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21W. 742

Reader's Journal

Class #1

Takaki, Ronald. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993 .

If you were in a chatroom online and you asked someone where he (or she) was from, suppose that person were to say, "I'm American.", would you automatically assume that person was white? I would. I asked a couple of my friends this question and they all said that they would too. Isn't that ironic, considering that I too, am an American citizen?

Takaki writes that American history is the history of immigration. And this is true. If one group of people had to be called the true Americans, that group would be the Native Americans and history shows that they emigrated too; from Asia, across the Bering Strait. Everyone else who's since claimed the country immigrated too. If only people would start celebrating that fact rather than claiming differences. As for the slaves who were forced to immigrate as slaves—the original slaves may claim loyalty to their African countries, but what of their children? Or their children's children who've only known the United States as home? Can they be African even though they've never been to Africa?

I was reading the Tech article on Jean Elliot's talk about MIT and she said that the United States is not a melting pot. We're more like a stir fry (or if you think the frying involved signifies losing identities: the US could be a salad bowl, with the different components unified under the salad dressing that covers them all!).

When the LA riots broke out, I was in Kuwait. Racism wasn't an issue that I thought about often, but I remember wondering how differently things would have turned out if the rioters had decided to not fight back. To not let one act of violence result in thousand others. But now, I realize that that's what Martin Luther King tried. As successful as he was in removing much racism, he didn't get it all. Susan Smith knew that when she accused a "big, burly, black man with a gun" of hijacking her car and kidnapping her children, she'd get the nation's sympathy. After all, everyone readily agreed that black people were dangerous.

I forget who it was, but didn't someone accuse the Jews of knowing that September 11, 2001 was going to happen? He said there was a reason that Ariel Sharon stayed away, that thousands of Jews didn't go to work that day. How can people make such statements? What did

he do instead? Go with the first piece of evidence that suggested that. Even if people are fanatically crazy about their perspectives and their beliefs does it occur to them to think before they make statements that damage interracial/cultural relations?

Close, Ellis. "Our New Look: The Colors of Race". *Newsweek.* 1 Jan. 2000: 26

I've always felt that articles that write about Hispanics outnumbering the whites in the near future are implying that there's a reason for fear. What is the need for this information? It makes it sounds as though Hispanics are competing with the largest minority group at present to become more numerous, somehow making births in that population nothing more than procreation. Will there be a massive white-flight if suddenly they become the minority in the US? If someone really believes that…they're being incredibly stupid.

There are many more biracial couples now, much more mixing among the races and the article implies that this will make the US more tolerant. Could it be true? I think I'm going to be optimistic and say, yes. But only because once they leave behind their peers who are ethnically similar to them and high school where they tend to stick to each other, children are likely to become open minded.

My high school in Queens was predominantly Chinese- and Korean-American. With 4, 200 students in all, however, this "predominance" didn't mean that other cultures/races were in the minority. Just that there was a biology class especially for Korean students who didn't speak English fluently. Yet, interracial dating was not at all common in my high school. I was pleasantly surprised when I came to MIT and there was the diversity that I was used to, even expected, but there were more interracial couples, than I'd ever seen before—mostly Asian and whites. Like high school, however, the students still tend to segregate themselves along race lines. I'm sure you've heard of what goes on in public high school cafeterias. But I don't think that's necessarily an indication of intolerance.

Kelley, Robin D. G. "The People in Me". *Colorlines.* 1999 .

Do I wish for people to recognize my ethnicity when they meet me? Yes, but I suppose it wouldn't be fair to ask that they know the ethnicity is Indian. Actually, that's not much of a problem for me. Hee hee, if you are brown, people usually assume you're Indian. Perhaps it's difficult to pronounce "Pakistani" and/ or "Bangla" or they're just ignorant to know those are other countries as well. As much as I want them to recognize my ethnicity, I do not appreciate it when people assume to know something about my culture based on representation in the media. (Come on! "Monsoon Wedding" is hardly representative of my family!).

How relevant is my being an Indian by birth to my identity? I don't know. Do I relate everything I do to my being Indian? No, I don't. I know quite a bit about India, but then I assume, so do people who belong to one country while living in another. My parents brought me up a certain way, but I don't think values like honesty, respect and diligence are restricted to any particular culture.

As much as I hate to admit it, I believe in double standards. I know it's wrong, but I can't help it. I don't mind as much when another colored person asks me where I'm really from—especially older people. Over the years, this question has become, "Where are your *parents* from?", eventually going to: "Can you speak Malayalam?", very tentatively as though they don't want to offend my, "I'm an American!" sensibilities.

Kelley is absolutely correct when he says that one can't look at one revolution or rebellion without looking at the events from the rest of the world. Martin Luther King looked to Mahatma Gandhi(ji) who read about Jesus Christ. The French revolution looked the American one and…my history isn't in top form, but you get the idea. As imperialistic and smug as the English government was, I'm certain the people who got their ideas for the Glorious Revolution got inspiration from somewhere as well. Kelley argues that Africans helped create Western Civilization and that is true! Not just in the form of slave labor, but through materials imported from the different countries in Africa.

Class # 2

Lee, Chang-Rae. "Coming Home Again." *Best American Essays 1996*. Ed . Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1996 .

I almost cried when I read about Lee's mother saying that she regretted her decision to send him away to Exeter. Lee mentions that she was sending him to Exeter because she thought he was becoming too much like her, but he doesn't elaborate on this. How is he becoming too much like her? Was it that he was spending too much time in the kitchen unlike other boys or was his personality becoming like hers? He writes "…but without outside pressure I was readily given to sloth and vanity." (Lee 228). Isn't that more a product of her spoiling him than his copying her personality? From the essay, I don't see any evidence of sloth and vanity in her.

Their sending him to Exeter does not seem to be an attempt to imitate the affluent people in their society. If his parents emigrated from South Korea to the United States for the latter's better education and opportunities for advancement, why would they not try to send their son to the best high school they knew about? If he had the intellectual capacity to get in—why not send

him? No, I think Lee's mother regrets sending him because she gave educational advancement more priority than the formation of a real relationship. It's similar to the situations where parents are hardworking professionals. They pursue their careers at the expense of their relationships with their children.

