Reader's Notebook

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Writing About Race
Spring 2003

Class #1

Takaki, R. *A Different Kind of Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1993. 1-17.

Takaki's depiction of the "problems" in educating a racially divided America is refreshing and candid. I believe there is a common sentiment amongst educators at many levels that an educated student is one who fits well in to a homogenized classroom. It is okay to have different colors of skin, even different religions, as long as one conforms to a common set of social rules and personal priorities.

By labeling children from different backgrounds as "disadvantaged" educators imply a flaw in the culture from which they come. While it is true that this label was originally applied because of society's reactions to people of different colors and cultures, the label itself has become a cross to bear. How is a child from an African American, Hispanic, or immigrant family disadvantaged except by the strict expectations our society impresses upon them? Acculturation is difficult because it is demanded. The demand to conform makes the culture of a child's home a source of disgrace, and an obstacle in advancing in society. As Richard Rodriguez notes in his autobiography, *Hunger of Memory*, students are compelled to break ties with their families to resolve this paradox of values.

Takaki proposes a valuable stepping-stone in the process of society becoming more culturally accepting: education about different groups. It is true that with a greater understanding of each other there also comes a greater value in the ideas, rituals, and values of other groups. However this is only one step in the process. If cultural education is used in excess it can lead to stereotyping and overconfidence in predicting the behavior and motivations of others. It neglects the effects of individual life

experiences, the complexities that arise from multiculturalism, and the ways that groups interact with each other. The goal of cultural education in my view should not be just to give lessons about isolated groups, but to give people a framework in which they can begin to understand that each person carries his own since of cultural identity. That identity is shaped not only by people from within a group, but also by people from outside of that group. For this reason it is vital not to label bilingual children as "disadvantaged" or train educators about the special methods of handling families from different backgrounds (both strategies I encountered in my early education), but instead to train educators and students to seek out methods for utilizing their differences constructively.

I am interested in exploring the impact of cultural education and perceptions of cultures by educators on minority and immigrant students. While many overtly culturally derogatory educational strategies have been discarded there are still subtle differences in the ways minorities are treated in the classroom and taught to think about themselves in terms of their educations.

Cose, E. “Our New Look: The Colors of Race.” *Newsweek* 1 Jan. 2000. 28-30.

Ellis Cose presents a good argument for the idea that racial lines and definitions are shifting, as they have always shifted, in America. He argues that the increasing commonness of interracial marriages and acceptance of multiculturalism will ultimately serve to dilute current racial boundaries. I agree with Cose in his summation that racial categories are dynamic. Race is a concept of society’s creation. There are few established rules as to what constitutes a race or ethnic group and under what circumstances that connection can be claimed.

Cose’s argument is somewhat idealistic however. He assumes that a climate of racial acceptance has given rise to an increase in intercultural unions. In my personal experience the opposite argument holds in many cases as well; racial and ethnic minorities seek to marry outside of their communities in order to escape the stigmas of their heritage and have children outside of the cultural immersion of their own group. In my family, my mother’s first marriage was into another large Catholic Hispanic family. Although she never said anything explicitly derogatory about Mexican men, after the end of my parents’ marriage my mother never again dated a Chicano man. When she married my German born, only child, stepfather she said simply, “It will be easier this way. Less complicated.” Taking this step away from her own background gave her a since of relief.

I have heard of similar situations in the African American communities when families attempted to bleach their bloodlines by mixing with whites. Historically it has not been because those unions were particularly acceptable, but because they would improve the lives of the children they produced by distancing them from their Black ancestry. Ideally I would like to live in a country where unions of cultures occurred only

in a climate of acceptance, but I believe we are deluding ourselves if we begin to believe we have already achieved that goal.

An interesting essay to write might be one, in response to the Close piece, that shows the many different motivations for becoming involved in a multiracial relationship. I am sure that cultures aside from Mexican American and African American have also found it advantageous to marry into a majority culture. I would also be interested in investigating whether there is a gender bias in these relationships. My suspicion is that women are more likely to marry into a racial majority than men, but I have never seen or done research on the subject.

Kelly, R. The People In Me. *Colorlines;* Winter 1999. 85-89.

I loved this piece! Kelley explores the topic of racial identity with a candid and open voice that immediately makes the reader comfortable with the idea of talking about race. He establishes this comfort by managing to sustain a dialogue with the reader from the first line of the essay. By beginning with his own challenging question, "So what are you?" he draws the reader into his conundrum and asks the reader to consider his own identity in parallel to Kelley's exploration. Kelley's relaxed diction makes the piece conversational rather than confrontational. I can picture him giving this monologue to a crowd of regulars at a neighborhood bar and I want to join in the conversation.

This relaxed tone allows him to ease the reader into a discussion of different cultures and stereotypes. By the time Kelley is talking about his family of "not black enough, not white enough – just a bunch of not-quite-nappy-headed enigmas" I am comfortable enough with his style not to be shocked. By relaxing the atmosphere of his piece with humor Kelley provides an empathizing environment for his reader; a nervous giggle is allowed because it's a difficult topic. In spite of this humor he is able to educate and persuade his readers. He provides an intimate view of the differences between being multicultural and polycultural without giving the essay an argumentative feel. More importantly, in the second half of his essay he points to the connections between the Black American community and other cultures, making this an essay relevant to every person.

Through a conversational tone, engaging questions, and broad cultural examples Kelley allows his reader to identify personally with the questions of identity he has confronted throughout his life, highlighting the complexities each person can consider in claiming his own heritage. Kelley's work encourages me to try to use humor to explore

my own racial identity. He also reminds me to consider the reader's reaction to my work. By setting a reader at ease he or she will be more accepting of the message I want to convey through my work.

Class #2

Lee, C. “Coming Home Again.” Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1996. 227-237.

Lee effectively communicates the symbolic role that food can play in cultural identification and a person's since of home through memories of his first semester at school and his return home before his mother's death.

