan began and abandoned seven novels and roughly 1,000 pages. What she finally connected with was the first-person narrative of a woman who had survived both war and an abusive spouse, much of the story drawn from her own mother's life before immigrating to the United States. What the woman needed, to make her story complete, was an audience, since, as Tan writes, "A story should be a gift" ("Angst" 332). Enter the woman's daughter, who has her own secret (multiple sclerosis) and is linked to her mother's history in ways she does not know.

The Kitchen God's Wife is, most simply, "a retelling of the Kitchen God's story—from a contemporary feminist point of view" (Huntley 85). In this Chinese folktale, an ungrateful husband degrades his good wife, only to commit suicide when faced with her mercy later. His capacity for shame prompts his deification, giving him responsibility for judging mortals at New Year's. Tan, via Winnie, reclaims the story, recognizing the wife as the true hero and deifying her in turn. This story stands as a backdrop for Winnie's own, for she, too, has lived as the degraded wife of an abusive man, yet was able to triumph over her own history. Ultimately, "Winnie's voice is that of a survivor, but it also is the voice of a mother who is compelled to share the story of her life with her daughter" (Huntley 84).

Looming larger than the Kitchen God's tale is the Sino-Japanese War, a backdrop for Winnie's story after she marries Wen Fu, a Kuomintang pilot. Winnie initially saw the marriage as an escape from her emotionally barren life, only to face even

worse with Wen Fu. As a pilot, he flies away from each battle, afterward claiming, "I was chasing a Japanese fighter that ran off another way. . . . Too bad I didn't catch him" (204). As a husband, Wen Fu begins by degrading his wife sexually each night, moving on to beatings, rape, infidelity, public shaming, child abuse, and, through abuse and neglect, the deaths of their children. In large part, Wen Fu's burgeoning evil is concurrent with the worsening conditions in war-stricken China.

The backdrop of war puts Tan's book on troubled ground, as some find her focus on Winnie (instead of the war) or her brief description of major events (such as the Rape of Nanking, in which up to 300,000 civilians were raped and murdered in China's capital city, Nanking/Nanjing, over the course of six weeks) a cruel denial of the facts of the Sino-Japanese War. However, many also praise Tan for her resistance to Japanese revisionism that says the events never happened. Tan's focus on an individual's story also hints at her Americanness, in which the individual's trauma must be the primary focus. By making Winnie's story the center of the book, with the war as background, Tan forges a stronger connection between her tale and her readers. As Bella Adams suggests, "*The Kitchen God's Wife* addresses the fictionalization of rape to affect radically historical understanding of . . . factual rape" ("Representing History" 10).

Tan plays with concepts of truth, reality, and memory as Winnie tells her story and expresses both certainty and uncertainty regarding the truth of her memories. These are in particular contrast to the recollections of Winnie's friend, Helen/Hulan, the woman who was Winnie's companion during the war and who pushes both Winnie and Pearl into revealing their secrets. "Ten thousand different things," Winnie says, "that come from your memory or imagination—and you do not know which is which, which was true, which is false" (89). Tan's play with memory works on many levels: For one, it speaks to historical revisionists who say atrocities like the rape of Nanking (or, for that matter, the rape of a wife, Winnie) never happened. There is also a level of realism, an acceptance of how personal memories are unavoidably flawed and yet say something profound about the one holding them, such as Winnie's wanting to face facts, pleasant or not, while Helen wants to remember happiness: "'Remember how you stole a pedicab the day the paper warnings fell from the sky?' . . . Helen laughed. 'I don't remember this. . . . Anyway, how can you accuse me of stealing? I never stole anything!'" (218). Despite these notes, Winnie's telling has a more personal function as well: "As Winnie carefully and slowly remembers and then articulates the shaping events of her life, she progresses on the journey toward verbal authority and eloquence" (Huntley 109). This becomes especially profound as Winnie is forced to admit her final rape by Wen Fu, which probably resulted in Pearl's conception, and her fears that Pearl would inherit his evil.

Verbal authority and eloquence, the right to own her history without shame in front of a beloved daughter, are the ultimate outcome in *The Kitchen God's Wife* and what release Winnie from her past. In telling how she survived both heinous marriage and war, "Winnie re-imagines her past and comes to terms with it, and she relives her traumatic history, transforming it into an allegory of the human spirit's ability to survive the worst of circumstances" (Huntley 110). Inspired by her mother's tale, Pearl tells Winnie of her multiple sclerosis, moving mother and daughter into an honest and loving understanding of each other. Winnie moves the aforementioned allegory full circle by giving Pearl a new goddess, no longer known as the Kitchen God's Wife: "See her name," Winnie tells Pearl. "Lady Sorrowfree, happiness winning over bitterness, no regrets in this world" (415).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Do some research on the Rape of Nanking; one good resource is Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II.* How effective is *The Kitchen God's Wife* as historical fiction? Does this seem to be an important period to remember? In your opinion, does Tan's brief discussion of the Rape of Nanking (pages 233–235) serve to respect or disregard the memory of what happened? Explain.

2. *The Kitchen God's Wife* is full of dynamic female characters—Winnie, Auntie Du, Helen, Pearl, Winnie's mother and stepmother, Beautiful Betty. How do these characters function in the troubled circumstances they face? What actions do they take that are good or bad? How do these characters fit into Winnie's tale, and what do they say about Tan and feminism in a larger context?

The Bonesetter's Daughter (2001)

The Bonesetter's Daughter focuses on the originating connections between mothers and daughters. It is very personal for Amy Tan, as the book deals directly with Daisy Tan's battle with Alzheimer's disease and their mother-daughter relationship. While aspects of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* may be more directly biographical or autobiographical, there is an emotional resonance in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* that speaks to its truth. Tan describes the elements that reflect her mother's life, saying, "The regrets are hers, the fear of the curse, the sense of danger she instilled in me while wanting me to have a better life. Asking forgiveness is in the book as well. That was part of our saying goodbye" (Cujec 215). *The Bonesetter's Daughter* ultimately becomes, as was Tan's intention, a fictional contemplation on "the things we remember and the things that should be remembered" (quoted in Gray and Sachs).

Tan's struggle to give voice to her and her mother's experience, mirrored in LuLing and her daughter Ruth's own inabilities to speak, makes up an important subtext in the book. Tan struggled for more than four years trying to write the novel; upon Daisy Tan's death in 1999, she finished it in six months, perhaps viewing the book as a way to keep her mother near: "It almost felt as though, as long as I kept writing the book, [Daisy] would stay alive" (quoted in Adams, *Amy Tan* 126). In the introduction, Tan credits two ghostwriters for helping her finish the book, saying, "The heart of this story belongs to my grandmother, its voice to my mother." The indication of ghosts and ghostwriters segues nicely into the novel, since Ruth works as a ghostwriter, or "book doctor," and also foreshadows the highly personal nature of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

The Bonesetter's Daughter begins with a prologue entitled "Truth," in which LuLing explains, in the first person, the things she knows to be true. But what she does not know is the real name of her mother, Precious Auntie, the woman she thought of as nursemaid, who told LuLing their family name and ordered her never to forget it. Further complicating the situation is LuLing's own worsening Alzheimer's disease, as well as her desire to pass on her memories to her daughter, Ruth. In addition, Precious Auntie's attempt at suicide—by drinking boiling ink, which mangled her face and left her mute—has made LuLing Precious Auntie's sole interpreter. Using a system of grunts, hand gestures, and seeming telepathy, Precious Auntie speaks only to LuLing: "Hand-talk, face-talk, and chalk-talk were the languages I grew up with," LuLing writes, "soundless and strong" (2).

Ruth, too, suffers from an inability to speak, both literally and figuratively. She has been living with, but not married to, Art Kamen for 10 years and works as a ghostwriter (a term she hates) despite a lingering desire to write novels of her own. Regardless of desire, Ruth thinks she has no stories to tell. Ruth also loses her voice yearly, a psychosomatic week of silence that always begins on August 12. This stems from both a broken arm in Ruth's childhood and a period of muteness in Tan's real life, which followed the murder of a college friend. Ruth's loss of voice represents her inability to speak to those close to her, especially Art—regarding their disintegrating relationship—and LuLing, who is always threatening suicide and claiming Ruth does not love her. "She made her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease or a mystery," the book says, representing Ruth's disconnection from her heritage (10).

At the heart of *The Bonesetter's Daughter,* surrounded by all these women who cannot speak,

lies LuLing's narrative, the memoir she has written down in classic Chinese in the hope Ruth will read and understand it. In terms of the novel, this middle section, bookended by third-person narratives about Ruth, makes up the core of the book and is its strongest part. Ruth, having forgotten how to read the Chinese calligraphy her "mother had once drilled . . . into her reluctant brain," hires a translator, Mr. Tang, to decipher her mother's memoir (12). What comes back is a strong voice Ruth has never heard, the result of both her mother's lack of facility with English and her worsening Alzheimer's.

LuLing relates Precious Auntie's tragic history as the intelligent, strong-willed daughter of a bonesetter whose marriage to Baby Uncle is thwarted by the evil Chang. Within the Liu family, Precious Auntie is allowed to continue the caretaking of her illegitimate daughter by Baby Uncle, LuLing, but only in the capacity of nursemaid. When the Chang family sets up a betrothal for LuLing, Precious Auntie commits suicide at last, canceling LuLing's betrothal and putting her in a Christian orphanage. Here LuLing finds education and love, marrying the geologist Pan Kai Jing, only to have him executed by the Japanese during the Sino-Japanese War. Her brief but happy marriage in America to Edwin Young is thwarted by Young's early death, and "the lengthy second widowhood turns into a miserable battleground with Ruth, a disobedient child who resents her mother's otherness and longs for independence" (Snodgrass 42). This difficulty in reconciling a daughter's strong will with a mother's heritage and knowledge becomes a central motif in *The Bonesetter's Daughter,* from Precious Auntie to LuLing to Ruth, as well as a continuing current in all of Tan's novels.

The Bonesetter's Daughter may be Tan's most accomplished work, moving beyond the softness of *The Joy Luck Club* and the jumble that is occasionally found in *The Kitchen God's Wife* and *A Hundred Secret Senses.* True, some have criticized *Bonesetter's* for its too-perfect conclusion—Ruth and Art reconcile and are better than ever; LuLing finds comfort in a nice rest home and love with her translator, Mr. Tang—but the book's nuance makes for Tan at her best. Whatever problems the novel might have, Tan retains a marvelous voice.

For Discussion or Writing

Read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried,* Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark,* or Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,* or choose another novel known to have a strong autobiographical element. Do some research into the life of the author(s) and see where life intersects with the fictional. What is the purpose of this mingling of fact and fiction? Why not simply write autobiography or memoir? Does the study of what is "real" or "true" and what is "fake" or "false" even matter? Why or why not?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON TAN AND HER WORK

1. Tan's commercially successful work has been criticized for pandering to white readers by exploiting Chinese culture to provide a glimpse of the exotic "other." Do you agree or disagree with that assessment? Should writers bear any responsibility for the representations of their own cultures or ethnicities? Is it possible to separate the personal from the political in situations like these?
2. Mothers and daughters play a central role in Tan's writing, which gives voice to those who have been silenced for reasons of race, ethnicity, or gender. How are male characters portrayed in Tan's work? What roles do they play in the narrative? Read Frank Chin's *Donald Duk,* which centers on an Asian-American father-son relationship. Compare Chin's and Tan's work and discuss how each author deals with male and female characters. Chin has argued that Asian-American male characters are frequently marginalized and emasculated; respond to his theory, citing specific examples to support your argument.

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Sarah Stoeckl

Helena María Viramontes
(1954–)

> TÚ ERES MUJER, he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, and that was the end of any argument. . . . "So what's wrong with being a mujer," she asked herself out loud.
>
> ("Growing")

Helena María Viramontes's sparse, powerful language in tales about the ordinary, the downtrodden, and the forgotten have won her a faithful readership and critical appreciation. She was born in East Los Angeles, California, on February 26, 1954. She grew up with three brothers and five sisters, yet despite the family's cramped quarters, they always made room for relatives and friends from Mexico who stayed temporarily. Viramontes attended James A. Garfield High School, one of the schools that, in the late 1960s, participated in protests over unfair treatment, including a general lack of funding. The school was later made famous by the film *Stand and Deliver*.

After she graduated from Garfield, Viramontes worked a part-time job and attended Immaculate Heart College, where she earned her B.A. in English in 1975. Although Viramontes recalls that her elementary, middle, and high school were populated by 99.9 percent Mexican Americans, she was one of only five Chicanas in her entire graduating class at Immaculate Heart ("Four Guiding Principles" 126). The culture shock of attending college was felt not only while in the classroom and on campus; Viramontes's own family were puzzled by her desire to continue her education.

Viramontes next enrolled in the creative writing program at the University of California, Irvine. One of her short stories, "Requiem for the Poor," received a prize in 1977 from *Statement* magazine. She received the same honor from *Statement* the following year when her story "The Broken Web" was awarded top prize in fiction. In 1979, her short story "Birthday" won the Chicano Literary Contest at U.C. Irvine.

In "Birthday," the Catholic Church appears as an unforgiving and immutable force, tormenting a young pregnant college student named Alice as she contemplates having an abortion. Viramontes's story chronicles Alice's psychological turmoil. Her thoughts during the procedure are fixed on her relationship with God: "No! I don't love you, not you, God, knotted ball. I hate you, Alice" (*Moths* 50). Her hatred results from felt necessity to preserve herself against God's hatred of her for committing the sins of adultery and murder, the Catholic Church's view of abortion. Alice almost hypnotically begins the opening phrase of confession, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned," which is also echoed in "The Broken Web." But unlike the other story, which contains a priest, the Catholic Church in "Birthday" is represented only through Alice's guilt and unhappiness. Alice finds some solace in her best friend, Terry, who speaks from experience about the anguish of preparing herself for an abortion: "Look, you'll stew and brood and feel pitiful and pray until your knees chap, but in the end, you'll decide on the abortion. So why not cut out all this silliness" (48). Clearly, Terry has gone through the very agonizing experience that

she anticipates for Alice, and it is in this friendship, in the sympathetic connection with Terry, rather than in the church or in her boyfriend, that Alice finds comfort.

Sisterhood functioning as a salve against life's pains and the judgment of others also appears in "Growing." This story features 14-year-old Naomi and her younger sister, Lucía, as the two walk to Jorge's house. Told from the teenager's perspective, the story begins first with a degree of hostility toward the younger sister, who tattles to the girls' parents all that she sees and hears. When Naomi looks at her sister and realizes that functioning as a chaperone is a duty imposed on her by their father rather than the younger sister's idea, the teenager's feelings soften. She sits on the curb watching a game of stickball, postponing her trip to Jorge's and, more profoundly, taking a moment out of a quickly disappearing childhood to enjoy the worry-free life embodied in the game. She knows the kids at play have nothing weighing on their minds except what game to play next, while she, who has been grounded for two months because she was caught making out with Joe behind the gym building at a carnival, must contend with the difficulties of being not quite an adult but no longer a child. The harshest reality she must wrestle with is her father's shifting treatment of her. She wonders "what she had done to make him so distrustful. *TÚ ERES MUJER,* he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, and that was the end of any argument" (36). In that one capitalized statement, "TÚ ERES MUJER," or "you are a woman," Viramontes encapsulates much of the machismo driving women into positions in which they feel shameful about their own sexuality and are always under suspicion. In many ways, the short phrase hearkens back to the biblical Eve of the Book of Genesis and seems to equate budding female sexuality with ultimate betrayal and sin. Naomi's father abruptly stops trusting her because her newfound sexuality makes her just like all other women.

Female sexuality and identity—and men's inability to reach beyond prescriptive views of women in order to see the ones in their lives more individually and compassionately—are also central topics in "The Long Reconciliation." Although Chato and Amanda begin their married life together in bliss, their relationship soon sours when Amanda seeks an abortion because they cannot financially provide for a child. She drinks corn-silk tea brewed by Don Serafín and prays in church for God to relieve "this . . . pain, Father, to sprout a child that we can't feed or care for" (89). Against the harsh realities of her meager existence with Chato as dirt farmers in pre-1910 Mexico, the priest offers only the consolation of prayer. Amanda responds, "But Father, wasn't He supposed to take care of us, His poor?" (89). Just as the priest offers Amanda a prescribed remedy to her dilemma, her husband, Chato, cannot break free of the church's rigid stance on abortion. He cannot forgive her for having aborted their child: "Amanda would touch him and try to make him love her again. Each time she touched him, he saw his child's face, and would jerk away from her grasp" (85). Chato's refusal to see Amanda outside the strict views of either virgin or whore, pure or sinful, effectively ends their marriage; it is only years later, when Chato lies dying in a hospital bed, that he is able to reconcile with his wife. Chato ultimately realizes that the hatred and pain he suffered from his inability to forgive Amanda, symbolized as an immovable mountain, "was no bigger than a stone, a stone I could have thrown into the distance . . . at twenty-four, but instead waited fifty-eight years later" (94). Tellingly, this idea of reconciliation that takes place over a considerable length of time also occurred in Viramontes's own life, in her relationship with the creative writing program at Irvine.

Viramontes left the M.F.A. program in 1981 but returned to complete her degree in 1994. As she relates in an essay entitled "Four Guiding Principles," Viramontes left U.C. Irvine because of a conversation she had with her adviser, who "began to explain why he thought I was a cheap imitation of Gabriel García Márquez. . . . [He said] the trouble is that you write about Chicanos. You should be writing about people" (128). In response, Viramontes left the office and "never

returned to the program and for another ten years never ever entered the Humanities building again." In the interim, she published short stories in a variety of literary magazines such as *Maize, Cenzontle Chicano Short Stories and Poetry,* and *Xhisme Arte*. Viramontes helped to produce *Xhisme Arte,* an important small literary magazine, in a downtown Los Angeles studio along with colleagues she had met in workshops at the Los Angeles Latino Writers Association. Her major accomplishment before she earned her graduate degree was the 1985 publication of her collection *The Moths and Other Stories.* It was published by Arte Público Press, which is associated with the University of Houston.

In 1987, Viramontes organized a Chicana writers' conference at the University of California at Irvine. That conference produced an important anthology, *Chicana Creativity and Criticism,* which she coedited with María Herrera-Sobek. The book collects numerous writers and critics who have helped form the foundation of Chicana literature and criticism, with contributions from academics such as Tey Diana Rebolledo and Norma Alarcón, as well as poetry and prose by Lucha Corpi, Denise Chávez, and Lorna Dee Cervantes.