I see why people writing about food may annoy Alice. A person's life is intertwined with history and other aspects of his culture. To concentrate on food, I'm certain, allows people who are not of the same culture to overlook the history, the arts and the literature. However, as Alaina pointed out, food *is* one of the most prominent markers of a culture. In most cultures, children get acquainted with food through their mothers. I'm certain it's changing now—fathers know as much about cooking as mothers, but for many of my friends—and me—the thought of food is accompanied by images of our mothers preparing them in the kitchen. That's when my mother and I got to know each other. On the weekends my mother was not working, she'd spend a lot of time cooking. Around 12, my sister and I would wander to the living room and Mummy would come in from the kitchen and sit down. That was my sign to go get some glasses of grape juice on a tray. *The Punnoose ladies were about the enjoy their afternoon wine.*

Look, Lenore . "Facing the Village." ***Best American Essays 2001*** **. Ed . Norris, Kathleen . Series ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2001 .**

Returning to one's birthplace after a long absence can never be easy, but it is especially difficult for Lenore Look's father whose family had suffered so much in China under the Communist government. Although the senior Looks are poor by American standards, they are quite rich compared to the part of their family that remained in China. That fact alone is bound to make the visiting Looks feel guilty. As they prepare to leave after their visit, the writer mentions that her father observes the custom of giving money. Do you suppose Look's father felt guilty about being in a position to give money to their older relatives? If I were in the same position, I know I'd be wracked with doubt. Would Uncle X think I was belittling his status and age if I gave him money? Would Achachan (older brother) think that I was suggesting I was superior to him if I offered him money? However, in reading Look's essay, you realize that both men involved in the exchange of money regret that it has to be done. Everything would be much better if they were on equal footing—on the financially secure side, however, the fact is, they aren't. When one hasn't seen a cousin in fifty years, a pretty little trinket has no meaning or value, but understanding that the cousin is strapped for money and giving him some money (however small an amount) sincerely means much more.

When I read this essay last year for 21W.735, I was piqued at Look's squeezing in the paragraph about how she fought her Chinese culture because she wanted to be white. I thought later I was being rash, but no. This term, I still feel the same way. She begins by writing about her father's returning to his village and meeting a cousin who still remembered him. She does a convincing and good job of describing the scene and the emotions her father was experiencing upon being reunited with his cousin, but she lost her punch by mentioning the forced repression of her culture by her white peers. It sounds clichéd, as though she tacked it on at the end because she couldn't think of another way to tie things together. I know immigrants' stories often involve denial of one's original culture at some point, but it seems very forced in Look's essay. If she grew up rejecting and denying her culture, why is she so accepting of it now? Is it easier to accept her culture when she's being admired as the sophisticated American by the Taishanese villagers? Why did her culture seem agreeable to her only when she attended Chinese culture classes at Princeton? Was living it at home with her parents not sufficient culture immersion for her?

I don't know how to answer these questions. I've thought long and hard about why I feel so piqued and I've concluded I can't understand her actions because I have never had to defend my race or my culture to anyone. It's easy for me to criticize Look for attempting to deny her culture because I've never had to do that to be accepted. There have been a few incidents, but those were so few and far in between that they've never made a lasting impression on me.

Williams , Patricia J. "Reflections on Law, Contracts, and the Value of Life ." Ms. Magazine May/Jun . 1991 : 42-46 .

The woman who's suing the sperm bank for mixing up her husband's sperm with another man's has a point—she married the man because she loved him and presumably wanted to have children with *him*. But one has to wonder, does she feel no love for the child? Even though the her father isn't whom the woman intended it to be, half of the child's genes come from the woman herself. How will the child react to the knowledge that her mother sued the establishment that gave her the child?

Suppose the wrong sperm had come from a white man instead and everything was all fine and dandy until the child was later determined to have a disease that is genetically inherited from the father (I can't think of a disease inherited from father to daughter, but I did say "suppose")—something the woman's husband was known not to have? If the kid were still white, would the woman have overlooked the illness and still loved the child?

Williams writes, in her opening paragraphs, that her mother spoke of her white-lawyer heritage as something to draw strength from. William's great-great-grandmother was impregnated by this white lawyer, Miller, undoubtedly, against her will. Yet, it's that part that the mother asks her to be proud of. Is she inadvertently telling Williams to be confident because she too is partly white? Did the woman from the sperm-mixup case know for a fact that her husband had no black ancestry? The article did not mention this as a possibility, but it didn't rule it out expressly. Would she try to sue his family for his "deceiving" her about his heritage?

Tan, Amy . "Mother Tongue." *The Contemporary Essay*. 3rd ed. Ed. Donald Hall. Boston : Bedford St. Martin's 1995 : 529-534.

The first indication I had that many people didn't necessarily speak the same English at home and at school, was when my friend, Rakhi refused to call home after a class trip. We got caught in traffic and didn't get back to school until two hours after we'd planned to. Ms. Schwab, the 8th grade Spanish teacher, suggested we call home. Rakhi and I walked to the pay phones with the others, but after I'd called home, she refused to do the same. When I asked her why, she said, "I speak differently to my grandmother." It wasn't that she spoke only Urdu to her grandmother, but that she spoke a different version of English. However, I don't think Rakhi meant that her grandmother didn't speak English, simply that she spoke it with an Indian accent, with plenty of Urdu words replacing English ones. Rakhi probably called it "English for home" and no longer spoke with an American Accent to her grandmother.

I've always hated the expression "broken English". It doesn't give any credit to the person for speaking other languages, but just penalizes the person—patronizingly—for not knowing English. The moment someone hears what they term broken English, they immediately envision ignorance and backwardness. Broken English only means that the person speaks another language better than he speaks English. I speak very good English, but I can't sound eloquent in Malayalam. My Malayalam is, in all likelihood, at the same level as a second grade slacker. And forget Hindi, the official language of India. My grammar is nonexistent and the only sentences I can form correctly are single word questions: What? You? How? And Why?