In my “reflections on racial identity” piece I mentioned that I had felt compelled to leave my home and my family to continue my education. I recognized in high school that I would not be able to continue my schoolwork at home; the more I learned the more distant I grew from my mother. I felt the urge to make that emotional and cultural distance a physical one - by not being near my family I would forgive myself for not being close to them. I reflected on these ideas as I read *Coming Home Again*.

Lee’s description of leaving and returning home is one with which I identify deeply. As a freshman I was extremely homesick. On my first trip from Boston back to New Mexico I spent the entire weekend eating green chili and letting the sights and smells of my mother’s kitchen fill me. Like Lee’s mother, my mother sent me back to school with as much food as I could carry and the promise of seeing me again soon. Our first visit was so short that I had to gulp down my fill of home as quickly as possible.

It was not until my first college summer that I realized how much the relationship between my mother and I had changed. Our first fight was about chocolate chip cookies. “You go to MIT and think you know how to do everything now, huh? Forget everything your mother taught you. Why do you have to change everything?” I had substituted colorful M&M candies for my mother’s chocolate chips. I knew we were not just talking about food. That summer our kitchen became the epicenter of the council and confrontations between mother and daughter. I wanted to learn everything I could from

my mother because on some level I recognized that this was the last time I would really live at home. We cooked when she got home from work. I often started before she arrived, only to have her undo half of my work. ("You can't cut the potatoes like that, mi jita. They will never cook!") As frustrated as I was at times, I loved to watch her work. Her hands knew how to handle ingredients. Like Lee's mother she cooked by sight and smell. Our kitchen lessons allowed me to be a novice and my mother to be an expert. Our roles were as they should be, undisrupted by my education or the distance between us.

Just as Lee describes his return to his family's kitchen as part of his return home, each time I vacation with my family my mother and I are most comfortable in our old rolls in the kitchen. In the midst of its warmth and familiarity she can always teach me and I am always hungry for her lessons.

Look, L. “Facing the Village.” Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2001. 152-164.

The vivid descriptions of the Chinese countryside and the drastic differences between life in China and life in the United States are what struck me most in *Facing the Village*. Look’s command of imagery was apparent from the beginning of the essay when she described her family’s encounter with the taxi drivers. In particular I liked the line when she described how the drivers had swarmed on her family and “fallen into an angry shouting match and tug-of-war over the day’s catch of over-seas Chinese.” In this scene Look not only directly describes the drivers, the sing-song quality of her words such as “over-seas Chinese” sets the stage for the dance that her father does in bargaining with the drivers.

Look again demonstrates her ability to create a vivid scene in a few lines when she describes her father’s arrival at his native village. According to Look her father begins his visit by grinding his foot in the dirt, “a habit he had picked up in the village but long since given up.” Look shows the reader that her father is nervous and making more than just a geographical journey to his youth. She explains her own journey with a similar image. “Setting my own foot in the place that has been my source of myth was supposed to give me a sense of reality and purpose with which to better understand myself and my life.” This very simple image of a foot on a dirt road highlights the similarities and differences in the travels of father and daughter. By interweaving these types of simple images into her essay Look creates a vivid and symbol filled world for her readers. Looks' work reminds me of the powerful role that a concise, well-formed image can play in writing. She uses the classic “show them, don't tell them” strategy that I often find myself missing in the first draft of my work.

Williams, P. “Reflections on Law Contracts, and the Value of Life.” *Ms. Magazine*, May/June 1991. 42-46.

Williams is extremely skilled in using quotes and paraphrasing to bring credibility to her arguments against the contractualization of life. Beginning with her mother’s assurance that Williams’ ancestors “The Millers were lawyers, so you have it in your blood” Williams utilizes different voices to add a humanistic quality to her essay. Particularly poignant was her description of a Black woman forced to undergo sterilization. When asked why she would not make eye contact “the young woman answered that she didn’t like white people seeing inside her.” This confession shows the depth of violation this young woman endured and Williams uses it to transition into some of her own experiences with the meaning of body language.

The author uses quotations of court orders and judges to illustrate the injustices of the American legal system. For example she explores the absurdity of an order for a surrogate mother to “not form or attempt to form a parent-child relationship with any child or children” she was carrying. In this case the child is wanted and accepted by multiple families. However the author later shows that contractualizing parenthood can also lead to the apparent rejection of children. Williams relates the case of a White woman who gives birth to a Black child after going to a sperm bank. The lawyer representing the woman explains that she is suing the sperm bank because “she is determined that what happened to her and her daughter doesn’t happen to any other couple.” By simply restating the court’s and lawyer’s words it becomes clear that the legal system has neglected to consider the complexity of the definition of parenthood and the extent to which it can be legally regulated. I admire the strength that Williams adds to her argument through her ability to use other people's words to defend her position.

Tan, A. “Mother Tongue.” *The Contemporary Essay*, Third Ed. ed. Donald Hall. Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s, 1995. 529-534.

In her essay “Mother Tongue” Amy Tan discusses her relationship with language in the context of her culture, family, and life as a writer. She explains her joys and frustrations with language in each of these roles.

I very much identify with Tan’s concept of herself as a writer, learning to use words to express her thoughts on the world, rather than as an academic immersed in literature or English. Since I was little I have found myself being caught by words. When I was in grade school individual words captivated me. I would hear one that I liked and repeat it over and over to myself. "Gargantuan. Gargantuan. Gargantuan!” Even if I did not know exactly what they meant I would use these words at any opportunity. “Why Patrick, your feet are looking rather gargantuan today.” Huh?

My teachers would chuckle and my mother would raise her eyebrow. Kids on the playground would ask me, “Why do you talk like a grown-up?” My baby-sitter would correct me. “If you don’t have something nice to say then keep it to yourself.” I thought my words were nice. I thought they were beautiful. As my vocabulary grew my understanding of the power of words grew as well. I began to see that many powerful statements are made indirectly. My focus shifted from gathering words to learning how to string them together to evoke feelings. It no longer mattered to me that Patrick had big feet unless I could explain how small his feet made me feel when he chased me around the playground.