Another of her award-winning short stories, "The Broken Web," delves into the double standard toward sexuality in men and women. Tomas chastises his wife for having an affair yet does not accept her anger at his affair with Olivia, an aging barmaid from Tijuana: "Don't I have a right to be unfaithful? Weren't you?" (*Moths* 59). His anger toward her escalates, erupting into physical violence. His wife ends this cycle of abuse by shooting him. This violent act is never addressed directly, however. Rather, it appears in an abbreviated sentence yelled by Yreina, one of her daughters, as she tries to waken her sister, Martha. The tale of Tomas's murder also appears in Martha's confession to a distracted, less than sympathetic priest, and in this scene, Viramontes critically examines the church's role in perpetuating the systems that oppress women. The wife strives to liberate herself "from the misery . . . of guilt imposed by man and God" (16). The priest to whom Martha relates the tale of her mother's shooting her father is distracted by his hunger. He is accustomed to hearing voices in confession: "It was always the same monotonous whisper; man or woman—no real difference. They came to him seeking redemption; they had stepped into the realm of sin; they had all slapped his walls with hideous, ridiculously funny and often imaginary sins—and they expected him to erase their sins, to ease their souls so that they could, with the innocence of a pure heart, enter into sin once again. The whispering tune of secrets hidden and finally banished" (53). For the priest, the contrite and their sins are blurred into an anonymous hum.

Similarly, the mother of Yreina and Martha is never called by her own proper name. She appears only as Tomas's wife. She herself acknowledges her lack of individuality: "And she could not leave him because she no longer owned herself. He owned her, her children owned her, and she needed them all to live" (60). This pervasive sense of male dominance even characterizes the wife's sense of Olivia. Rather than hating or despising her husband's lover, Tomas's wife feels pity for her and wonders whether she herself would be in Olivia's position were Tomas to abandon her. "Tomas' wife wondered if that old barmaid (what-was-her-name-now?) still worked there and she wondered if Tomas left her, would she become like her?" Against traditional treatment of mistresses by wives, in which there is much rancor and animosity, Tomas's wife finds a certain kind of kinship with Olivia as they are both united by Tomas's power over them.

Viramontes published her first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus,* in 1995. Her second, *Their Dogs Came With Them,* appeared in 2007. She is currently a professor of English and creative writing at Cornell University.

Viramontes has received numerous awards in recognition of her talent, including a 1989 National Endowment for the Arts fellowship to work with Gabriel García Márquez at the Sundance Institute, as well as the 1995 John Dos Passos Prize. In 2006, she received the Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature from the University

of California, Santa Barbara and the Santa Barbara Book & Author Festival. Viramontes was named a Ford Fellow in 2007.

Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córboba write of Viramontes's work ethic: "An extremely disciplined writer, she famously rises each day before dawn to work on her creations, and will not succumb to pressure from her fans to release any new work until she feels entirely comfortable that it is ready" (549). In an essay entitled "Why I Write," Viramontes explains, "Through writing, I have learned to protect the soles of my feet from the broken glass. . . . Writing is the only way I know how to pray."

"The Moths" (1985)

In this frequently anthologized short story, Viramontes chronicles the time in which her unnamed female protagonist begins to love and care for her grandmother, known only as *Abuelita*. The absence of names is a critical element in the story: The absence of markers that may limit the young girl's experience opens to all readers the lessons to be learned from the tale. The young girl in "The Moths" lashes out violently against family members, who she believes cannot and do not understand her. She carries a piece of brick in her shoe as a weapon against her sisters. At every juncture, she faces accusations about her own inability to fit in: She does not want to attend Mass every Sunday as her father expects, she cannot create "feminine" art with an embroidery needle, and she does not feel comfortable or at home in her own body. Her "bull hands" are large, misshapen, and conspicuously unfeminine. In short, the very identity issues with which the young girl struggles are the same for all young girls on their way to womanhood.

In the figure of her Abuelita, the unnamed protagonist finds a model she can and eventually does emulate. As Abuelita succumbs to stomach cancer, the protagonist begins to behave in ways that reverse the roles between grandmother and granddaughter. The girl shops for food and prepares meals for her grandmother, and, most poignantly, when her Abuelita dies, she lovingly prepares her body for burial.

The story's title is taken from the miraculous appearance of moths, which fly out of Abuelita's mouth and hover above a light in the bathroom. As the protagonist draws a bath and gently lowers her Abuelita into the tub, she notices the moths that emerge from Abuelita and float upward. Moths symbolize the soul, the aspect of a person that survives after the human body expires. Abuelita had previously explained their significance to the protagonist, telling her of moths that "lay within the soul and slowly eat the spirit up" (32).

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider all of the natural elements that appear in the story. How do they function? What role do they play in the story?
2. "The Moths" contains two moments that fall loosely into the realm of magical realism: the appearance of the moths from Abuelita's mouth and the "melting" of the protagonist's "bull hands" with Abuelita's salve and touch. Examine both the real and the magical elements of these two moments. How do they merge? How do they contribute to different interpretations of the story?
3. Compare the relationship between the grandmother and granddaughter in "The Moths" to the relationship between Arlene and Champ in "Miss Clairol." Who act as adults? Do the relationships change as the stories progress? If so, why or how?

"Cariboo Cafe" (1985)

Viramontes merges three different voices and story lines in this short but poignant tale, published in *The Moths and Other Stories*. In the first, she takes on the thoughts and words of a young girl named Sonya as she returns home from school. Having lost her house key in a tussle in the schoolyard,

Sonya thinks to retrace her steps to the house of Mrs. Avila, the woman who cares for her baby brother, Macky. In the second section, the narrator switches to the owner of the Cariboo Cafe. From his thoughts, we learn that he has lost his son in the Vietnam War; is divorced from his wife, Nell; and has a soft spot for transients, particularly one named Paulie who is the same age the owner's son would have been had he lived. In the third part, another war, that waged by the contras in Central America, is responsible for the disappearance and death of another child. Geraldo, the son of an unnamed washerwoman, is taken by soldiers and accused of espionage while making an innocuous trip to the market to buy a mango for his mother. Readers learn the grief and despair of the nameless woman from Central America who travels across borders into the United States in search of her lost son. To gain mastery over her loss and reclaim her dead son, the washerwoman abducts Macky and Sonya because Macky's eyes seem reminiscent of Geraldo's.

These various storylines converge inside the cafe that, because the "paint's peeled off 'cept for the two O's," is referred to as the "double zero cafe" (68). This accidental name is appropriate in its symbolism of the marginalized and forgotten people—the unnamed "illegals" who are rounded up and arrested by members of "La Migra," or the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), as they take refuge in the cafe's restroom. Their stories are not told, and yet they appear as the faceless and nameless workers for an equally nameless and generic factory. With a view cankered by anger and hardened against humanity, the cafe owner describes "all these illegals running out of the factory to hide, like roaches when the lightswitch goes on" (71). What makes this description all the more disheartening, however, is his description of himself: "Look, I'm a nice guy."

The "polie," "La Migra," and the contras are each just another force that figures centrally in the story, although one that is never named and whose perspective is never shown. In fact, Viramontes reduces the INS to the "green vans," making them just as shadowy as the characters they arrest. These authorities interject chaos and function, serving as the deus ex machina in the story, breaking up families and shuttling characters from one location to another. Against this powerful force, Viramontes creates characters who act out of a profound impulse to connect, to become whole, and to unite or reunite families.

For Discussion or Writing

1. "Cariboo Cafe" ends with a defiant stance taken by the unnamed washerwoman, mother of Geraldo. Compare this conclusion to the closing scene of *Their Dogs Came with Them*. How do these final scenes impact your view of the tales? Do you read them as hopeful or hopeless?
2. Make an argument explaining why the multiple viewpoints are appropriate for this story, citing examples from the text.

"Miss Clairol" (1988)

One of Viramontes's early stories, "Miss Clairol" was published in 1988 and first appeared in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism*. The story's title is from a hair-dye product that represented the epitome of Anglo beauty in the 1970s. As the story opens, Arlene's daughter Champ notes the changes in her mother based on the color of hair dye that she has used: Light Ash to Flame to Sun Bronze. All of these cycles of dyeing her hair, however, have left it "stiff, break[ing] at the ends" (164). The narrator says that "Arlene has burned the softness of her hair with peroxide." The images of hair dye and the damage it inflicts are indicative of the way the beauty industry markets white beauty to the detriment of women of color such as Arlene, who suffer to emulate a particular aesthetic norm. Of further significance is the name *Miss Clairol*. She is imagined to be a young woman, unmarried, and certainly without children. This sense of youthfulness and freedom is embraced by Arlene in her choice of attire. She wears "bell bottom jeans two sizes too small" and

a "pink, strapless tube top," but her body seems to defy this clothing, as her stomach spills out over the top of her jeans and they bind her so tightly that she cannot bend over.

Arlene is trapped or bound in other ways as well. As she prepares for her date, singing along to the radio, Arlene recounts various sexual experiences she has had in the past; this is when the reader recognizes the violent cycles of abuse that Arlene has endured and survived. When she sings the song lyrics "I will do anything, forrr your love," the reader recognizes the tragic undertones (166). For the idea of romance and love, Arlene has subjected herself to violence, "one nipple blind from a cigarette burn." In the mirror, she sees reflected "the face who has worn too many relationships." She recalls the first time she had sex under a house at the age of 11, but resolves not to tell Champ about her earlier encounter with a boy named Puppet. It is the notion of love or romance that has captured Arlene and left her forever searching for an ideal hawked in advertisements, products like Miss Clairol, Calgon commercials, and songs like "For Your Love."

While Arlene goes through her rituals in preparation for her date, her daughter Champ appears to be acting out her own. She opens a can of soup, watches television, and cuts out "Miss Breck models" from magazines: "Champ collects the array of honey colored haired women, puts them in a shoe box with all her other special things" (166). The reader has the sense that one generation's Miss Clairol becomes another's Miss Breck.

For Discussion or Writing

1. The narrator refers to Arlene as a romantic. How do you interpret this characterization? Is it sincere? Sarcastic? Tragic?
2. Arlene promises to show Champ how she can look pretty when she is older. How should readers interpret this promise? Is it a threat? Does the story offer any evidence or hope that Champ might escape the same fate as Arlene? Consider the closing scene, in which Champ looks out the window.

Under the Feet of Jesus (1995)

Under the Feet of Jesus tells the stories of migrant workers. Viramontes sets her novel in California and focuses primarily on one family held together by the mother, Petra. As the novel opens, Petra directs Perfecto, described repeatedly in the novel as "the man who was not [Estrella's] father," to another "shabby wood frame bungalow," where they will work in the fields alongside her children: Estrella, Ricky, Perla, and Cuca.

Estrella is the true protagonist in this coming-of-age tale. Early in the novel, she wrestles with prejudice and other reminders of her foreshortened childhood. When she stumbles upon a Little League baseball game as she walks along some train tracks, she is blinded by the floodlights used to illuminate nighttime play. In this moment, in which Estrella makes a feeble attempt to shield her eyes from the light, she is reminded of "La Migra," the border patrol.

Another moment that reminds Estrella of her difficult living conditions occurs in the classroom, where teachers like Mrs. Horn make her feel dirty. The teacher focuses on Estrella's outer appearance rather than on the more important issue of educating her mind. "They inspected her head for lice, parting her long hair with ice cream sticks. They scrubbed her fingers with a toothbrush until they were so sore she couldn't hold a pencil properly" (24). This attention to hygiene not only proves insulting and degrading, but also impedes learning. Estrella's newly scrubbed fingers cannot hold on to a pencil, and her abbreviated time in the classroom leaves her feeling lost and angry, as if the teachers were "never giving her the information she wanted." Her literacy seems to be gained in spite of rather than because of her teachers.

And it is Estrella who reads Maxine's comic books to her, even though Maxine is older and the only one in the migrant camp to own a book of any kind. In the relationship between Estrella and Maxine, Viramontes reminds readers that not all migrant workers are Mexican or Mexican

American. Further, their dynamic reverses the traditional racial stereotypes usually present between Anglos and Chicanos. Maxine is crass, foulmouthed, and sexually knowing for a young girl. Her uneven maturation stands in stark contrast to that of Estrella, whose burgeoning sexuality is treated as something special, secret, and pure by Viramontes and the other characters in the novel. Estrella's mother saddens at the sight of Estrella's carrying a watermelon as if it were a baby, a sure and poignant sign that Petra herself has suffered as a mother and wishes to postpone such difficult living for her daughter.

Against the harsh and unlikely background of the migrant camp, Viramontes stages the sweet and budding romance between Estrella and Alejo, a young scholar with a love of history and the earth. Under a truck, in search of shade and some privacy, Alejo holds Estrella's hand and tells her about the Le Brea tar pits and the source of oil. It is an unknown history, much like the tales of migrant workers. People buy their groceries from the store but do not think of their source; people put oil in their cars but do not stop to contemplate its deep history: "The bones lay in the seabed for millions of years. That's how it was. Makes sense don't it, bones becoming tar oil?" (87). Bones, lives, are the source of daily fuel for cars. And it is not surprising that when Alejo is sprayed by the pesticides, risking his own life to harvest food that will appear on other people's tables, he thinks of sinking in the pits. "As the rotary of the biplane approached again, he closed his eyes and imagined sinking into the tar pits" (78).

Estrella fights against the possibility of losing Alejo by driving him first to a clinic and then to a hospital. At the clinic, Estrella's family scrapes together what little money they have—nine dollars and seven cents—in the hope that someone will offer Alejo the medical help he so desperately needs. Perfecto scans the trailer with the intent of bartering his labor for services for Alejo. He notes that the posts need recementing, the toilet fixing. Petra scans the nurse's desk and makes her own assessment:

> Even the many things on the nurse's desk implied fakery; the pictures of her smiling boys (Who did they think they were, smiling so boldly at the camera?), the porcelain statue of a calico kitten with a little stethoscope, wearing a folded white cap with a red cross between its too cute perky little ears; a pile of manila folder files stacked in a strange way that seemed cluttered and disordered. She wore too much red lipstick, too much perfume and asked too many questions and seemed too clean, too white just like the imitation cotton. She might fool other people but certainly not her. (141)

By including the kitten statue in her sweeping gaze of the nurse, Petra recognizes how jarringly different her life is from the nurse's. She also penetrates beneath the artificial, such as the bleached cottonballs and nurse's too-red lips, to discover an unkind woman who will not deviate from the rules, even when she knows Alejo is severely ill and those paying for his care are desperately poor. Petra sees excess, marking the vast difference between her and the nurse.

Estrella responds to this gap of haves and have-nots by violently smashing the kitten with a crowbar and retrieving the family's nine dollars and seven cents. Alejo, however, disapproves of Estrella's violence, arguing that Estrella is acting exactly as the nurse expects. In Petra's view of the nurse, and Estrella's violent reaction to the nurse's costly ineffectiveness, Viramontes tells a larger story of how poverty separates people and turns them against one another. Alejo, a victim of poverty alongside Estrella and her family, stands as a voice of compassion and understanding to bridge this gap.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Viramontes's idea for this novel began with mention of a barn as forbidden territory in Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's memoir, *Paletitas de Guayaba*. What does the barn symbolize for Estrella? For Perfecto? Does its meaning change as the novel progresses?

2. The narrator mentions packaging for food products, such as the elderly man on the box of Quaker Oats and the young, smiling girl on the Sun-Maid Raisins box. How do these advertising images compare with the beauty products mentioned in the short story "Miss Clairol"? In what ways are they different?
3. Explain the significance of the work's title. Where does it appear in the novel, and what larger message does it present?

Their Dogs Came with Them (2007)

In a 2007 interview, Viramontes revealed that *Their Dogs Came with Them* was actually her first novel, before *Under the Feet of Jesus.* She began writing it during a busy time in her life, when she and her husband were raising two small children. She wrote a first and then a second draft of the novel in Puerto Rico, while her husband looked after their young children back home. And, as is her custom with all of her writing, she read someone else's work after completing a draft of her own. The novella was Erlinda Gonzales-Berry's *Paletitas de Guayaba.* In the memoir, Gonzales-Berry tells of her father's prohibiting her from going into a barn. Viramontes says this image "immediately struck my heart's chord" and became the beginning of *Under the Feet of Jesus.* She tabled *Their Dogs Came with Them* until the other work's completion. The 1990s and early 2000s as "decades of fear and binary language" greatly influenced her novel, as did the two Iraqi wars. Accordingly, Viramontes refers to *Their Dogs Came with Them* as a "project of great darkness that I had to . . . touch around with my fingers" (Silverblatt).

To bridge a decade (1960–70), a community, and a nation ripped apart, as well as multiple storylines from numerous characters, Viramontes struck upon freeways as her supporting structure. She drew upon her own memories of the 710 freeway, which was constructed during her childhood. This freeway, she explains, caused East Los Angeles to be "basically amputated from the rest of the city." She also knew, from urban legends in her childhood, that the freeway construction had unearthed bodies disturbed from their graves. When she looks at the freeways, Viramontes recognizes that they are held up by "the bones of the forgotten." And telling their stories became the impetus for her novel: "This was my main commitment. What happened to this neighborhood? What happened to all the people?" (Silverblatt).

Viramontes's second novel is set in East L.A. in the tumultuous decade of 1960 to 1970, a time and a place disrupted by the Vietnam War, the Watts riots, a quarantine and curfew due to a rabies scare, and the construction of a large-scale freeway system. The cultural, spiritual, and spatial dislocations of the novel are echoed in the characters, whose disparate tales alternate, intersect, and crash into one another. One central character is Turtle, a female member of an otherwise all-male gang, who, as she does, carry memories of home (the gang is called McBride after the street of one of their founding members). As Viramontes has discussed in an interview, the character of Turtle was radically rewritten after she considered the comments of one of her graduate students at Cornell, the novelist Junot Diaz. After Diaz read portions of the novel, he remarked that Turtle, who was then a male character, was an unoriginal character, a cliché. Viramontes thought about Diaz's comment and then remembered a woman from her neighborhood who had killed her father, the neighborhood drunk. At the time, Viramontes says, there was no language to define this woman. In today's terms, she might be called a "butch dyke." This childhood memory became the basis for transforming Turtle's identity. In making her a woman who dressed and acted as a man, Viramontes was able to discard the cliché and reach into the psyche of a character who had been hardened by years of pain.

Turtle keeps her brother's lessons from gang life and combat in Vietnam close to her as she roams the streets in search of a safe place to sleep, temporary shelter from the rain and cold, and neutral territory in an area claimed by warring gangs. In her search, Turtle briefly glimpses an old and unnamed homeless woman who finds a warm meal

and compassion at a makeshift missionary shelter run by another main character, Tranquilada. In this manner, Viramontes weaves together the narratives of her characters, indicating to the reader the importance of connection, of human contact and compassion; in an urban setting that tends to divide people through freeways, quarantine, gang territory, and language. Tranquilada is the daughter of two missionaries who fled an hacienda in Mexico in search of a better life on "el otro lado," the other side. Although her parents were not religious people before their journey, the presence of divine intervention—which allowed her pregnant mother to survive in the desert and miraculously allowed her father to fly in search of help and direction—takes both of them to their current vocation in Los Angeles. Tranquilada maintains her parents' commitment to help others by routinely assisting Ana in her attempts to find and help her troubled brother, Ben.

