

Optional Ethnicities: For Whites Only?

Question for the Portfolio Reading Set

Due Date: Monday June 6, 2005

Context:

In her article, “Optional Ethnicities: For Whites Only?,” Mary Waters argues that ethnicity is socially constructed (not biologically determined) in two distinct forms: either as “symbolic” or “oppositional” identities. Water argues symbolic identity is a matter of choice. Initially, one is assimilated as an American; then, one chooses an ethnicity, and culture--an identity is added on to, or hyphenated with one’s American identity. However, Waters claims that non-whites do not have this form of identity available to them: symbolic ethnicity is a form of white privilege--a freedom limited to white Americans to construct multiple identities.

Question:

Write an essay that analyzes Waters’s argument regarding the “option” to claim ethnicity. Evaluate the experiences of ethnic identities in the writings of Liu, Laurino, and either Ortiz Cofer, or Jen. Your essay should summarize Waters’s argument and her key terms. Then, you should apply her argument to the other authors. Develop your own position evaluating Waters’s idea by examining and analyzing the experiences of the authors: Do their struggles to define their identities operate within the framework that Waters describes; Do their struggles to define themselves operate in ways that complicate Waters’s position; or, Do they define themselves in ways that operate completely different from the manner that Waters’s position describes?

University of Massachusetts/Boston

Writing Proficiency Evaluation Portfolio Reading Set

The Portfolio should be submitted on June 6, 2005 no later than 5:00 P.M at the Writing Proficiency Office, Campus Center 2/2100.

Optional Ethnicities: For Whites Only?

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1. Waters, Mary. "Optional Ethnicities: For Whites Only?" *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996.
2. Liu, Eric. "Notes of a Native Speaker." *The Accidental Asian*. New York: Random House, 1998.
3. Laurino, Maria. "Scents." *Were You Always an Italian*. New York: Norton, 2000.
4. Cofer, Judith Ortiz. "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria." *The Latin Deli*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993.
5. Jen, Gish. "An Ethnic Trump." *The New York Times Magazine*, July 7, 1996.

Notes:

1) Please check our website (<http://www.umb.edu/academics/wpr/>) for the dates and times of the Writing Proficiency Workshops for the June 2005 Portfolio. The workshops will focus on strategies for developing a thesis, organizing an argument, and analyzing the reading sets.

2) Plagiarism in a portfolio, *whether it is in the new essay or in one of the supporting essays*, will be treated in the manner as outlined in the [Code of Student Conduct](#). The consequences of violating these policies are serious and may include suspension or expulsion.

3) Please use page numbers on all portfolio essays; place them either in a header or in a footer.

Optional Ethnicities: For Whites Only?

By Mary Waters

Mary Waters, a professor of sociology at Harvard University, is the author of *Ethnic Options: Choosing Ethnic Identities in America* (1990) and *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (2000).

What does it mean to talk about ethnicity as an option for an individual? To argue that an individual has some degree of choice in their ethnic identity flies in the face of the commonsense notion of ethnicity many of us believe in—that one’s ethnic identity is a fixed characteristic, reflective of blood ties and given at birth. However, social scientists who study ethnicity have long concluded that while ethnicity is based on a belief in a common ancestry, ethnicity is primarily a social phenomenon, not a biological one (Alba 1985, 1990; Barth 1969; Weber [1921] 1968, p. 389). The belief that members of an ethnic group have that they share a common ancestry may not be a fact. There is a great deal of change in ethnic identities across generations through intermarriage, changing allegiances, and changing social categories. There is also a much larger amount of change in the identities of individuals over their lives than is commonly believed. While most people are aware of the phenomenon known as “passing”—people raised as one race who change at some point and claim a different race as their identity—there are similar life-course changes in ethnicity that happen all the time and are not given the same degree of attention as racial passing.

White Americans of European ancestry can be described as having a great deal of choice in terms of their ethnic identities. The two major types of options White Americans can exercise are (1) the option of whether to claim any specific ancestry, or to just be “White” or American (Lieberson [1985] called these people “unhyphenated Whites”) and (2) the choice of which of their European ancestries to choose to include in their description of their own identities. In both cases, the option of choosing how to present yourself on surveys and in everyday social interactions exists for Whites because of social changes and societal conditions that have created a great deal of social mobility, immigrant assimilation, and political and economic power for Whites in the United States. Specifically, the option of being able to not claim any ethnic identity exists for Whites of European background in the United States because they are the majority group—in terms of holding political and social power, as well as being a numerical majority. The option of choosing among different ethnicities in their family backgrounds exists because the degree of discrimination and social distance attached to specific European backgrounds has diminished over time....

Symbolic Ethnicities for White Americans

What do these ethnic identities mean to people and why do they cling to them rather than just abandoning the tie and calling themselves American? My own field research with suburban Whites in California and Pennsylvania found that later-generation descendants of European origin maintain what are called “symbolic ethnicities.” Symbolic ethnicity is a term coined by Herbert Gans (1979) to refer to ethnicity that is individualistic in nature and without real social cost for the individual. These symbolic identifications are essentially leisure-time activities, rooted in nuclear family traditions and reinforced by the voluntary enjoyable aspects of being ethnic (Waters 1990). Richard Alba (1990) also found later-generation Whites in Albany, New York, who chose to keep a tie with an ethnic identity because of the enjoyable and voluntary aspects to those identities, along with the feelings of specialness they entailed. An example of symbolic ethnicity is individuals who identify as Irish, for example, on occasions such as Saint Patrick’s Day, on family holidays, or for vacations. They do not usually belong to Irish American organizations, live in Irish neighborhoods, work in Irish jobs, or marry other Irish people. The symbolic meaning of being Irish American can be constructed by individuals from mass media images, family traditions, or other intermittent social activities. In other words, for later-generation White ethnics, ethnicity is not something that influences their lives unless they want it to. In the world of work and school and neighborhood, individuals do not have to admit to being ethnic unless they choose to. And for an increasing number of European-origin individuals whose parents and grandparents have intermarried,

the ethnicity they claim is largely a matter of personal choice as they sort through all of the possible combinations of groups in their genealogies....

Race Relations and Symbolic Ethnicity

However much symbolic ethnicity is without cost for the individual, there is a cost associated with symbolic ethnicity for the society. That is because symbolic ethnicities of the type described here are confined to White Americans of European origin. Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians do not have the option of a symbolic ethnicity at present in the United States. For all of the ways in which ethnicity does not matter for White Americans, it does matter for non-Whites. Who your ancestors are does affect your choice of spouse, where you live, what job you have, who your friends are, and what your chances are for success in American society, if those ancestors happen not to be from Europe. The reality is that White ethnics have a lot more choice and room for maneuver than they themselves think they do. The situation is very different for members of racial minorities, whose lives are strongly influenced by their race or national origin regardless of how much they may choose not to identify themselves in terms of their ancestries.

When White Americans learn the stories of how their grandparents and great-grandparents triumphed in the United States over adversity, they are usually told in terms of their individual efforts and triumphs. The important role of labor unions and other organized political and economic actors in their social and economic successes are left out of the story in favor of a generational story of individual Americans rising up against communitarian, Old World intolerance, and New World resistance. As a result, the “individualized” voluntary, cultural view of ethnicity for Whites is what is remembered.

One important implication of these identities is that they tend to be very individualistic. There is a tendency to view valuing diversity in a pluralist environment as equating all groups. The symbolic ethnic tends to think that all groups are equal; everyone has a background that is their right to celebrate and pass on to their children. This leads to the conclusion that all identities are equal and all identities in some sense are interchangeable—“I’m Italian American, you’re Polish American. I’m Irish American, you’re African American.” The important thing is to treat people as individuals and all equally. However, this assumption ignores the very big difference between an individualistic symbolic ethnic identity and a socially enforced and imposed racial identity.

