placed under the tree during the night. There were a few small glittering packages, a big doll for Doris, but no bicycle. I must have looked disappointed.

21 "It looks like Santa Claus didn't do too well by you this year, Buddy," she said, as I opened packages. A shirt. A necktie. I said something halfhearted like, "It's the thought that counts," but what I felt was bitter disappointment. I supposed she'd found the bike intolerably expensive and sent it back.

22 "Wait a minute!" she cried, snapping her fingers. "There's something in my bedroom I forgot all about."

23 She beckoned to Doris, the two of them went out, and a moment later came back wheeling between them the big black two-wheeler with balloon tires. I didn't have to fake my delight, after all. The three of us—Doris, my mother, and I—were people bred to repress the emotional expressions of love, but I did something that startled both my mother and me. I threw my arms around her spontaneously and kissed her.

24 "All right now, don't carry on about it. It's only a bicycle," she said.

25 Still, I knew that she was as happy as I was to see her so happy.

Brent Staples

Black Men and Public Space

The son of a truck driver, Brent Staples grew up in a family of eleven that was constantly on the move due to hard economic times in his hometown of Chester, Pennsylvania. At one point uncertain as to whether he would finish high school, he eventually parlayed a college scholarship into a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. After an unrewarding career as a lecturer in behavioral science, he found his niche as a writer, first for the *Chicago Sun Times*, then for the *New York Times*, where he continues to work as an editorial writer. While he acknowledges that his race has had a tremendous impact on his life, Staples refuses to let race define him. In this essay, which was originally published in *Harper's* magazine, Staples examines the moment that he discovered that others didn't share his views about his race.

1 MY FIRST VICTIM WAS A WOMAN—WHITE, well-dressed, probably in her early twenties. I came upon her late one evening on a deserted street in Hyde Park, a relatively affluent neighborhood in an otherwise mean, impoverished section of Chicago. As I swung onto the avenue behind her, there seemed to be a discreet, uninflammatory distance between us. Not so. She cast back a worried glance. To her, the youngish black man—a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket—seemed menacingly close. After a few more quick glimpses, she picked up her pace and was soon running in earnest. Within seconds she disappeared into a cross street.

2 That was more than a decade ago. I was twenty-two years old, a graduate student newly arrived at the University of Chicago. It was in the echo of that terrified woman's footfalls that I first began to know the unwieldy inheritance I'd come into—the ability to alter public space in ugly ways. It was clear that she thought herself the quarry of a mugger, a rapist, or worse. Suffering a bout of insomnia, however, I was stalking sleep, not defenseless wayfarers. As a softy who is scarcely able to take a knife to a raw chicken—let alone hold it to a person's throat—I was surprised, embarrassed, and dismayed all at once. Her flight made me feel like an accomplice in tyranny. It also made it clear that I was indistinguishable from the muggers who occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto. That first encounter, and those that followed, signified that a vast, unnerving gulf lay between nighttime pedestrians—particularly women—and me. And I soon gathered that being perceived as dangerous is a hazard in itself. I only needed to turn a corner into a dicey situation, or crowd some frightened, armed person in a foyer somewhere, or make an errant move after being pulled over by a policeman. Where fear and weapons meet—and they often do in urban America—there is always the possibility of death.

3 In that first year, my first away from my hometown, I was to become thoroughly familiar with the language of fear. At dark, shadowy intersections in Chicago, I could cross in front of a car stopped at a traffic light and elicit the *thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk* of the driver—black, white, male, or female—hammering down the door locks. On less traveled streets after dark, I grew accustomed to but never comfortable with people who crossed to the other side of the street rather than pass me. Then there were the standard unpleasantries with policemen, doormen, bouncers, cab drivers, and others whose business it is to screen out troublesome individuals *before* there is any nastiness.

4 I moved to New York nearly two years ago and I have remained an avid night walker. In central Manhattan, the near-constant crowd cover minimizes tense one-on-one street encounters. Elsewhere—visiting friends in SoHo, where sidewalks are narrow and tightly spaced buildings shut out the sky—things can get very taut indeed.

5 Black men have a firm place in New York mugging literature. Norman Podhoretz in his famed (or infamous) 1963 essay, "My Negro Problem—And Ours," recalls growing up in terror of black males; they "were tougher than we were, more ruthless," he writes—and as an adult on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, he continues, he cannot constrain his nervousness when he meets black men on certain streets. Similarly, a decade later, the essayist and novelist Edward Hoagland extols a New York where once "Negro bitterness

bore down mainly on other Negroes." Where some see mere panhandlers, Hoagland sees "a mugger who is clearly screwing up his nerve to do more than just *ask* for money." But Hoagland has "the New Yorker's quick-hunch posture for broken-field maneuvering," and the bad guy swerves away.