Kothari, Geeta. "If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?" *Best American Essay 2000*. Ed. Alan Lightman . Series ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002 : 91-100.

Food is very important to Malayalees. When I was much younger, every meal my sister and I ate was a huge production. We weren't allowed to get dressed for school until we'd eaten

two dosas with sambar and drank our tea. Lunch, at school, was a paltry turkey sandwich and a flask of milk. Once we came home, however, we had to eat our "real" lunch : the requisite rice with fish and some vegetable dish. Dinner was easier; the chappathi and chicken curry were always less tedious to down than the rice.

I remember wishing as a child, that I could have some cereal for breakfast, a PBJ sandwich for lunch and soup for dinner. Less clean up, less fuss and much faster to eat. Yesterday, I was talking to my mother about breakfast and she suggested I eat cereal or toast and all I could think of was, "but that's not filling. I want dosa or idli!" I don't know how Malayalee traditions have contributed to a super-busy person's lifestyle, but I'll tell you this: the concept of a grab-n-go breakfast was not invented in Kerala. If you have to be out of the house by 5am, you wake up at four to make sure you can sit down to a proper breakfast. Lunch hours at Malayalee school are, in fact, an hour long. Students who live nearby are expected to go home to eat their lunch with their parents—who've also come back from work, just for lunch.

Kothari's essay reminded me of home so much! Some of the foods and ingredients she mentioned are unfamiliar, but that could be because her family's from a different Indian state than mine is. It is impossible to get my mother to write recipes, so I'm forever fretting that one day, after my parents are long gone I'll wake up craving upumav (a breakfast dish, which looks like cous cous only in texture) with a fantastic craving and will not know how to make it. Or worse, I'll only know the Malayalee word for an ingredient and will never be able to find it at a grocery store.

But, then again, that's really not a serious concern. There are so many Indians, especially Malayalees, living in New York that there are competing Indian groceries everywhere in Queens. It's interesting how food is often the way recent immigrants situate themselves. By the end of our first month in New York, my parents had yet to work out where I'd be going to school, but we had found all of the Indian groceries in Floral Park, Bellerose and New Hyde Park. ;). And there's a glut of cooking books for people interested in Indian Cuisine.

One of the statements that caught my attention in Kothari's essay was when she explained that she wanted to be like her American peers when she was in the US, but couldn't because she was restricted by her Indian eating habits and when she went back to India, she couldn't eat like her peers there either because although she was still adhering to some of her culture's dietary restrictions, her having been brought up abroad made her too weak-stomached

to handle the spice. I think most people who've immigrated in and out of countries feel this way. One's never Indian enough or American enough.

Class #3

Williams, Sherley Anne. "Meditations on History". *Best American Essay 2000* . Ed. Alan Lightman . Series ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002 : 91-100.

Is it possible for one group of people to believe another group to be so stupid, so infantile and so non-human simply because the latter are darker? How could the narrator, the "educated" lawyer, actually believe that a people could be undeserving of dignity because they were different? I can't come close to imagining the lives of the slaves, but this story gave a small glimpse. They were treated like animals. They're constantly referred to as beasts. Why that should surprise me, I don't know. They're still doing it today. Have you ever read articles on Venus and Serena Williams? "Their muscles ripple like beasts'.." or "Agassi wins by brain and Venus by brawn.".

What stood out the most in this story is that no matter what the slaves did, the white people in the story hastened to credit their actions to intrinsic stupidity. Black people were either slaves to their reflexes or intelligent in the same way a domesticated animal seems to be to its owner. Whenever Dessa said or did something that seemed human, the narrator was quick to explain it away and suggest she was doing what "their kind" usually did. Or that he was spending so much time with her his senses were getting dulled.

I think, slaves used this misconstrued stupidity to their advantage. Take Dessa as an example. The narrator and most other slave owners must have heard slaves singing. Of course, as slaves to their reflexes, the blacks *couldn't* have had a motive to their singing. The couldn't be communicating ideas or messages to each other, they weren't that intelligent. Dessa used her songs to signal to her accomplice and the narrator chalked it off to the slaves commiserating with each other and tried to patronize her then as well. Well, well, he was made a fool after all.

Class #4

Baldwin, James . "Notes of a Native Son". *The Price of the Ticket* . New York: St. Martin's, 1985.

When he was a younger boy, did Baldwin feel that his father was misrepresenting the extent of the racism he (the father) had experienced? I ask because at the top of the second page, he writes that he was "contemptuous of his father for the conditions of his life". Baldwin may be

referring to their eternal poverty, but perhaps he blamed his father for letting racism cripple him to the extent where he couldn't maintain a job long enough to provide for the family?

Over and over again in this essay, Baldwin writes about how he regrets never having spoken to his father. They've never had a sincere conversation except for when his father told him that he realized that he, James, would rather write than preach. It's as though they shared a moment of understanding that was to last them forever and compensate for the time they'd never have. Maybe it was a glimpse of what their life would have been like if his father had been able to overcome his own hate and bitterness and if James himself had been able to see through the hatred and bitterness that was suffocating his father.

James Baldwin's essay initially gives the impression that he wants to forget his father—why else would he go drinking with his girlfriend on the day of his father's funeral? But later you realize that he connects every experience he's had to his father—what his father would have done, what he (JB) would not do because he wasn't like his father and finally, how his father's experiences made him retreat from human contact.

That night in New Jersey when he (JB) almost killed the white waitress he suddenly understood the fury that his father had fallen victim to. He tasted the impotence that came with the rage: on one hand, he hated the whites for treating him like a little less than rubbish and wanted to hurt them, but how could he reduce himself to their level? How could he copy their murderous actions and avenge his pride? His father may have dealt with that and retreated into a shell because he couldn't do anything, but James Baldwin realizes that "Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was an immutable law." He chooses not to hate because he doesn't want to destroy his mind and his life. He doesn't want that and he realizes this as a result of his father's life, which was ruined by bitterness and hate.

Class #5

Morrison, Toni . *The Bluest Eye* . New York : Plume . 1994 .