My favorite example of how this type of thinking can lead to some severe misunderstandings between people of different backgrounds is from the *Dear Abby* advice column. A few years back a person wrote in who had asked an acquaintance of Asian background where his family was from. His acquaintance answered that this was a rude question and he would not reply. The bewildered White asked Abby why it was rude, since he thought it was a sign of respect to wonder where people were from, and he certainly would not mind anyone asking HIM about where his family was from. Abby asked her readers to write in to say whether it was rude to ask about a person’s ethnic background. She reported that she got a large response, that most non-Whites thought it was a sign of disrespect, and Whites thought it was flattering:

Dear Abby,

I am 100 percent American and because I am of Asian ancestry I am often asked “What are you?” It’s not the personal nature of this question that bothers me, it’s the question itself. This query seems to question my very humanity. “What am I? Why I am a person like everyone else!”

Signed, A REAL AMERICAN

Dear Abby,

Why do people resent being asked what they are? The Irish are so proud of being Irish, they tell you before you even ask. Tip O’Neill has never tried to hide his Irish ancestry.

Signed, JIMMY

In this exchange Jimmy cannot understand why Asians are not as happy to be asked about their ethnicity as he is, because he understands his ethnicity and theirs to be separate but equal. Everyone has to come from somewhere—his family from Ireland, another’s family from Asia—each has a history and each should be proud of it. But the reason he cannot understand the perspective of the Asian American is that all ethnicities are not equal; all are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary. When White Americans equate their own symbolic ethnicities with the socially enforced identities of non-White Americans, they obscure the fact that the experiences of Whites and non-Whites have been qualitatively different in the United States and that the current identities of individuals partly reflect that unequal history.

In the next section I describe how relations between Black and White students on college campuses reflect some of these asymmetries in the understanding of what a racial or ethnic identity means. While I focus on Black and White students in the following discussion, you should be aware that the myriad other groups in the United States—Mexican Americans, American Indians, Japanese Americans—all have some degree of social and individual influences on their identities, which reflect the group’s social and economic history and present circumstance.

Relations on College Campuses

Both Black and White students face the task of developing their race and ethnic identities. Sociologists and psychologists note that at the time people leave home and begin to live independently from their parents, often ages eighteen to twenty-two, they report a heightened sense of racial and ethnic identity as they sort through how much of their beliefs and behaviors are idiosyncratic to their families and how much are shared with other people. It is not until one comes in close contact with many people who are different from oneself that individuals realize the ways in which their backgrounds may influence their individual personality. This involves coming into contact with people who are different in terms of their ethnicity, class, religion, region, and race. For White students, the ethnicity they claim is more often than not a symbolic one—with all of the voluntary, enjoyable, and intermittent characteristics I have described above.

Black students at the university are also developing identities through interactions with others who are different from them. Their identity development is more complicated than that of Whites because of the added element of racial discrimination and racism, along with the “ethnic” developments of finding others who share their background. Thus Black students have the positive attraction of being around other Black students who share some cultural elements, as well as the need to band together with other students in a reactive and oppositional way in the face of racist incidents on campus.

Colleges and universities across the country have been increasing diversity among their student bodies in the last few decades. This has led in many cases to strained relations among students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The 1980s and 1990s produced a great number of racial incidents and high racial tensions on campuses. While there were a number of racial incidents that were due to bigotry, unlawful behavior, and violent or vicious attacks, much of what happens among students on campuses involves a low level of tension and awkwardness in social interactions.

Many Black students experience racism personally for the first time on campus. The upper-middle-class students from White suburbs were often isolated enough that their presence was not threatening to racists in their high schools. Also, their class background was known by their residence and this may have prevented attacks being directed at them. Often Black students at the university who begin talking with other students and recognizing racial slights will remember incidents that happened to them earlier that they might not have thought were related to race.

Black college students across the country experience a sizeable number of incidents that are clearly the result of racism. Many of the most blatant ones that occur between students are the result of drinking. Sometimes late at night, drunken groups of White students coming home from parties will yell slurs at single Black students on the street. The other types of incidents that happen include being singled

out for special treatment by employees, such as being followed when shopping at the campus bookstore, or going to the art museum with your class and the guard stops you and asks for your I.D. Others involve impersonal encounters on the street—being called a nigger by a truck driver while crossing the street, or seeing old ladies clutch their pocketbooks and shake in terror as you pass them on the street. For the most part these incidents are not specific to the university environment, they are the types of incidents middle-class Blacks face every day throughout American society, and they have been documented by sociologists (Feagin 1991).

[...] The anthropologist John Ogbu (1990) has documented the tendency of minorities in a variety of societies around the world, who have experienced severe blocked mobility for long periods of time, to develop such oppositional identities. An important component of having such an identity is to describe others of your group who do not join in the group solidarity as devaluing and denying their very core identity. This is why it is not common for successful Asians to be accused by others of “acting White” in the United States, but it is quite common for such a term to be used by Blacks and Latinos. The oppositional component of a Black identity also explains how Black people can question whether others are acting “Black enough.” On campus, it explains some of the intense pressures felt by Black students who do not make their racial identity central and who choose to hang out primarily with non-Blacks. This pressure from the group, which is partly defining itself by not being White, is exacerbated by the fact that race is a physical marker in American society. No one immediately notices the Jewish students sitting together in the dining hall, or the one Jewish student sitting surrounded by non-Jews, or the Texan sitting with the Californians, but everyone notices the Black student who is or is not at the “Black table” in the cafeteria.

An example of the kinds of misunderstandings that can arise because of different understandings of the meanings and implications of symbolic versus oppositional identities concerns questions students ask one another in the dorms about personal appearances and customs. A very common type of interaction in the dorm concerns questions Whites ask Blacks about their hair. Because Whites tend to know little about Blacks, and Blacks know a lot about Whites, there is a general asymmetry in the level of curiosity people have about one another. Whites, as the numerical majority, have had little contact with Black culture; Blacks, especially those who are in college, have had to develop bicultural skills—knowledge about the social worlds of both Whites and Blacks. Miscommunication and hurt feelings about White students’ questions about Black students’ hair illustrate this point. One of the things that happens freshman year is that White students are around Black students as they fix their hair. White students are generally quite curious about Black students’ hair—they have basic questions such as how often Blacks wash their hair, how they get it straightened or curled, what products they use on their hair, how they comb it, etc. Whites often wonder to themselves whether they should ask these questions. One thought experiment Whites perform is to ask themselves whether a particular question would upset them. Adopting the “do unto others” rule, they ask themselves, “If a Black person was curious about my hair would I get upset?” The answer usually is “No, I would be happy to tell them.” Another example is an Italian American student wondering to herself, “Would I be upset if someone asked me about calamari?” The answer is no, so she asks her Black roommate about collard greens, and the roommate explodes with an angry response such as, “Do you think all Black people eat watermelon too?” Note that if this Italian American knew her friend was Trinidadian American and asked about peas and rice the situation would be more similar and would not necessarily ignite underlying tensions.

Like the debate in *Dear Abby*, these innocent questions are likely to lead to resentment. The issue of stereotypes about Black Americans and the assumption that all Blacks are alike and have the same stereotypical cultural traits has more power to hurt or offend a Black person than vice versa. The innocent questions about Black hair also bring up a number of asymmetries between the Black and White experience. Because Blacks tend to have more knowledge about Whites than vice versa, there is not an even exchange going on; the Black freshman is likely to have fewer basic questions about his White roommate than his White roommate has about him. Because of the differences historically in the group

experiences of Blacks and Whites there are some connotations to Black hair that don't exist about White hair. (For instance, is straightening your hair a form of assimilation, do some people distinguish between women having “good hair” and “bad hair” in terms of beauty and how is that related to looking “White”?) Finally, even a Black freshman who cheerfully disregards or is unaware that there are these asymmetries will soon slam into another asymmetry if she willingly answers every innocent question asked of her. In a situation where Blacks make up only 10 percent of the student body, if every non-Black needs to be educated about hair, she will have to explain it to nine other students. As one Black student explained to me, after you’ve been asked a couple of times about something so personal you begin to feel like you are an attraction in a zoo, that you are at the university for the education of the White students. [...]