6 I often witness that "hunch posture," from women after dark on the warrenlike streets of Brooklyn where I live. They seem to set their faces on neutral and, with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled. I understand, of course, that the danger they perceive is not a hallucination. Women are particularly vulnerable to street violence, and young black males are drastically overrepresented among the perpetrators of that violence. Yet these truths are no solace against the kind of alienation that comes of being ever the suspect, against being set apart, a fearsome entity with whom pedestrians avoid making eye contact.

7 It is not altogether clear to me how I reached the ripe old age of twenty-two without being conscious of the lethality nighttime pedestrians attributed to me. Perhaps it was because in Chester, Pennsylvania, the small, angry industrial town where I came of age in the 1960s, I was scarcely noticeable against a backdrop of gang warfare, street knifings, and murders. I grew up one of the good boys, had perhaps a half-dozen fistfights. In retrospect, my shyness of combat has clear sources.

8 Many things go into the making of a young thug. One of those things is the consummation of the male romance with the power to intimidate. An infant discovers that random flailings send the baby bottle flying out of the crib and crashing to the floor. Delighted, the joyful babe repeats those motions again and again, seeking to duplicate the feat. Just so, I recall the points at which some of my boyhood friends were finally seduced by the perception of themselves as tough guys. When a mark cowered and surrendered his money without resistance, myth and reality merged—and paid off. It is, after all, only manly to embrace the power to frighten and intimidate. We, as men, are not supposed to give an inch of our lane on the highway; we are to seize the fighter's edge in work and in play and even in love; we are to be valiant in the face of hostile forces.

9 Unfortunately, poor and powerless young men seem to take all this nonsense literally. As a boy, I saw countless tough guys locked away; I have since buried several, too. They were babies, really—a teenage cousin, a brother of 22, a childhood friend in his mid-twenties—all gone down in episodes of bravado played out in the streets. I came to doubt the virtues of intimidation early on. I chose, perhaps even unconsciously, to remain a shadow—timid, but a survivor.

10 The fearsomeness mistakenly attributed to me in public places often has a perilous flavor. The most frightening of these confusions occurred in the late

1970s and early 1980s when I worked as a journalist in Chicago. One day, rushing into the office of a magazine I was writing for with a deadline story in hand, I was mistaken for a burglar. The office manager called security and, with an *ad hoc* posse, pursued me through the labyrinthine halls, nearly to my editor's door. I had no way of proving who I was. I could only move briskly toward the company of someone who knew me.

11 Another time I was on assignment for a local paper and killing time before an interview. I entered a jewelry store on the city's affluent Near North Side. The proprietor excused herself and returned with an enormous red Doberman pinscher straining at the end of a leash. She stood, the dog extended toward me, silent to my questions, her eyes bulging nearly out of her head. I took a cursory look around, nodded, and bade her good night. Relatively speaking, however, I never fared as badly as another black male journalist. He went to nearby Waukegan, Illinois, a couple of summers ago to work on a story about a murderer who was born there. Mistaking the reporter for the killer, police hauled him from his car at gunpoint and but for his press credentials would probably have tried to book him. Such episodes are not uncommon. Black men trade tales like this all the time.

12 In "My Negro Problem—And Ours," Podhoretz writes that the hatred he feels for blacks makes itself known to him through a variety of avenues—one being his discomfort with that "special brand of paranoid touchiness" to which he says blacks are prone. No doubt he is speaking here of black men. In time, I learned to smother the rage I felt at so often being taken for a criminal. Not to do so would surely have led to madness—via that special "paranoid touchiness" that so annoyed Podhoretz at the time he wrote the essay.

13 I began to take precautions to make myself less threatening. I move about with care, particularly late in the evening. I give a wide berth to nervous people on subway platforms during the wee hours, particularly when I have exchanged business clothes for jeans. If I happen to be entering a building behind some people who appear skittish, I may walk by, letting them clear the lobby before I return, so as not to seem to be following them. I have been calm and extremely congenial on those rare occasions when I've been pulled over by the police.

14 And on late-evening constitutionals along streets less traveled by, I employ what has proved to be an excellent tension-reducing measure. I whistle melodies from Beethoven and Vivaldi and the more popular classical composers. Even steely New Yorkers hunching toward nighttime destinations seem to relax, and occasionally they even join in the tune. Virtually everybody seems to sense that a mugger wouldn't be warbling bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. It is my equivalent of the cowbell that hikers wear when they know they are in bear country.

our old men, given them in solemn hours of night by the Great Spirit; and the visions of our sachems; and it is written in the hearts of our people.

6 "Your dead cease to love you and the land of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb and wander way beyond the stars. They are soon forgotten and never return. Our dead never forget the beautiful world that gave them being.