About this time I also started to notice the different Englishes I used in my life. On the playground of the 1980s with my school friends everything was, “way cool dude.” At home I was accustomed to my mother’s Spanish interjections and the way the rhythm

of her speech was just a little different from my friends' mothers' (especially when she was angry!). I noticed that I never said "cool" during class and that my teachers spoke differently to each other than they did to their students. Like Tan I began to feel, and continue to feel, that language is both an uniting force and a social divider. My interest in writing stems from wanting to learn how to utilize language to communicate across social and cultural barriers.

Kothari. G. “If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?” *Best American Essays 2000*. Ed. Alan Lightman. Series Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000. 91-100.

Kothari’s essay about food and her identity within her culture and as an American reminded me of several incidents in my own youth:

I am sitting at the edge of my kitchen counter swinging my legs below me. Getting up on the counter is my new trick, I glow with my accomplishment as I watch my slippers bounce around below me. My seven-year-old mind is hard at work on what I consider a very big problem. “Mommy, I told my teacher that you make the best chocolate cake in the world!”

“That’s sweet Marissa. Did you brush your teeth? Its almost time for bed.”

“Mommy, listen! I told Mrs. Radigan that you make the best cake in the world and she said it would be so nice if you would make it for our class.”

“Of course I will mija, but right now its time to get ready for bed.”

“Can I finish telling you what Mrs. Radigan said?”

“Okay, what else did she say?”

“She said it would be wonderful if you would make your wonderful chocolate cake for class and I told her of course you would just like you said! And I told her you would make it for our class snack tomorrow because its so wonderful I just couldn’t wait much longer than that.” I smiled. I loved my mother’s cake.

“Aye Marissa, you want it for tomorrow?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I was thinking!” I say, ecstatic that she has come to this conclusion on her own.

Like Kothari's mother, my mother also worked full time, but made every effort to cook the food that she was "supposed to cook" and bake the best cake for the cakewalk every year. While she coaxed my sister and me into eating the traditional casserole dishes of her youth, she never subjected our friends to the less well-known Mexican dishes. Just as Kothari's mother made curry to fulfill her guests' expectations, once a year my mother made fajitas for our neighborhood Easter party. For the rest of the year we ate the nondescript mash and goo and carne de anything wrapped in a tortilla.

One day my sister came home and announced that she had to make a traditional dessert from her family and culture. My mom suggested that she bake chocolate chip cookies made with our secrete family recipe. My sister scoffed. "I want to take something Mexican. What's Mexican about that?"

"Well, if you make them they're Mexican American. I made you and you're Mexican, right?"

My sister rolled her eyes and searched for a recipe for flan. It was the first and last time she ever ate it. Food has always been an imperfect means of explaining my culture to others. Every one has had "Mexican" food, but very few people recognize the dishes that my family ate each night of my childhood. As Kothari writes, the pressure to conform to social expectations when it comes to food is enormous. No child wants to be different and no parent wants to fail to meet her child's expectations. It took me years to appreciate the spices of my mother's kitchen and the care that she put into every creation, including the occasional last minuet cake!

Class #3

Baldwin, J. "Notes of a Native Son." *The Price of the Ticket*. New York: St. Martins, 1985. 127-145.

Baldwin's essay is a work of opposites and challenges. In the basic plot of the piece he contrasts birth and coming of age with death. He uses illness as an extended metaphor to illustrate several paired opposites and the ways that they have affected him as an individual, through his father, and through society.

Mental illness begins as a biological explanation of his father's abusive behavior. Baldwin explains, "he had been ill a long time – in the mind…the discovery that his cruelty to our bodies and our minds, had been one of the symptoms of his illness was not, then, enough to enable us to forgive him." When Baldwin discovers the emotional roots of this illness taking hold within himself he begins to worry. "It frightened me…to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize that this bitterness was now mine…the bitterness which had helped to kill my father could also kill me," he explains.

Baldwin then uses his father's illness and their relationship to comment on problems with racial intolerance in society as a whole. "I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain," he says, describing his struggle to forgive his father. That struggle is similar to the one Baldwin encounters as an African American man in White America. Baldwin's essay is a chorus of empathy for the difficulties of growing up as a minority in the United States. He realistically examines the rolls of victim and violator. He speaks of understandable anger towards his father and society for

their abuses, but does not suggest anger as a solution; instead he acknowledges his capacity to care about both of these entities. I was amazed by the positive tone with which Baldwin ends such a painful piece. In his discussion of dual reality of accepting and fighting injustice Baldwin again shows the reader the paradoxes of opposites in life: love and pain, death and birth, acceptance and fighting, treating these complexities with extreme elegance which makes the problems of racial intolerance and its repercussions seems conquerable.

In my own writing I am interested in examining the ways that different authors choose to portray abuse and abusers. Both individuals and large social networks can be responsible for emotionally and physically harming people. However, rarely is there a clear right and wrong or good and bad. As Baldwin shows, his father did not parent well, but he also suffered as the victim of social abuse and worried about the well-being of his children. It is difficult to balance the realities of domestic violence and I am interested in examining other authors who attempt to do so as well.

Class #4

Williams, Sherley Anne. "Meditations on History." *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds*. Ed. Mary Helen Washington. New York: Anchor Books. 230-277.

In "Meditations on History," the story of a pregnant slave-prisoner named Dessa, I was struck by the subtle methods Williams uses to develop and reveal her characters. I was taken with the many different types of English that Williams uses in her story. In particular, the dialect in the first segment of the story flows surprisingly well. Williams manages to balance the character's dialogue with interjects in the narrator's voice that serve to diminish any difficulties in understanding for the reader. This allows the reader to get comfortable with the dialect and find out more about Dessa's character. I also noted that this first section of the story is told in third person. As the narrator notes, Dessa thinks of many sly comebacks for the boss of her crew, "But she didn't say it." This character is in a position in the story that does not give her the freedom or right to speak for herself. Dessa's situation with language reminds me of Amy Tan's description of the difference in treatment between herself and her mother due to their accents. When Tan makes phone calls for her mother, her needs are met. In the same way Williams' narrator helps Dessa to reveal herself.