The implications of symbolic ethnicities for thinking about race relations are subtle but consequential. If your understanding of your own ethnicity and its relationship to society and politics is one of individual choice, it becomes harder to understand the need for programs like affirmative action, which recognize the ongoing need for group struggle and group recognition, in order to bring about social change. It also is hard for a White college student to understand the need that minority students feel to band together against discrimination. It also is easy, on the individual level, to expect everyone else to be able to turn their ethnicity on and off at will, the way you are able to, without understanding that ongoing discrimination and societal attention to minority status makes that impossible for individuals from minority groups to do. The paradox of symbolic ethnicity is that it depends upon the ultimate goal of a pluralist society, and at the same time makes it more difficult to achieve that ultimate goal. It is dependent upon the concept that all ethnicities mean the same thing, that enjoying the traditions of one’s heritage is an option available to a group or an individual, but that such a heritage should not have any social costs associated with it.

As the Asian Americans who wrote to *Dear Abby* make clear, there are many societal issues and involuntary ascriptions associated with non-White identities. The developments necessary for this to change are not individual but societal in nature. Social mobility and declining racial and ethnic sensitivity are closely associated. The legacy and the present reality of discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity must be overcome before the ideal of a pluralist society, where all heritages are treated equally and are equally available for individuals to choose or discard at will, is realized.

References

- Alba, Richard D. 1985. *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
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“Notes of a Native Speaker”

by Eric Liu

Eric Liu is a fellow at the New American Foundation and writes for MSNBC. This selection is taken from his collection of personal essays, *The Accidental Asian* (1998).

Here are some of the ways you could say I am “white”:

I listen to National Public Radio.
I wear khaki Dockers.
I own brown suede bucks.
I eat gourmet greens.
I have few close friends "of color."
I married a white woman.
I am a child of the suburbs.
I furnish my condo a la Crate & Barrel.
I vacation in charming bed-and-breakfasts.
I have never once been the victim of blatant discrimination.
I am a member of several exclusive institutions.
I have been in the inner sanctums of political power.
I have been there as something other than an attendant.
I have the ambition to return.
I am a producer of the culture.
I expect my voice to be heard.
I speak flawless, unaccented English.
I subscribe to *Foreign Affairs*.
I do not mind when editorialists write in the first person plural.
I do not mind how white television casts are.
I am not too ethnic. I am wary of minority militants.
I consider myself neither in exile nor in opposition.
I am considered “a credit to my race.”

I never asked to be white. I am not literally white. That is, I do not have white skin or white ancestors. I have yellow skin and yellow ancestors, hundreds of generations of them. But like so many other Asian Americans of the second generation, I find myself now the bearer of a strange new status: white, by acclamation. Thus it is that I have been described as an “honorary white,” by other whites, and as a “banana,” by other Asians. Both the honorific and the epithet take as a given this idea: to the extent that I have moved away from the periphery and toward the center of American life, I have become white inside. *Some are born white, others achieve whiteness, still others have whiteness thrust upon them.* This, supposedly, is what it means to assimilate.

There was a time when assimilation did quite strictly mean whitening. In fact, well into the first half of this century, mimicry of the stylized standards of the WASP gentry was the proper, dominant, perhaps even sole method of ensuring that your origins would not be held against you. You “made it” in society not only by putting on airs of anglitude, but also by assiduously bleaching out the marks of a darker, dirtier past. And this bargain, stifling as it was, was open to European immigrants almost exclusively; to blacks, only on the passing occasion; to Asians, hardly at all.

Times have changed, and I suppose you could call it progress that a Chinaman, too, may now aspire to whiteness. But precisely because the times have changed, that aspiration—and the *imputation* of the aspiration—now seems astonishingly outmoded. The meaning of “American” has undergone a revolution in the twenty-nine years I have been alive, a revolution of color, class, and culture. Yet the vocabulary of “assimilation” has remained fixed all this time: fixed in whiteness, which is still our

metonym for power; and fixed in shame, which is what the colored are expected to feel for embracing the power.

I have assimilated. I am of the mainstream. In many ways I fit the psychological profile of the so-called banana: imitative, impressionable, rootless, eager to please. As I will admit in this essay, I have at times gone to great lengths to downplay my difference, the better to penetrate the “establishment” of the moment. Yet I’m not sure that what I did was so cut-and-dried as “becoming white.” I plead guilty to the charges above: achieving, learning the ways of the upper middle class, distancing myself from radicals of any hue. But having confessed, I still do not know my crime.

To be an accused banana is to stand at the ill-fated intersection of class and race. And because class is the only thing Americans have more trouble talking about than race, a minority’s climb up the social ladder is often willfully misnamed and wrongly portrayed. There is usually, in the portrayal, a strong whiff of betrayal: the assimilist is a traitor to his kind, to his class, to his own family. He cannot gain the world without losing his soul. To be sure, something *is* lost in any migration, whether from place to place or from class to class. But something is gained as well. And the result is always more complicated than the monochrome language of “whiteness” and “authenticity” would suggest.

My own assimilation began long before I was born. It began with my parents, who came here with an appetite for Western ways already whetted by films and books and music and, in my mother’s case, by a father who’d been to the West. My parents, who traded Chinese formality for the more laissez-faire stance of this country. Who made their way by hard work and quiet adaptation. Who fashioned a comfortable life in a quiet development in a second-tier suburb. Who, unlike your “typical” Chinese parents, were not pushy, status-obsessed, rigid, disciplined, or prepared. Who were haphazard about passing down ancestral traditions and “lessons” to their children. Who did pass down, however, the sense that their children were entitled to mix and match, as they saw fit, whatever aspects of whatever cultures they encountered.

I was raised, in short, to assimilate, to claim this place as mine. I don’t mean that my parents told me to act like an American. That’s partly the point: they didn’t tell me to do anything except to be a good boy. They trusted I would find my way, and I did, following their example and navigating by the lights of the culture that encircled me like a dome. As a function of my parents’ own half-conscious, half-finished acculturation, I grew up feeling that my life was Book II of an ongoing saga. Or that I was running the second leg of a relay race. *Slap!* I was out of the womb and sprinting, baton in hand. Gradually more sure of my stride, my breathing, the feel of the track beneath me. Eyes forward, never backward.

Today, nearly seven years after my father’s death and two years after my marriage into a large white family, it is as if I have come round a bend and realized that I am no longer sure where I am running or why. My sprint slows to a trot. I scan the unfamiliar vista that is opening up. I am somewhere else now, somewhere far from the China that yielded my mother and father; far, as well, from the modest horizons I knew as a boy. I look at my limbs and realize I am no longer that boy; my gait and grasp exceed his by an order of magnitude. Now I want desperately to see my face, to see what time has marked and what it has erased. But I can find no mirror except the people who surround me. And they are mainly pale, powerful.

How did I end up here, standing in what seems the very seat of whiteness, gazing from the promontory of social privilege? How did I cover so much ground so quickly? What was it, in my blind journey, that I felt I should leave behind? And what *did* I leave behind? This, the jettisoning of one mode of life to send another aloft, is not only the immigrant’s tale; it is the son’s tale, too. By coming to America, my parents made themselves into citizens of a new country. By traveling the trajectory of an assimilist, so did I.