7 "Day and night cannot dwell together. The Red Man has ever fled the approach of the White Man, as the morning mist flees before the morning sun. However, your proposition seems fair and I think that my people will accept it and will retire to the reservation you offer them. Then we will dwell apart in peace, for the words of the Great White Chief seem to be the words of nature speaking to my people out of dense darkness.

8 "It matters little where we pass the remnant of our days. They will not be many. A few more moons; a few more winters—and not one of the descendants of the mighty hosts that once moved over this broad land or lived in happy homes, protected by the Great Spirit, will remain to mourn over the graves of a people once more powerful and hopeful than yours. But why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless. Your time of decay may be distant, but it will surely come, for even the White Man whose God walked and talked with him as friend with friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We will see.

9 "We will ponder your proposition, and when we decide we will let you know. But should we accept it, I here and now make this condition that we will not be denied the privilege without molestation of visiting at any time the tombs of our ancestors, friends and children. Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. . . . The very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch. . . . Even the little children who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season will love these somber solitudes and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits. And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. . . . At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.

10 "Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless."

W. E. B. DuBois

The Souls of White Folk

William Edgar Burghardt DuBois was a descendant of a French Huguenot and an African slave. He received B.A. degrees from both Fisk and Harvard Universities and a Ph.D. from the University of Berlin. He taught, at various times, at Wilberforce, the University of Pennsylvania, and Atlanta University, holding professorships in Greek, Latin, Sociology, Economics, and History. In addition, he edited many publications, including *Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, from 1910 to 1934. One of his most famous works was *The Souls of Black Folk*—both a fine piece of English prose and a plea for greater understanding of blacks by whites. Seven years later, in 1910, he wrote this essay as a plea to whites to understand themselves.

HIGH IN THE TOWER WHERE I SIT beside the loud complaining of the human 1
sea I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that puzzle me more than the Souls of White Folk. Not, mind you, the souls of them that are white, but souls of them that have become painfully conscious of their whiteness; those in whose minds the paleness of their bodily skins is fraught with tremendous and eternal significance.

Forgetting (as I can at times forget) the meaning of this singular obsession 2
to me and my folk, I become the more acutely sensitive to the marvelous part this thought is playing today, and to the way it is developing the Souls of White Folk, and I wonder what the end will be.

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's people is a very 3
modern thing—a nineteenth- and twentieth-century matter, indeed. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction. The Middle Ages regarded it with mild curiosity, and even up into the eighteenth century we were hammering our national manikins into one great Universal Man with fine frenzy, which ignored color and race as well as birth. Today we have changed all that, and the world, in sudden emotional conversation, has discovered that it is white, and, by that token, wonderful.

When I seek to explain this, to me, inexplicable phenomenon, there al- 4
ways creeps first to my mind the analogy of the child and his candy. To every child there comes a time when the toothsomeness of his sweets is strangely enhanced by the thought that his playmate has none. Further than this, however, the analogy fails, for with one accord the mother world seeks to teach this child the third new joy of sharing. Any thought, however, of sharing their color is to white folk not simply unthinkable, but its mention is liable to lead to violent explosions of anger and vituperation. Not only is there this unre-

buked and vociferously applauded greediness, but something that sounds like: "I shall keep my candy and you shall not have yours." Or, in other words, it is not the obvious proposition: "I am white and you are black," but the astonishing declaration, "I am white and you are nothing."

5 This assumption that of all the hues of God, whiteness alone is candy to the world child—is inherently and obviously better than brownness or tan—leads to curious acts; even the sweeter souls of the dominant world, as they discourse with me on weather, weal and woe, are continually playing above their actual words an obligato of turn and tone, saying:

6 "My poor unwhite thing! Weep not nor rage. I know, too well, that the curse of God lies heavy on you. Why? That is not for me to say; but be brave! Do your work in your lowly sphere, praying the good Lord that into heaven above, where all is love, you may one day, be born—white!"

7 At such times I have an unholy desire to laugh, and to ask with seemingly irrelevance and certain irreverence: "But what on earth is whiteness, that one should so desire it?"

8 Then always somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth, forever and ever, Amen!

9 Now, what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time. Its first effects are funny; the strut of the Southerner, the arrogance of the Englishman amuck, the whoop of the hoodlum who vicariously leads your mob. Next it appears dampening generous enthusiasm in what we once counted glorious: To free the slave is discovered to be tolerable only insofar as it freed his master. Do we sense somnolent writhings in black Africa, or angry groans in India, or triumphant "banzais" in Japan? "To your tents, O Israel!" These nations are not white. Build warships and heft the Big Stick.