The opposite is true for the story's other main character, the academic. Society afforded him the right not only to speak, but also to write about many things about which he knows very little. It is apparent from his reaction and analysis of slaves that he has actually had very little experience with them. However, this right to words ultimately forces him to consider life from a slave's perspective. In transcribing his interactions with Dessa the academic speaks with her voice requiring him to carefully consider her situation. By the end of the story he sees her as a multidimensional creature capable of

happiness and affection. By illustrating this change Williams shows that in making a real effort to understand other people we can shed our fearfulness and be more aware of our capacity to hurt one another.

I admire Williams' writing as I have a very difficult time creating dynamic and interesting fictional characters. Williams' ability to write from such different perspectives about the same situation and to use very subtle cues to show the reader how her characters are growing and changing is a talent to which I aspire!

Class #5 and #6

Morrison, T. *Bluest Eye.* New York: Penguin, 1993.

In her novel *Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a little girl going up in a physically and sexually abusive home. Morrison shows the effects of society's messages about attractiveness and the value of being White on Pecola's self-confidence. Morrison also shows the combination of destructive forces, both internal and external to the Breedlove family, that result in Pecola's ultimate mental breakdown.

Morrison strikes an extremely difficult balance in her portrayal of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and mental illness in her novel *Bluest Eye*. Realistically these issues rarely arise without some catalyst in the form of mistreatment or devaluing of human beings. Morrison's book gives a history of each character before revealing his crime or disability. For example, it is much easier to understand the delusions of Cholly, a child molester, when we understand his history of humiliating sexual experiences and little support.

Cholly's daughter and victim, Pecola, has a mental illness that is particularly disturbing because she is an extremely innocent and humble character. The roots of her illness in physical, emotional, and sexual abuse are clear. What is less obvious is the continued abuse she will suffer due to her victimhood. In her final internal dialogue Pecola acknowledges that she has doubts about her moral character due to her responses to her father's sexual abuse. Pecola's judgment against herself is echoed in the sentiments of her older neighbors.

Because this judgment against Pecola is passed by her community it is possible to see the cycle of abuse come full circle to be taken out on a small child. The strict boundaries of right and wrong and good and evil give way when confronted with the

realities of the conditions that create abusers and the mentally ill. In some sense Pecola is very similar to her own father years before. The difference is time and how they are each treated after they are violated. Unfortunately for Pecola, in spite of her innocence it appears her community will pass judgment against her.

The hope that Morrison leaves us with is in Claudia and Frieda Mac Teer, Pecola's friends who love and accept her. These little girls might help contribute to a future society that provides victims with love rather than ostracism. Throughout the novel the Mac Teer family represents the love and stability missing in Pecola's life. Morrison uses parallel situations between the Breedloves and the Mac Teers to show the ways that appropriately directed love and discipline can be used to raise children. Claudia and Frieda's lives are not without obstacles, but their parents constantly reinforce a sense of self-worth in their children. Like Pecola, Frieda is also molested. The Mac Teer family's reaction to this violation is quite different from Pecola's parents. Pecola's father is her rapist and her mother is indifferent to her condition. However, Mr. Mac Teer protects his daughter and Mrs. Mac Teer defends her honor.

In a less extreme situation, the novel opens with Mrs. Mac Teer caring for her sick child. While her words are harsh at times, her actions are filled with love. Claudia describes her mother's work as, "Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up in to that cracked window….It coated my chest, along with the salve…" (12). This thick love, filling the gaps in health and home is what holds the Mac Teer family together. It allows the Mac Teer children the wisdom to have sympathy, love, and respect for Pecola. Families like the Mac Teers can raise children with a strong sense of self-worth and compassion for those less fortunate than themselves. This family represents not only the

ideal environment in which to raise children, the family's compassion is also a tool to heal the wider wounds in the African American community.

Like Baldwin, Morrison's complex portrayal of abusers and victims interests me a great deal. Morrison's work offers even more relationships to examine and show the negative effects of an unsupportive community on abuse victims. She also thoroughly explains each character's background, showing that she recognizes the many causes of abuse in the Black community.

African-American Living History Museum. presented by MIT's Black Theater Guild and Vinnie Burrows, Cambridge, MA. 27 Feb. 2003.

The *African American Living History Museum* was a performance and discussion between a handful of prominent Black civil rights leaders. It was structured to teach the audience about each of the play's characters, and then allowed audience members to interact with and question the characters about their lives and political views.

I very much enjoyed the style of theater in the *Living History Museum*. The idea of famous activists returning to assess America's current state is an excellent way to remind the audience to evaluate their lives based not only on their own comfort, but also in terms of the activists' visions of the future. For example Ella Baker's speech reminded me that although there are African American students at most universities in the U.S. they are still not treated equally or welcomed equally into upper academic circles. Most critically there is also still an enormous disparity between the early educational environments of minority students and other students.

I also found it interesting to hear some of the activists' ideas with my 21st century perspective. For example I was sympathetic but saddened by Marcus Garvey's proposal for Black Americans to return to Africa. Although I recognize the sentiments and experiences that would cause African-Americans to feel rejected by the U.S., their mass departure would be a tremendous loss for the country. Not only would we lose a strong, beautiful, and diversely talented group, we would also lose some of the hope that the people of the United States will some day be able to co-exist without hatred and ostracism of sub-groups.

The idea of interacting directly with the cast was exciting and unusual and I regretted the audience's and my own shyness in asking questions. The idea that people

today are still in a dialogue with our former leaders is a powerful tool. Although none of the activists in the play are still with us in life they all left their ideas and words behind as guides in the continuing struggle to improve the quality of life for people of color.