Another patron of the shelter, Ben is a central character in one of the many narratives of the novel. In Ben's voice, Viramontes tells the tale of a young boy struggling with mental illness; he has a bright and inquisitive mind but suffers early in childhood from anxieties that become more severe as he matures into a college student. As an aspiring writer, Ben offers another authorial voice in the novel, and yet another point of view for the various events that occur through flashbacks and in his imagination. Despite Ben's extraordinariness—he can memorize anatomy books and is the only person in his neighborhood to receive a scholarship, to attend the University of Southern California—Viramontes celebrates the ordinariness and the sacrifice of his sister, Ana, who takes care of him. Viramontes has stated that she is "committed to honoring people like Ana who sacrificed a great amount of their lives" in caring for others.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Viramontes dedicates the novel to Ann Sunstein Kheel, "who believed in neighborhoods." To what extent is the novel dedicated to the idea of neighborhood? How is neighborhood defined and treated in the novel? Who embodies the neighborhood? How is this different from or similar to your own neighborhood?
2. Examine the epigraph to the novel. What is the connection between the Aztec account of the Spanish conquest of Mexico and East L.A. during the 1960s and 1970s? Who are the conquered and who the conquerors? Who are the dogs?

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON VIRAMONTES AND HER WORK

1. Viramontes has said, "Through writing, I have learned to protect the soles of my feet from the broken glass. . . . Writing is the only way I know how to pray." Examine at least two works by Viramontes, such as her short story "The Moths," and write an essay on the author's form of "prayer." What might constitute prayer for the various characters in her writing? What roles do the Catholic Church and traditional prayer play?
2. Chicana wives, mothers, and daughters loom large in Viramontes's work. How are male characters depicted? Would you consider Viramontes a feminist? Why or why not? Pick another writer who often focuses on female characters, such as Amy Tan or Toni Morrison, and compare the way each portrays female characters and relationships, citing examples from the texts. How are Chicana, African-American, or Asian-American feminist perspectives different? Similar?

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Andrea Tinnemeyer and Megan Inclán

Alice Walker (1944–)

In search of my mother's garden, I found my own.

(*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*)

Poet, novelist, essayist, activist, womanist—these are all terms that describe Alice Walker. Whether she is communicating with her readers in personal poetry or taking a more public stance against social injustice worldwide, Walker has solidified her place in the American imagination.

She was born February 9, 1944, in Georgia, the daughter of sharecroppers. Her father, Willie Lee Walker, and mother, Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, were both master storytellers who encouraged Walker to create stories and poems. Injured by a childhood accident at age eight, Walker lost sight in her right eye. The accident resulted in a cataract and scarring that left her feeling unattractive. Walker subsequently turned to literature—particularly the classics and poetry—as a means of dealing with her loneliness. She soon began writing her own poetry. When she was 14 years old, she visited her brother in Boston, where she had the cataract removed. She recalls that this operation changed her life and that she became outgoing and confident once again. Walker graduated from high school as valedictorian, was selected most popular in her class, and was elected prom queen.

She received a scholarship to attend Spelman College in Atlanta, where, inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., she became an activist in the Civil Rights movement. She did not, however, feel that Spelman supported her activities, so she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. Although Sarah Lawrence offered her more freedom, Walker encountered many struggles there. The summer after her junior year, she traveled to Uganda as an exchange student and worked in Georgia on voter registration drives. Upon returning to Sarah Lawrence, Walker discovered that she was pregnant midway through her senior year. She struggled with feelings of guilt and anxiety as she worried about how the pregnancy would affect her goal to earn a college degree. For several days she slept with a razor blade under her pillow as she contemplated suicide. She finally decided to have an abortion. After the abortion, she suffered from depression and again turned to writing as a means of handling distress. Walker graduated from Sarah Lawrence College with a bachelor's degree in January 1966.

Walker then took a job with New York City's welfare department and moved to Manhattan's Lower East Side. This experience fueled her view that not only the welfare system but also the entire country needed reform. The United States was in the midst of protests: against the Vietnam War, against racial bigotry, against society in general. It was during this time that the poems Walker had written while at Sarah Lawrence—and had slipped under the door of her professor, Muriel Rukeyser, who then sent them to her literary agent, Monica McCall—were published. The collection of 30 poems was

entitled *Once* and was dedicated to Howard Zinn, one of Walker's professors at Spelman who had influenced her activism.

In 1967, Walker married the civil rights attorney Melvyn Leventhal and relocated with him to Mississippi. Theirs was the first interracial marriage recognized by Mississippi. That same year, she published her first short story, "To Hell with Dying." Walker drew upon her observations of the effects of poverty on African-American men and women as she began her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The novel was completed only a few days before she gave birth to her daughter, Rebecca. Reviews were mixed: While many embraced the book, others thought that Walker represented black men in a negative manner. The novel spans three generations: Grange Copeland reacts to his mistreatment by whites by mistreating his wife, and his son, Brownfield, maintains his father's legacy with his own wife. Only after Grange violently attacks several minority figures who "act white" does he recognize what his hatred has accomplished. He returns home to share with his son what he has learned. "I know the danger of putting the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. . . . Nobody's as powerful as we make them out to be. We own our own souls, don't we?" (187). After completion of the novel, Walker became a writer in residence at Jackson State College and later at Tougaloo College, both in Mississippi. In 1971, she accepted an offer for a Radcliffe Institute Fellowship.

Walker's father died in January 1973, an event she was unable to deal with until much later, through poetry and essays. Also in 1973, she published a collection of poetry and a collection of short stories. *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973) begins with several memories of people who played a major role in influencing Walker. The tributes include recollections of church events, old men, and strong women. One poem in particular, "Women," comments on the women of her mother's generation who fought for an education for their children. The wisdom of these women is reflected in the concluding lines:

> How they knew what we
> *Must* know
> Without knowing a page
> Of it
> Themselves. (lines 22–26)

Their duality of existence had them fighting even while continuing to iron the "Starched white / Shirts" (lines 10–11) of their employers. The poem is a forceful reminder that not all battles occur in a declared war zone; sometimes the battles are within our own communities. Other noteworthy poems in this collection include "Revolutionary Petunias," "Expect Nothing," "For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties," "Eagle Rock," "Reassurance," and "While Love Is Unfashionable." Walker says of this collection:

> These poems reflect my delight at being once again in a Southern African American environment, and also my growing realization that the sincerest struggle to change the world must start within. I was saved from despair countless times by the flowers and the trees I planted. (*Her Blue Body* 153)

In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women, also published in 1973, contained 13 short stories about various black women and their problems. Walker addressed discrimination in "The Welcome Table" and a mother's ignorance in "Strong Horse Tea." In "The Child Who Favored Daughter," Walker drew upon personal experience: Her paternal grandmother had been murdered while Walker's father had watched. Even though the murderer would be caught and incarcerated, Willie Lee Walker carried the scars with him. As his daughter Ruth grew up, her resemblance to her grandmother would cause Mr. Walker to be harder on her than the other children as a way of dealing with his emotional scars. "To Hell with Dying," which had been published earlier by Langston Hughes in a collection of short stories, recalled a man Walker called "Mr. Sweet." In the story, Mr. Sweet is an alcoholic with a talent for playing the guitar. He hovers on the brink of

death several times but is restored to life when the narrator's father calls in the children to smother him with kisses and tickles. The narrator continues doing this for several years, and it is not until she is off at college that she is unable to return quickly enough to Mr. Sweet's side. "He was like a piece of rare and delicate china which was always being saved from breaking and which finally fell" (*In Love and Trouble* 137).

The story "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" was inspired by an event in her childhood, when her mother was refused government surplus aid by a white woman because Minnie Walker was dressed too nicely. Walker developed the idea that the white woman would suffer from a voodoo curse. While researching voodoo for the story, Walker sought authentic black writers who knew about ancient voodoo methods and means. Her search led her to discover the writer Zora Neale Hurston. Walker was both amazed and distressed by the black community's ignorance of a woman she would call "A Genius of the South" (from one of Jean Toomer's poems) (*In Search* 107). Upset that not one of her professors had introduced her to Hurston's work, Walker subsequently made it a mission to recover Hurston's works and to gain recognition for someone she believed had "given so much of obvious value to all of us . . . [and was] so casually . . . consigned to a sneering oblivion" (86). "My feeling is that Zora Neale Hurston is probably one of the most misunderstood, least appreciated writers of this century. Which is a pity. She is great. A writer of courage, and incredible humor, with poetry in every line" (260). Largely as a result of Walker's efforts, Hurston's place in American literature has been solidified. In 1973, Walker placed a monument at the unmarked gravesite of Hurston in Fort Pierce, Florida.

Walker left Mississippi in 1974 to take a job as contributing editor at *Ms.* magazine. She divided her time between her writing for the magazine and her own work, which included a biography of the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes. She also taught the first course on black women writers at Wellesley College. In 1976, after she and her husband filed for divorce, Walker began work on a new novel inspired by her personal experiences working for civil rights. This book, *Meridian,* received both praise and criticism for its portrayal of a young black woman's experiences in Mississippi during the Civil Rights movement. While many saw the work as "the price blacks (and whites) paid as they struggled to achieve a common humanity" (E. White 285), others saw the book as antiblack, crude, and negative (295).

After her father's death and her divorce, Walker again turned to poetry to express her heartache. A third volume of poems, *Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning,* was published in 1979. After being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, Walker moved to northern California and began her third (and best-known) novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). This work received the same mixed initial reviews as her previous novels: While many saw the beauty of the language and message, some felt that it, as did *Meridian,* portrayed black men in a negative light. Nonetheless, *The Color Purple* was soon widely recognized as a major achievement. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and was later made into a film starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Oprah Winfrey. Ten years after the film appeared, Walker would reflect on the movie in her book *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult: A Meditation on Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the Film* The Color Purple; *Ten Years Later* (1996).

Over the next 25 years, Walker would continue writing and publishing. Her output included a second short-story collection, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Short Stories* (1981); a collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983); and a third volume of poetry, *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful: Poems* (1984). In a second collection of essays, published in 1988, *Living by the Word: Selected Writings, 1973–1987,* Walker comments on various topics such as meditation and Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1989, Walker produced another novel, *The Temple of My Familiar.* While many found the novel ponderous, Walker explained, "It's like any other thing you create. If I make shoes, then I'll make shoes and put them out there. My part will

have been done" (E. White 449). Although not a sequel to *The Color Purple,* both *The Temple of My Familiar* and her next novel would continue the story of characters from the Pulitzer-winning novel, relating the experiences of Tashi after being circumcised and mutilated, as was customary in many African cultures. In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), Walker attacks the practice of genital mutilation in many parts of Africa. She then collaborated with Pratibha Parmar to write *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993), a nonfiction explanation of the barbaric practice of female circumcision and the physical and emotional scarring that result from it.

In between the two novels was Walker's fourth collection of poetry, *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965–1990 Complete* (1991), which included the poems from the volumes *Once; Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems; Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning;* and *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful,* as well as previously unpublished poems. Walker explored her involvement with activism on many fronts in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997). She would continue expressing messages on various topics through another novel, *By the Light of My Father's Smile: A Novel* (1998); another collection of short stories, *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000); post–9/11 commentary, *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit: After the Attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon* (2001); new poems, *A Poem Traveled down My Arm: Poems and Drawings* (2003) and *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems* (2003); and, most recently, another essay collection, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (2006). Walker's work continues to attract a major following, but some critics consider her more recent work too ideological and lacking the power of her earlier work, particularly *The Color Purple.*

Walker has been influenced by the philosophy of Albert Camus, the blues of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, the writings of Toomer, Hurston, O'Connor, and Hughes. She is well read and well educated on world concerns; she weaves all of these influences together as she creates her writings. She has been recognized with numerous honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award in 1983, for *The Color Purple;* the O. Henry Award in 1986, for the short story "Kindred Spirits"; the National Endowment for the Arts' Lillian Smith Book Award in 1973, for *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems;* the Rosenthal Award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters; and fellowships from Radcliffe, the Merrill Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

In a 1972 address to graduates of her alma mater, Sarah Lawrence College, Walker read two poems. Both were from the *Revolutionary Petunias* collection. The first poem was "Be Nobody's Darling"; the second was "Reassurance," in which Walker acknowledges Rainer Maria Rilke's influence. In *Letters to a Young Poet,* Rilke encourages us "to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue" (Rilke chapter 4). Walker's poem reflects on this thought—that though we may not have all the keys to unlock the rooms, we must continue to search for answers in order to become who we are.

"Everyday Use" (1973)

One of Walker's most anthologized short stories is entitled "Everyday Use," one of 13 stories from the collection *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973). It is a story "in which a mother mediates a conflict between her sophisticated daughter, who comes home from the city, and her shy sister, who has remained at home" (Stanford and Amin 89). However, the conflict between sisters is not the only one that Walker considers; the mother, Mrs. Johnson, must serve as a buffer between Dee and Maggie. Additionally, Walker addresses the conflicts between cultures: the 1960s culture of the black nationalists versus the historical culture of the African-American heritage.

The story begins as Mama (Mrs. Johnson) awaits the arrival of Dee, her educated daughter, who is returning home for a visit. Mama fantasizes about the happy reunion between mother and daughter, an event full of love, respect, and admiration. However, Mama realizes that she is not the type of woman whom Dee would love, respect, or admire. "In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man" (*In Love and Trouble* 48). In her fantasy, she is just as Dee would want her to be: light skinned, thinner, witty. There is a sense that Mama would be all these things if only she could be. But reality returns; Mama realizes that she is describing Dee more than herself. She believes that Maggie feels that her sister has always had an easier time in life and that "no is a word the world never learned to say to [Dee]" (47).

In contrast to Dee is shy and uncertain Maggie, more like her mother in temperament and action. The two share many traits: fearing to look a white man in the face, being content with a summer's breeze, sharing a can of snuff. They also share an appreciation of the importance of personal heritage. Maggie's conflict with Dee is due to Dee's feeling that Maggie could make something of herself if she only wanted to. Dee was able to escape the rural "cow pasture" existence, and she does not understand why her mother and sister would want to remain there.

When Dee arrives, stepping forth from the automobile in a costume that screams African connection, along with her male companion, she crushes any chance for a happy reunion when she tells of her decision to discard her given name in preference for her new, authentic name, *Wangero*. When Mama asks what was wrong with her old name, Wangero states that she refuses to be named after "her oppressors." Mama points out that Dee had been named after her aunt and grandmother, but Wangero (Dee) refuses to accept this. She wants a name that will allow her to identify with her *true* African culture.

With a calculating eye, Dee selects the items from the meager home that she plans to acquire in order to display them "properly" in her residence in the city. The butter churn top and dasher are wrapped up—without any thought as to what Mama and Maggie will do for butter once they are gone. Dee gushes over the "rump" marks in the handmade benches. Then she moves in for what she has been eying all along—two quilts made from scraps of her grandparents' and relatives' clothing. Ironically, Dee has returned to the homestead to collect items that she views as quaint and representative of her heritage, while dismissing the family and history that *are* her heritage. The quilts (along with the handmade benches and butter dasher) represent the art that is abundant around us, created by us.

Mama hears a sound—it is Maggie, retreating from the scavenging. Gathering her inner courage, Mama informs Wangero that those quilts have been promised to Maggie. She offers two other quilts in their place, but Wangero demands the "authentic" pieces; she rejects the machine-stitched versions because she wants these quilts for display. For Dee, the quilts represent the artistic side of the meager existence amid the cow field. For Mama and Maggie, they represent a promise made. When Maggie offers the quilts to her sister—"I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts" (58)—Mama knows that her acknowledgment is true, but that truth and justice are not the same. In describing Maggie, David White suggests that

> her lack of education and refinement does not prevent her from having an inherent understanding of heritage based on her love and respect for those who came before her. This is clear from her ability to associate pieces of fabric in two quilts with the people whose clothes they had been cut from.

Mama remains steadfast with her promise and Wangero exits the scene. Mama and Maggie resume their snuff dipping under the tree.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How might the story have been told differently from Dee's viewpoint? Maggie's viewpoint? A third-person viewpoint? What does Walker accomplish by telling the story from Mama's perspective?
2. Discuss the theme of artistry and the concept of "everyday use." What constitutes art? What is the significance of things put to everyday use? What are some items in your household that have personal significance to you? What link do these items have with your family's history?
3. Some critics believe there is a little of Walker in each of the three characters. In terms of her history, cite examples from Walker's life to support this theory. Which character do you identify with most? Why?

"Expect Nothing" (1973)

In her collection *Revolutionary Petunias and Other* Poems, Walker offers advice on survival in the poem "Expect Nothing." In a commencement speech to Spelman College on May 22, 1995, Walker introduced her poem:

> The poet in me has made good use of everything, and I look back, the poems are like glistening stones along the moist riverbank of trial and error I have walked along. . . . And I ask myself: What can I give you for comfort on those bleak days to come—and they will—when you are wondering if "this" (whatever the limit is that you have reached) is all there is. I can give you this poem: ["Expect Nothing"]. (*Anything We Love Can Be Saved* 90)

"Expect Nothing" is a counsel on living one's life—knowing that bad days will occur, but, by expecting nothing, managing to enjoy the beautiful moments when they do. She cautions us to "become a stranger / To need of pity" (lines 3–4). Here Walker asks readers to live independently, not depending on others for pity, compassion, or even kindness. Do not want too much, she warns, and do not beg. And when you have taken just enough of compassion to get by, stop yourself. Then do away with the further need of more compassion.

Wanting and wishing for things that are too much will only cause disappointment, according to the poem. Wrap yourself with a covering for your soul that will protect you from an uncaring and cold world. Then, Walker advocates, discover why we are here on this earth—as a creature so large and yet so small: "Discover the reason why / So tiny human midget / Exists at all" (lines 17–19). Finally, she cautions again that we expect nothing out of life and "Live frugally / On surprise" (lines 21–22).

In an interview with Bill Moyers, Walker read this poem aloud. Moyers introduced it by saying, "It's not new but it endures. . . . That seems to be pure Alice Walker." It seems that in this poem, "Alice Walker, healed and healer, expresses a sentiment that, perhaps more than any, embodies her victory" (E. White 453).

For Discussion or Writing

1. What dichotomies or oppositions can you discover within "Expect Nothing"? Explain why Walker uses them and what they signify.
2. Why does Walker caution us not to want too much? Do you agree or disagree with her reasoning?
3. What do you believe Walker means when she says to live "on surprise"? What overall message do you get from the poem? To whom do you believe the poem is addressed? Does its meaning change, depending on its audience?