10 After the more comic manifestations and chilling of generous enthusiasm, come subtler, darker deeds. Everything considered, the title to the universe claimed by white folk is faulty. It ought at least to look plausible. How easy, then, by emphasis and omission, to make every child believe that every great soul the world ever saw was a white man's soul; that every great thought the world ever knew was a white man's thought; that every great deed the world ever did was a white man's deed; that every great dream the world ever sang was a white man's dream. In fine, that if from the world were dropped everything that could not fairly be attributed to white folk the world would, if anything, be even greater, truer, better than now. And if all this be a lie, is it not a lie in a great cause?

11 Here it is that the comedy verges to tragedy. The first minor note is struck all unconsciously by those worthy souls in whom consciousness of high descent

brings burning desire to spread the gift abroad—the obligation of nobility to the ignoble. Such sense of duty assumes two things: A real possession of the heritage and its frank appreciation by the humbly born. So long, then, as humble black folk, voluble with thanks, receive barrels of old clothes from lordly and generous whites, there is much mental peace and moral satisfaction. But when the black man begins to dispute the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Father's in wage and position, authority and training; and when his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human rights to swagger and swear and waste—then the spell is suddenly broken and the philanthropist is apt to be ready to believe that Negroes are impudent, that the South is right, and that Japan wants to fight us.

12 Mentally the blight has fallen on American science. The race problem is not insoluble if the correct answer is sought. It is insoluble if the wrong answer is insisted upon as it has been insisted upon for thrice a hundred years. A very moderate brain can show that two and two is four. But no human ingenuity can make that sum three or five. This American science has long attempted to do. It has made itself the handmaid of a miserable prejudice. In its attempt to justify the treatment of black folk it has repeatedly suppressed evidence, misquoted authority, distorted fact and deliberately lied. It is wonderful that in the very lines of social study, where America should shine, it has done nothing.

13 Worse than this is our moral and religious plight. We profess a religion of high ethical advancement, a spiritual faith, of respect for truth, despising of personal riches, a reverence for humility, and not simply justice to our fellows, but personal sacrifice of our good for theirs. It is a high aim, so high that we ought not utterly to be condemned for not reaching it, so long as we strive bravely toward it. Do we, as a people? On the contrary, we have injected into our creed a gospel of human hatred and prejudice, a despising of our less fortunate fellows, not to speak of our reverence for wealth, which flatly contradicts the Christian ideal. Granting all that American Christianity has done to educate and uplift black men, it must be frankly admitted that there is absolutely no logical method by which the treatment of black folk by white folk in this land can be squared with any reasonable statement or practice of the Christian ideal.

14 What is the result? It is either the abandonment of the Christian ideal or hypocrisy. Some frankly abandon Christianity when it comes to the race problem and say: Religion does not enter here. They then retire to some more primitive paganism and live there, enlightened by such prejudices as they adopt or inherit. This is retrogression toward barbarism, but it is at least honest. It is infinitely better than its widely accepted alternative, which attempts to reconcile color caste and Christianity, and sees or affects to see no incongruity. What ails the religion of a land when its strongholds of orthodoxy are to be found in those regions where race prejudice is most uncompromising, vindictive, and cruel; where human brotherhood is a lie?

15 The one great moral issue of America upon which the Church of Christ comes nearest being dumb is the question as to the application of the golden rule between white and black folk.

16 All this I see and hear up in my tower above the thunder of the seven seas. From my narrowed windows I stare into the night that looms beneath the cloud-swept stars. Eastward and westward storms are brewing great, ugly whirlwinds of hatred and blood and cruelty. I will not believe them inevitable. I will not believe that all that was must be—that all the shameful drama of the past must be done again today before the sunlight sweeps the silver seas.

17 If I cry amid this roar of elemental forces, must my cry be vain because it is but a cry—a small and human cry amid Promethean gloom?

18 Back beyond the world and swept by these wild white faces of the awful dead, why will this Soul of the White Folk, this modern Prometheus, hang bound by his own binding, tethered by a labor of the past? I hear his mighty cry reverberating through the world, "I am white!" Well and good, O Prometheus, divine thief! The world is wide enough for two colors, two little shinings of the sun; why then devour your own vitals when I answer, "I am black"?

Student Essay

Susan Scarbek

Monkey See, Monkey Do

Though this essay seems mostly to complain about writing instructors, it also has a good point to make about writing: there is no one way to write well. Sometimes "I am going bananas" is just the right sentence for the situation.

1 DURING A RECENT WORKSHOP ON GRAMMAR, a sentence—"I am going bananas"—was introduced for comment. A short poll of this class has rendered some suggestions about the kinds of responses a teacher would give if a student dared to write such a sentence.

2 "I am going bananas." The teacher will write "Slang. Please rewrite" in the margin. The student will obviously know what's slangy about the sentence, so no further comment is needed. This approach avoids the sticky question of verbs altogether and especially avoids discussion of intransitive, transitive, and linking verbs.

3 The teacher will probably get "I am going crazy" as the rewritten sentence.

waltz and the tango—and as for whatever it is we do to rock music, that works just as well in flats.