Between Class #6 and Class #7

Smoke Signals. Dir. Chris Eyre. Perf. Adam Beach, Irene Bedard, Gary Farmerm Tantoo Cardinal, and Evan Adams. Miramax Films, 1998.

Smoke Signals made a very good attempt to depict issues of Native Americans' self image, stereotyping of Indians, and the challenges that Native people still face in existing as part of the United States. As one character said, "You're leaving the Rez going out into America. There ain't no place more foreign than that!" The film treated the issue of poverty on reservations and family structures in the Indian community with candor and humor. The humor throughout the movie adds to the optimism and digestibility of the movie. The dialogue is full of witty puns and continuously confronts stereotypes about American Indians. The contrast between the reality of Indian life and stereotypes of Tantoo and the stoic Indian served to highlight the absurdity of unrealistic Indian portrayals. The humor in the film is also a device to set the audience at ease with discussions of difficult issues such as racial tension and poverty.

At the age of 22, when most young men in the United States are beginning to make their own homes, the movie's main characters, Thomas and Victor, remain at home with their families. This is in part due to their inability to afford to live elsewhere and in part a decision to remain close to their families, particularly in the case of Thomas and his grandmother. However, Victor also faces the reality that he cannot afford to be anywhere but home.

This struggle with poverty is particularly evident in Victor's inability to pay for a trip to collect his father's remains. By accepting Thomas' help in paying for the trip Victor is engaging in exercises of both independence and interdependence. The trip allows both young men to explore life outside of the reservation, but requires them to

engage in that exploration together. Victor's tie to Thomas is challenging for him as he is not used to allowing himself to depend on others.

Just as I appreciated the portrayals of abusers in *Bluest Eye* and "Native Son," I also liked the way *Smoke Signals* portrayed Victor's father, an abusive alcoholic. In the same way that Baldwin is able to use some of the experiences of his youth to explain his father's development, it is possible to see generations of low self-esteem and alcohol abuse in the characters of *Smoke Signals*. The audience also sees the pain that that abuse causes to both the victims and the abusers. Victor's father, Arnold Joseph, clearly cares about his son. His friendship with a neighbor reinforces this. However, he cares so much that he believes that he must escape his family to allow them to survive and live peacefully. Arnold is torn between his desire to be a father and his fear of hurting the people he loves.

Victor begins to face this same dilemma in his relationship with Thomas. Thomas loves, accepts, and admires Victor, just as Victor looked up to his father. Thomas also serves as a reminder of the positive aspects of Arnold. In spite of the ill treatment he receives from Victor, Thomas returns time and again to talk with and support him. At the beginning of the film Victor tells Thomas, "Just remember Thomas, you can't trust anybody." However, with practice Victor learns to trust himself to care about other people, including his father. Both the Baldwin piece and *Smoke Signals* show the roots of violence and give an optimistic view of the possible ways to battle its reprocussions.

Class #7

Erdich, L. *Love Medicine*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

Erdich is able to juggle a large number of characters and narrators in her novel *Love Medicine*. Each narrator has a fairly distinct voice, coloring the story with his or her own feelings. By adding and averaging each of these versions of the family's history the reader finds a very rich picture each character and their role in their community.

The character of June Morrissey is an excellent example of the richness that Erdich creates with her many narrators. June is one of the few major characters in the novel that does not narrate a portion of the story. Erdich chooses to open her novel with a third person section devoted to June. The reader cannot develop a particularly good opinion of June from this first section in which she is extremely intoxicated, clearly sleeps with many men, and her self-destructive behavior leads to her death. This portion of the book and the voice in which it is told highlight June as an important, but removed character. In this section June exemplifies the typical stereotypes about Indian people, but the reader does not know enough about June's background to judge her fairly from these early scenes.

Through the rest of the novel Erdich explains the roots of June's behavior, asking the reader to reevaluate her initial judgment of the character. The initial challenge to the reader's first impression of June comes from her niece Albertine who clearly adores her aunt. Albertine begins to fill in the gaps in June's character with memories about bubble gum and princess hair. Albertine also reveals a history of physical abuse in June's relationships. Marie Kashpaw, who raised June during part of her youth, gives the reader a since of June's vitality as well as her pain. In a flashback about a hanging June stages

with Marie's children Marie explains June's temper and hints at her self-destructive tendencies. It is clear that the death of June's mother has affected June deeply, isolating her from accepting the love and support Marie offers her.

Erdich forces her reader to acknowledge many stereotypes of Native Americans in her initial portrayal of June. However, she gives June's community an opportunity to speak on her behalf, explaining the roots of her behavior and giving the reader a since of June as a loving, spirited person. By the end of the novel the reader's judgment of June has changed. In a sense June is a single person who represents her entire community.

I also enjoyed Erdich's ability to construct a complex family and community network. Her novel reminded me of Faulkner's work in her use of many narrators and complex kinship trees. Although Erdich demands a great deal of attention from her readers, the complexity of the stories of Native people in America warrant this attention. The novel itself becomes a representation of the complexities of American Indian life.

In *Love Medicine* Erdich demands that readers acknowledge the roots of the stereotypical problems in Indian communities. She forces people to acknowledge both that these stereotypes are not always true, and that when they are true they have their roots in the life Indians have been pushed to live by the larger American society. Erdich's variety of narrators appeal to a wide range of genders and ages and create an uniting, humanistic perspective of the difficulties that have faced American Indians for the past century.

I would love to read other similarly complex portrayals of other ethnic communities. I know that Faulkner has written about the relationships between African Americans and Whites in the south, but I know of no other similar books about Hispanic or other cultures. I believe that one of the powerful aspects of Erdich's work is that she

traces one group over such a large span of time, allowing her reader to understand the long-term reprocussions of racism and repression.

Class #11 and #13

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*. New York: Vintage International, 1975.