"Revolutionary Petunias" (1973)

In Walker's introduction to the collection of poems published in 1973, she acknowledges that "these poems are about Revolutionaries and Lovers; and about the loss of compassion, trust, and the ability to expand in love that marks the end of hopeful strategy. Whether in love or revolution. They are

also about (and for) those few embattled souls who remain painfully committed to beauty and to love even while facing the firing squad" (*Her Blue Body* 154).

The title poem, "Revolutionary Petunias," tells the story of a God-fearing woman who is sentenced to the electric chair for murdering her husband's murderer using a cultivator's hoe "with verve and skill" (line 5). We are not privy to how her husband died, or what finally snapped in Sammy Lou that made her commit the crime, which is opposed to her Christian values; we see only her "disbelief" at how others view her now.

There is a duality in her name, a combination of the masculine and the feminine—*Sammy* and *Lou*. While she acts with the vengeance of a man (killing her spouse's murderer), she is also mindful of her womanly duties (to respect God and take care of the petunias). Her final words as she is led away comment on her values: "Always respect the word of God" and "Don't yall forgit to *water* / my purple petunias" (lines 21, 25–26).

This "backwoods woman" represents the proper churchgoing woman of any rural community. Evelyn C. White's biography tells the following story of Walker's own mother:

> The distinctive title of the collection paid tribute to Alice's mother and her practice of brightening whatever inelegant sharecropper's cabin the family found themselves in by planting petunias . . . in the front yard. Mrs. Walker had started the tradition years before Alice was born when one day she and Mr. Walker . . . passed a deserted house where there remained a single lavender petunia poking up from the ground. Charmed by the flower's tenacity and splendor, Mrs. Walker took it home and planted it in a big stump in her yard. Every time the family moved, Mrs. Walker would gather up the petunia cluster, replant it, and watch with pride as it inevitably bloomed in each new setting. When Rebecca [Alice's daughter] was born, more than thirty years after Mrs. Walker had first rescued the petunia, she gave Alice a cutting from the plant, which continued to hold forth in riotous glory. (245)

In an interview with John O'Brien, Walker was asked why Sammy Lou was chosen to be the heroine of this poem. Walker responded that she wanted someone who was "incorrect" (342) and that

> Although Sammy Lou is more a rebel than a revolutionary (since you need more than one for a revolution) I named the poem "Revolutionary Petunias" because she is not—when you view her kind of person historically—isolated. She is part of an ongoing revolution. Any black revolution, instead of calling her "incorrect," will have to honor her single act of rebellion. (343)

Walker also likes petunias and says they "bloom their heads off—exactly . . . like black people tend to do" (343). Even as Sammy Lou's life is about to end, she is mindful of what is important in life.

For Discussion or Writing

Reread the excerpt regarding Walker's mother and the petunia. How is this poem (and other works by Walker) an expression of individuals' wanting to save something beautiful? What price do they pay?

Meridian (1976)

Walker's second novel, *Meridian,* is a coming-of-age story about the experiences of a young woman from the South who seeks fulfillment through personal connections with others. The protagonist, Meridian Hill, "after deadening experiences as a wife and mother, exciting but short-lived work in the Civil Rights movement, and distressing interaction with the revolutionary movement, seeks to work out a way of life that will permit her own growth and will allow her to stimulate growth in others" (Stanford and Amin 89). There is some confusion in that the events are not related chronologically; the story begins in the present,

with a former coworker and lover, Truman Held, searching to reunite with Meridian. Meridian then recalls a time 10 years earlier, when she leaves her revolutionary friends because she cannot kill in the name of revolution. The third part of the novel retreats further into Meridian's history, back to when she is 13 years old and decides to reject her mother's Christianity. In the final section, Walker takes us back to the beginning of the novel, where Meridian confronts Truman.

Meridian's ignorance of sex causes her to become trapped in a loveless marriage. This experience leaves her wanting more out of life. With a hint of Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* she walks away from both her husband and her child (the former by way of divorce and the latter by sending him away) and attends college before beginning work with the voter registration drive (reminiscent of Walker's own experiences).

During this second phase of her life, Meridian seeks to interact with the people she registers, rather than preaching to them and encouraging them to revolt. Meridian wants to spill no blood and believes that her conscience would not allow it. She attempts to deal with the everyday skills necessary for the people's survival—not unlike Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in which basic survival is needed before advancing toward the fulfillment of other needs. Even after her friends move on to other jobs and better conditions, Meridian continues to work with the poor.

The third phase of her life encompasses Meridian's experiences with the revolutionary movement in the South. She cannot remain with this group because she does not share its passion for the mission. When she is informed that she is expected to kill (that is, murder) for the revolution, she realizes that she does not belong. Instead she returns to the everyday people whom she feels she can best serve.

Throughout the novel, Meridian refuses to allow others to determine how she is to act or to dictate her beliefs. In the preface to the novel, Walker defines *meridian* as "in astronomy, an imaginary great circle of the celestial sphere" and "in geography, a great circle of the earth passing through the geographical poles and any given point on the earth's surface." This aptly defines the title character, in that she is centered, well balanced, and determined to do what she can to make the world a better place.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare and contrast the relationships among Truman, Lynne, and Meridian with the relationships among Mr. ———, Celie, and Shug in *The Color Purple.* How do the novels' different settings and contexts affect these relationships?
2. What does Meridian do to define her individuality? Give specific examples of how she is able to avoid conformity. Does Meridian ever demonstrate the characteristics of a saint? How does this affect our view of her individuality?

"Nineteen Fifty-five" (1981)

Influenced by the blues musicians of the 1950s, Walker's short story "Nineteen Fifty-five," from the 1981 collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down,* tells the story of Gracie Mae Still's experiences with a popular singer, Traynor.

Told in first-person narrative over a period of 22 years (from 1955 to 1977), Gracie Mae, through reflections and letters, relates several incidents regarding the purchase of one of her songs (which is never named but closely resembles "Hound Dog" and the relationship between Willie Mae Thornton and Elvis Presley). It was not uncommon in the 1950s for white singers to purchase the rights for songs by black artists. One irony is that although Traynor makes millions from his rendition of the song, he is unable to enjoy the wealth because he does not understand the meaning behind the lyrics. He searches Gracie Mae's background, learning all he can about her and her life, in an effort to unlock their mysteries. Traynor even goes so far as to admit to Gracie Mae, "I don't have the faintest notion what that song means" (*You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* 8), and he later asks, "Where out of your life did [that song] come from?" (11),

but she never answers him. His life ends amid overindulgence and pills without an answer to his question.

While it might seem that Gracie Mae is tricked into selling the rights to her song for a paltry $500, perhaps she is the one who does the tricking. Gracie Mae is a down-to-earth individual who admits the "deacon" and "boy" into her front room, but she never invites them into the back, where her husband has escaped and, perhaps figuratively, where the basis of her song exists. It is in this "tricking" that Walker uses the literary term *signifying*. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., signifying has its roots in Africa from the oral tales of a monkey who instigates dissention through the use of language play. It is possible that Gracie Mae is the one who—by withholding the information Traynor wants—gets the better part of the deal.

The rise and fall of the singer Traynor parallel events from Presley's own life: television appearances with hip-swinging gyrations, military service, a southern mansion (Graceland), failed relationships, overindulgence/overweight, and death by overdose of pills. What is more important is the contrast between Gracie Mae and Traynor and how they handle the stardom, hers vicariously through his.

While Traynor appears to search for happiness through material gain (cars, houses, wives, jewelry), Gracie Mae finds her happiness in cultivating the ordinary things of life (fishing, watching TV with her husband, losing weight). It is through this cultivation of the ordinary life that she remains balanced and generally happy. Traynor, on the other hand, cannot find balance in his life. A part of him may even blame his failures on not being able to understand the song he sings. The hollowness of his life needs to be filled with the meaning of the song he has made famous but does not understand. This, ultimately, is his tragedy.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Is Gracie Mae the foil or opposite of Traynor? How are they alike?
2. Why did Walker choose to tell the story though a first-person narrative? Is there bias in her story? How would a different perspective change the telling of the story?
3. *Signifying* is the use of metaphors, similes, and double entendres—language play—to communicate pain and resistance. How do people use signifying when communicating today? How is it used in the story?
4. The critic Maria V. Johnson states that the example of Gracie Mae's experience with Traynor is "the racist and exploitative phenomenon of white singers imitating or 'covering' the songs of African Americans" (2). Discuss the merits of this statement, giving examples to support your viewpoint.

The Color Purple (1982)

Walker's third novel is arguably her best known. Upon its publication, *The Color Purple* drew praise and criticism for Walker's portrayal of characters such as Celie, Pa, Mr. ———, Nettie, and Shug. The novel, written in epistolary style, tells its story through a number of letters composed over several years. While it addresses several topics (such as incest, abuse, and redemption), it also traces the developing relationship between two women. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983 (the first such award to an African-American female) as well as the National Book Award. In 1984, *The Color Purple* was made into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Oprah Winfrey; a musical stage version opened on Broadway in 2005.

In spite of her surroundings and the abuse she encounters, Celie develops over time into a strong, self-assured woman. She grows through her relationships with her husband's mistress, her sister, her daughters-in-law, and even her abusive husband. As her character evolves, so do her letters. In the beginning, she writes to God. As Nettie says in a letter to Celie, "I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was" (*The Color Purple* 125). This is important because Celie feels too ashamed

and insignificant to pray directly to God; instead, her only means of communication with him is through these letters, which track the sexual abuse she suffers from Pa, the sorrow from the death of her Mama, and her fear that her sister Nettie will be Pa's next victim.

After Celie marries Mr. ———, the letters become longer and more narrative in style. Through these letters, we discover that she is treated as a servant and feels ugly and undeserving of any kindness. When Nettie goes to live with Celie and Mr. ———, Celie is initially pleased, but Mr. ———'s attention becomes too invasive and Nettie must leave. Celie gives the names of a minister and his wife who might help Nettie. Celie has seen them in town and recognized their daughter as her own first child, whom Pa had taken away. Nettie leaves, but not before promising, "Nothing but death can keep me from [writing]" (18). Since Celie does not receive any letters from Nettie, she assumes this is because Nettie is dead. She continues her letters to God to tell him plainly what is happening to her and to those around her. After she discovers that Nettie is alive and has been writing to her for several years, she begins writing to Nettie instead of to God.

Why does Celie write to God? Because the novel begins with the admonition from her Pa: *"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy"* (1). What Celie not supposed to tell? How she became pregnant. Through this first statement, the theme of religion and its influence is significant in the novel. The lack of God's response is central, making Celie's conversation one-sided. But it is through these conversations that she is able to give some order to her universe. Religion is sprinkled throughout the novel, as when the women at the local church make assumptions about Celie due to her two pregnancies out of wedlock. Instead of offering a kind, supportive atmosphere, they shun her and whisper about her behind her back. This hurtful behavior festers in Celie; instead of religion's serving as a comfort to her, it only makes her feel more alienated. Even the letters that Celie writes to God are unanswered. But religion does save Nettie, for Sammy and Corrine offer her a safe home. It is Shug who gives a new view of religion to Celie: "[People] come to church to *share* God, not find God" (188). Then she goes on to explain, "God is inside you and inside everybody else. . . . But only them that search for it inside find it. . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found [God]" (190).

Another recurring theme in the novel is the abuse that Celie and others must bear. The first abuse is sexual, at the hands of Pa, who she believes is her father. Because her mother is no longer able to satisfy Pa's physical needs, he turns to Celie for release. This abuse continues through two pregnancies and ends only when she is married off to Mr. ———. Once married, Celie suffers physically, sexually, and emotionally. Mr. ——— seems to believe the only way to keep a woman under control is to beat her into submission. When his oldest son, Harpo, marries, Mr. ——— gives him this same advice. Unfortunately for Harpo, his wife, Sophia, is not a willing participant in the beatings and gives as good as she gets.

Loss is another theme of the novel. Not only does Celie lose her virginity through violence, but she also loses her self-esteem through the treatment she receives at the hands of the two men most influential in her life, Pa and Mr. ———. A second loss concerns Celie's two babies, whom Pa takes away, letting Celie believe they are dead. It is not until years later that she discovers they have been adopted by a local minister. Many more years pass before she has the opportunity to see both of them and be reunited. Another loss that affects Celie very deeply is that of her sister Nettie. After Nettie leaves Celie, she does not write, so Celie assumes she is dead. However, with the aid of Shug, Celie discovers letters that Mr. ——— has kept from her over the years. After her original anger subsides, Celie feels matters are going to be put right. It is at this point that the novel takes another powerful turn, and Celie begins writing her letters to Nettie instead of God.

One key idea in the novel is the concept of identity. When Celie is first offered in marriage to Mr. ———, she has no name for him. In her mind,

he is nameless—he is simply another man who is her master. Once Shug arrives to stay with them, Celie learns Mr. ————'s first name, *Albert*. This is a turning point for Celie because she now sees him as a person and not a master. Celie gains her own identity through Shug's encouragement. After Celie makes a pair of pants for Shug, everyone wants a pair. Celie starts small but ultimately opens her own factory. For once, she is the one who is in charge; she gives the orders. Her new identity is one of power. When she discovers the letters from Nettie that Mr. ———— has withheld from her, for the first time in her life Celie becomes angry. Her new identity begins to surface as she is able to feel something.

Finally, relationships, mainly among the women of the novel, play an important part in Celie's growth. The relationship between Celie and Shug is arguably the most important in the novel. Through this highly unlikely union, Celie is able to throw aside her low self-esteem, her apathy toward sex, and her inability to be angry. Shug helps Celie feel good about herself by encouraging her to start her own business, to experience orgasm, and to stand up to Albert (Mr.————). Another relationship that develops is between Celie and her husband. In the beginning, she is like a slave, waiting on him and his four children day and night, working in the fields, and being treated as a piece of property rather than a person. With the help of Shug, however, Celie stands up to Albert and leaves him to join Shug in Memphis. While there, Celie begins to take care of her appearance; when she returns to Georgia, Albert not only has changed his ways (now that he has learned that he must fend for himself, he cleans up after himself), but is appreciative of the new Celie. The two begin an uneasy relationship that blooms into something akin to friendship. Although this causes some jealousy in Shug (who is accustomed to having all of Albert's affection), it is a very powerful accomplishment for Celie. While the relationship between Shug and Celie would appear to be strained because they feel "married to the same man" (*In Search* 355), they are in actuality drawn together. Meanwhile, the relationship between Nettie and Corrine (the minister's wife) would appear to be supportive, since both are employed in God's work among the natives in Africa; however, their relationship is at odds and Corrine cannot handle her jealousy.

Walker uses both music and colors as themes or symbols in the novel. Music is an expressive means for Shug and Mary Agnes as well as for Celie. Shug uses her music not only as a means of making a living and being independent, but also for expressing her emotions. When she creates a song for Celie, Celie says, "First time somebody made something and name it after me" (72). Harpo's second wife, Mary Agnes (Squeak), also turns to music as a way of finding independence. The colors yellow, red, and purple have meaning as well. Celie mentions the yellow dress that Shug has donated for patches in a quilt. Celie says the pieces are like stars, like the wishes that Celie dare not dream. Red is associated with Shug and her clothes and indicates desire and sexuality. Early in the novel, Celie desires purple fabric for a dress because it is the color of royalty and it reminds her of Shug; instead, she settles for the less flamboyant blue. Later in the novel, Celie says that she has been so busy thinking about how God is a white man that she has never thought about "the color purple (where it come from?)" (192). But it is Shug who says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (191). At first Celie wants to be like Shug, but as she matures, she thinks more on her own and begins noticing the evidence of God around her.

Just as significantly, *The Color Purple* examines multiple forms of love: love between sisters, love between friends, love between a man and a woman, and love between two women. It is through these examples of love that Celie matures into an independent woman by the end of the novel. Nettie writes to Celie, "There is so much we don't understand. And so much unhappiness comes because of that" (186). It is through this truth that Celie becomes liberated.

For Discussion or Writing

1. How effective is Walker's use of epistolary style? Discuss other possible styles she could have

used. Would they have been as effective? Why or why not?
2. Trace the character of Shug Avery in the novel. How is she important to Celie's growth? Give specific examples from the text.
3. Is this a feminist novel? Why or why not? Walker has been criticized for what some would call "black male bashing" because of her treatment of characters such as Pa and Mr. ———. What are your ideas on this topic? Give evidence from the novel to support your viewpoint.
4. Nettie lives in a round house in Africa; Shug wants a round house in Memphis. What do you believe is the link between these two houses? Why does Walker include these details?
5. Walker's portrayal of whites is sometimes criticized. Are all of the white characters in this novel racists? Explain, citing examples from the novel.

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983)

Walker's first collection of essays was *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens.* Dedicated to her daughter, Rebecca, "Who saw in me / what I considered / a scar / And redefined it / as / a world," Walker begins with her definition of the word *womanist.* She says that a womanist is one who is serious and willful, one who is interested in grown-up things. Along with other requirements, a womanist loves herself. She concludes with the concept "Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender" (xii).

Many of her essays in part 1 reflect the importance of those who preceded her, who exemplified the existence and possibility of being an artist. She includes in this list Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Earnest Gaines, and Flannery O'Connor. Walker states that "what is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before" (5). Walker recalls Toni Morrison's statement that "she writes the kind of books she wants to read" (8) and expands upon it by including her own justification for writing: "In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write all the things *I should have been able to read"* (13). Walker concludes her first essay by explaining why writers write:

> It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. Whether we are "minority" writers or "majority." It is simply in our power to do this. We do it because we care. . . . We care because we know this: *the life we save is our own.* (14)

Part 2 deals mainly with the Civil Rights movement and revolutionaries such as Martin Luther King, Jr.; Coretta Scott King; Angela Davis; and members of the Cuban revolution.

Addressing the creative side of women in part 3, Walker claims that "these grandmothers and mothers of ours were . . . Artists. . . . They were Creators" (233). Phillis Wheatley, Billie Holiday, and Aretha Franklin were all artists who used their creativity to express the gifts within them. Walker compares women like her mother to these artists. Despite a life of rising before dawn to work all day in the fields, only to go home to continue with housework, her mother had a creative spark that was demonstrated in her ability to create a garden of beautiful flowers wherever the family had to move. "Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them" (241–242).

The final section of the collection addresses revolutions that she has joined—fighting injustice for all, nuclear arms, anti-Semitism—and notably the revolution within her when she was face to face with the pain associated with losing sight in her eye at age eight. As Walker tells it, Rebecca (her daughter) had looked into her mother's face very carefully and said, "'Mommy, there's a world in your eye . . . Mommy, where did you get that world in your eye?'" (379). Walker's response was to realize that

yes, there was a world in her eye, and she celebrated the possibilities of everything she had suffered and learned as a result of the injury.

For Discussion or Writing

Walker speaks of the pain she endured because of the blinding and scarring from her childhood accident. Does suffering allow people to become more aware of the positive in life, or does it lead to unnecessary pain? What does Walker believe? Does she appear to espouse the same idea throughout her work, or are there exceptions?