Pecola's situation—the wanting to be white— can't have been unique. Every black girl who grew up in the early 20th century may have wanted to be white at some point. The difference was that there was no one to tell Pecola that she was beautiful in her own right. The people who were supposed to tell her that, instead reinforced her belief in her ugliness. But it's not all about being black. If her parents had told Pecola that it was only her who was ugly, she would have wanted to be like her mother (for example) and still wouldn't learn how to love herself. *The Bluest Eye* emphasizes that everyone, even those respected, admired members of society, is

guilty of treating beautiful people better. If there's one message to be taken from this book, I would say, it's to stop labeling people based on their looks. It's not fair, it's damaging. Why should one group of people decide how to exclude everyone else and make them feel inferior?

Frieda was beginning to fall into the trap. Pecola and Frieda would be the ones who'd long to be like Geraldine. Claudia, undoubtedly, would hate her. She prefers the loud, singing, passionate Mrs. McTyre (her mother, but still), complete with funkiness and human smells. Claudia seems ahead of her sister and Pecola, but perhaps, everyone begins life wanting to be unique and then becomes aware of society's dislikes and likes before succumbing to the conventions. Claudia herself alludes to a time when she makes the conventions enough—it was disappointing to read that, but then I realized, it's idealistic to expect a teenager to remain on the outside of her peer group simply to maintain her principles. Why would anyone want to deal with that isolation?

I was (and still am) a little confused by the chronological order of events. Did Pecola come to stay with Claudia and Freida before or after she was raped by her father? She begins menstruating during her stay, so I think it was before. But how did Pecola return to her parents' house if she once she was in foster care?

Class #7
Herbert, Bob. "Recalling An Ugly Time". *New York Times.* 24 Feb. 2003: A21.

It's reading articles like these that makes me suspicious of every white person I pass on the street. After I read Williams' short story on Dessa and the racist narrator, I felt myself getting angry most randomly. I remember an incident on the T. I was headed to MGH and there was a little boy standing with his grandfather, in front of me. The kid wasn't holding onto anything and when the train pulled to a stop, he lurched. I caught him before he could fall and the grandfather grabbed him from me, throwing a grimace my way. It wasn't a thank-you and it wasn't a "Ah, kids!" grimace. He didn't look pleased to me.

It seems like a worthy cause superficially. Get rid of Affirmative Action because it makes minority students feel inferior, because it takes away seats from qualified whites and because the blacks aren't disadvantaged anymore. But the groups that organize these arguments aren't so justifiable: genetic superiority of whites. Superiority that's based on what? Colored people have

endured more severe climates than the Europeans who enslaved/colonized them and were civilized long before the imperialists arrived. But, of course, the West claims to have brought civilization to everyone else. I think the phrase the Pioneer Fund's founders are looking for is "Inflatable sense of self-worth". Hmph.

Class #7 and Class #9
Edrich, Louis. *Love Medicine*. New York : Holt, Rhineheart and Winston . 1984 .
Smoke Signals . Dir Chris Eyre . Perf Adam Beach and Evan Adams . 1998

I couldn't help but think of a report I'd read earlier about the high rates of suicide and depression among Native Americans. It's a small wonder, what with the forced settlement of so many of them by the United States Government. The government knew it was eradicating a way of life. I think that was their purpose. If they gave the Native Americans something to be responsible for, to be beholden to, the Native Americans would forever be at the whim of the government.

I think it's interesting that although Eli was the one without the schooling that the rest of America thought was necessary to make one civilized, moral and responsible, it was he who was more responsible than his educated (slightly self-absorbed?) brother, Nector. Nector seemed to running away from the "family man" predicament he'd gotten himself into—all from one careless encounter from Marie, who he thought was stealing from the nuns. Although Marie made him respectable, Nector didn't appreciate her efforts. That one stunning moment when he realizes that time has passed him by—that his days as a stud are over, the style of writing places the reader *right* in the middle of the scene. As I read it, I could almost sense every noise receding to the foreground and motion stopping as Nector remembered and saw everything that had happened to him, in his mind. And later in his life, he developed Alzheimers. As Albertine later suggests, maybe he sought refuge in not remembering.

I didn't quite know what to make of the relationship between Henry Lamartine and Albertine Kashpaw. Initially, I thought she knew she was putting herself in harm's way; she knew he was a Vietnam Veteran, scarred both emotionally and physically by the war, but she still sought him out and clung to him. I don't think there was any malicious intent in him. He was lost and reacted in the only way he knew how to.

The reservation described in this novel seems starker and lonelier than the one seen in Chris Eyre's Smoke Signals. I read that the movie was based on a novel by Sherman Alexie and

that the movie was a lot lighter and humorous. Coincidence? I think not! The sight of green hills and rain-related fog makes everything look prettier and hopeful, but Edrich's book doesn't devote much time to describing plant life other than to name shrubs and other plants "bending in the wind." For June, greenery has a negative connotation because her mother did leave her in the bushes when she (the mother) died. The author makes a connection between Eli and the forest he grew up in and how that made him more grounded and reliable than his brother. In *Smoke Signals*, it's the trailer that the Arnold lived on, away from his family, that's barren. It's in Arizona, in the midst of a desert.

Incidentally, the woman who was driving the car that only moved backwards was the doctor's receptionist on the TV show: Northern Exposure, while the gymnast on the bus, was the bartender's wife on the same show. And! The actor who played the young Thomas was the little Indian kid that Jackie Chan saves from a rival tribe in *Shanghai Noon*.

When the two began singing the song about John Wayne's teeth, I thought the other passengers would laugh at them and yell at them to stop disturbing the peace. However, none of that happened. Instead, it seemed to be the beginning of an understanding between Thomas and Victor. As the camera shot the bus driving away ("into the sunset") the John Wayne song took a more serious note and sounded like a song an Indian might sing and that sounded ridiculous. It sounded like the cartoons that portray Indians as wearing a whole lot of war paint, running around a campfire, screaming.

I couldn't help but feel angry with Victor for not being more curious about his father's life away from the rest of the family. He didn't seem even a little jealous that Suzie knew his father better than he had (although, Arnold was to blame for that). That Victor shared Arnold's ashes with Thomas is poignant because Arnold was "symbolically" Thomas's father as well. He did *give* him life in that Arnold caught Thomas when the latter's parents tossed him out of the burning house. But one wonders, why didn't the parents jump out too? And didn't Thomas suffer from smoke-inhalation related problems?