Kingston's depictions of her youth and her mother's stories are extremely rich and at times quite unsettling. She does a beautiful job showing the ways that the problems for women of her mother's generation who grew up in China translate to women of her generation who grew up in the United States.

Kingston structures her essay collection to illustrate her maturation. At the beginning of the collection Kingston emphasizes the stories of her mother and other relatives. She uses their stories to highlight the confusion she faced in shaping her value system and identity. Kingston's mother told Kinston that she "would be a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20). In retelling her mother's folk tales Kingston uses first person to show strong identification with the woman warrior. Through the author's own childhood experiences the reader learns about the enslavement Kingston feels from her Chinese American heritage. "We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine" Kingston explains (172). Towards the end of her essay collection Kingston reflects on the affects of these paradoxical expectations of the slave and warrior on her mother and herself. She tells stories of both women confronting and hating the weaknesses they saw in others. These parallel accounts show how similar these different generations of women are and how little their struggles have changed over time. They also show Kingston growing up in her mother's footsteps.

My favorite device of Kingston's is her use of ghosts throughout her story. I was about a third of the way though the memoirs before I realized that "ghost" was also

synonymous with white person. It showed just how far removed Kingston, and particularly her mother, felt from White America. Kingston shows that the ghosts of "Brave Orchid" or her mother's world are the forces she cannot control. This is in stark contrast to her mother's ability to tame the ghosts she encountered in her medical school days. This contrast made me realize how difficult the immigration process must be, even for a strong and intelligent woman.

I appreciated the generational differences between Maxine and her mother. I too have encountered the very different attitudes and acculturation levels between the generations of my family. When I find myself getting frustrated with my mother, I think back to some of the silly stories she told me about her own mother, a more recent immigrant, when I was growing up. I can see the same translation of stories in my life that Kingston explores in her essays. Kingston introduces the final story in her collection by saying, "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending is mine" (206). Here Kingston explicitly states the structure of her entire memoir. The beginning is her mother's story, the ending is her own. Kingston weaves her own "story talking" with her mother's to create an intricate fabric of intergenerationally relevant essays. For mothers and daughters, Kingston reminds the reader that often the beginning belongs to the mother, but the daughter must continue traditions of courage and communication in new frontiers.

I have often wanted to write more about the differences between my mother and myself. I hesitate to both because I do not want to assume that I understand the complexities of her actions and feelings, and because she is a very private person and it seems almost a violation of my relationship with her to write a great deal about her. Like

the Tan family, my family prefers to handle all of its problems internally, rarely revealing conflicts or struggles to those outside of its closest kinship circle. I am sure that Tan faced similar doubts before writing *Woman Warrior*. I cannot help but wonder how she resolved them and what her family's reaction to her book was.

Class #11

The Long Walk Home. Dir. Richard Pearce. Perf. Sissy Spacek, Whoopi Goldberg, and Dwight Schultz. Miramax Films, 1991.

The Long Walk Home is a film that demonstrates how extremely difficult it was for both Black and White Americans to become involved in the civil rights movement of the 1950s. Whoopi Goldberg's character, Odessa Carter, is an African American maid for Sissy Spacek's character, Ms. Thompson, an upper middle class white woman.

Carter and Thompson both have families with children. Both women struggle with their own values in relation to civil rights, as well as how to teach, protect and interact with their families. The women's husbands have very different stands on the issue of civil rights. Mr. Carter supports the Montgomery bus boycott. "I want to ride at the front of the bus," he tells his family over dinner. Mr. Thompson's family dinner conversation is quite different. Thompson and his extended family believe that Black people "want too much and they aren't willing to work for it." Mrs. Carter's husband supports her through her difficult and long days of walking to and from work to support the bus boycott. Mrs. Thompson's husband yells at her for attempting to help Mrs. Carter with a ride to work in the morning.

While there is a great deal of difference between the reactions of their husbands, there is a great deal of similarity between the women's desires to protect and teach their children. For Carter's children, the danger of riding on the boycotted Montgomery bus system is extremely high. When Carter's daughter Selma takes this risk Carter's son pays the price in a physical altercation to save his sister. The danger for Mary Katherine, Thompson's child, is less eminent, but equally violent in potential. In the last scene of the film Thompson finds she and her daughter in the midst of a protest. It is clear that by

supporting African Americans both Thompson, and by association Mary Katherine, are just as vulnerable to attacks as the Black protesting. Thompson must decide if the lessons her daughter will take from the experience are worth the risk of physical danger. Ultimately both women risk themselves and their families to follow what they know to be the right path. This film proves that no matter what one's life situation was in the fifties, it was a difficult and courageous decision to become involved in civil rights activism.

Class #16

Walcott, D. *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. New York: The Noonday Press. 1984. 17-21, 300-301, 367-367.

I found the task of reading Walcott's poems challenging and somewhat unsettling. I have been out of practice at reading poems, so while these works were only a couple of pages long I found myself spending several hours working to understand the complexity and compactness of Walcott's language. My favorite poems among our selections were *Ruins of a Great House* and *New World*.

I very much enjoyed the vivid imagery in *Ruins of a Great House*. Walcott's use of color and smell are quite striking. In particular I liked his juxtaposition of vibrant green grass and trees with rotting limes. I felt that I was able to be a part of the cool garden, once a symbol of high culture and domination, now growing wild. In this scene nature is reclaiming the great house and its false walls. Walcott sums up this scene in his line "The world's green age was then a rotting lime" (20).

In *New World* Walcott poses a puzzle to his reader: who was the Adam of the New World. He gives us no clear answer, although he offers several possibilities. Walcott immediately shows his reader that he is considering old ideas in new ways with his description of Adam after the fall of Eden: "O yes, the awe of Adam / at the first bead of sweat" (300). He continues this thought provoking line of thought with his depiction of Adam's relationship with the snake. According to Walcott Adam learned to work with the snake to both of their benefit. Through this metaphor Walcott points out the benefits and detriments of Adam and the snake's plan to "share / the loss of Eden for a profit" implying that man did benefit from the destruction of the pristine environment of North

America. Walcott reminds his reader to consider the complex benefits and costs of the colonization of the Americas.