"I Said to Poetry" (1984)

Imagine being able to converse with the concept called Poetry. That is what Walker does in this poem from the volume *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1984). In this book, she takes a slightly different look at the world as she evaluates her experiences in Mississippi, transgressions in life, and protection of the natural world (E. White). The collection "garnered favorable reviews from critics who extolled Alice's melding of personal and political themes" (390). This poem in particular is a conversation between the poet (Walker) and the poetry itself. Reminiscently of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Walker takes a fresh approach to Poetry (personified) and Poetry's creation and existence in the world. In a 1973 interview with John O'Brien, Walker discussed the process of writing a poem by saying that it is never planned, and restlessness precedes the actual writing (*In Search*); it might be said that she was speaking of "I Said to Poetry."

The poem begins with the Poet's addressing Poetry in a moment of frustration. It seems that the efforts to create that which the poet desires are too insurmountable. She complains that she is going to quit because "Having to almost die / before some weird light / comes creeping through / is no fun" (lines 3–6). Sometimes even the most prolific writers experience writer's block. Here the poet is tired of waiting for that light, that epiphany to show up and inspire her. She informs Poetry that she is giving up and just wants to enjoy the "good times" (line 9).

It is at this point that Poetry plays dead—but the Poet is not content; she is restless. Then, at five o'clock in the morning, the assault begins. Poetry addresses the Poet by reminding her of the joy in being able to see the beauty of the desert (even though it was with but one eye, at least she had that one eye). The Poet is reluctant to arise to "discuss" this—after all, it is five in the morning! But Poetry will not be silenced. She again reminds the Poet of beauties she has seen (with her one good eye). "Think of that!" Poetry commands (line 36).

The Poet turns away from the commands and announces that maybe she will join the church and "learn how to pray again!" (line 39). But Poetry is ready for this and asks her when she prays, "what do you think / you'll see?" (lines 41–42). The Poet tries to make excuses (no paper, uncomfortable ink pen), but Poetry responds, "Bullshit" (line 48). The Poet acquiesces. Writer's block has been eliminated. All efforts of the Poet to put off until the next day the writing that needs to be done are surrendered. Like it or not, the Poet has been inspired again to engage in the creation of a new poem.

For Discussion or Writing

How is the style in this poem different from that of "Revolutionary Petunias" and "Expect Nothing"? How does the style affect the poem's meaning?

FURTHER QUESTIONS ON WALKER AND HER WORK

1. Walker is clearly influenced by her personal experiences in developing her fictional writing—specifically with *Meridian,* her short stories, and her poetry. How is her less autobiographical work different?
2. Walker names Virginia Woolf as a major influence in her development as a writer. In one essay, she describes how she modeled her discipline in writing on Woolf's "A Room of One's Own." Read Woolf's "A Room of One's Own"

and Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Examine how Walker and other African-American writers found a room of their own.

3. Religion is an important element in Walker's novels and stories. Evaluate its influence in *The Color Purple,* "Revolutionary Petunias," "The Welcome Table," and *Meridian.* Some ideas to consider: How does Shug Avery change the way that Celie looks at religion? How is religion important to Sammy Lou Rue? What is Walker's message about God in "The Welcome Table"? How does religion cause a schism between Meridian and her mother?
4. Walker has been criticized for portraying black men in a negative light. Some critics see this representation only in Walker's male characters who are especially sexually active. Do you agree or disagree? Evaluate several male characters who are outside (either younger or older) the role of sexual dominator. Are they portrayed in a positive or negative light, especially in comparison to other male characters?

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Kathleen McKenzie

August Wilson (1945–2005)

The message of America is "Leave your Africanness outside the door." My message is "Claim what is yours."

(quoted in the *New York Times Magazine,* 10 June 1987)

If it can be said that a single voice dominated the American theater from the 1980s through 2005, that voice definitely belonged to the playwright August Wilson. Wilson, whom the news analyst Gwen Ifill called "the American Shakespeare," was a prolific writer with more than 10 major plays, numerous theatrical commentaries, and other creative work to his credit. Yet it is not merely the number of his productions that marks Wilson's dominance in modern drama, but his ability to put into words the ideas and experiences of everyday African Americans, who have long been ignored or displaced altogether in drama created by playwrights from the mainstream white society. His characters, while living out their lives for the most part in a single locale, grapple with themes and issues that face all humanity. In constructing a thoroughly American world of recording studios, taxi stands, backyards, and kitchens, Wilson created a body of drama with universal appeal.

One of only seven Americans to have won multiple Pulitzer Prizes for drama, Wilson was, in addition to being one of the country's finest playwrights, one of its most ambitious writers. (Other dramatists who won the Pulitzer Prize two or more times are Edward Albee, George S. Kaufman, Eugene O'Neill, Robert E. Sherwood, Thornton Wilder, and Tennessee Williams.) Early in his dramatic career, he assigned himself the goal of writing 10 plays that, taken together, would depict African-American experiences in the 20th century. Each play was to be set in a different decade and to reflect cultural issues vital to giving a well-rounded picture of life in the United States.

Wilson devoted almost three decades to the project, which he completed just before his death in 2005. (*Radio Golf,* the 10th play in the cycle, made its Los Angeles debut after Wilson had been diagnosed with liver cancer, a scant four months before he died.) In the course of pursuing this dramatic cultural history of America, Wilson not only completed his mission, but also did so in a manner garnering widespread public and critical praise, as well as numerous fellowships and awards. Having "envisioned theatre as a means to raise the collective community's conscience about black life in 20th-century America," Wilson also proved himself to be a gifted writer whose themes and characters are so complex and so skillfully wrought that they merit the international acclaim they have received (Elkins xi).

It would be a mistake to classify Wilson as either a historian or a merely didactic writer. He denied that his primary interest was history, although his plays are steeped in actual events. Rather, he was more concerned with exploring black culture: "I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother's life—her

myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter—are all worthy of art" (*Seven Guitars* n.p.). He referred to himself as

> a representative of a culture and the carrier of some very valuable antecedents . . . [and says that his development as a writer originated in] black cultural nationalism as exemplified by Amiri Baraka in the sixties. It posited black Americans as coming from a long line of honorable people with a cultural and political history, a people of manners with a strong moral personality that had to be reclaimed by strengthening the elements of the culture that made it unique and by developing institutions for preserving and promoting it. The ideas of self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense which it espoused are still very much a part of my life as I sit down to write. (*Three Plays* ix)

According to Mike Downing, Wilson elected to present America through a black cultural lens because "white culture has access to all the mechanisms to promote its own agenda; whereas black culture has not had the same benefits. That's why he presses this agenda."

Wilson did acknowledge himself to be "a race man," claiming the Black Power movement of the 1960s as "the kiln in which I was fired," the experience that caused him to see how deeply embedded race and racism are in the culture of the United States (*Ground* 12). He considered race the single most important aspect African Americans share, because it "allows for group identification and it is the organizing principle around which cultures are formed" (12). Since black Americans have the common legacy of slavery, Wilson says, "we [are] now seeking ways to alter our relationship to the society in which we live—and, perhaps more important, searching for ways to alter the shared expectations of ourselves as a community of people" (12). Wilson saw the dearth of black theaters as a reflection of "the problematic nature of the relationship between whites and blacks," resulting not in any lack of talent, but in a lack of funding for black theater (16). In both his staged plays and his theatrical criticism, Wilson calls for a new kind of drama, one that is created by black artists writing about black experience and is staged by black directors. In an interview with *Ebony*'s Charles Whitaker, Wilson said, "I write, like any artist, for an audience of one, basically, to satisfy myself. But I'm also trying to make an aesthetic statement. What I am trying to do is put Black culture on stage and demonstrate to the world—not to White folks, not to Black folks, but to the world—that it exists and that it is capable of sustaining you. I want to show the world that there is no idea or concept in the human experience that cannot be examined through Black life and culture." Wilson led the way in producing the drama he called for, with a body of work known around the world for its excellence.

Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr., in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945, the fourth of six children. His parents were Frederick August Kittel, Sr., a baker of Austro-Hungarian descent, and Daisy Wilson, an African-American cleaning woman of great inner strength, whose own determined mother had gone to Pittsburgh from Spear, North Carolina, walking the entire way (Snodgrass 5). Wilson recalls the importance of the cultural training he obtained growing up in his mother's house:

> I learned the language, the eating habits, the religious beliefs, the gestures, the notions of common sense, attitudes towards sex, concepts of beauty and justice, and the responses to pleasure and pain . . . that my mother had learned from her mother, and which you could trace back to the first African who set foot on the continent. It is this culture that stands on these shores today as a testament to the resiliency of the African American spirit. (*Ground* 15–16)

After the death of his father in 1969, Wilson elected to adopt his mother's birth name, rather than that of his father or of David Bedford, his stepfather. The playwright dedicated his first dramatic success, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), to his mother and credits her for his habit of voracious reading and his love of words. Sadly, she died of lung cancer just months before *Ma Rainey* opened on Broadway.

Wilson's early childhood was spent in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, a diverse locale that figures as the setting for all but one of his plays. Until high school, he attended neighborhood Catholic schools. When in 1959 his stepfather moved the family to a mostly white suburb, Wilson encountered pervasive racism as the only black student in his school, Gladstone High. When he was 15, a teacher who failed to recognize the extent of his talent falsely accused him of plagiarizing a report on Napoleon Bonaparte and challenged him to prove his authorship. Outraged and disgusted, Wilson threw the report into the trash and left school, spending his days educating himself at the neighborhood Carnegie Library, where he read widely and voraciously. (One honor that Wilson particularly treasured is the high school diploma issued him by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh in recognition of his de facto education there; his is the only one it has awarded.) About that period, the writer says, "Those were my learning years. I read everything and anything that I could get my hands on, things that interested me: Anthropology was one, cultural anthropology; theology was another. I read books on furniture making. I read everything, novels, whatever" (Fitzgerald 1). He spent the next two years in a series of jobs until entering the U.S. Army, securing a discharge after one year.

Returning to Pittsburgh, Wilson began his writing career as a poet rather than a dramatist. Much of his life over the next few years was spent in reading widely, buying hundreds of jazz records and playing them over and over, and listening to ordinary people speaking on the streets, all of which would form the foundation for his later work in drama. In 1965, he helped to establish the Centre Avenue Poets Theatre Workshop, one of a number of artistic communities he would be instrumental in founding. Three years afterward, along with Rob Penny, Wilson founded the Black Horizon Theater. Wilson was married briefly, from 1969 to 1972, to Brenda Burton. During the 1970s, his poetry output intensified, culminating in the piece Wilson considered his best to date, 1973's "Morning Statement."

In 1976, Wilson attended Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead,* a play that, according to critics, "may be viewed as a theatrical response to the very complicated and dynamic sociopolitical situation [of apartheid]" (www.fb10.uni-bremen.de). From this experience, Wilson began increasingly to see theater as a critical ingredient of any discussion of cultural life in the United States. Further, he felt so strongly that he could play a role in the development of American drama in this important direction that in 1978 he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to write drama for Claude Purdy and to become a scriptwriter for the Science Museum of Minnesota. Soon Wilson was deeply involved with the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis. His first play to be produced was *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills,* a satirical western Wilson had adapted from an earlier series of poems; it appeared at the Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul in 1981. Other early plays by Wilson are *The Homecoming,* 1979; *The Coldest Day of the Year,* 1979; *Fullerton Street,* 1980; and *The Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket,* 1983.

The year before the appearance of *Black Bart,* Rob Penny, Wilson's longtime friend and collaborator, sent him a brochure calling for submissions for the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center National Playwrights Conference in New York. Each summer, 15 of approximately 1,500 playwrights were invited to produce their work at this conference, which was conducted by the legendary director Lloyd Richards. Penny urged Wilson to submit his writing for consideration. Following Penny's suggestion, Wilson submitted a play that was rejected for the O'Neill, as were his next four.

Nevertheless, these were productive years. *Jitney,* a drama that later became a part of Wilson's 10-play cycle, was written during this period and in 1982 was produced at the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh. That same year, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was accepted for production at the O'Neill Theater. Wilson says his experience at the O'Neill summer workshops cannot be overlooked in his growth as a playwright, and he credits the "many talented professionals, who, by their insights and provocations, have contributed to important changes in the texts" (*Three Plays* xii–xiii). From that time on, multiple revisions would become standard in the playwright's creative process.

Wilson went to New York, where he met Lloyd Richards, a man who would profoundly influence his writing. Richards's stature as dean of the American theater had been established long before their meeting, when in 1958 he directed Lorraine Hansberry's revolutionary drama *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway. Richards recognized in Wilson the dramatic talent he had been seeking. The two began a supportive relationship that would continue beyond Richards's retirement in 1991 and includes subsequent productions of *Fences, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson, Two Trains Running,* and *Seven Guitars,* all parts of Wilson's 10-play chronicle. Wilson and Richards also established a pattern that worked well for them—Wilson's new play would premiere in a regional theater, go through rewrites until it was ready for a larger audience, and then be presented on Broadway. In 1983 *Fences,* Wilson's play set in the 1950s, began its run at the O'Neill.

After an attention-getting engagement there, followed by further development, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* opened on Broadway on October 11, 1984. Critics were full of praise for the play and its creator, acknowledging Wilson as a significant new dramatic voice and calling the play

> a major find for the American theater. . . . This play is a searing inside account of what white racism does to its victims—and it floats on the same authentic artistry as the blues music it celebrates. Harrowing as *Ma Rainey's* can be, it is also funny, salty, carnal and lyrical. Like his real-life heroine, the legendary singer Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, Mr. Wilson articulates a legacy of unspeakable agony and rage in a spellbinding voice. (Rich "Wilson's *Ma Rainey's* Opens")

Ma Rainey went on to be nominated for a Tony Award and win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best American play, the first of several that would go to Wilson's work. Meanwhile, a new play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* had been accepted at the O'Neill. Wilson, no longer a struggling unknown, was also awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship, given in support of emerging talents who have the potential for being major forces in their fields.

In 1985, *Fences* opened at the Yale Repertory Company, to be followed by the Yale Repertory opening of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in 1986. Also that year, Wilson was the recipient of a Whiting Foundation Award for *Ma Rainey* and a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. When *Fences* began its New York run on March 26, 1987, its reception surpassed even that of Wilson's earlier work. The *New York Times* critic Frank Rich gave what for him was a rave review, saying, "*Fences* leaves no doubt that Mr. Wilson is a major writer, combining a poet's ear for vernacular with a robust sense of humor, a sure sense for crackling dramatic incident, and a passionate commitment to a great subject" ("Family Ties"). Awards for *Fences* seemingly could not stop coming: In 1987 alone, it won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award, the Tony Award for best dramatic work, and finally the Pulitzer Prize. The Outer Critics Circle John Gassner Award honored Wilson as the best American playwright, and the *Chicago Tribune* capped off the year by naming him Artist of the Year. Early in 1988, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* appeared on Broadway, winning another Tony nomination and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award.

But Wilson was not slowing down. His next Pulitzer-winning drama, *The Piano Lesson,* was already being workshopped in New Haven, Connecticut, at the Yale Repertory. When it opened on Broadway in 1990, the play quickly won a Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Drama Desk Award for best new play, going on to obtain a second Pulitzer for its author. The *Time* critic William A. Henry III proclaimed, "The musical instrument of the title is the most potent symbol in American drama since Laura Wingfield's glass menagerie." When the second Pulitzer was conferred upon Wilson, *Time* stated he had "established himself as the richest theatrical voice to emerge in the U.S. since Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Just as significant, he has transcended the categorization of 'black' playwright to demonstrate that his stories, although consistently about black families and communities, speak to the entire U.S. culture" ("Two-Timer"). Critics around the country raved, describing *The Piano Lesson* in such lavish terms as *haunting, mesmerizing, provocative,* and *riveting* (Wilson, *Piano Lesson* n.p.). Significantly, Clive Barnes of the *New York Post,* as well as the drama critic from the Newark, New Jersey, *Star-Ledger,* commented on the sophisticated humor in the play, while pointing to its dramatic dimensions. A solid, rich humor is an important part of most of Wilson's drama, whether used as a coping device; a cultural practice such as "doing the dozens," in which characters hurl taunts at one another, trying to see who can land a supreme blow; or just the realistic give and take of everyday living.

New Wilson plays followed quickly, as did awards and acclaim for them. At one point, Wilson even had two plays on Broadway simultaneously. *Two Trains Running* opened on Broadway in 1992 to critical praise, followed by an additional Tony nomination and an American Theatre Critics' Association award. In 1996, *Seven Guitars,* the sixth play written for the Pittsburgh Cycle, appeared and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best new play. Critics praised the work for its lyricism and gripping action, its musicality, and its thoughtful comedy, all showing a writer who had come into his own. Next was *King Hedley II,* which was nominated for what would have been Wilson's third Pulitzer and garnered its author another Tony nomination. Despite critical kudos, *King Hedley*'s intensity did not find an audience, and the play was not a popular success. Wilson saved the framework decades of the 1900s and 1990s for his last two plays in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf.*

The 10 plays of Wilson's decades project, sometimes known as the Pittsburgh Cycle, have won a Tony Award, an Olivier Award, two Pulitzer Prizes, five New Play Awards from the American Theatre Critics Association, and seven New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards. The playwright won the Whiting Writers Award, the William Inge Award for Distinguished Achievement in the American Theatre, and numerous other prestigious prizes. Additional honors include Rockefeller, Guggenheim, and McKnight fellowships; a National Humanities Medal; numerous honorary doctorates; and the 2003 Heinz Award in Arts and Humanities. He was a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1995, Wilson was nominated for an Emmy for his screenplay for *The Piano Lesson*. The New Dramatists, America's oldest nonprofit workshop, gave Wilson a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2003, and in 2006 the Signature Theatre Company in New York City was dedicated to his dramatic achievements.

Wilson was the father of two daughters—Sakina Ansari, from his short-lived marriage to Brenda Burton, and Azula Carmen Wilson, from his third marriage, to the artist and costume designer Constanza Romero. He habitually dedicated his theatrical works to those who played an important part in his life. For example, he dedicated *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* to Sakina Ansari, *Fences* to Lloyd Richards, *The Piano Lesson* to his five sisters and brothers, *Seven Guitars* to Constanza Romero, *Jitney* to Azula Carmen,

and *King Hedley II* in part to Rob Penny. Wilson spent his last years in Seattle, Washington, where he made his home after the dissolution of his second marriage (1981–90), to Judy Oliver, a social worker.