[...] Being an ABC (“American-born Chinese,” as our parents called us) certainly affected me another way. It made me feel like something of a greenhorn, a social immigrant. I wanted so greatly to be

liked. And my earnestness, though endearing, was not the sort of demeanor that won girls' hearts. Though I was observant enough to notice how people talked when flirting, astute enough to mimic the forms, I was oblivious to the subterranean levels of courtship, blind to the more subtle rituals of "getting chicks" by spurning them. I held the view that if you were manifestly a good person, eventually someone of the opposite sex would do the rational thing and be smitten with you. I was clueless. Many years would pass before I'd wise up.

It wasn't just dating rituals that befuddled me as a youth. It was ritual of all kinds. Ceremony, protocol, etiquette—all these made me feel like an awkward stranger. Things that came as second nature to many white kids were utterly exotic to me. American-style manners, for instance. Chinese families often have their own elaborate etiquette, but "please" and "may I" weren't the sort of words ever heard around my house. That kind of formality seemed so beside the point. I was never taught by my parents to write thank-you notes. I didn't even have the breeding to *say* "Thank you" after sleeping over at a friend's house. I can recall the awful, sour feeling in my stomach when this friend told me his mother had been offended by my impoliteness. (At that point, I expressed my thanks.)

Eating dinner at the home of a *yangren* could be especially trying. The oaken furniture seemed scaled-up, chairs like thrones. The meal would begin with someone, usually the father, mumbling grace. Furtively, I'd steal a glance at the heads bowed in prayer. What if they asked me something? I looked back down and kept my mouth shut. Next was the question of silverware: which pieces to use, in which order, and so forth. I'd realize then that at home I ate by using chopsticks to shove rice and meat straight from bowl to slurping mouth. Then the whole thing about passing platter of food around the table, instead of just reaching over and getting what you wanted. I would hear myself ask, in too-high tones, "Would you please pass the carrots, please?" It was usually at that point that I would notice that my napkin was the only one still folded neatly on the table.

All this, of course, was in the context of being with my friends and having a nice time. But something made me feel vaguely sad while I sat there, swallowing huge servings of gravy-drenched food with this other family. These were the moments when I realized I was becoming something other than my parents. I wanted so badly then just to be home, in my own kitchen, taking in the aroma of stir-fry on the wok and the chattering sounds of Chinglish. And yet, like an amphibian that has just breached the shore, I could not stop inhaling this wondrous new atmosphere. My moist, blinking eyes opened wide, observing and recording the customs and predilections of these "regular" Americans. The more time I spent in their midst, the more I learned to be like them. To make their everyday idioms and idiosyncrasies familiar. To possess them.

This, the mundane, would be the locus of my conversion. It was through the small things that I made myself over. I wish, if only for story-telling purposes, that I could offer a more dramatic tale, a searing incident of racism that sent me into deep, self-abnegating alienation. The truth is, I can't. I was sometimes uncomfortable, but never really alienated. There were one or two occasions in seventh grade when the toughs in the back of the bus taunted me, called me *chink*, shot spitballs at me. I didn't like it. But each time, one of my friends—one of my white friends, in whose house I'd later eat dinner—would stand with me and fire back both spitballs and insults. Our insults were mean, too: scornful references to the trailer parks where these kids lived or the grubby clothes they wore or the crummy jobs their parents had. These skirmishes weren't just about race; they were also about mobility.

The same could be said, ultimately, about my own assimilation. To say simply that I became a banana, that I became white-identified, is somewhat simplistic. As an impressionable teen, I came to identify not with white people in general but with that subset of people, most of them white, who were educated, affluent: going *places*. It was their cues that I picked up, their judgments that I cared about. It was in their presence that old patterns of thought began to fall away like so much scaffolding around my psyche. It was in their presence that I began to imagine myself beyond race.

I recently dug up a photograph of myself from freshman year of college that made me smile. I have on the wrong shoes, the wrong socks, the wrong checkered shirt tucked the wrong way into the wrong slacks. I look like what I was: a boy sprung from a middlebrow burg who affected a secondhand preppiness. I look nervous. Compare that image to one from my senior-class dinner: now I am attired in a gray tweed jacket with a green plaid bow tie and a sensible button-down shirt, all purchased at the Yale Co-op. I look confident, and more than a bit contrived.

What happened in between those two photographs is that I experienced, then overcame, what the poet Meena Alexander has called “the shock of arrival.” When I was deposited at the wrought-iron gates of my residential college as a freshman, I felt more like an outsider than I’d thought possible. It wasn’t just that I was a small Chinese boy standing at a grand WASP temple; nor simply that I was a hayseed neophyte puzzled by the refinements of college style. It was *both*: color and class were all twisted together in a double helix of felt inadequacy.

[...] Yet it would be misleading, I think, to suggest that my education centered solely on the discomfort caused by race. The fact is, when I first got to college I felt deficient compared with people of *every* color. Part of why I believed it so necessary to achieve was that I lacked the connections, the wealth, the experience, the sophistication that so many of my classmates seemed to have. I didn’t get the jokes or the intellectual references. I didn’t have the canny attitude. So in addition to all my coursework, I began to puzzle over this, the culture of the influential class.

Over time, I suppose, I learned the culture. My interests and vocabulary became ever more worldly. I made my way onto what Calvin Trillin once described as the “magic escalator” of a Yale education. Extracurriculars opened the door to an alumni internship, which brought me to Capitol Hill, which led to a job and a life in Washington after commencement. Gradually, very gradually, I found that I was not so much of an outsider anymore. I found that by almost any standard, but particularly by the standards of my younger self, I was actually beginning to “make it.”

It has taken me until now, however, to appraise the thoughts and acts of that younger self. I can see now that the straitening path I took was not the only or even the best path. For while it may be possible to transcend race, *it is not always necessary to try*. And while racial identity is sometimes a shackle, it is not *only* a shackle. I could have spared myself a great deal of heartache had I understood this earlier, that the choice of race is not simply “embrace or efface.”

I wonder sometimes how I would have turned out had I been, from the start, more comfortable in my own skin. What did I miss by distancing myself from race? What friendships did I forgo, what self-knowledge did I defer? Had certain accidents of privilege been accidents of privation or exclusion, I might well have developed a different view of the world. But I do not know just how my view would have differed.

What I know is that through all those years of shadow-dancing with my identity, something happened, something that had only partially to do with color. By the time I left Yale I was no longer the scared boy of that freshman photo. I had become more sure of myself and of my place—sure enough, indeed, to perceive the folly of my fears. And in the years since, I have assumed a sense of expectation, of access and *belonging*, that my younger self could scarcely have imagined. All this happened incrementally. There was no clear tipping point, no obvious moment of mutation. The shock of arrival, it would seem, is simply that I arrived.

“The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.” So wrote James Baldwin after having lived in a tiny Swiss village where, to his knowledge, no black man had ever set foot. It was there, in the icy heart of whiteness, that the young expatriate began to comprehend the desire of so many of his countrymen to return to some state of nature where only white people existed. It was there too that he recognized just how impossible that was, just how intertwined were the fates and identities of the races in America. “No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where

white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger,” he wrote. “I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive.”

That is precisely how I feel when I consider my own journey, my own family’s travels. For here I am now, standing in a new country. Not as an expatriate or a resident alien, but as a citizen. And as I survey this realm—this Republic of Privilege—I realize certain things, things that my mother and father might also have realized about *their* new country a generation ago. I realize that my entry has yielded me great opportunities. I realize, as well, that my route of entry has taken a certain toll. I have neglected my ancestral heritage. I have lost something. Yes, I can speak some Mandarin and stir-fry a few easy dishes. I have been to China and know something of its history. Still, I could never claim to be Chinese at the core.