Class #17

Mississippi Masala. Dir. Mira Nair. Perf. Denzel Washington, Roshan Seth, Sarita Choudhury, Charles S. Dutton, and Joe Seneca. SCS Films, 1992.

I found the many layers of multiculturalism in Nair's *Mississippi Masala* fascinating. This film tackles multiculturalism within an individual in its portrayal of Jay, Mina's father, as well as the effects of multiculturalism on relationships in the interactions between Mina and Demetrius.

The film opens by introducing Jay, an ethnically Indian man raised in Uganda. The audience learns that Jay's best friend believes that "Africa is for Africans – Black Africans." As a native Ugandan Jay is clearly torn about whether to remain in Africa. He considers himself an Ugandan, but his native country and his closest friend are rejecting him. The opening scenes of the film make it clear that in Uganda Jay's family is subject to severe mistreatment due to his race.

Even when he immigrates to the United States Jay is unable to escape biased treatment. His family lives in near poverty and faces the judgments and stereotypes of other Americans. It is clear that the Indian community in Mississippi values the light skin and monetary ideal of mainstream America. At one point an older woman in the community criticizes Jay's "darkie daughter," Mina. This woman explains that you must either have money or fair skin to be a worthy bride. In fact many members of Jay's community places an unusually high value on the material possessions for which they have worked so hard. When Mina and her mother get into a car wreck her cousin asks about the state of his car before asking about the health of his family members.

In some ways Jay's family's identity as involuntarily displaced emigrants robbed of their past status and wealth allows the family to identify with African Americans. In

one scene Mina's uncle tells Demetrius "All of us people of color have got to stick together." Unfortunately Mina's family is less accepting of Demetrius when the two of them become romantically involved. The relationship between Mina and Demetrius forces Mina's family to expand its comfort zones in dealing with other cultures. This relationship is also Mina's big departure from her family. At a time when Mina's family is attempting to return to Uganda Mina is deepening her ties in the United States and embracing American culture and courtship. Jay must respect Mina's choice to remain with Demetrius as just as important as his choice to return to Uganda.

Between Class #17 and Class #20

Mitcham, Judson. *The Sweet Everlasting*. New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1996.

The Sweet Everlasting tells the story of how deeply engrained prejudice can destroy lives. In particular the novel focuses on Ellis Burt, a white sharecropper raised in the south during the Depression. While the Burt family respects and is friends with local African American families, he still believes deeply that the races should remain separate but equal. The first time that Ellis encounters the idea of a white woman and black man having sex he says "just the idea of it made my skin crawl….That's how I felt, and I couldn't help it – that's how I was raised" (111). He goes on to say that even if the black man was Isaiah, his closest friend, his feelings would be unchanged.

Ellis' prejudices do not prevent him for having deep affection and compassion for his friend. As a young man Ellis see witnesses Isaiah's torturer and brutal murder by a gang of vengeful white community members. "I'd never been so mad in my life – though mainly I was scared, scared till I felt sick, like my whole body was sick" (150) he tells his wife years later. Ellis' compassion allows his wife to share her life long secrete with him: she was part African American. Unfortunately Ellis' sympathy does not extend to empathy. His belief that the races should not mix blinds him to the years of companionship and love he has shared with his wife and he explodes hatefully at her.

Ellis is so eager to rid his life of his wife that after the death of their son Ellis burns down his family's home. It is not until after over six years in prison and years of aimless labor that, in his seventities, Ellis seeks forgiveness from his wife. In a sense Ellis' son is a sacrifice, like Christ, which forces Ellis to evaluate his value system and remake his life.

It is the love of his wife, in spite of his previous views about her race, that is the Sweet Everlasting. Mitcham traces this force through the book using flowers. As Ellis and Susan fall in love she begins to teach him about flowers along with how to love and be loved. In one scene she shows him a cat foot, "'or some call it sweet everlasting.' And I nodded like that meant something to me," Ellis recounts (16). Mitcham later tells the reader that everlasting refers to flowers that hold their color over time. Susan holds her color both in the lasting quality of her love, and her inability to escape her racial roots. While they are married Ellis does not learn fully about flowers or how to love from his wife. He requires a separation from her to truly understand the power of their union.

Class #21

Twilight: Los Angeles. Dir. Anna Deavere Smith. Perf. Anna Deavere Smith. PBS Home Video, 2001.

First and foremost I was amazed by Anna Deavere Smith's ability to portray such a tremendous variety of characters, changing between them so quickly and accurately. The characters she chose to focus on each represent a unique facet of the Los Angeles community. Although at first some of the seem absurd and trivial, Smith manages to bring the fear and pain each one feels to the surface. For example, although I was initially annoyed with the real estate agent character and her talk of remaining safely in a Beverly Hills hotel, the more Smith presented this character the more I understood how her world was being effected by the tragedies around her.

My favorite character in the movie was Josie Morales, a LA resident who witnessed the Rodney King beating by LAPD and was not allowed to testify at the police officers' trials. Her perspective reminded me of the roots of the riots themselves: the belittling and ignoring of the concerns of the minority communities in Los Angeles. Even as the riots occurred Smith makes it apparent that the police department in LA protected the White, upper-class neighborhoods, leaving the Black, Asian, and Hispanic communities to destroy and defend themselves. This reality, beginning before the beating of Rodney King and continuing through the riots, directly contradicts the statements of the LA police spokesman who says, "The Rodney King beatings had nothing to do with race."