Remembering the impulse that began his career as a dramatist, Wilson spoke of his deeply felt desire to emulate the blues, which he saw as "a flag bearer of self-definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators" (*Three Plays* x). Early on, he recalled:

> I turned my ear, my heart, and whatever analytical tools I possessed to embrace this world. I elevated it, rightly or wrongly, to biblical status. I rooted out the ideas and attitudes expressed in the music, charted them and bent and twisted and stretched them. I gave my whole being, muscle and bone and sinew and flesh and spirit, over to the emotional reference provided by the music. . . . This was life being lived in all its timbre and horrifics, with the zest and purpose and the affirmation of the self of worthy of the highest possibilities and the highest celebration. What more fertile ground could any artist want? (x)

Throughout the decades of his dramatic creativity, Wilson continued to write "with the blues and what I call the blood's memory as my only guide and companion" (xii). The world-class plays he created as a result of this strong commitment assure Wilson's place in the artistic life of America.

Shortly after Wilson learned in June 2005 that he had liver cancer and would have only three to five months to live, he told Christopher Rawson, drama editor of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* "It's not like poker, you can't throw your hand in. I've lived a blessed life. I'm ready. I'm glad I finished the cycle [of plays]." He spent the two months after learning of his illness working on a major rewrite of *Radio Golf,* although his condition did not allow him to go to Los Angeles for the rehearsals, the first such absence in his career; still, he communicated almost daily through fax and phone, spending his final months also working on a number of other writing projects.

At the time of Wilson's death, the *Time* critic Richard Zoglin offered this assessment of the dramatist's contribution:

> His work stood apart from, and above, nearly everything else in contemporary American theater. While others wrote spare, personal, ironic plays, Wilson's were big, verbose and passionate, brimming with social protest and epic poetry. Offstage, too, he was a maverick, opposing color-blind casting and advocating what some felt was a separatist black theater. Yet his work will endure, for everyone. (27)

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1981, 1985)

Although *Ma Rainey* opened on Broadway in 1984, Wilson had begun writing it in 1976, after seriously listening to the blues for an extended time. As a young man, he had bought old 78 rpm records for a nickel apiece, eventually collecting about 2,000 and listening to all of them with an eager ear. The playwright acknowledged the blues as one of the prime influences on his artistry, which he calls his "four Bs": "Romare Bearden [the collage artist]; Imamu Amiri Baraka [a.k.a. Leroi Jones]; the poet and dramatist; Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine poet and short-story writer; and the most significant *B* of all: the blues" (Wilson, "How to Write a Play" 2.5). Pressed by the reporter Marcy Silman to prioritize these four, Wilson named the blues (www.npr.org). He recalls:

> One night in the fall of 1965 I put a typewritten yellow-labeled record titled "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine," by someone named Bessie Smith, on

> the turntable of my 78 rpm phonograph, and the universe stuttered and everything fell to a new place. . . . I cannot describe or even relate what I felt. Suffice it to say it was a birth, a baptism, a resurrection, and a redemption all rolled up in one. . . . With my discovery of Bessie Smith and the blues I had been given a world that contained my image, a world at once rich and varied, marked and marking, brutal and beautiful, and at crucial odds with the larger world that contained it and preyed and pressed it from every conceivable angle. (*Three Plays* ix)

What Wilson discovered afresh that night was the power of vernacular language. Bessie Smith sang in the language of the street, yet communicated with all the subtlety the most elevated poet could employ. As much as he admired writers such as, say, Dylan Thomas, Wilson realized that the black vernacular is as powerful an instrument as any playwright could want for his characters. From that time on, he determined to make the same linguistic commitment as that made by Borges, whose work he so admires: "In the language of the day I will say eternal things" (*Seven Black Plays* x). *Ma Rainey,* as well as each of Wilson's subsequent plays, remains true to that commitment.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom takes its title from the blues song of the same name. The play is set in 1927 Chicago at a rundown recording studio on the South Side, where members of a blues band wait to record a session with Ma Rainey, the legendary blues queen. Tied to a slavery and sharecropping past they can still remember, caught in the conflicts between their rural past and urban present, *Ma Rainey's* black characters are searching for an identity of their own; presumably, they can find it in the music. The blues, in this play functioning as Wilson's symbol of the African-American heritage, could "instruct and allow [free men of definite and sincere worth] to reconnect if it were truly heard as Ma herself hears it, as a personal song to be improvised and sung with fervor (*Ma Rainey* xvi). Ma values the blues as "life's way of talking . . . a way of understanding life . . . [and]keep[ing] things balanced" (82). Others do not see the matter Ma's way. For Sturdyvant and Irvin, the white producer and agent who have set up the session, the music is only a way to "make a bundle" (19). These men have become wealthy exploiting Ma's recordings, providing a strong example of black victimization by social racism. As one character explains, "White folks don't care nothing about Ma Rainey. She's just another nigger who they can use to make them some money" (97).

Nor is there black unity in *Ma Rainey*; the squabbles among the musicians offer a natural way for Wilson to explore both intra- and interracial conflict. Of particular note is Levee, whom the playwright pits against Ma, the band members, and the whites. The most frequent targets of Levee's abuse are Christianity and Toledo's philosophical talk about building a better life. He demeans Toledo's ideas as ineffectual nonsense, calling him "Booker T. Washington" and telling him he's "just a whole lot of mouth" with his "highfalutin ideas" and "that old philosophy bullshit" (41–42). Levee feels that "if there's a god up there, he done went to sleep . . . God don't mean nothing to me" (43, 46). This relentlessly bitter man has concluded that if there were a God, the inequities black people suffer daily would not be allowed. He becomes increasingly antagonistic, countering Toledo's dreams with his own horrific memories, including seeing his mother gang-raped when he was eight years old. Trying to defend her, Levee was slashed with a knife; he still carries the scar, both literally and metaphorically.

Much of the second act consists of a series of debates between Toledo and Levee about the fairness of life and the powerlessness of blacks in a white-dominated society. He becomes increasingly overwrought when he hears Cutler, the leader of the blues band, recall a bitter memory of his own. A minister whom Cutler knew, the Reverend Gates, became a victim of racist Jim

Crow laws when, getting off a train to use the bathroom at a small southern crossroads, he failed to return on time because the only facility available to blacks was a remote outhouse. A group of whites with guns torment the minister, tearing the cross from his neck, ripping his Bible, and making him dance. Hearing this story, Levee is incensed: "Why didn't God strike some of them crackers down? . . .' Cause he a white man's God. That's why. God ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers. God take a nigger's prayers and throw them in the garbage. . . . God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart . . . "God can kiss my ass" (98). Hearing this, Cutler leaps to his feet and smashes Levee in the mouth. Levee pulls a knife and begins screaming, enraged not so much at Cutler as at life itself, which in his view offers a black man no recourse. Maybe, he thinks, he can find an outlet in the music, which he has a gift for arranging.

But Sturdyvant rejects Levee's music and dismisses him condescendingly. Levee again pulls his knife, this time turning on the first person he sees in order to express all the pent-up frustrations from the racism he and others have suffered at white hands North and South. It happens to be Toledo, and before he is aware of what he has done, Levee has stabbed and killed the man. This recording session—not a rehearsal of music so much as of the evils of a racist society—ends in victimization. Once again, the black man's ability to find and celebrate his song, so central an idea in Wilson's plays, is thwarted.

An important stylistic innovation began for Wilson in this first major play: the insertion of poetic introductions, often not acted out on stage or included in the playbill. These introductions display the skill Wilson had honed in his long years as a poet. *Ma Rainey's* introduction, for example, speaks to the blues, the ever-significant refrain in his drama: "It is hard to define this music. Suffice it to say that it is music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other. . . . [It] would instruct and allow them to reconnect, to reassemble and gird up for the next battle in which they would be both victim and the ten thousand slain" (16). The prologue to *Fences,* his next Broadway production, would maintain this new tradition in high poetic form. Even Wilson's stage directions for the entire cycle indicate that he always retained his poetic beginnings. In *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), for example, one of the characters, Solly, is mortally wounded. As Aunt Ester moves to treat the injury, Wilson directs the actress who plays the role: "Aunt Ester and Black Mary begin to work urgently at treating the wound, trying to stop the flow of blood. For Aunt Ester it is an old, old, unwelcome visitation" (81). By the time he had written *King Hedley II,* the 1980s play, Wilson was including prologues in which his overviews of the cultural life to be staged were acted out, becoming integral parts of the drama. For some playwrights, any introductions and stage directions are simply directions to cast and crew; for Wilson, that is not so. They must be interpreted along with the dialogue, often carrying serious weight.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Listen to several blues recordings, especially those featuring Bessie Smith. What features of the music do you think inspired Wilson?
2. Examine the character of Levee. Is he more a malcontent or a realist? Justify your response with quotes from the play.
3. Read Alice Walker's "Nineteen Fifty-five," from her collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). As Wilson's *Ma Rainey* does, Walker's short story deals with exploitation of a black artist. Compare and contrast the two main characters.

Fences (1986)

By the time of *Fences,* Wilson's 1950s play, the great migration had ended, leaving blacks in northern cities much busier coping with the challenges of everyday living than their parents

had hoped when they began the move out of the South. Wilson makes this focus clear in his prologue: Unlike European immigrants and their descendents, he writes,

> descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation [in the city]. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they . . . [lived] in quiet desperation and vengeful pride . . . in pursuit of their own dream. That they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. (xvii)

Wilson's main consideration in this play is the fences society builds around us and those we construct, willingly or unwillingly, around ourselves.

The chief individual in this family tragedy is Troy Maxon, played on Broadway in a Tony-winning performance by James Earl Jones. Troy's extreme bitterness results from never being able to realize his dream of playing professional baseball. His glory days were years before the 1957 setting of the play, when baseball was segregated and members of Troy's Negro League did not stand a chance for advancement. Unable to read, he has spent his life working as a garbage man, a menial job that does little more than put food on the table and constantly remind Troy how far he has fallen from his dreams. His son Cory, with whom Troy has an embattled relationship, is a star athlete, too, a football player. When Troy intervenes, forcing Cory to give up football just before a college recruiter is arriving to watch him play, tension between the two comes to a head as Cory accuses his father: "You ain't never gave me nothing! You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was gonna be better than you. All you ever did was try and make me scared of you. I used to tremble every time you called my name. . . . You can't whup me no more. You're too old. You just an old man" (86–87). Troy, enraged at his son's words—a mixture of truthful accusations and a hurtful inability to recognize what his father has done for him—advances on Cory with a baseball bat, then orders him to get out. His own dreams dashed, Cory runs away to join the army.

A theme of *Fences,* articulated so strongly before in Wilson's drama (particularly in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*), is the need to sing one's own song. The recurrent melody in the play is a traditional folk song from Troy's childhood about a dog named Blue that "treed a possum out on a limb" (99). The final scene takes place eight years after Cory's last encounter with his father, on the day of Troy's funeral. Unable to stay away in spite of all that has passed between them, Cory goes home and confronts his connections with the past.

One of these legacies is his tie to his half sister Raynell, with whom he shares the memory of their father's song. When Cory connects with her, he affirms his part in a long continuum of events beginning in Pittsburgh but moving back beyond the middle passage to Africa. Cory and Raynell are finally able to sing their father's song together. It is at once theirs and Troy's and older than all of them, a melody that speaks of their interconnectedness. It signifies, as Ralph Ellison says of the blues, "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (90). Threading backward through time, this simple song binds brother and sister to each other and to the mixture of pain and unarticulated love that is their common inheritance. At its conclusion, they are for the first time truly a family (Gantt passim).

One often-overlooked aspect of *Fences* is the strength of Rose, Troy's wife. A woman who has sacrificed everything of her own to try to make Troy happy, Rose at first may seem to support those critics who say Wilson does not have

a strong female character in his plays. But Rose emerges as Wilson's first important female character, a woman who foreshadows the outspoken Tonya in *King Hedley II* and the invincible Aunt Ester, the focal character in *Gem of the Ocean*. In Rose's most significant speech she challenges Troy:

> Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me? Don't you think . . . that I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget my responsibilities? . . . You not the only one who's got wants and needs. But I held on to you, Troy. I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams . . . and I buried them inside you. . . . I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn't the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going . . . I wanted to be there with you. Cause you was my husband. Cause that's the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. You always talking about what you give . . . and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take . . . and don't even know nobody's giving! (70–71)

The irony in Rose's life is that the more she submerges her own personality in Troy's, the more resentment he feels about the responsibilities she embodies and the more he wants to escape her.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Compare Wilson's introductory remarks and stage directions to *Fences* to the poetry of such writers as Robert Frost, Rita Dove, or Pat Mora. Does Wilson's writing exhibit poetic qualities? How? Keep in mind that Wilson was a poet before he turned to writing drama.
2. Select a second Wilson play that contains a substantive introduction. Realizing that audiences would not hear or read these introductions, compare the two in terms of what they add to the play, even under these circumstances. Justify your response with support from each play and your own critical sense.
3. *Fences* has often been compared to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* primarily for its depiction of an authoritarian father/son conflict and for its treatment of the American dream. Do a comparative study of the two plays.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988)

Like all of Wilson's dramas, *Joe Turner* is a play in two acts. The year 1911 is the setting for its action, which treats the lives of people living in Seth Holly's Pittsburgh boardinghouse, a natural microcosm where a variety of people can come together. According to Wilson, *Joe Turner* began as a short story that soon moved into being a play (Shannon 229).

From the play's inception, Wilson introduces the idea of black Americans as a wandering people. The prologue places the action in the context of the diaspora—especially that involving southern slavery—with a lyrical description of the migration by the "sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves" to the great cities of the North, where they hope to shape "a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth" (iii). Significantly, slavery exists for these wanderers in the freshness of memory or of actual lived experience. "Foreigners in a strange land. . . . Isolated, cut off from memory . . . they arrive dazed and stunned" by all they have already endured (iii). The psychological baggage they carry is considerable: Refused full access both to their African heritage and to modern financial and political power, they desire ways to "give clear and luminous meaning" to the as-yet-unarticulated song they have within, one composed of both "a wail and a whelp of joy" (iii). They arrive "carrying Bibles and guitars," symbols of old faith and new songs (iii).

In this play, as in others, Wilson shows no reluctance to explore the slave past, about which he says, "Blacks in America want to forget about slavery—the stigma, the shame. That's the wrong

move. If you can't be who you are, who can you be? How can you know what to do?" (Freedman 40). For *Joe Turner*'s characters, the quest for identity and the pain of memory are inextricably bound.

Bynum, a root worker and conjure man, is in many ways the most intriguing character in the play. Always "lost in a world of his own making," he is searching—not, as is Herald Loomis, for an actual missing person, but for his "shiny man," who has appeared to him in a vision (4, 6). In Bynum's vision, the stranger promises to show him the secret of life but instead leads him to a mystic place where he encounters his father's ghost. The ghost charges Bynum not to sing someone else's song, but to find one of his own; the shiny man will give him a unique melody that will be "accepted and work its full power in the world" (10). Bynum's vision is heavy with symbolic meaning in the African-American search for identity. Forced for so long to sing others' songs, African Americans must find their own and sing them boldly.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Look up the term *magical realism*. How does Wilson's use of magical realism in this play compare with examples by other writers? Compare Wilson's magical realism to that of writers such as Rudolfo Anaya or Gabriel García Márquez.
2. As do Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and others, Wilson incorporates several aspects of folk medicine in his drama. Discuss his use of the root worker in *Joe Turner*.
3. At the end of act 1, there is a lively musical display called a *juba*. What is a juba? What are its origins and traditions? How does it function in this play, both literally and symbolically?

The Piano Lesson (1990)

Set in 1936, *The Piano Lesson* takes place in the Pittsburgh kitchen and parlor of the house that Doaker Charles occupies with his niece, Berniece, and her daughter, Maretha, and soon visited by Berniece's brother, Boy Willie. Typical of Wilson's plays, this one is in two acts. The background of the Great Depression, as well as the humble circumstances of the family, dictates simple surroundings. The focal point of their parlor is a piano, never played, which is decorated with elaborate carvings of figures.

The "whole solid past" that will not be rejected, but must be faced and dealt with, is perhaps strongest in this drama (Welty 206). The "lesson" of the title is not just one conducted on the keys of the upright that dominates the family parlor; it is also inscribed in the wooden carvings the piano bears, masklike figures of Berniece and Boy Willie's ancestors, long departed. The carvings are reminiscent of African sculptures "rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them . . . into the realm of art" (Wilson, *Piano Lesson* xiii). They are, for this family, the only record of the ancestors who live on in their names and memories.

Further, the piano's lesson is dramatically emphasized throughout the play in the Charleses' confrontations about whether to sell the piano to finance Boy Willie's dream of buying Mississippi farmland on which their family once worked as slaves for Sutter—a move resonant with irony and justice—or to hold on to it for what it represents to Berniece of their proud spiritual legacy of reverence for family and the past. According to Frank Rich, "the disposition of the piano becomes synonymous with the use to which the characters put their ancestral legacy . . . somber shrine to a tragic past [or] stake to freedom" ("A Family Confronts Its History"). Truly "the past has never passed" for this haunted sister and brother but exists in ghosts of their Mississippi heritage that are both actual and psychological (Ching 71). Here Wilson invites his audience to consider a number of crucial questions: What is the place of tradition? Of community? Of family? Of the past? What do we owe them and memory? To examine these issues, *The Piano Lesson*'s

characters must recall and evaluate their heritage and what it signifies for their shared futures. For this reason, this play is presented more through storytelling than through action.

Wilson skillfully conducts the debate between brother and sister, with each confrontation adding more details to the family story. Wining Boy, Doaker's older brother, brings matters to a climax with his musical tribute to memory. All at once everyone feels the presence of Sutter's ghost, but no one can exorcise it. Even Boy Willie wrestles with the ghost but is thrown. Berniece then realizes that only she can save them from Sutter's evil presence, and that she must do so by playing the piano. She can neither ignore the past nor let it lie dormant nor sell it nor give it away. She must take it up and "play" it, making its song a part of her and of all of them.

She sits at the piano and begins a powerful song, playing her incantation to Mama Berniece, Mama Ester, Papa Boy Charles, and Mama Ola—the old ones whose ancestral portraits in the legs of the piano have prevented the past from being forgotten—asking them repeatedly to help her preserve her family from their common enemy. Her prayer is granted, and Sutter's ghost vanishes. Berniece, in whose name kinship is embedded, liberates her family by squarely facing the past she has steadfastly avoided throughout the play. All find comfort in the confrontation. Berniece learns, as Wilson insists his people must, that she cannot suppress any portion of her own sense of self if she and her loved ones are to move on with their lives, balanced and whole. At the conclusion of *The Piano Lesson,* Boy Willie leaves for Mississippi, content for the piano to stay where it is so long as someone will make use of it to give music and meaning to the present. Through music, the piano's song reaffirms the stories of the past, transforming the ugly and awful, along with the beautiful and tender, into a joyous melody of hope (Gantt passim).