The last scene, where Victor drops his father's ashes into the river, I could almost sense the burden being lifted from his shoulders. Victor had finally learned to give up the anger he felt towards his father. While in Thomas's case, it was sorrow because a father figure had left, in Victor's case, it was anger. Thomas asks Victor one last time, "Do you know why your father left?" and after a meaningful pause, Victor replies, "I don't know, but it doesn't matter."

Class #11 to Class #14
Kingston, Maxine H. . *Woman Warrior:Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc . 1975 .

This is the first time I've seen the word FOB written in a published book. I didn't know people other than Indians used this to describe recent immigrants until my Freshman year at MIT when a Chinese American friend told me she could never date "one of those FOBs" because her halting English would remind her too much of her father.

While I read the last chapter were Kingston describes her taunting (of) the other Chinese immigrant in the class, I could sense her desperation. She really wanted the other girl to talk. The other girl was everything Kingston knew she was, or at the very least, looked like to everyone else and she hated that! It seemed as though Kingston thought that getting the girl to talk would provide her with a release to talk, but I don't think she would have started talking just because she'd managed to scare the girl.

A lot of my cousins who were born in the United States, for their first few years, only spoke Malayalam. When they start school, they suddenly have problems understanding and are put in speech therapy or ESL classes and their parents immerse them in English: english movies, english music, english cartoons and the extent to which my cousins grasp the language is amazing (it's a testament to language acquisition and the brain's plasticity…oops, wrong discussion!), but at the same time, they develop an abhorrence for Malayalam. I think that happens because they resent the language that separated them from their peers for (what seems to them) a long time. Because I know they hate Malayalam, I often speak to them in it—these are kids who a few years before school only spoke to me in Malayalam. They answer me in English and most of them usually ask me why I still speak Malayalam. I try to explain about cultural pride, see their eyes glazing over, realize I sound like a parent and give up. It's easy for me to criticize them because I spoke English *and* Malayalam before I went to school. ☺

I didn't enjoy the chapters about the cultural legends as much. It reminded me too much of Amy Tan's novels—which individually are great to read, but the three books of hers that I've read (*Joy Luck Club, Kitchen God's Wife* and *A Hundred Secret Senses*) are either all based on a myth or have myths weaved into the text. But someone in class did point out that Kingston was probably an innovator in her time; Amy Tan did come much later.

I found the chapter on Brave Orchid's education at Medical School very interesting, especially because of the scene in the "haunted room". Brave Orchid talks about waking up in the middle of the night feeling a suffocating weight on her chest and thinking it's a monster. I've read of this in a textbook for one of my classes. Here's what the textbook says:

> Night terror, which is a sudden arousal from stage 3 or 4 [slow wave sleep] marked by intense fear and autonomic activation. In night terror the sleeper does not recall a vivid dream, but may remember a sense of a crushing feeling on the chest, as though being suffocated. Night terrors, common in children during the early part of an evening's sleep, seem to be a disorder of arousal. (Rozenwieg 446).

On the page after this description, there's a picture of a woman asleep with what looks like a Gargoyle sitting on her chest. Doesn't that remind you of Brave Orchid's ordeal with the creature in the haunted room?

Class #15

***A Long Walk Home.* Dir Richard Pearce. Perf Whoopi Goldberg and Sissy Spacek. 1990.**

I did take American History in high school, but I never stopped to think about how long the Montgomery Bus Boycott lasted. I had never considered what had happened *between* Rosa Parks's initiating the boycott and the Supreme Court's declaring segregation on the buses unconstitutional

I did some research on the topic and found that the boycott had lasted a year: December 5, 1955 to December 20, 1956. It was this issue of desegregating the bus system that gave Reverend Martin Luther King and his policy of non-violence the nation's attention. I found out that the leaders who organized the boycott made three demands of the transportation authority.

1. The bus drivers should treat black customers fairly.
2. The customers be served in order of their arrival—once they entered the bus, blacks should proceed to the back and whites to the front (filling up space as they entered).
3. They should allow black bus drivers to drive in predominantly black routes.

The last two demands seemed to further promote segregation than eliminate it. For instance, why should the blacks automatically go to the back of the buses? If they were paying as much as the white patrons, shouldn't they be able to sit where they want? Going to the back would make them second-class citizens yet again. Perhaps, the leaders of the boycott had demanded this because they knew they had to do things in moderation. In New York (I don't use the bus much here in Boston), I noticed that the black and Hispanic students in my school gravitated to the

back of the bus with the Asians (me) and the Caucasians sitting in the front. Does this have anything to do with racial issues or is it just a coincidence?

My favorite scene in the movie—hands down—would have to be when Miriam laid down the law to Norman. He comes home sniffling because of his cold and Miriam asks him how he's feeling. In reply he lists his ailments and ends with his headache. Miriam, however, is so nervous about what she's going to say next that she brushes off his whining with, "That's wonderful, honey—" and launches into her demand that he stay out of household business. Her argument makes it sound like she's fighting as a woman, but I thought that was just a façade. The real issue—one she was afraid of broaching to her husband, was that she didn't support racism *all the way*. She wasn't as prejudiced against the African Americans as her husband wasn't and his family was and she doesn't support his (or Tucker's) views on how to interact with "the Negroes".

The scene where Norman takes his family to the construction site and shows them the streets he's named after them didn't make sense to me until the end of the movie when (the grown-up) Mary Kate remarks that her mother had been a part of something great and had gotten her involved as well. By participating in the car pool and shaking off her need to remain neutral, Miriam had left behind something more enduring and emphatic than a street (which didn't have her last name and so wouldn't be enduring anyway!).