On a very personal level Smith makes clear the destructive forces of the LA riots. We see a Black store owner crying, a Korean woman who lost her husband, a Mexican woman who almost lost her unborn child, a juror terrified by letters she gets from the

KKK, and a White man who feels "just generic guilt…I began to deserve a little guilt. To say I deserve it. I deserve it." Smith portrays the cycle of violence and hatred, showing each group as both victim and perpetrator, with no one innocent and everyone unfairly judged. By acting all of the parts herself Smith creates a unity in her movie, showing her audience that we are all part of the same whole, that we all suffer, and we all must heal the wounds of racism together.

Class #23

Faulkner, W. *Go Down, Moses*. New York: Vintage International of Random House, Inc., 1970.

Faulkner's stories of life in Yoknapatawapha County provide a humorous and disturbing depiction of the relationships between the races, genders, and generations in the county. Faulkner creates a complex network of characters that the reader has to learn about slowly though their actions, just as if the reader was a member of the community and had to get to know his neighbors over several years.

In "Was," the opening section of the book, Faulkner gives examples of the relationships between Black and Whites, and men and women of the late nineteenth century southern United States. Faulkner depicts White men objectifying Blacks and women, reducing them to mere stakes in a poker game. The irony of this humor is underscored when one of the poker players tells the other, "This is the most serious foolishness you ever took park in in your life" (23).

It is not only women and slaves who are treated like game to be won and lost. Faulkner also shows the objectification of a man, Uncle Buck, by Miss Sophonsiba, who is in search of a husband. When Buck discovers Miss Sophonsiba has tricked him into marrying him he pleads with her bother to be reasonable and not force the match. "Reasonable is just what I'm being," her brother says. "You come into bear-country of your own free will and accord" (21).

Faulkner shows his readers that all facets of his fictional community are trapped in some way, and striving to relate to one another and make lives for themselves. In this way Falkner's work is very similar to Erdich's *Love Medicine*. Both authors show a complex and multigenerational social network with behavior patters and ideologies that

are difficult to escape. While it is clear that some of the characters in *Go Down Moses* do not believe that slavery is morally right, they continue their family's traditions in some form or another. In this way Faulkner shows that for some people it was difficult to escape repressive traditions whether they were the slave or the slave owner. Faulkner and Erdich both develop not only dynamic characters, but also dynamic communities, showing changes due to social pressures and time.

Class #27

Cisneros, Sandra. *House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

In *House on Mango Street* Sandra Cisneros uses the lyric voice of a little girl named Esperanza to build a set of vignettes about life in a Hispanic neighborhood in Chicago. My favorite aspect of Cisneros' writing is the poetic quality of her writing. Most of the pieces in Mango Street are less than two pages long, but each is filled with elegant phrasing and concise metaphors.

For example, in Laughter, one of my favorite passages in the book, Cisneros compares the intangible marks of identification between sisters to the narrator's ingrained understanding of what a Mexican home feels like. She begins by explaining, "Nenny and I don't look like sisters…not right away." But the sisters have similar laughter and "other things [Esperanza] can't explain." At first Cisneros' next statement seems to be tangential, reflecting the unfocused mind of her child-narrator. However, her words mean much more: "One day we were passing a house that looked…like houses I had seen in Mexico. I don't know why…but it seemed to feel right." This indefinable recognition is similar to the relationship between Esperanza and Nenny. By evoking the feeling of instinctual recognition in her reader, Cisneros is able to create a deeper understanding of the similarities between Esperanza and her sister.

Cisneros' use of a child-narrator allows her to examine many aspects of budding sexuality and the role of the Latina women in her family and community. She illustrates with humor and sorrow, the events that bring Esperanza into womanhood. Cisneros shows Esperanza learning about hips and high heels from her friends, but she also shows the child's reluctance to mature and her fear of being violated or controlled by men.

Esperanza sense of sexual control and safety is violated emotionally several times in the book, and physically twice when older men take advantage of her innocence or powerless situation. Esperanza's father acts as a foil to these characters, representing the model of the caring, respectful, Hispanic man.

Cisneros' method of revealing a community piece by piece reminded me a great deal of Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* and Erdich's *Love Medicine.* Her use of a child narrator mirrored that of Morrison in *Bluest Eye*. This choice results in an assumption of candor and innocence in the narrator. Esperanza is not a particularly judgmental narrator given the events of her life. She reports her best understanding of her neighbors and the factors that affect their lives.

From Cisneros I would love to learn conciseness of language and fluidity of dialogue. With little formal punctuation Cisneros creates lively and easily understandable scenes between her characters. She wastes no words, but her prose remain extremely easy to understand.

Class #29

Lone Star. Dir. John Sayles. Perf. Chris Cooper, Elizabeth Peña. Castle Rock, 1996.

Lone Star is a film about relationships between Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, and Indians in a small Texas border town in Rio County. The film focuses on work and personal history of Sam Deeds, the county sheriff.

As Sam explores his family's history and his father's work as the previous sheriff, the town explores its history of war, occupation, and race relations. Sam is torn about how he should view his father's work and lifestyle. Members of Rio County see the senior Sheriff Deeds as a noble, trustworthy man. Sam focuses on his father's political and personal indiscretions rather than the positive aspects of his work. These different perspectives parallel the struggle of the town's view of its own history. While some members of the town focus on acknowledging the rich complexities of the region's history, others want to claim the area and its history as a victory for only their race, defining history's participants as either winners or losers.

Methods of defining and acknowledging personal history are also addressed in one of the town's Black families. Otis Payne, one of Rio County's long-term residents, tells his grand son that the boy's father may always be angry with him, just as the grandson may always resent his father. Otis then reveals to his grandson that their family is part Indian. However, Otis Payne tells his grandson, "blood is what you make it," reminding him that his biological connections are only as significant as he chooses to make him. Sam and Pilar, his high school sweetheart, come to a similar understanding when the lovers learn that they are actually half siblings. Their biology will have no impact on their relationship since they do not plan to have children together, so they choose to remain together.

This movie focuses on the idea that history is not a concrete concept. It is open to different interpretations and dependent on each person's value system and life experiences. On both the community and personal level the audience sees history filtered through individual's lives, creating community conflict and personal confusion.