13 Still, it's hard to visualize a great formal party without stylish women kicking up their high heels. Like some of the other indulgences of that and like occasions, they're probably O.K. in moderation. But for everyday wear they make as little sense as a three-martini lunch. They're a relatively recent innovation. They've wormed their way into our sexual imagery. But it's hard to see why they have to stay there.

Lani Kwon Meilgaard

An "Other" American

On Being Multiracial-American

Lani Kwon Meilgaard grew up on the islands of Oahu and Maui, where being multi-ethnic was not unusual. She graduated with honors from the University of Hawaii at Manoa with a degree in English. She received her M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she wrote this essay, which originally appeared in the e-zine *Interracial Voice*. Meilgaard lives in California where she is a professor of English writing. She has just completed her first novel, *A Place Without Regret*.

San Bernardino, California
December 1967

1 "But Sharon," said my grandmother, sitting across from Mom at the dinner table, buttering a piece of white bread, "won't your children be. . . ." She paused, searching for the right words, ". . . confused?"

2 It was incredibly hot in the kitchen, and Mom could feel rivulets of sweat running down her sides under her pullover and in the waistband of pink pedal pushers. Heat continued to radiate from the gas oven. Mom's mind was only half on the conversation. She was thinking of the most recent letter she had received. She was thinking of Dad, who was no longer a music major at Redlands University and had narrowly escaped being drafted into the Army. They had both realized that he could have been mistaken for Vietnamese and shot in "friendly fire" if he was fighting on the ground. Enlisted in the Navy instead, he was at boot camp in San Diego, soon to be 2nd class petty officer/machinist mate on the U.S.S. Hancock, stationed off the northern coast of Vietnam.

3 "Don't you think it will be difficult for your children?" Grandma held the

slice of bread out as if it were a crystal ball or flattened palm in which Mom would certainly see her future.

"What do you mean, Mom?" 4

"Getting married to this . . . this . . . Japanese person." Grandma's thin 5
lips shriveled as if she had tasted something bitter.

"Mom," she sighed long-sufferingly, "Michael's an American, not Japa . . ." 6

"He's dark, Sharon." Grandma hissed what she had up until that point 7
kept to herself.

"So?" Mom said, only realizing she had spoken aloud when she saw her 8
mother's pursed lips.

Grandma sighed, "Don't you see?" 9

"We've already set the date. January 26th." 10

"Sharon, I'm trying to help you . . ." 11

Mom stabbed at the dry roast chicken breast on her plate. She didn't look 12
up as she said,

"The best way to help is to give me your blessing." 13

"Your children will hate you." 14

Grandma spat out the words. 15

Mom sat there stunned. She heard the screen door slam behind her and 16
exhaled, not realizing that she had been holding her breath. She turned to her father.

It had been a rough day for him, working construction in Riverside 17
County. He carefully wiped his face, bald head and neck with an old red bandanna—an indication of his reluctance to get involved—before saying, "It's your choice."

It was my parents' choice. California was the first state, in 1948, to decide 18
that interracial marriages were *not* unconstitutional. It took almost twenty years, until 1967, for anti-miscegenation laws to be struck down nationwide in the aptly named Supreme Court decision, *Loving vs. Virginia*.

Grandma did not "forgive" Mom for marrying my father until after I was 19
born, until after she got to know my father and his family. It wasn't easy for her. I think she genuinely believed she had been trying to help, offering my mother "good" advice. I became the living symbol of what my grandmother had feared most—World War II propaganda come to life—"the enemy" marrying into the family, changing the blood, changing the future.

I am not sure if I have forgiven *her* yet. 20

I look into the mirror and try to see myself as a stranger might: dark brown 21
eyes and hair, full lips and light skin. I can see in the slight curving of my eyes my paternal grandparents' Asian faces, my mother's Native American features. Under bright, artificial light, I can see the slight yellow cast of my skin, my irises so dark that I can only see the pupil if I look close.

In Hawaii, I grew up *hapa haole*, of *mixed race*. But in England and in Col- 22

orado, the identity *hapa* was taken from me; I was labeled *white*, rather than being categorized as *other*, like many of my darker-skinned friends. In California, I am once again *hapa* and difficult to conveniently categorize, although here, often other Asian-Americans (unless they are originally from Hawaii) do not recognize me as another Asian. Never before was my race and ethnicity an issue to me, and I have tried to discover why. How has my racial identity shifted? It wasn't a change from the inside, but rather from the outside. It is based upon other people's assumptions, differing in each of the places I have lived.