Yet neither would I claim, as if by default, to be merely “white inside.” I do not want to be white. I only want to be integrated. When I identify with white people who wield economic and political power, it is not for their whiteness but for their power. When I imagine myself among white people who influence the currents of our culture, it is not for their whiteness but for their influence. When I emulate white people who are at ease with the world, it is not for their whiteness but for their ease. I don’t like it that the people I should learn from tend so often to be white, for it says something damning about how opportunity is still distributed. But it helps not at all to call me white for learning from them. It is cruel enough that the least privileged Americans today have colored skin, the most privileged fair. It is crueler still that by our very language we should help convert this fact into rule. The time has come to describe assimilation as something other than the White Way of Being.

The time has also come, I think, to conceive of assimilation as more than a series of losses—and to recognize that what is lost is not necessarily sacred. I have, as I say, allowed my Chinese ethnicity to become diluted. And I often resolve to do more to preserve, to conserve, my inheritance. But have my acts of neglect thus far, my many omissions, been inherently wrong? G. K. Chesterton once wrote that “conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone, you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone, you leave it to a torrent of change.” I may have been born a Chinese baby, but it would have taken unremitting reinforcement, by my parents and by myself, for me to have remained Chinese. Instead, we left things alone. And a torrent of change washed over me.

This, we must remember, has been an act of creation as much as destruction. Something new is emerging from the torrent, in my case and the many millions like it. Something undeveloped, speaking the unformed tongue of an unformed nation. Something not white, and probably more Chinese than I know. Whatever it is that I am becoming, is it any less authentic for being an amalgam? Is it intrinsically less meaningful than what I might otherwise have been? In every assimilation, there is a mutiny against history—but there is also a destiny, which is to redefine history. What it means to be American—in spirit, in blood—is something far more borrowed and commingled than anything previous generations ever knew. Alongside the pain of migration, then, and the possibility, there is this truth: America is white no longer, and it will never be white again.

“SCENTS” from *Were You Always an Italian?*

by Maria Laurino

Maria Laurino was a journalist who worked for the *Village Voice*. She was interviewing the former governor Mario Cuomo about his own Italian-American background when he asked her “Were you always an Italian?” She states that his question “captured by own ethnic ambivalence [...] to him, ‘being’ Italian meant understanding the *Mezzogiorno* culture; being Italian meant overcoming the urge to hide the impoverished land of your ancestry” (37).

I can still remember the day when my ethnicity no longer felt like the tag line of my narrative, reluctantly affixed to my American self, but instead signified an inescapable me. I was a teenager standing in line before gym class, and we began to strut in sync, bare legs and barely covered bodies, to the gymnasium. Our uniforms were the baby blue of surgeons’ gowns and prison uniforms. I felt both sick (or I feigned physical illness) and trapped (excuses about stomachaches rarely worked) during those fifty forced minutes of exercise.

Gym class, humiliating gym class, had provoked earlier difficult episodes. Once, in junior high—that particular place and time in which sameness is the prize, and a seed of adolescent difference could sprout into a field of skunk cabbage—a blond girl who had already developed curves that had captured the attention of a league of boys mentioned with a bored nonchalance how she needed to shave her legs. The blond girl’s legs were as smooth and silky as a newly varnished oak floor, and I couldn’t imagine why she’d put a razor to her skin. The hair on my legs, however, looked like a bed of wilted grass dipped in black ink.

“I need to shave too,” I naively replied. To share the truth—that my mother thought I was too young to have a woman’s legs—would have been mortifying, but I also lacked the instinct to distract her with a line like “You know, Cybill Shepherd couldn’t hold a candle to your thighs,” and quickly change the topic. The look of horror on that girl’s face when she peered down at my calves is as clear to me today as it was back then in 1973. I’m sure she had never encountered the hirsute beauty of the Italian-American body.

The girl, too young to be tactful, revealed her thoughts in wide-eyed disbelief. At about the same time, I received a more discreet reaction to my appearance from a motherly neighbor who casually mentioned that I should bleach my dark arm hair blond. For much of my childhood I stood out in homogenized suburbia (hard as I tried to mask the Italian side of my hyphen); I grew up in a neighborhood where, in every other home, Mazola poured from clear plastic bottles, while we lifted heavy golden-colored tins of olive oil. To a child who wished to imitate others with the precision of a forger’s brush, that was a clumsy, humiliating distinction. While such incidents embarrassed me, none was as difficult as this conversation before gym class:

“You were shopping at Saks the other day?” the popular girl next to me asked.

“Uh-huh,” I meekly replied. (She had never spoken to me before; in retrospect the visit to Saks probably provided a necessary credential.)

“Yeah, I told my mother, ‘That’s the smelly Italian girl who stands in front of me in gym class.’”

I was stunned. I didn’t move quickly enough in class even to perspire. But instead of challenging her, I just stood there. Silently. As she continued to chatter, I yearned to shed my smell, my self, that very instant. Standing in the powerless world of childhood, a world in which the words and actions of peers cast the parts that we play for years, I intuitively understood that I was bound to the sweat of my ancestors, peasants from southern Italy. Even the name of the region, the *Mezzogiorno*, or “midday,” invokes an oppressive afternoon heat that parches the skin and then showers it with drops of sweat.

Yet despite my deep self-consciousness, the part of me that recognized the significance of a school social hierarchy was flattered: this pretty, popular girl was talking to me. Sloe-eyed with chocolate

brown hair, she was Jewish; I could never be like the WASPY girls, but I could see myself as a darker, rawer version of her. We were both slightly above average height, but she was thin, shaved her legs, plucked her eyebrows, and dyed unwanted lip hairs blond with a jar of Jolene. I, on the other hand, was chubby, and had the leg hairs of a grizzly, a light mustache, and a bristly black feather of an eyebrow that rested proudly at the bottom of my forehead.

Comparing our basic similarities, I saw the potential for my own reform. So I decided that if she continued to befriend me, I would ignore the nasty comment. In the following weeks, I tried to ingratiate myself into her world and she began to accept me. But always she'd tell classmates about the incident that sparked our first conversation. "I saw her shopping at Saks," she would say with a high-pitched giggle, "and I told my mother, 'That's the smelly Italian girl who stands in front of me in gym class.'"

She never talked about the smelly girl, or that smelly girl who is Italian, but rather that "smelly Italian girl"—in other words, I was smelly *because* I was Italian. She also acted surprised to have seen me at Saks; with a popular girl's unfailing instinct for the social ladder, perhaps she found it amusing that an Italian girl, who should have been on the bottom rung, would shop in the town's fanciest store.

Soon sympathetic friends pulled me aside to say that I never smelled and she must have confused me with someone else. I burned with embarrassment, but politely nodded as they defended me. Looking back on those days, I must have believed them, since I did not begin to shower three times a day to escape my odors. Instead, I continued the same bath regimen (although I can't say precisely if it was every day or every other) and sprayed myself with a fragrance called Love's Fresh Lemon, marketed for teens with a popular Donovan song about wearing your love like heaven. Did I smell like hell and rotten lemons? Probably not. Rather than believing that I smelled, I accepted the definition of being smelly. That is, if someone thought I had a body odor, there must be something unpleasant about me that needed to be changed.

Gym class wasn't the only time I heard the words "Italian" and "smelly" placed together, like a pungent clove of garlic sweating in a pan of warm olive oil. A few months later, I was sitting in the cafeteria with my new gym pal and a friend of hers, sharing gossip and news between bites of our sandwiches. The other girl mentioned that her father was planning a trip to Italy, and my friend and I swayed in delight at the idea of traveling to Europe.

"Are you going with him?" we asked in an enthusiastic chorus.