Class #17
***Mississippi Masala*. Dir Mira Nair. Perf Sarita Choudhury and Denzel Washington. 1991 .**

It's so easy for me to talk about the double standards in other communities, but not about my own. I feel a little embarrassed discussing this movie. For all the whining we do about being treated poorly because of race, Indians do have their own racial stereotypes and prejudices against other races. On the surface, everyone's nice to everyone else—when they feel the stand to benefit (re: Mina's uncle being all friendly and "hey, we're all colored" to Tyrone), but go home and suddenly, it's that "black boy" or "white girl". I don't think that's restricted to Indians either. Every community has its own opinions about other races.

Mina isn't an Indian except in that she looks like one and probably holds an Indian passport. She was born in Uganda, lived in India for a short (very short) while, then moved to England before finally settling with her parents in Mississippi. Yet, her parents expect her to fit

right in with the Indian community they find in Mississippi which, to be fair, she tries to do, but she finds that she's more compatible (and comfortable) with Demetrius, an African American.

The Indian community doesn't completely accept the family either. Her mother, for instance, runs a liquor store. Alcohol isn't a comfortable subject for Indians—men drink, but no one talks about that and women aren't supposed to touch the stuff. That Mina's mother *runs* a store is quite the scandal. Mina's father, played by Roshan Seth (Nehru in *Gandhi*), is still trying to get compensation from Uganda's government and isn't employed—quite the shame! When Mina leaves her cousin's wedding with the most eligible bachelor, one sees the glares from the other women at the wedding who think it's presumptuous of her to think she can marry him; she's poor *and* dark.

Her eloping with Demetrius embarrasses the family more—it's seen as beneath their stations to marry a non-Indian, an a black man at that. It demeans the way her parents brought her up and I'm sure people would say something about Mina's pride; her marrying out shows that she must think she's too good for the Indian men.

Class #17 to Class #18
Mitcham, Judson. *The Sweet Everlasting* . New York : Avon Books, Inc . 1996 .

I knew when I read the first line of the book that something horrible had happened and left the narrator bereft of his wife and child. "It was an idea as real as a sharp stick, and even better for drawing blood. But if you looked at it good, like I finally did, it didn't have nothing to back it up." That statement immediately made me think that his family had been unexpectedly and tragically killed and it had all happened so quickly after a period in their lives that had been intensely happy that the whole "family life" experience had been a daydream that had lasted by a couple of minutes.

As I read the book I realized it race and prejudice were important to the novel and the more I got to know Ellis, the more I realized that the first line referred (also?) to his attitude on separation of the races. Since I was expecting something horrible to happen with every revelation Ellis made—a horrible something that ended with the deaths of Susan and W.D., I found myself nervous with anticipation most of the time. Take that scene with Ellis's colleague who was continuously throwing herself at Ellis for example. I was convinced that Ellis would have an affair with her, feel guilty about it and confess to Susan. Susan, blinded by rage, would strike out at Ellis, and in the ensuing struggle, Ellis accidentally kills her and loses W.D to foster care. That

didn't happen, but then (or was it before?), I read about Ellis's "spells". Clearly, the tragic event would be his getting into one of those while he was driving or something and then killing Susan and W.D. while surviving himself.

I hadn't expected Susan to have any black ancestry. The scene as they walked home from the revival where Ellis tells Susan that he didn't believe in that sort of foolishness, I sensed that his repeating (to the readers, not Susan) that he had been referring to the preacher's style and not his beliefs should have been a clue that his omission to Susan would have dire consequences. But, I didn't think of that until later. My favorite scene in The Sweet Everlasting was the scene between Ellis and Susan after they dropped W.D. off at school and walked back home, laughing with each other and celebrating their pride in their son's education.

I wish W.D. hadn't had to die the way he did, but I wonder, if he hadn't would Ellis have come to the conclusion he had about race and love not being entwined? Would he have come to the understanding that he would have loved Susan regardless of her race? I think the point to focus on it not that Susan was only technically black or that she had 1/16 black blood. The point is that Ellis rejected her when he thought her to be black by his society's standards. That reminded me of the essay we read at the beginning of the year about the woman who'd sued a fertility institution for giving her a black man's sperm and thus, having a black baby. When Ellis's says, "You done made my boy a nigger too, put your own nigger blood in his veins and made him a nigger too. My boy, *my* boy." this reader was wondering why Ellis wasn't remembering how beautiful he thought W.D. was.

Class #21
Twilight LA. Perf. Anna Deveare Smith. Videocassette. PBS, 2000.

I was in Kuwait when the LA riots broke out. My remoteness contributed largely to my not understanding the horror of what was happening. It was probably why, years later in New York, when everyone was talking about the possibilities of riots in response to the Abner Louima and Amadu Diallo cases, I scoffed. Race Riots *did not* happen in post Civil Rights Era America. Hah. I didn't know about Latasha Harlans until my freshman year at MIT.

Why did the blacks think that burning down the Korean-Americans' stores would accomplish something? Although property destruction is not a justified way of showing the anger, I know the anger itself was justified. How could the justice system have assigned an all white jury to this case? It was resoundingly reminiscent of the cases of black murders in the early part of the century when whites were found innocent regardless of the evidence stacked against

them. Even if King was a regular rabble-rouser resisting arrest, I don't see how anyone could justify the police officers beating him repeatedly and so viciously. The man was flat on the ground, on his back and they were still beating him.

One thing that this production made clear was that no one is blameless in this. Maybe the Korean Americans could have done more to connect to their black counterparts. Maybe the African Americans could have identified that something had to be done about black teenagers disrupting business in neighborhood stores. About that Community leader who called the Korean Americans cockroaches. Did she realize that she was perpetuating prejudice? How could she dismiss an entire people like that? As though their pain wasn't worth anything, as though their differences from her race made them unworthy of membership in an American society.

The talent agent who recognized that he was guilty of *something* was quite thought provoking. It always seems a little insincere when a person who was not immediately involved with an incident accepts blame for it. Was he simply saying what he thought was PC or did he genuinely feel like white people had a huge part of the blame to own up to? He seemed to be the voice of reason among all his peers—the ones who kept referring to the "unknown they" and panicking about nothing. He said he could understand the blacks wanting to destroy his neighborhood, but couldn't understand why they'd want to damage their own. That seemed a little obtuse. Well, duh. The Korean-American stores in "their" neighborhoods don't count as a part of the African Americans' neighborhoods, of course. Just because the majority of the country lumps all minorities into one group ('them'), it doesn't follow that the minorities themselves do.