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *The Piano Lesson,* a heavily carved piano functions as an important symbol. As you read Wilson's play, be alert to what the piano means to various characters. What is its "lesson"?
2. One of the fundamental principles of the debate between Berniece and Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* is that neither side is clearly right or wrong. Discuss the key factors in each character's position, defending it as if it were your own.
3. Discuss Wilson's use of the vernacular in *The Piano Lesson*. What does it contribute to the play? Examine vernacular speech in the oral histories conducted during the 1930s by interviewers from the Federal Writers' Project, available on the Internet from the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov). How faithful is the speech of Wilson's characters to actual speech from the 1930s?
4. Compare *The Piano Lesson* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* for their views of the depression era in the United States. What are the similarities of the experiences of poor blacks and poor whites? What are the differences?
5. In connection with *The Piano Lesson,* read Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents,* Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter,* Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus,* and/or Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker.* How does each work depict the complex legacy of the past?

Two Trains Running (1993)

Two Trains Running, set in 1969, finds Wilson's characters at the end of a turbulent and violent decade during which many saw their hopes for achieving racial equity dashed or greatly diminished. The locale, Memphis Lee's small Pittsburgh restaurant, is symbolically placed just across the street from Lutz's Meat Market (life) and West's Funeral Home (death). Memphis, who has witnessed tremendous change in the 40 years since he left the Jackson, Mississippi, farm where he grew up, sees every occurrence as an occasion

for a story. He and his friend Holloway, a regular at the restaurant and something of a historian, constantly swap memories. Now Memphis faces possible destruction as urban renewal threatens to tear down his restaurant, a risk that provokes his recollecting the past with even greater intensity than he has before.

Memphis intends to return to the South one day, to catch one of the two trains running daily there, and flaunt his material successes in Jackson, where he was robbed of his land and run out of town. He believes in working hard and saving money and has no use for Wolf, who plays the numbers, or Sterling, a young man who will not or cannot keep a series of menial jobs, his only option since release from prison. When Memphis calls Sterling "lazy," he provokes a history lesson from Holloway: "People kill me talking about niggers is lazy. Niggers is the most hard-working people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. And didn't take no lunch hour. . . . If it wasn't for you the white man would be poor. Every little bit he got he got standing on top of you. That's why he could reach so high" (34). Holloway ranges beyond the slave past to the middle passage, then returns to present inequities, thinking a sense of history will give Memphis some needed perspective. But Memphis does not care to take the long view: He has watched civil rights leaders felled one after another, and nothing seems to have improved much in his eyes. "Malcolm X is dead," Memphis says (40). "They killed Martin. If they did that to him you can imagine what they do to me or you. If they kill the sheep you know what they do to the wolf. . . . Ain't no justice. That's why they got that statue of her and got her blindfolded" (41–42). His credo is that God blesses the child that's got his own, and he intends to mind his own business and protect his property as best he can.

Going to the courthouse on the day that city officials are expected to announce their decision about his property, Memphis learns to his surprise that they are ready to pay him $35,000 for the restaurant, $10,000 more than he was planning to fight for. Confused by this sudden turn, he goes for guidance to Aunt Ester, the local prophetess; she tells him he must "go back and pick up the ball" (109). He interprets Ester's advice as a mandate to return to the South, face matters there, and reclaim the farm that is rightfully his. By dealing with the past, Memphis can be free to go forward. As the play closes, he is triumphant and full of plans for the future. Thus *Two Trains Running* carries a question that resonates through all Wilson's plays: How can we know who we are and where we are going if we do not acknowledge the past, struggle toward understanding it, and reconcile ourselves to its present legacy to us?

For Discussion or Writing

1. In *Two Trains Running,* Wilson introduces the character of Aunt Ester, who will appear repeatedly in his subsequent plays, including *Gem of the Ocean,* which centers around her. Writers such as John Galsworthy in *The Forsyte Saga* and Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* also make use of recurring characters. From your reading, discuss the work of Wilson and another author who uses such characters. What might this technique contribute to a literary work? What are its shortcomings? Support your responses with specific references to the texts.
2. The train is a frequent symbol for Wilson. Discuss its function in *Two Trains Running* and another Wilson play.

Seven Guitars (1996)

This play is Wilson's treatment of a sixth decade, the 1940s. It takes place in 1948—again in Pittsburgh's Hill District. The story follows a small group of friends who gather to attend the funeral of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, a local blues artist "on the edge of stardom. Together, they reminisce about his short life and discover the unspoken passions and undying spirit that live within each of them" (verso cover). In

his review, the *Washington Times* critic Nelson Pressley commented, "Nobody puts more life on the stage than August Wilson" ("Plucking Drama"). The musicality promised in Wilson's title is realized as, according to *Newsweek*'s Jack Kroll, Wilson stages "a gritty, lyrical polyphony of voices that evokes the character and destiny of men and women who can't help singing the blues even when they're just talking." The play won a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best new drama.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Music holds a vital place in Wilson's drama, and he has frequently spoken about the influence of the blues on his work. Note how many of his play titles relate to aspects of music, some of it not necessarily related to the blues—*The Piano Lesson, Seven Guitars,* and *Gem of the Ocean,* for example. Why is music such a central motif in Wilson's work? How does it function in the play(s) you have read or seen?
2. In *Seven Guitars,* Wilson makes use of recurring characters, as he had before (as in *Two Trains Running*) and would again (*King Hedley II, Gem of the Ocean*). What does this dramatic device add to his themes of the past, racial memory, African and African-American culture, and music?

Jitney (1979, 1982, 2000)

Although *Jitney,* Wilson's 1970s play, did not have its New York premiere until April 2000, it was the first of the cycle plays Wilson wrote (although by the time it appeared on Broadway it was much changed from the earlier version). It is set in 1977 at a jitney, or gypsy taxicab, station in Pittsburgh. The director Marion McClinton has this to say about the universality of the play:

> The story of Becker and Booster, a tale of father and son, becomes the legend of every parent and child. The story of Youngblood and Rena, two young adults attempting with determination to do the heavy lifting that true love calls for, while also trying to make a decent and better life for their son. Turnbo, Doub, Fielding, Shealy, and Philmore, the drivers and customers of the Jitney Station, men who meet each day straight up and head on and who only want to reach the end of the day with the same amount of dignity and integrity that they began with. These are the stories that must be told and passed on because they reveal to us our humanity, giving us the hope that we might walk our day with similar grace and nobility. (*Jitney* 8)

This play, too, won a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best new drama.

For Discussion or Writing

Wilson's drama is known for its reliance upon ordinary people as the models for his characters. How, then, do you think his definition of a tragic hero differs from the Aristotelian ideal? How would you defend Wilson's choices?

The Ground on Which I Stand (1996, 2001)

The Ground on Which I Stand is a piece of expository prose, rather than a play, based on an address Wilson delivered on June 26, 1996, to the 11th biennial Theater Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University. In it, Wilson not only expresses his own poetics, but also calls for African-American artists to "seize the power over their own cultural identity and to establish permanent institutions that celebrate and preserve the singular achievements of African American dramatic art and reaffirm its equal importance in contemporary American culture" (verso cover).

After acknowledging that the dramatic ground on which he stands was peopled first "by the Greek dramatists—by Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles—by William Shakespeare, by Shaw,

Ibsen and Chekhov, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams," Wilson goes on to assert that these dramatists constitute only a part of his heritage as an artist (11). He is also the inheritor, he states, of black activists like Nat Turner and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, men who affirmed the worth of black Americans "in the face of this society's urgent and sometimes profound denial" (11). He calls on all who have a stake in the theater, from critics to students of arts management to playwrights and actors themselves, to prevent black theater from stagnating. One of the key problems in the proliferation of the arts among black artists, Wilson states, is basic finance: "If you do not know, I will tell you: black theatre in America is alive, it is vibrant, it is vital . . . it just isn't funded" (17). Urging black artists to make a difference, he asserts their right "to amend, to explore, and to add our African consciousness and our African aesthetic" to the theatrical traditions American theater has inherited from its European forebears.

This address served as a rallying call to supporters of black theater. Part of its legacy has been an ongoing debate about the presence of cultural diversity on the American stage. As a result of Wilson's speech, the African Grove Institute for the Arts (AGIA), an organization "dedicated to creating an environment to support artistic excellence and to promote the advancement and preservation of Black Theatre and Black Performing Arts," was formed (2). Wilson served as the AGIA chairman of the board.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Using both print resources and those available online at www.npr.org, examine a series of Wilson's interviews, considering him as an author who is also a literary critic, in the manner of Paula Gunn Allen or Toni Morrison. How does their critical commentary shape their writing? How does their writing inform their critical views?
2. Explore Wilson's work in the context of cycle plays—those of the Greeks, for example. What are the similarities and differences between his contemporary cycle and those of the ancients?

King Hedley II (2001)

Next in the dramatic cycle was *King Hedley II* (2001), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award. The hero of this play, set in 1985 in two tenement backyards in Pittsburgh's Hill District, is King, or King Hedley II, an ex-convict who is trying to make his way in a world that offers him few chances to succeed, which critic Mary Ellen Snodgrass sees as Wilson's major theme (125). Another key concept in the play is the ultimate importance of a sense of community and culture in the face of a crumbling urban society. This play can be compared to *Fences* in its investigation of the American dream; it is also interesting as a sequel, with many characters appearing in other Wilson dramas. Key to the work is the death of Aunt Ester, a recurring character for Wilson. Set in a decade of anger and violence, much of the play consists of "complex exchanges of angry males," especially its hero, whose obvious facial scar is a symbol of internal ferment and frustrations (Snodgrass 124).

While very much a product of his time, Hedley occupies the traditional role of the "baaaaad" folk hero, whose braggadocio is his stock in trade. He claims that he wants "everybody to know that King Hedley II is here. And I want everybody to know, just like my daddy, that you can't fuck with me . . . the next motherfucker that fucks with me it's gonna be World War III" (Wilson 1996, 58). Trying to negotiate his way through life, Hedley has encountered numerous injustices in the system, all of which have made him justifiably bitter. His claims to what he sees as his basic rights, honor and dignity, have been thwarted repeatedly by white society. He says in defiance: "I can do it all. I ain't got no limits. I know right from wrong. I know which way the wind blows too. It don't blow my way. Mellon got six houses. I

ain't got none. But that don't mean he six times a better man than me" (Wilson 1996, 55). Access to what his culture deems to be success is barred for King—partly, as for Troy Maxon in *Fences,* because of attitudes and events of his own making, and partly because he is surrounded by what he calls the "barbed wire" of prejudice (Wilson 1996, 55). Key to it all is that he simply wants a job, a way to obtain the things that he and his family have every right to expect. As Mister, a friend of King's, states, "If they had some barbed wire you could cut through it. But you can't cut through not having no job. You can't cut through that. That's better than barbed wire" (Wilson 1996, 55). Just as in earlier plays, Wilson here explores, in Langston Hughes's terms, what happens "to a dream deferred." In King's case, it explodes, resulting in King's eventual murder. Despite critical kudos, *King Hedley*'s intensity did not find an audience, and the play was not a popular success.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Investigate the topic of finding a woman's voice in *King Hedley II,* Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* or Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter.* How does each author approach this search?
2. Although Wilson depends on the black agricultural past as an element in each of his plays, they are all set in the city—even in a place of urban decay. Discuss Wilson's juxtaposition of urban and rural elements.
3. Compare and contrast the tragic heroes of *King Hedley II* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear.* Which one, in your opinion, constitutes the greater figure? Why? Support your opinion with examples from each text.
4. If you were casting actors for *King Hedley II* and could not have the choices Wilson made, what actors would you choose? Justify your selections on the sole criterion of faithfulness to the character as Wilson has created her/him.

Gem of the Ocean (2003)

Wilson saved the framework decades of the 1900s and 1990s for his last two plays in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* (2003) and *Radio Golf* (2004). Although the ninth play in Wilson's dramatic journey, *Gem of the Ocean* deals with the opening decade of the 20th century. Because this is Wilson's middle passage play, it is central to his treatment of the decade that there were still many people who could recall slavery as part of their lived experience.

The play begins on the eve of the 287th birthday of Aunt Ester, the "keeper of traditions that date to the arrival of the first slaves in America in the early 1600s. . . . Those traditions provide a sense of self for a people freed from slavery only four decades earlier. That freedom has proved elusive, particularly in 1904 Pittsburgh, where economic bondage has become just as stifling as life in the South before the Civil War" (Kuchwara 1–2). Aunt Ester is a recurring character in Wilson's cycle, a griot, or storyteller and spiritual adviser, who was sold into slavery at age 12 for $607. Manipulating time over the centuries, Wilson infuses the play with aspects of his own brand of magical realism, as he previously had in making supernatural elements central to both *The Piano Lesson* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.* Again we are in Pittsburgh's Hill District, this time in Aunt Ester's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue, where numerous characters go for guidance.

The critic Michael Kuchwara maintains that the "two questions that hover over" what he defines as "Wilson's majestic, mystical rumination" are "'How do you handle freedom once you have it? And what if you are not really free?'" (1–2). Principal searchers for the answers to these questions are Solly Two Kings, a former conductor on the Underground Railroad, and Citizen Barlow, a young man trying to elude the spiritual turmoil that consumes him.

What constitutes freedom varies with the character expressing his views. According to Eli, Aunt Ester's gatekeeper, "Freedom is what you make

it"; Solly, however, believes, "You got to fight to make it mean something. . . . What good is freedom if you can't do nothing with it?" (28). Caesar, a local constable, defines freedom in terms of what he can control: "I'm a free man. I can get up whatever time I want to in the morning. I can move all over and pick any woman I want. I can walk down the street to the store and buy anything my money will buy. There ain't nothing I can't have" (37).

Wisely, Aunt Ester knows that you have to find yourself and be able to live with the truth of your life before you can really be free. When Barlow seeks Ester's advice, she is magically able to transform her own bill of sale as a slave into a boat, which she calls *Gem of the Ocean*. On it Barlow sets off on a spiritual journey to find the mythic City of Bones, located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Barlow's quest reveals a number of astonishing discoveries and sets him on a course of duty and redemption. What he, as do so many of Wilson's characters, eventually learns is that one must reconcile himself to the past in order to move confidently toward the future, which is also the lesson of *Radio Golf*.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Wilson referred to *Gem of the Ocean* as his "Middle Passage play." Read another work on the middle passage—for example, Walter Dean Myers's *Amistad* or Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*. Compare the treatment of the-Middle-Passage in each work. How does the genre of the work affect the telling of history?
2. Discuss what Aunt Ester contributes to *Gem of the Ocean,* both in its historicity and in its themes. Elaborate on your responses, supporting them with citations from the play.

Radio Golf (2004)

Radio Golf (2004), the last play of the Pittsburgh Cycle, takes place in 1997. The protagonist is Harmond Wilks, an affluent graduate of Cornell, who now lives in an upscale suburb of the Hill and is well on his way to becoming Pittsburgh's first black mayor. Set in the real-estate development office he shares with Roosevelt Hicks, the play chronicles what happens when Wilks tries to stop the demolition of 1839 Wylie Avenue, the former neighborhood sanctuary inhabited by Aunt Ester. Wilks becomes aware of the historical and aesthetic significance of 1839 Wylie, and he feels guilty for acquiring the property through a legal loophole that takes advantage of his cousin, Elder Barlow, with whom he has recently become reacquainted.

Hicks betrays Wilks and their heritage by serving as a "black face" for white investors, by enforcing the demolition, and by forcing Wilks's removal from the project. Unwilling to compromise his values, Wilks is caught between his worlds. He can save neither Aunt Ester's house nor his role as the project's developer, suggesting that black assimilation and material success require unethical practices and a lack of reverence for one's heritage. What more fertile ground could one find for the blues?

Remembering the impulse that began his career as a dramatist, Wilson spoke many times of his deeply felt desire to emulate the blues, which he saw as "a flag bearer of self-definition, and within the scope of the larger world which lay beyond its doorstep, it carved out a life, set down rules, and urged a manner of being that corresponded to the temperament and sensibilities of its creators" (Wilson 1991, *Three Plays,* x). Early on, he recalled:

> I turned my ear, my heart, and whatever analytical tools I possessed to embrace this world. I elevated it, rightly or wrongly, to biblical status. I rooted out the ideas and attitudes expressed in the music, charted them and bent and twisted and stretched them. I gave my whole being, muscle and bone and sinew and flesh and spirit, over to the emotional reference provided by the

> music. . . . This was life being lived in all its timbre and horrifics, with the zest and purpose and the affirmation of the self of worthy of the highest possibilities and the highest celebration. What more fertile ground could any artist want? (Wilson 1991b, x)

Throughout the decades of his dramatic creation, Wilson continued to write "with the blues and what [he called] the blood's memory as [his] only guide and companion" (Wilson 1991b, xii). The marvelous plays he created as a result of this strong commitment assure Wilson's place in the artistic life of the United States.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Consider *Radio Golf* in the light of recent or ongoing takeovers of property long held by a family or group, such as that in inner-city Washington, D.C.; the Sea Islands of Georgia; or other examples in your area. Does Wilson provide as much insight into social problems in this play as he does in, say, *The Piano Lesson*? Support your response with examples from both current events and Wilson's drama.
2. Since this is the last of Wilson's plays, use this occasion to reflect on his depictions of strong women, beginning with Ma Rainey and ending with the female characters in *Radio Golf.* Do you see these characters as evolving, interchangeable, or something else? Defend your answer, citing examples from the plays you consider.

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FURTHER QUESTIONS ON WILSON AND HIS WORK

1. In an interview with Wilson, Gwen Ifill comments that he gained a reputation as "the American Shakespeare." Make a comparative study of the two playwrights, perhaps using *Fences* and *King Lear* (parent/child issues) or *The Piano Lesson* and *Macbeth* (use of the supernatural).
2. Discuss Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun,* Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie,* and Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* as plays in which absent characters play pivotal roles.
3. Examine the roles of children in drama and fiction. Read *Fences* and two to three other works, such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible,* Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus,* or Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Why are the roles children play in each work so crucial to its themes?
4. Read *A Raisin in the Sun* (Lorraine Hansberry), *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald), *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (Julia Alvarez), and the Wilson play of your choice. Discuss the American dream as depicted in each selection. What is the author's attitude toward the American dream? What influences shape the formation of each version of the American dream?
5. Wilson at times plays the part of the classic trickster, putting into practice Ralph Ellison's advice that to slip the yoke [of a stereotype], one must change the joke. One example of this technique occurs when, in *The Piano Lesson,* Wilson has Boy Willie and his friend Lymon working the streets of Pittsburgh, selling a truckload of watermelons they have transported from the South—the very item that has figured so prominently in racist stereotypes and minstrel-show depictions of blacks. Yet in this play, it is the whites—who will pay a dollar or more for a watermelon at a time when a person can buy a full meal for fifteen cents and who believe Boy Willie when he tells them the melons are sweet because "we put sugar right in the ground with the seed"—who are the butt of Boy Willie's and Lymon's jokes (59). Locate examples of such trickster behavior in other plays by Wilson, explaining what each instance adds to the play as a whole.
6. For a major investigation of Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle, do a study of his minor male characters. What does each of them add to the play in which he appears? How would the play

be different without him? Why is it best—or not best—that he remain a minor, rather than a major, character? Support your study with citations from the plays in which these characters appear, as well as with your own original analysis.