"Are you kidding?" she replied with a girlish laugh. "And be around all those smelly Italians?"

Suellen Hoy, the author of a book on cleanliness, tells this anecdote: In 1957, when she was a teenager and had recently begun to shave, she was lounging at a pool with several other bare-legged friends. There they saw an older woman in a beautiful bathing suit reveal her hairy legs and armpits. Hoy was "shocked and repulsed" to see this woman's unsightly hair in public, and her girlfriends decided that the woman must be "foreign" because European women didn't shave. The incident, Hoy explains, first taught her about America's obsession with being clean. Not much has changed—she also cites a "Dear Abby" column from 1985 in which a reader advises that if "'Rapunzel Legs' [is] too lazy to shave, she should move to Europe." Another woman wrote in that Europeans who don't shave also "think sweat and other natural body odors are sexy. Pee-ooey!"

It may be a peculiarly American habit to associate leg hair with dirt. Ultimately, however, looking dark and unkempt because of unwanted body hair is very different from being called smelly. I wonder if I earned that label because I seemed more foreign than the rest of the girls in my class. Not that we were recent Italian immigrants; I am third-generation, the youngest of my grandparents' youngest-born. Yet around the same time as the gym incident, a teacher who called out my name for attendance on the first day of class asked if I spoke English.

The label “smelly Italian” was acceptable to many teenagers in my high school for another reason: body odor suggests that you are ill-bred, a member of the lower class. For centuries, the sweet scents of the upper class and the earthy smells of the lower class differentiated both groups in body and spirit. More than the clothes one wears or the language one speaks, the stink that fills the air of an unwashed person, the dirt and sweat that turn underarms and loins into a triangular estuary of odor, a repository of the unwanted emissions of our bodies, separates the classes. The “basement odor of the masses,” as Flaubert once wrote, serves as one of the clearest demarcations between rich and poor. [...]

I may have accepted my classmates’ assumptions because my family’s economic position could be described as deep in the basement of upper-middle-class life, or, more accurately, we lived a middle-middle-class life—in the strict American sense of annual income. [...] I learned as a child that the shrill whistle sounding every hour at the station signaled more than an approaching train: the town’s dividing line was drawn at the railroad, and we were on the wrong side of the tracks. While many of my friends lived in sprawling ranch houses with stone patios and outdoor pools, our little split-level house in a new development had a modest lawn that blended into the same-sized property of our neighbors, who were mostly small businessmen, middle managers, and teachers. As my neighborhood pal would remind me, we lived in “the ghetto of Short Hills.”

Perhaps any child who is poor among the rich learns to kowtow to the needs of the wealthy, and in doing so carries a deep sense of shame over her own inadequacies. The child intuits the sense of privilege that the rich share, and knows she’ll be rewarded by indulging them, commenting on how lovely their house is, oohing and aahing at the wall of mirrors in the bathroom, enthusiastically accepting the gracious invitation to swim in their pool. Her role is to be a constant reminder, like a grandfather clock that chimes reassuringly, of just how much they have.

But people pride themselves on degrees of wealth, so I never forgot that the real “ghetto” was in a section of Millburn, the neighboring town where my father had grown up, that housed an enclave of Italian-Americans. Because Short Hills was part of Millburn Township, the poor kids and young gents went to school together (the public school was so good that there was not the usual channeling of the elite to private schools). In both junior high and high school, there were mainly middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-class teens. Latinos and African-Americans were still excluded back then, so the only people of color in my high school were the children of the housekeeper at the local Catholic church. That left the largest dark ethnic group: the lower-middle-class Italians from Millburn, and the only kids labeled with an ethnic slur.

In high school, the Italian-American boys were known as the “Ginzo Gang”; they were greasers with beat-up cars that first chugged, then soared, thanks to their work at the local gas station (Palumbo’s), owned by the father of one of them. Olive-skinned and muscular, they were sexy in their crudeness; and their faint gasoline scent and oiled-down hair defined the image of Italian-Americans in our school. The young women who hung out with them had little separate identity other than as the girlfriends of the Ginzos.

The Ginzos were my rearview mirror, a reflection of the near past that I wished to move beyond. They were an acknowledgment of my heritage, a recognition that the small sum of money my mother had inherited from her parents, used as the down payment on our house in a neighborhood a mile away, allowed me to escape from their world. But who was I fooling? My grandfather, who started a small construction company, earned his money by digging the earth; sweat and dirt were part of me, an oath of fealty to my family’s peasant past. Yet I preferred to bury the memories of his labor, which provided us with some material comforts but not enough to rid me of the label of the “smelly Italian girl.”

In the interval between the accusation of being smelly and an unspoken admission of my guilt, a denial of my ethnic self emerged. Unprepared to confront my fears, I responded like a criminal who’d do anything to get the charges dropped. If the cause of being called smelly were my Italian roots, then I would pretend not to be Italian.

At first I rejected the smells of my southern European heritage. Gone were the tastes and aromas of my youth: the sweet scent of tomato sauce simmering on the stove, soothing as a cup of tea on a rainy night; the paper-thin slices of *prosciutto*, salty and smooth on the tongue; and my own madeleine, oil-laden frying peppers, light green in color with long, curvaceous bodies that effortlessly glide down the throat and conjure up memories of summer day trips to Asbury Park, where we ate ham, Swiss, and fried pepper sandwiches prepared by my mother. Instead, I began to savor the old flavors of eastern Europe, new to my tongue: pickled herring and cured fish, sour and smoky, and the brisket I was served when I ate holiday meals with my new friend from gym class. [...]

Only years later did I begin the precarious work of trying to replace the layers of ethnicity I had stripped away in order to dissociate myself from the smelly Italians. The alien surroundings of college fostered a nostalgia for familiar tastes and allowed me to appreciate the foods I had grown up with, although not everyone shared my enthusiasm. Once my freshman roommate approached me, her face a picture of compassion and concern, as I entered our tiny dorm room. How was my weak stomach? she asked. Momentarily befuddled, I soon realized that she had confused the pungent aroma of the *provolone* I had recently eaten with that of vomit, and believed that I had thrown up in our room. By my early twenties, I learned more about the girl at the cafeteria table who talked about the smelly Italians. According to the local grapevine, her parents were getting divorced because her father had been making seasonal trips to Italy to visit his secret mistress and their two children. Now I realize that she probably was never invited on her father's frequent sojourns, and the thoughtless remark was the defense of an insecure child, rejected by a man too busy sniffing the earthy scents of Italians to spend much time with her.

Today I have a new fear about smell; I fear that I lack a defining odor. I feel removed from my own sense of smell and the images it could conjure. I feel a languorous appreciation for everyday scents, like my pots of dried lavender, whose wildflower fragrance has faded to a docile sachet, as its deep purple buds grew pale with streaks of beige, a graceful bow to domesticity and old age. I refuse to linger by the coffeepot and sniff my carefully chosen beans, or inhale their smoky end, first ground, then muddied and scorched by a hot rain; instead, I quickly dump the grounds and wash the pot in soapy water, just as I will rush to lather the summer heat off my body. No smell, no mess. Life is measured, careful, far removed from the chaos of dirt and its primitive pleasures, and the smelly label of my youth.

Clean, but without texture; scrubbed of the salty drops that tell our singular stories. I fear that after years of trying to rid myself of the perceived stench of my ethnic group and its musty-basement-class status, I sanitized my own voice, washed it away.

Certain incidents in life—like being told during gym class that you smell—become emotional markers, and around these events a series of reactions are set in motion: giving up pizza for pickled herring can take years to undo. I have recently come to notice how much time I spend scenting my body, covering it with colognes, milks, and creams, giving it a pleasant but artificial character, or voice, you could say. At first I was unaware that I had become perfume-obsessed, as people can often be unaware of their obsessions. But now I think I can link its beginnings to a time and a place.