23 For many years, the cultural model of assimilation, "the melting pot," was touted as the only way to be an American. Yet the standard for this model was based on the politically and economically more powerful European settlers' values and cultural norms. In the 1960s and '70s, a more inclusive ideology was suggested—"a stew" or "mixed salad"—whereby immigrants to America might maintain their distinct cultures, languages and traditions, their *ethnicity* or *ancestry*, while at the same time recognizing their "Americanness."

24 Today, rising numbers of Americans are, like myself, of mixed ethnicity. Many of us are proud of this heritage and interested in our multiple ancestries. We do not fit the limiting, artificial categories of race—White, Black or Negro, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Asian or Pacific Islander—outlined in Statistical Directive 15, which was adopted in 1978 by the Office of Management and Budget and used in the 1990 U.S. Census of the Population. We are "Multiracial-Americans."

25 Nationality is a complex and often shifting set of political, historical and socio-economic circumstances. A group of people recognize themselves as a country. They identify themselves by their country of origin. At the birth of our relatively young nation, perhaps people wanted to be known *only* by their new national identity—American.

26 Yet saying I am simply "American" not only fails to address the complexity of my being: It nullifies the elements that make me whole. It disregards my ethnicity and ancestry and the many cultural values attached. When I am labeled *white*, I am not seen in relation to the other parts of myself I value. For in addition to being of several European ethnicities—Scottish, Irish, Dutch, German, English, French, and Spanish—I am also Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Native American (Iroquois and Delaware).

27 When your veins flow with the blood of twelve nations, you belong to none, yet are encompassed by all.

Brunswick, Georgia
March 30, 1969

28 When Mom filled out the application for my birth certificate, she was faced with the following question:

Race of child: 29
__White __Black. 30

"But my baby's half-Asian." 31

The nurse, a Caucasian matriarch dressed in starched white, many shades 32
lighter than her skin, replied, "Honey, that baby ain't Black, so she's White." And so I am, according to Georgia Department of Public Health records.

My father, too, was classified *"White"* on my birth certificate, but he gained 33
none of the privileges whites at this time took for granted—something as simple as the right to walk by or to go into a store without being stared at by others.

Lea, the middle sister, was born in Jacksonville, Florida and was classified 34
"Malaysian," even though she has no Malay blood. This practice was apparently discontinued in 1971, when my youngest sister, Laura, was born in Lamar, California. According to my mother, she is not classified by race.

Have these slips of paper changed who we are? 35

A paper that says you're white means nothing when your dark-skinned, 36
Asian father moves back to Hawaii—where many Asian-Americans live—taking his family with him just to feel he belongs.

Makakilo, Hawaii 1978
Defining the "Other," Hawaiian Style

Haole n. White person, American, Englishman, Caucasian; formerly, 37
any foreigner.

v. ["To be haole"] To act like a white person, to ape the white peo- 38
ple, or assume airs of superiority, often said disparagingly, especially of half-whites. (Pukui 58)

At my elementary school, the last day of school was called "Kill Haole 39
Day." It was when kids of the non-white races, who were in the majority, would pick on white kids—call them names, throw rotten eggs at them, beat them up.

I don't remember anything ever actually happening on this day; most of 40
the white kids stayed at home, and most of the kids talking about participating were part-white themselves. All I remember was trying to fit in, being a tomboy, acting as if I were tough. I did not know that there were decades of suppressed rage behind what we were doing.

We were unaware of the implications behind racial jokes—which in Hawaii 41
were common but not taken seriously or intended to offend. Everybody made fun of everybody, knew all the local stereotypes—that Chinese were *pake*, interested only in money; that Japanese were xenophobic and ambitious; that whites were greedy and loud; while Hawaiians were labeled lazy. In some ways,

these racial jokes provided a safety valve for the unnamed feelings many of us did not acknowledge.

42 Our persecution of white children re-enacted on a smaller scale the resentment of some of our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, the collective anger against generations of oppression by white *lunas*, overseers on the plantations, and white missionaries. We were emulating a dangerous precedent about which we knew nothing, and yet we somehow remained ignorant that this was racism—in our own school, our own neighborhood.

43 Would I have held down little Aaron—the boy whose breath was tinged with the sour odor of milk and fear—while Kaui beat his white skin red and purple? These were the colors of our anger, of misunderstanding and revenge. For what? The fact that Aaron did better in class than we? Or that his clothes were newer and more expensive? Or was it his Southern accent that we disliked, his way of ignoring the taunts and jeers every day as he got off the bus?

44 Aaron does not exist. He is all the children who did not fit in, some white, some black, but more often defined as *from the Mainland*, a place that was too far away and alien for many of us to understand.

45 "Racism" was something that happened on the Mainland: Whites against Blacks. We did not think that racism could happen in Hawaii. We did not think.

Pearl City, Hawaii
Christmas 1982

46 Christmas festivities in my family consisted of a mixture of American tradition and several local customs unique to the region: eating *kim chee* and sushi with our Christmas turkey or ham, making a gingerbread house garnished with imported Japanese candy bought at Shirokiya, and sometimes having a picnic of hamburgers and *lomi lomi* salmon at the beach.