I always feel a little condescending when I say things like this, but I think Smith was very convincing in all the roles she played in *Twilight LA*. From the white male juror to the angry, old, Korean woman, she was very convincing. To a Korean, the accent may have been off, the speech patterns clearly fake, but to me, it seemed very authentic. I had a little trouble convincing myself that the last Korean woman (Mrs. Suh?) was actually Smith and not a Korean woman.

The video was interspersed with actual footage from the riots and that was a great way of substantiating what her characters were saying during their interviews. The most poignant scene in the footage shown was the one with the elderly African American yelling, with tears streaming down his face, at the looting youngsters. Is the looting what Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X,

countless others were assassinated, incarcerated, heckled and firebombed for? I don't think their message had been equal treatment for just blacks, yet that's what the looters were suggesting.

Class #22 to Class 25
Faulkner, William. *Go Down, Moses*. New York : Random House, Inc . 1942 .

Where do I start? After I finished the book, some of the things that are at the top of my mind:

1. In *Pantaloon in Black*, when the white sheriff describes his day to his wife he says,
   So he comes to work, the first man on the job when McAndrews and everybody else expected him to take the day off since even a nigger couldn't want no better excuse for a holiday than he had just buried his wife, when a white man would have took the day off out of pure respect no matter how he felt about his wife, when even a little child would have had sense enough to take a day off when he would still get paid for it too. But not [Rider]. (Faulkner 151).

There are several other instances in *Go down, Moses*, of white men treating or talking about black men and women in a way that suggests that the darker race isn't capable of higher thought and emotions. The biggest example of this is Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin having a son with his own daughter and simply providing for her family later—no guilt, no shame at what he'd done. Lucius must have known who the woman was when he had sex with her, but he didn't recognize her as his daughter. She was a black slave and nothing more. The slaves, it would seem, had more morality than their white owners.

4. In *The Old People,* in his description of Sam Fathers, Ike writes :
   In the boy's eyes at least it was Sam Fathers, the negro , who bore himself not only toward his cousin McCaslin and Major de Spain but toward all white men, with gravity and dignity and without servility or recourse to that impenetrable wall of ready and easy mirth which negroes sustain between themselves and white men, bearing himself toward his cousin MCCalsin not only as one man to another but as an older man to a younger.

   None of the blacks mentioned in this novel show that sense of humor and unshakable loyalty that are integral to movies like *The Lone Ranger* and well, I can't think of another example, but you know what I mean. Those movies in which either the black man or the Indian is doggedly following around his white superior, doting on him and worshipping him. The black and Indian (and any mixes thereof) men in Faulkner's novel are strong, proud characters. Lucas Beauchamp has a disdain for Roth Edmonds, but Sam Fathers isn't disdainful or scornful to anyone, he simply doesn't think he's anyone's inferior. Neither ask for permission before they do anything and they don't take instructions from any white men. And during the course of *the Bear*, I got the feeling that Sam Father (I keep wanting to calling him Samwise Gangee!) was superior to the other people mentioned (Major de Spain, the General, McCaslin, Ike). He seemed to have understood the place of the human being, the role they were supposed to play in nature.

3. In *The Fire and the Hearth*, (just a brief mention): I'm glad Lucas (who refused to be called Lucius!) decided not to let Molly get a "voce", but instead sacrificed his own greed to keep his marriage. And that he remembered Molly liked candy. His saying, "Here…you ain't got no teeth left but you can still gum it." is somehow very sweet! She liked candy when she was young and could chew on it, and now that she's old—they've been married for 45 years—he knows she still likes them, but can only suck on the sweets. ;)

The Bear was a difficult chapter to read. I don't think Faulkner should criticize Uncles Buck and Buddy and their father for ignoring the rules of grammar and punctuation. Faulkner seemed to be avoiding those as well. I guess if the whole book had been written like the ledgers the family had kept, it would be an even harder piece of work to understand.

I think I've read an excerpt of this section earlier, but I can't remember where. Why do you suppose everyone had it in for the black bear? I wonder if Faulkner made it black and not some other color for any particular reason. Could it have represented the black people of the South and the hunters, the white government that tried to tame them, control their passion and funkiness? What would Lion's role be? Why should Ike have hated Lion? Because he was the one to get to the bear first? I didn't understand why Lion hated Old Ben so much. It seemed ironic that, in the end, it was Boon who had terrible aim, that downed the bear—with his knife. I was disappointed. I was expecting Ike to be the one who killed Old Ben.

When Ike reads the ledger that details his family's incest, he is ashamed and horrified. Was he genuinely horrified at how his family had treated its slaves or was he just shocked at the idea of incest? I think the fact that he relinquished his inheritance and any claims he might have had on the land shows that it was the former, but in *Delta Autumn*, he calls the woman a nigger and tells her to marry a black man. I was hoping he'd be the first one to see past the color line, but that may be asking for too much too soon. Ike does allude to a time when race will no longer matter, but he recognizes that such a time will be a while in coming and he won't live to see it. His only remaining kin, Roth, won't admit to the feelings he has for a woman simply because she's black. I wonder if he knows they're related, that he had had a relationship with Lucas's niece.

Class #27
Cisnerso, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*

Everyone in class seemed to think that Esperanza having a crush on Sally suggested that she was a lesbian, I *don't* think so. Esperanza may or may not have been a lesbian, but I don't think her infatuation on Sally was sexual at all. The description of Esperanza's infatuation on Sally suggests (to me at least!) that Esperanza was in awe of everything Sally was and had. (How to say this without sounding scary?) She wanted a claim on Sally that no one else could have or take away from her. She was jealous of the boys who flirted with Sally not because she (Esperanza) felt that Sally was attracted to them instead of her, but because…Sally wasn't paying attention to her. Hmmm, this doesn't sound like I'm saying anything different. I suppose all I'm trying to say is that it wasn't necessarily a sexual attraction, but a possessive one. Does that make any sense?