Initially, I didn't realize the connection between a fragrance fixation and a freelance writing career, but neither did I fully understand that a spray of cologne can provide a narrative for your body in case your own story lacks luster. My aromatic addiction began when I decided not to return (after a brief stint in government) to the newspaper I had worked at for nearly a decade, which was as familiar as family. I was nervous about the decision to freelance, because it not only took away an important piece of identity but would force *me* to choose my subjects, instead of writing about what others expected of me. And perhaps even worse, telling people that you are a full-time freelancer sounds more like a euphemism for unemployment than an adult career choice. So I acted a bit like the child who leaves home for the first time: one part wants to go while the other kicks and drags his way down the stairs, clutching the newel post. The final decision to step out the door and not return to my old work home coincided with a surprise

birthday gift from my husband, a five-day trip to Paris. A perfect distraction, except that I found myself spending a good part of the time thinking about a particular French cologne. [...]

After that trip, I became even more attached to the fragrance, or perhaps the idea of this fragrance. In department stores, I allowed myself one indulgent purchase: hand cream, body lotion, perfumed body cream (my favorite—it's as if I'm covered in lemons and cream), soaps, other colognes to mix with my fragrance to create a new, layered smell—the possibilities seemed endless. I no longer just sprayed behind the ears but covered myself completely in the scent, letting the perfume conquer the blandness of a scrubbed self, an elixir to enliven a diffident voice.

I used to think that my guilt-free desire for an expensive French cologne meant that I was at least coming to terms with the embarrassing bourgeois side of myself, which capitalized on the chic of a European heritage rather than my real-life peasant roots. But now I realize that, like the young girl who wanted to deny her heritage, again I was ducking for cover. I never quite unlearned the lesson from gym class long ago, when the voices of my family and my past were silenced as I altered the scents surrounding me. It's easier to shower away a smell, to censor yourself with a scent, than to accept your body's signature, the rawness of odor and sweat.

The smelly Italian girl no longer exists, if she ever did. In addition to my fragrance, my body is practically hairless, waxed from lip to toe by a Gallic woman who says “Voila” after finishing each leg and who reminisces about her country, sharing with me that she knows the colorist who knows the colorist who mixes the blond hair dye for Catherine Deneuve (her six strands of separation from true glamour). During the months between waxings, I let my leg hair grow long and I run my fingers through it, still mystified by the abundance of those dark strands that I wish to find beautiful, but that I ultimately decide to remove once again.

I have tried to escape the class boundaries of my youth, but sometimes, in that lonely space between me and the bathwater, I wonder what has become of my own smell, and what it would be like to uncover a voice that could tell the stories of my past.

“The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria”

by Judith Ortiz Cofer

Cofer was born in Puerto Rico, and emigrated with her family to the United States in 1956. She is the author of *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (1990). This essay is from *The Latin Deli: Telling the Lives of Barrio Women* (1993), which describe the cultural duality of growing up both Puerto Rican and American. She is currently Professor of English at the University of Georgia.

Note: The song referred to in the title of this essay is from *West Side Story*, a popular Broadway musical and film about two teenagers who fall in love despite their different ethnic backgrounds and allegiances to rival gangs.

On a bus trip to London from Oxford University where I was earning some graduate credits one summer, a young man, obviously fresh from a pub, spotted me and as if struck by inspiration went down on his knees in the aisle. With both hands over his heart he broke into an Irish tenor’s rendition of “Maria” from *West Side Story*. My politely amused fellow passengers gave his lovely voice the round of gentle applause it deserved. Though I was not quite as amused, I managed my version of an English smile: no show of teeth, no extreme contortions of the facial muscles—I was at this time of my life practicing reserve and cool. Oh, that British control, how I coveted it. But Maria had followed me to London, reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are a Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno’s gene pool, the Island travels with you.

This is sometimes a very good thing—it may win you that extra minute of someone’s attention. But with some people, the same things can make *you* an island—not so much a tropical paradise as an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit. As a Puerto Rican girl growing up in the United States and wanting like most children to “belong,” I resented the stereotype that my Hispanic appearance called forth from many people I met.

Our family lived in a large urban center in New Jersey during the sixties, where life was designed as a microcosm of my parents’ casas on the island. We spoke in Spanish, we ate Puerto Rican food bought at the bodega, and we practiced strict Catholicism complete with Saturday confession and Sunday mass at a church where our parents were accommodated into a one-hour Spanish mass slot, performed by a Chinese priest trained as a missionary for Latin America.

As a girl I was kept under strict surveillance, since virtue and modesty were, by cultural equation, the same as family honor. As a teenager I was instructed on how to behave as a proper *senorita*. But it was a conflicting message girls got, since the Puerto Rican mothers also encouraged their daughters to look and act like women and to dress in clothes our Anglo friends and their mothers found too “mature” for our age. It was, and is, cultural, yet I often felt humiliated when I appeared at an American friend’s party wearing a dress more suitable to a semiformal than to a playroom birthday celebration. At Puerto Rican festivities, neither the music nor the colors we wore could be too loud. I still experience a vague sense of letdown when I’m invited to a “party” and it turns out to be a marathon conversation in hushed tones rather than a fiesta with salsa, laughter, and dancing—the kind of celebration I remember from my childhood.

I remember Career Day in our high school, when teachers told us to come dressed as if for a job interview. It quickly became obvious that to the barrio girls, “dressing up” sometimes meant wearing ornate jewelry and clothing that would be more appropriate (by mainstream standards) for the company Christmas party than as daily office attire. That morning I had agonized in front of my closet, trying to figure out what a “career girl” would wear because, essentially, except for Marlo Thomas on TV, I had no models on which to base my decision. I knew how to dress for school: at the Catholic school I attended we all wore uniforms; I knew how to dress for Sunday mass, and I knew what dresses to wear for parties at my relatives’ homes. Though I do not recall the precise details of my Career Day outfit, it must have been a composite of the above choices. But I remember a comment my friend (an Italian-American) made

in later years that coalesced my impressions of that day. She said that at the business school she was attending the Puerto Rican girls always stood out for wearing “everything at once.” She meant, of course, too much jewelry, too many accessories. On that day at school, we were simply made the negative models by the nuns who were themselves not credible fashion experts to any of us. But it was painfully obvious to me that to the others, in their tailored skirts and silk blouses, we must have seemed “hopeless” and “vulgar.” Though I now know that most adolescents feel out of step much of the time, I also know that for the Puerto Rican girls of my generation that sense was intensified. The way our teachers and classmates looked at us that day in school was just a taste of the culture clash that awaited us in the real world, where prospective employers and men on the street would often misinterpret our tight skirts and jingling bracelets as a come-on.

Mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes—for example, that of the Hispanic woman as the “Hot Tamale” or sexual firebrand. It is a one-dimensional view that the media have found easy to promote. In their special vocabulary, advertisers have designated “sizzling” and “smoldering” as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America. From conversations in my house I recall hearing about the harassment that Puerto Rican women endured in factories where the “boss men” talked to them as if sexual innuendo was all they understood and, worse, often gave them the choice of submitting to advances or being fired.

It is custom, however, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink. As young girls, we were influenced in our decisions about clothes and colors by the women—older sisters and mothers who had grown up on a tropical island where the natural environment was a riot of primary colors, where showing your skin was one way to keep cool as well as to look sexy. Most important of all, on the island, women perhaps felt freer to dress and move more provocatively, since, in most cases, they were protected by the traditions, mores, and laws of a Spanish/Catholic system of morality and machismo whose main rule was: *You may look at my sister, but if you touch her I will kill you.* The extended family and church structure could provide a young woman with a circle of safety in her small pueblo on the island; if a man “wronged” a girl, everyone would close in to save her family honor.