47 On this occasion, my sisters and I had decorated our living room with the usual Christmas finery. In one corner a Douglas Fir (one of the trees shipped in by the thousands from the mainland U.S. in refrigerated Matson shipping containers, the oddity of which we took for granted) wilted in its solution of sugar water. We made a construction paper fireplace where we hung our stockings. Antique hand-blown glass ornaments and handicrafts we had made in school (like the blue sequin-covered eggshell ornament which held my front-toothless 5th grade portrait) were in positions of prestige on the tree.

48 On Christmas morning we woke our parents up at 5 a.m. and began digging into our loot. The room smelled of Christmas pine and excitement. There are several gifts I remember from that year: a pink Barbie sportscar, silly putty and, from our paternal grandparents on Maui, dolls in costumes from around the world.

The card was inscribed, "To the girls. Value your ancestors. Love, 49
Grandma and Grandpa Kwon."

Each doll stood about six inches tall and, as promised, was dressed in 50
a "traditional" costume. Miss Japan wore a kimono adorned with a cherry blossom pattern and a golden *obi*, and she had an elaborate hairstyle. Was she from Tokyo or Osaka? The box did not specify. Miss America wore leather buckskin and beaded moccasins. She was an amalgam of popular images of Native Americans, like the Disneyfied Pocahontas would be years later. Miss Spain had a long flamenco-style dress, and in her hair there was a veil held by a miniature carved wooden comb. She was not from Galicia, the Northwestern region of Spain (once a part of Portugal) from whence our great-grandmother came. Yet we thought of her as being Spanish.

Each doll had some item of clothing that made her representative of her 51
nation, and each doll had the appropriately colored skin and eyes to match the perceived norm of her country of origin. But each doll failed to fully represent the ethnic and cultural diversity within each country.

What I discovered later is something difficult to explain. My sisters and I 52
are Japanese, Native American, Spanish, etc. . . , but who we are as people, as "individuals," differs greatly from each of the nations represented by the dolls.

We have an identity, but it is not determined by country of origin. It is 53
based on what our family has done together or what we have done individually—like driving to Hanauma Bay to snorkel, or taking a Kentucky Fried Chicken picnic up to the mountains of Aiea, or helping Grandma Kwon prepare *bul go gi*, Korean bar-be-cue beef—that makes us who we are.

Growing up was a mish-mash of cultural traditions. We'd watch Disney 54
movies like *The Jungle Book* and *Cinderella* on one day and dance hula the next. Hawaii's multiethnic "culture" offered us these choices, choices we could make according to individual taste and inclination. The cultural activities I enjoyed, like the Japanese *Obon* festivals in the summer at the local Hongwanji to honor our dead relatives, were sometimes different than those my sisters chose to attend.

My sisters and I are *individuals*. Doesn't the intrinsic meaning of that word 55
allow for difference?

Oxford, England
1992

Justin, my husband, had been working in England for about two years. He was 56
responsible for arranging housing, excursions and social events for an Ameri-

can agency which brought American students to Oxford to study. Justin's father is Danish, his mother English, Irish and Huguenot French. He is a British citizen by birth but grew up in Monterrey, Mexico and Detroit, Michigan. He, like myself, has always felt "different." But for him this feeling has come from inside—the feeling of being an observer, antsider—a person who has adapted to living in many different countries. It is an altogether different experience when this feeling of being an outsider is imposed on you from the outside.

57 On a typically gray evening, Justin and I were invited to a dinner party by an estate agent ("real estate agent" in American-English) with whom Justin often consulted. The night air smelled of ivy and dampness. The estate agent and his mother had offered to pick us up.

58 "So, how're you adjusting to our weather?"

59 At first I did not realize that the estate agent was speaking to me. He glanced at me in the rearview mirror, his horn-rimmed glasses and balding pate glowing slightly red from a traffic light. He and Justin had been talking business, while I was looking out the window at the rapidly passing landscape, lights whizzing by. "Oh, yes . . . I am. Thank you," I replied, uncertain as to why I had become unaccountably shy and withdrawn since I had come to England—a 180 degree turn from my usual personality.

60 The estate agent continued talking with Justin. His mother—a woman roughly in her sixties, wearing an old-fashioned overcoat, wool dress and stockings, whom I (knowing it was a stereotype) imagined knitted, owned a cat and never turned up the heat in her house—offered a word or two occasionally. I tuned in and out on what they were saying: "Yes, housing starts these days . . . outrageous. . . . New apartments available? . . . Oxford's growing too fast. . . . students. . . . would be a suburb of London if not for the zoning laws. . . ."