My favorite vignette in *The House on Mango Street*, involves Esperanza and her sister, Nenny. I don't have the book with me (I borrowed it from the Reserve book room and had to return it), so I can't tell you the name of the chapter. It's the vignette where Esperanza talks about being Nenny's sister. They associate images similarly so when Esperanza says a house looks like Mexico, Rachel and Lydia think she's crazy, but Nenny only nods and says, "Yup, there's Mexico." I've often felt that way with my sister, Lynn. Having grown up together, a lot of our associations with scents and colors and books are similar. Sometimes, we'll step out of our house in New York, and I'll say, "Hey, lynn, it smells like Kuwait on a humid day." She'll nod and we'll both stand still for a couple of minutes inhaling the scent of what could have been a 98% humidity day in Kuwait.

I don't know for sure, but is Edna's Ruth stuck at home because she's hiding from her abusive husband? Did she become relatively simple-minded because her husband hit her on the head? When Esperanza was reading her a story/poem at the end of that chapter, Ruth zones out and I wonder whether that was because she had suddenly remembered her dreams and aspirations before she'd gotten married and irreparably hurt.

Class #24
"That takes Ovaries."

It wasn't until I was walking home from the Open Mic that night that I remembered something I'd done that (for me) took a lot of guts, I mean, *ovaries*.

Last summer, I was a UROP at a Neural Development lab at MIT and I was taking a course with Princeton Review on the MCATS, an exam I'd be appearing for in August. It was hard to balance lab work and studying—going to lab for enough hours to get a good amount of research done without sacrificing homework so that I'd do well on the test. I tried to keep regular hours and notify my supervisor well in advance when I planned to take time off to study.

I had a feeling that my supervisor, a postdoctoral associate, (I'll call him Emil), didn't like my taking time off, but I wasn't about to change my schedule to suit him. I was finishing my work at lab, so as far as I was concerned, he had no reason to complain. Around mid-July, I decided to take a week off from lab to study for the MCATs uninterrupted. My MCAT classes were suffering because I hadn't spent enough time on the homework. When I told Emil that I'd be taking a week off, he said, "You can't just start something and take time off so often. It's the summer, so I was expecting you to be around more to finish the work. It's just a thought, but you should make your schedule more conducive to doing lab work."

I felt awful! One thing I've always hated is people telling me that I'm not working hard enough and I'd do anything to convince them otherwise. I'd just been told off by my supervisor! I went to an Athena cluster and emailed my sister. "Do you think I'm not working hard enough? Do you think Emil was right? I feel so small and insignificant. If he thinks that, I don't even want to know what Martha (faculty supervisor) thinks….damn, damn, damn." I hit 'send' and stared at the monitor briefly. Whenever my sister or my friends complained about people treating them poorly, I wondered why they'd sat through it without saying anything back. And yet, wasn't that what I'd just done?

I marched back to lab and into the lounge where Emil sat eating his lunch. "I need to talk to you, Emil." I said, my usual smile missing, my face a mask of anger (I'd like to imagine, so humor me). He looked a little apprehensive as he followed me out to the benches in the hallway.

Me: I didn't appreciate what you implied a little while ago, Emil. I know I do my work and I've been working hard to accomplish the deadlines I've set for myself without any help from you. I came to work last week, when [YOU] no one else was here to supervise me and finished what I had to do. So don't tell me—

Emil: (nervous) I know, I had a feeling you'd have more to say about that. I wasn't, uh—(moves over on bench). Can you sit down? It looks less confrontational then…

Me: No, I'd rather stand. (Sits down anyway, oh wimp! How I wished I'd remained standing).

Emil: I know you do your work and I'm sorry I suggested that I thought otherwise. I was just saying that…

Me: Yes, Emil?

Emil: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.

Emil no longer tries to make schedules for me or criticize how much work I accomplish. So there.

I'm glad that I went to the reading, although I didn't think of my own story in time. I never thought I'd meet two authors in one term alone! Listening to other women read about their own experiences and from books they'd enjoyed was very emphatic. I know this sounds a little cheesy, but I went away from the meeting feeling proud about being a woman. Some of the things that people read (Professor Lee, "kay") made me wonder about the attitudes that I take about things with out really thinking about them deeply.

Class #29
***Lone Star*. Dir John Sayles. Perf Chris Cooper. 1996 .**

My favorite scene in the movie? The scene in the Mexican restaurant when the camera pans in on Matthew McConahey (Aaargh, how do you spell his name again?!). Sigh. (or using the lingo I once used in my diary *from high school*: ψ).

Okay, no, I was only kidding. My favorite scene in the movie (why do you suppose everyone starts the presentation off with that question?) was where Montoya told Sam, after drawing a line in the sand and asking him to jump over it, that he didn't have to answer any of the gringo bastard's questions. Then there's the scene in Mercedes's café with Pilar and Sam: for a brief second, the camera is looking at them through the windows and the lighting is just wonderful. The scene is very peaceful and soothing.

A couple of things appeared a little protracted: the relationship between the two sergeants from the army base and the colonel's relationship with O. The relationship between the sergeants was meant to show how race lines were being blurred—I understand that it added to the movie's overall theme—but it seemed very forced and not clichéd, but…the two characters were obviously acting. And I didn't understand what purpose O's relationship with his son in the movie. It provided an opening for O's line about blood being only what one made it as well as his understanding of how all the races were forever connected, but other than that it seemed unnecessary. I don't think it should have been part of the movie at all. That Pilar and Sam were siblings didn't occur to me until Sam pointed it out. In retrospect, it should have been obvious: Sam was probing Cruz's murder in order to find out when he had died with respect to Pilar's

birth. If everyone in the town knew that Buddy was Pilar's father, how come no one "accidentally" let it slip? Did their loyalty to Buddy go that far?

Lone Star painted a good picture of the racially mixed populations that we see in cities today. Clearly, the closer the town is to the border, the more races that are present and the more interior cities don't have as much, but Sayles, I think was looking at the extreme case. When people may look like they belong to one race, but are really of two races and nothing (even the morality people want to assign to their parents) is black or white, but can only be described in shades of grey.