This is what I have gleaned from my discussions as an adult with older Puerto Rican women. They have told me about dressing in their best party clothes on Saturday nights and going to the town’s plaza to promenade with their girlfriends in front of the boys they liked. The males were thus given an opportunity to admire the women and to express their admiration in the form of *piropos*: erotically charged street poems they composed on the spot. I have been subjected to a few *piropos* while visiting the Island, and they can be outrageous, although custom dictates that they must never cross into obscenity. This ritual, as I understand it, also entails a show of studied indifference on the woman’s part; if she is “decent,” she must not acknowledge the man’s impassioned words. So I do understand how things can be lost in translation. When a Puerto Rican girl dressed in her idea of what is attractive meets a man from the mainstream culture who has been trained to react to certain types of clothing as a sexual signal, a clash is likely to take place. The line I first heard based on this aspect of the myth happened when the boy who took me to my first formal dance leaned over to plant a sloppy overeager kiss painfully on my mouth, and when I didn’t respond with sufficient passion said in a resentful tone: “I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early”—my first instance of being thought of as a fruit or vegetable—I was supposed to *ripen*, not just grow into womanhood like other girls.

This media-engendered image of the Latina in the United States has been documented by feminist Hispanic scholars, who claim that such portrayals are partially responsible for the denial of opportunities for upward mobility among Latinas in the professions. I have a Chicana friend working on a Ph.D. in philosophy at a major university. She says her doctor still shakes his head in puzzled amazement at all the “big words” she uses. Since I do not wear my diplomas around my neck for all to see, I too have on occasion been sent to that “kitchen,” where some think I obviously belong.

One such incident that has stayed with me, though I recognize it as a minor offense, happened on the day of my first public poetry reading. It took place in Miami in a boat-restaurant where we were having lunch before the event. I was nervous and excited as I walked in with my notebook in my hand. An older woman motioned me to her table. Thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my brand new slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was the waitress. Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose. I know that it wasn't an intentional act of cruelty, yet of all the good things that happened that day, I remember that scene most clearly, because it reminded me of what I had to overcome before anyone would take me seriously. In retrospect I understand that my anger gave my reading fire, that I have almost always taken doubts in my abilities as a challenge—and that the result is, most times, a feeling of satisfaction at having won a convert when I see the cold, appraising eyes warm to my words, the body language change, the smile that indicates that I have opened some avenue for communication. That day I read to that woman and her lowered eyes told me that she was embarrassed at her little faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, it was my victory, and she graciously allowed me to punish her with my full attention. We shook hands at the end of the reading, and I never saw her again. She has probably forgotten the whole thing but maybe not.

Yet I am one of the lucky ones. My parents made it possible for me to acquire a stronger footing in the mainstream culture by giving me the chance at an education. And, books and art have saved me from the harsher forms of ethnic and racial prejudice that many of my Hispanic *companeras* have had to endure. I travel a lot around the United States, reading from my books of poetry and my novel, and the reception I most often receive is one of positive interest by people who want to know more about my culture. There are, however, thousands of Latinas without the privilege of an education or the entree into society that I have. For them life is a struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as whore, domestic or criminal. We cannot change this by legislating the way people look at us. The transformation, as I see it, has to occur at a much more individual level. My personal goal in my public life is to try to replace the old pervasive stereotypes and myths about Latinas with a much more interesting set of realities. Every time I give a reading, I hope the stories I tell, the dreams and fears I examine in my work, can achieve some universal truth which will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes.

I once wrote a poem in which I called us Latinas “God’s brown daughters.” This poem is really a prayer of sorts, offered upward, but also, through the human-to-human channel of art, outward. It is a prayer for communication, and for respect. In it, Latin women pray “in Spanish to an Anglo God / with a Jewish heritage,” and they are “fervently hoping / that if not omnipotent, / at least He be bilingual.”

“An Ethnic Trump”

by Gish Jen

Born in 1956, Gish Jen graduated from Harvard College and received her master's degree in creative writing from the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop and lives in Cambridge MA. Jen is the author of: *Typical American* (1991), *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), and a collection of short stories entitled *Who's Irish?* (1999).

That my son, Luke, age 4, goes to Chinese-culture school seems inevitable to most people, even though his father is of Irish descent. For certain ethnicities trump others; Chinese, for example, trumps Irish. This has something to do with the relative distance of certain cultures from mainstream American culture, but it also has to do with race. For as we all know, it is not only certain ethnicities that trump others but certain colors: black trumps white, for example, always and forever; a mulatto is not a kind of white person, but a kind of black person.

And so it is, too, that my son is considered a kind of Asian person whose manifest destiny is to embrace Asian things. The Chinese language. Chinese food. Chinese New Year. No one cares whether he speaks Gaelic or wears green on St. Patrick's Day. For though Luke's skin is fair, and his features mixed, people see his straight black hair and “know” who he is.

But is this how we should define ourselves, by other people's perceptions? My husband, Dave, and I had originally hoped for Luke to grow up embracing his whole complex ethnic heritage. We had hoped to pass on to him values and habits of mind that had actually survived in both of us. Then one day, Luke combed his black hair and said he was turning it yellow. Another day, a fellow mother reported that her son had invited all blond-haired children like himself to his birthday party. And yet another day, Luke was happily scooting around the Cambridge Common playground when a pair of older boys, apparently brothers, blocked his way. “You're Chinese!” they shouted, leaning on the hood of Luke's scooter car. “You are! You're Chinese!” So brazen were these kids, that even when I, an adult, intervened, they continued to shout. Luke answered, “No, I'm not!”—to no avail; it was not clear if the boys even heard him. Then the boys' mother called to them from some distance away, outside the fence, and though her voice was no louder than Luke's, they left obediently.

Behind them opened a great, rippling quiet, like the wash of a battleship.

Luke and I immediately went over things he could say if anything like that ever happened again. I told him that he was 100 percent American, even though I knew from my own childhood in Yonkers that these words would be met only with derision. It was a sorry chore. Since then I have not asked him about the incident, hoping that he has forgotten about it, and wishing that I could, too. For I wish I could forget the sight of those kids' fingers on the hood of Luke's little car. I wish I could forget their loud attack, but also Luke's soft defense: *No, I'm not.*

Chinese-culture school. After dozens of phone calls, I was elated to discover the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association nearby in west Newton. The school takes children at 3, has a wonderful sense of community and is housed in a center paid for, in part, by great karaoke fund-raising events. (Never mind what the Japanese meant to the Chinese in the old world. In this world, people donate at least \$200 each for a chance at the mike, and the singing goes on all night.) There are even vendors who bring home-style Chinese food to sell after class—stuff you can't get in a restaurant. Dave and I couldn't wait for the second class, and a chance to buy more *bao* for our freezer.

But in the car on the way to the second class, Luke announced that he didn't want to go to Chinese school anymore. He said that the teacher talked mostly about ducks and bears and that he wasn't interested in ducks and bears. And I knew this was true. I knew that Luke was interested only in whales and ships. And what's more, I knew we wouldn't push him to take swimming lessons if he didn't want to, or music. Chinese school was a wonderful thing, but there was a way in which we were accepting it as

somehow non-optional. Was that right? Hadn't we always said that we didn't want our son to see himself as more essentially Chinese than Irish?

Yet we didn't want him to deny his Chinese heritage, either. And if there were going to be incidents on the playground, we wanted him to at least know what Chinese meant. So when Luke said again that he didn't want to go to Chinese school, I said, "Oh, really?" Later on we could try to teach him to define himself irrespective of race. For now, though, he was going to Chinese school. I exchanged glances with Dave. And then together, in a most carefully casual manner, we squinted at the road and kept going.