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Appendix I

Alphabetical List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*

Adams, Henry	1838–1918	Volume 2
Adams, John, and Abigail Adams	1735–1826 1744–1818	Volume 1
Albee, Edward	1928–	Volume 4
Alcott, Louisa May	1832–1888	Volume 2
Alvarez, Julia	1950–	Volume 5
Anaya, Rudolfo	1937–	Volume 5
Anderson, Sherwood	1876–1942	Volume 3
Angelou, Maya	1928–	Volume 5
Baca, Jimmy Santiago	1952–	Volume 5
Baldwin, James	1924–1987	Volume 4
Bambara, Toni Cade	1939–	Volume 5
Baraka, Amiri (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5
Bellow, Saul	1915–2005	Volume 4
Bierce, Ambrose	1842–1914?	Volume 2
Bishop, Elizabeth	1911–1979	Volume 4
Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3
Bradbury, Ray	1920–	Volume 4
Bradford, William	1590–1657	Volume 1
Bradstreet, Anne	1612–1672	Volume 1
Brooks, Gwendolyn	1917–2000	Volume 4
Brown, Charles Brockden	1771–1810	Volume 1
Bryant, William Cullen	1794–1878	Volume 1
Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez	1490–1556	Volume 1
Capote, Truman	1924–1984	Volume 4
Carver, Raymond	1938–1988	Volume 5
Cather, Willa	1873–1947	Volume 3
Champlain, Samuel de	1570–1635	Volume 1
Cheever, John	1912–1982	Volume 4
Chesnutt, Charles	1858–1932	Volume 2
Child, Lydia Maria	1802–1880	Volume 2
Chopin, Kate	1850–1904	Volume 2
Cisneros, Sandra	1954–	Volume 5
Cofer, Judith Ortiz	1952–	Volume 5
Collins, Billy	1941–	Volume 5
Columbus, Christopher	1451–1506	Volume 1
Cooper, James Fenimore	1789–1851	Volume 1
Crane, Hart	1899–1932	Volume 3
Crane, Stephen	1871–1900	Volume 2
Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St. John de	1735–1813	Volume 1
Cullen, Countee	1903–1946	Volume 3
Cummings, E. E.	1894–1962	Volume 3
Davis, Rebecca Harding	1831–1910	Volume 2
Dickinson, Emily	1830–1886	Volume 2
Dos Passos, John	1896–1970	Volume 3
Douglass, Frederick	1818–1895	Volume 2
Dove, Rita	1952–	Volume 5
Dreiser, Theodore	1871–1945	Volume 3
DuBois, W. E. B.	1868–1963	Volume 3
Dunbar, Paul Laurence	1872–1906	Volume 2
Edwards, Jonathan	1703–1758	Volume 1
Eliot, T. S.	1888–1965	Volume 3
Ellison, Ralph	1914–1994	Volume 4
Emerson, Ralph Waldo	1803–1882	Volume 2
Equiano, Olaudah	1745–1797	Volume 1
Erdrich, Louise	1954–	Volume 5
Faulkner, William	1897–1962	Volume 3
Ferlinghetti, Lawrence	1920–	Volume 4
Fern, Fanny (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Fitzgerald, F. Scott	1896–1940	Volume 3
Forché, Carolyn	1950–	Volume 5
Foster, Hannah Webster	1758–1840	Volume 1
Franklin, Benjamin	1706–1790	Volume 1
Freeman, Mary Eleanor Wilkins	1852–1930	Volume 2
Freneau, Philip Morin	1752–1832	Volume 1
Frost, Robert	1874–1963	Volume 3
Fuller, Margaret	1810–1850	Volume 2
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins	1860–1935	Volume 2

Ginsberg, Allen	1926–1997	Volume 4
Giovanni, Nikki	1943–	Volume 5
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3
Haley, Alex	1921–1992	Volume 4
Hammon, Jupiter	1711–1806	Volume 1
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1
Hansberry, Lorraine	1930–1965	Volume 4
Harjo, Joy	1951–	Volume 5
Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins	1825–1911	Volume 2
Harris, Joel Chandler	1848–1908	Volume 2
Harte, Bret	1836–1902	Volume 2
Hawthorne, Nathaniel	1804–1864	Volume 2
Hayden, Robert	1913–1980	Volume 4
Heller, Joseph	1923–1999	Volume 4
Hemingway, Ernest	1899–1961	Volume 3
Howells, William Dean	1837–1920	Volume 2
Hughes, Langston	1871–1967	Volume 3
Hurston, Zora Neale	1891–1960	Volume 3
Irving, Washington	1783–1859	Volume 1
Jackson, Shirley	1919–1965	Volume 4
Jacobs, Harriet	1813–1897	Volume 2
James, Henry	1843–1916	Volume 2
Jarrell, Randall	1914–1965	Volume 4
Jefferson, Thomas	1743–1826	Volume 1
Jewett, Sarah Orne	1849–1909	Volume 2
Kerouac, Jack	1922–1969	Volume 4
Kesey, Ken	1935–2001	Volume 4
King, Martin Luther, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4
Kingsolver, Barbara	1955–	Volume 5
Kingston, Maxine Hong	1940–	Volume 5
Knowles, John	1926–2001	Volume 4
Komunyakaa, Yusef	1947–	Volume 5
Larsen, Nella	1891–1964	Volume 3
Lee, Chang-rae	1965–	Volume 5
Lee, Harper	1926–	Volume 4
Levertov, Denise	1923–1997	Volume 4
London, Jack	1876–1916	Volume 3
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth	1807–1882	Volume 2
Lowell, Robert	1917–1977	Volume 4
Malamud, Bernard	1914–1986	Volume 4
Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4
Marshall, Paule	1929–	Volume 4
Mather, Cotton	1663–1728	Volume 1
McCarthy, Cormac	1933–	Volume 5
McKay, Claude	1890–1948	Volume 3
McMurtry, Larry	1936–	Volume 5
Melville, Herman	1819–1891	Volume 2
Millay, Edna St. Vincent	1892–1950	Volume 3
Miller, Arthur	1915–2005	Volume 4
Momaday, N. Scott	1934–	Volume 4
Moore, Marianne	1887–1972	Volume 3
Mora, Pat	1942–	Volume 5
Morrison, Toni	1931–	Volume 5
Morton, Thomas	1579–1647	Volume 1
Murray, Judith Sargent	1751–1820	Volume 1
Oates, Joyce Carol	1938–	Volume 5
O'Brien, Tim	1946–	Volume 5
Occom, Samson	1723–1792	Volume 1
O'Connor, Flannery	1925–1964	Volume 4
Oliver, Mary	1935–	Volume 5
O'Neill, Eugene	1888–1953	Volume 3
Ortiz, Simon J.	1941–	Volume 5
Paine, Thomas	1737–1809	Volume 1
Piatt, Sarah M. B.	1836–1919	Volume 2
Pinsky, Robert	1940–	Volume 5
Plath, Sylvia	1932–1963	Volume 4
Poe, Edgar Allan	1809–1849	Volume 2
Porter, Katherine Anne	1890–1980	Volume 3
Potok, Chaim	1929–2002	Volume 4
Pound, Ezra	1885–1972	Volume 3
Rand, Ayn	1905–1982	Volume 4
Reed, Ishmael	1938–	Volume 5
Rich, Adrienne	1929–	Volume 5
Robinson, Edwin Arlington	1869–1935	Volume 3
Roethke, Theodore	1908–1963	Volume 4
Roth, Philip	1933–	Volume 4
Rowson, Susanna Haswell	1762–1824	Volume 1
Salinger, J. D.	1919–2010	Volume 4
Sandburg, Carl	1878–1967	Volume 3
Sedgwick, Catharine Maria	1789–1867	Volume 1
Sexton, Anne	1928–1974	Volume 4
Silko, Leslie Marmon	1948–	Volume 5
Smith, John	1580–1631	Volume 1
Snyder, Gary	1930–	Volume 5
Soto, Gary	1952–	Volume 5

Stein, Gertrude	1874–1946	Volume 3
Steinbeck, John	1902–1968	Volume 3
Stevens, Wallace	1879–1955	Volume 3
Stowe, Harriet Beecher	1811–1896	Volume 2
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3
Swenson, May	1913–1989	Volume 4
Tan, Amy	1952–	Volume 5
Taylor, Edward	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1
Thoreau, Henry David	1817–1862	Volume 2
Toomer, Jean	1894–1967	Volume 3
Twain, Mark (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2
Updike, John	1932–2009	Volume 4
Viramontes, Helena María	1954–	Volume 5
Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4
Walker, Alice	1944–	Volume 5
Warren, Robert Penn	1905–1989	Volume 4
Washington, Booker T.	1856–1915	Volume 3
Welty, Eudora	1909–2001	Volume 4
Wharton, Edith	1862–1937	Volume 3
Wheatley, Phillis	1753–1784	Volume 1
Whitman, Walt	1819–1892	Volume 2
Wilbur, Richard	1921–	Volume 4
Wilder, Thornton	1897–1975	Volume 3
Williams, Tennessee	1911–1983	Volume 4
Williams, William Carlos	1883–1961	Volume 3
Wilson, August	1945–2005	Volume 5
Wilson, Harriet E.	1825–1900	Volume 2
Winthrop, John	1588–1649	Volume 1
Wright, Richard	1908–1960	Volume 3

Appendix II

Chronological List of Writers Included in All Volumes of the *Student's Encyclopedia of Great American Writers*, by Birth Date

Note that authors are placed in the volume that covers the period during which they published their most important works. Some authors published their works relatively early or relatively late in their lives. This explains why, for example, certain authors placed in volume 3 were actually born before certain authors placed in volume 2.

Christopher Columbus	1451–1506	Volume 1
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca	1490–1556	Volume 1
Samuel de Champlain	1570–1635	Volume 1
Thomas Morton	1579–1647	Volume 1
John Smith	1580–1631	Volume 1
John Winthrop	1588–1649	Volume 1
William Bradford	1590–1657	Volume 1
Anne Bradstreet	1612–1672	Volume 1
Edward Taylor	ca. 1642–1729	Volume 1
Cotton Mather	1663–1728	Volume 1
Jonathan Edwards	1703–1758	Volume 1
Benjamin Franklin	1706–1790	Volume 1
Jupiter Hammon	1711–1806	Volume 1
Samson Occom	1723–1792	Volume 1
J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur	1735–1813	Volume 1
Handsome Lake	1735–1815	Volume 1
John Adams	1735–1826	Volume 1
Thomas Paine	1737–1809	Volume 1
Thomas Jefferson	1743–1826	Volume 1
Abigail Adams	1744–1818	Volume 1
Olaudah Equiano	1745–1797	Volume 1
Judith Sargent Murray	1751–1820	Volume 1
Philip Morin Freneau	1752–1832	Volume 1
Phillis Wheatley	1753–1784	Volume 1
Hannah Webster Foster	1758–1840	Volume 1
Susanna Haswell Rowson	1762–1824	Volume 1
Charles Brockden Brown	1771–1810	Volume 1
Washington Irving	1783–1859	Volume 1
James Fenimore Cooper	1789–1851	Volume 1
Catharine Maria Sedgwick	1789–1867	Volume 1
William Cullen Bryant	1794–1878	Volume 1
Lydia Maria Child	1802–1880	Volume 2
Ralph Waldo Emerson	1803–1882	Volume 2
Nathaniel Hawthorne	1804–1864	Volume 2
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow	1807–1882	Volume 2
Edgar Allan Poe	1809–1849	Volume 2
Margaret Fuller	1810–1850	Volume 2
Fanny Fern (Sara Willis Parton)	1811–1872	Volume 2
Harriet Beecher Stowe	1811–1896	Volume 2
Harriet Jacobs	1813–1897	Volume 2
Henry David Thoreau	1817–1862	Volume 2
Frederick Douglass	1818–1895	Volume 2
Herman Melville	1819–1891	Volume 2
Walt Whitman	1819–1892	Volume 2
Frances Ellen Watkins Harper	1825–1911	Volume 2
Harriet E. Wilson	1825–1900	Volume 2
Emily Dickinson	1830–1886	Volume 2
Rebecca Harding Davis	1831–1910	Volume 2
Louisa May Alcott	1832–1888	Volume 2
Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)	1835–1910	Volume 2
Bret Harte	1836–1902	Volume 2
Sarah M. B. Piatt	1836–1919	Volume 2
William Dean Howells	1837–1920	Volume 2
Henry Adams	1838–1918	Volume 2
Ambrose Bierce	1842–1914?	Volume 2
Henry James	1843–1916	Volume 2
Joel Chandler Harris	1848–1908	Volume 2
Sarah Orne Jewett	1849–1909	Volume 2

Kate Chopin	1850–1904	Volume 2
Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman	1852–1930	Volume 2
Booker T. Washington	1856–1915	Volume 3
Charles Chesnutt	1858–1932	Volume 2
Charlotte Perkins Gilman	1860–1935	Volume 2
Edith Wharton	1862–1937	Volume 3
Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton)	1865–1914	Volume 3
W. E. B. DuBois	1868–1963	Volume 3
Edwin Arlington Robinson	1869–1935	Volume 3
Stephen Crane	1871–1900	Volume 2
Theodore Dreiser	1871–1945	Volume 3
Langston Hughes	1871–1967	Volume 3
Paul Laurence Dunbar	1872–1906	Volume 2
Willa Cather	1873–1947	Volume 3
Gertrude Stein	1874–1946	Volume 3
Robert Frost	1874–1963	Volume 3
Jack London	1876–1916	Volume 3
Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)	1876–1938	Volume 3
Sherwood Anderson	1876–1942	Volume 3
Carl Sandburg	1878–1967	Volume 3
Wallace Stevens	1879–1955	Volume 3
William Carlos Williams	1883–1961	Volume 3
Ezra Pound	1885–1972	Volume 3
H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)	1886–1961	Volume 3
Marianne Moore	1887–1972	Volume 3
Eugene O'Neill	1888–1953	Volume 3
T. S. Eliot	1888–1965	Volume 3
Claude McKay	1890–1948	Volume 3
Katherine Anne Porter	1890–1980	Volume 3
Zora Neale Hurston	1891–1960	Volume 3
Nella Larsen	1891–1964	Volume 3
Edna St. Vincent Millay	1892–1950	Volume 3
E. E. Cummings	1894–1962	Volume 3
Jean Toomer	1894–1967	Volume 3
F. Scott Fitzgerald	1896–1940	Volume 3
John Dos Passos	1896–1970	Volume 3
William Faulkner	1897–1962	Volume 3
Thornton Wilder	1897–1975	Volume 3
Hart Crane	1899–1932	Volume 3
Ernest Hemingway	1899–1961	Volume 3
John Steinbeck	1902–1968	Volume 3
Countee Cullen	1903–1946	Volume 3
Ayn Rand	1905–1982	Volume 4
Robert Penn Warren	1905–1989	Volume 4
Richard Wright	1908–1960	Volume 3
Theodore Roethke	1908–1963	Volume 4
Eudora Welty	1909–2001	Volume 4
Elizabeth Bishop	1911–1979	Volume 4
Tennessee Williams	1911–1983	Volume 4
John Cheever	1912–1982	Volume 4
Robert Hayden	1913–1980	Volume 4
May Swenson	1913–1989	Volume 4
Randall Jarrell	1914–1965	Volume 4
Bernard Malamud	1914–1986	Volume 4
Ralph Ellison	1914–1994	Volume 4
Saul Bellow	1915–2005	Volume 4
Arthur Miller	1915–2005	Volume 4
Robert Lowell	1917–1977	Volume 4
Gwendolyn Brooks	1917–2000	Volume 4
Shirley Jackson	1919–1965	Volume 4
J. D. Salinger	1919–2010	Volume 4
Ray Bradbury	1920–	Volume 4
Lawrence Ferlinghetti	1920–	Volume 4
Richard Wilbur	1921–	Volume 4
Alex Haley	1921–1992	Volume 4
Jack Kerouac	1922–1969	Volume 4
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	1922–2007	Volume 4
Denise Levertov	1923–1997	Volume 4
Joseph Heller	1923–1999	Volume 4
James Baldwin	1924–1987	Volume 4
Truman Capote	1924–1984	Volume 4
Flannery O'Connor	1925–1964	Volume 4
Malcolm X	1925–1965	Volume 4
Harper Lee	1926–	Volume 4
Allen Ginsberg	1926–1997	Volume 4
John Knowles	1926–2001	Volume 4
Edward Albee	1928–	Volume 4
Maya Angelou	1928–	Volume 5
Anne Sexton	1928–1974	Volume 4
Paule Marshall	1929–	Volume 4
Adrienne Rich	1929–	Volume 5
Martin Luther King, Jr.	1929–1968	Volume 4
Chaim Potok	1929–2002	Volume 4
Gary Snyder	1930–	Volume 5
Lorraine Hansberry	1930–1965	Volume 4
Toni Morrison	1931–	Volume 5

Sylvia Plath	1932–1963	Volume 4	Nikki Giovanni	1943–	Volume 5
John Updike	1932–2009	Volume 4	Alice Walker	1944–	Volume 5
Cormac McCarthy	1933–	Volume 5	August Wilson	1945–2005	Volume 5
Philip Roth	1933–	Volume 4	Tim O'Brien	1946–	Volume 5
N. Scott Momaday	1934–	Volume 4	Yusef Komunyakaa	1947–	Volume 5
Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones)	1934–	Volume 5	Leslie Marmon Silko	1948–	Volume 5
Mary Oliver	1935–	Volume 5	Julia Alvarez	1950–	Volume 5
Ken Kesey	1935–2001	Volume 4	Carolyn Forché	1950–	Volume 5
Larry McMurtry	1936–	Volume 5	Joy Harjo	1951–	Volume 5
Rudolfo Anaya	1937–	Volume 5	Jimmy Santiago Baca	1952–	Volume 5
Joyce Carol Oates	1938–	Volume 5	Judith Ortiz Cofer	1952–	Volume 5
Ishmael Reed	1938–	Volume 5	Rita Dove	1952–	Volume 5
Raymond Carver	1938–1988	Volume 5	Gary Soto	1952–	Volume 5
Toni Cade Bambara	1939–	Volume 5	Amy Tan	1952–	Volume 5
Maxine Hong Kingston	1940–	Volume 5	Sandra Cisneros	1954–	Volume 5
Robert Pinsky	1940–	Volume 5	Louise Erdrich	1954–	Volume 5
Billy Collins	1941–	Volume 5	Helena María Viramontes	1954–	Volume 5
Simon J. Ortiz	1941–	Volume 5	Barbara Kingsolver	1955–	Volume 5
Pat Mora	1942–	Volume 5	Chang-rae Lee	1965–	Volume 5