61 We spun around one of the freeway medians, which in England are circular and called "roundabouts." Suddenly, I heard the words, ". . . Japanese . . . yes, my wife is part Asian." Justin said this proudly, holding my hand. I noticed the mother's shoulders stiffen. Her son said nothing until we arrived at the house.

62 For the rest of the evening the estate agent's mother refused to speak with me, avoided my gaze. Her son eyed me strangely from under his bushy eyebrows.

63 At the time I racked my brain to discover what I might have said or done to offend them. Later, I realized it was nothing I had done, but simply who I was.

64 USA 1990 Census of Population Form: When it comes to the question of race, here's what you see:

RACE

Fill ONE circle for the race that the person considers himself/herself to be.

○ White ○ Black or Negro ○ Indian (Amer.)
If Indian (Amer.), print the name of the enrolled or principal tribe
○ Eskimo ○ Chinese ○ Japanese
○ Asian Indian If Other Asian or Pacific Islander (API),
○ Aleut Asian or Pacific Islander (API)
○ Other API (Print below) Cambodian, and so on.
○ Samoan print one group, for example: Hmong, Guamanian Fijian, Laotian, Thai, Tongan, Pakistani
○ Filipino ○ Hawaiian ○ Korean
○ Vietnamese ○ Other race (Print below)

Census records are kept as statistical data for a variety of Federal and State 65
Government uses—educational funding, city and state grants, to enforce the Voting Rights Act and equal employment regulations, just to name a few. People are asked to "Fill ONE circle for the race each person considers himself/herself to be" (Census E-2). But the race categorizations seem so arbitrary when you read:

> White—Includes persons who indicated their race as "White" or re- 66
> ported entries such as Canadian, German, Italian, Lebanese, Near Easterner, Arab, or Polish.

> Black—Includes persons who indicated their race as "Black or Negro" 67
> or reported entries such as African American, Afro-American, Black Puerto Rican, Jamaican, Nigerian, West Indian, or Haitian (B-29).

If you consider yourself of European or even Middle Eastern descent, you are 68
categorized by the government as "White." If you consider yourself African or Caribbean (which historically has also had interracial children born to parents of African, Indian and/or European races), you are categorized "Black."

An article entitled "The 'Other' Americans" in the June 1994 issue of 69
American Demographics, illustrates how outdated this thinking is:

> The 1990 census questionnaire asked respondents to put themselves 70
> into a racial category and to indicate their ethnicity and ancestry elsewhere. Respondents who felt that they didn't fit into one of the four categories checked a box marked "other race." The number of people who checked that box increased 45 percent between the 1980 and 1990 censuses, to 9.8 million. That's about 1 in 25 Americans (37).

71 Part of this increase is due to the fact that if you write in a "race" which is categorized by the government as an "ethnicity," your responses are categorized "other race." According to *American Demographics*, Statistical Directive 15 "defines Hispanic origin as an ethnic category separate from race" (37). People of Hispanic ethnicity are often categorized as either "white" or "black."

72 But if you are of multiracial heritage, like myself, you cannot list more than one "race" in the box marked "other." The box and classificatory system are too narrow.

73 You cannot, for example, check each and every box that applies to you. If you do so, according to the U.S. Census and Department of Commerce, either "the race of the mother [is] used" or "the first race reported by the person [is] used" (B-28) to define your race. You may fill in "multiethnic" or "multiracial," but you are categorized anonymously as "other." If you choose to rebel and fill in nothing, "race [is] assigned based upon the reported entries of race by other household members" (B-30). In most cases "White" is used. It just happens to be the first category provided on the census form.

Denver, Colorado
October 29, 1994

74 It was chilly, though still unseasonably warm that fall; the steam vents in the Denver streets released masses of white cloud. I was standing outside Currigan Exhibition Hall, site of the 2nd Annual Rocky Mountain Book Festival, with several friends—to see Linda Hogan, a professor of ours at the University of Colorado, and other writers we admired.

75 Linda arrived, wearing a black velvet tunic, long flowing pants and silver hoop earrings, which brushed against her shoulders. She smiled as she recognized our group.

76 There was a communal shout. "Linda!" "It's good to see you!" "How are you?"

77 "Linda, you're the only woman I'd get up at six to see," I said laughing as I gave her a hug.

78 "Me, too," she said, and we all laughed.

79 Linda was swept aside by one of the organizers of the festival toward the author's entrance, as we dashed up the stairs and into the "Agatha Christie" room for her reading.

80 Our room was full of rows of black, uncomfortable-looking chairs. The ceiling was high, and there was a raised stage before which stood an inauspicious wooden podium. We took seats in the second and third rows, amazed that we were so close to the front, having expected mobs for this first reading of the day.

I looked around the room, noticing a few others who had come to hear 81
Linda read: a couple of older men—white hair, denim; a group of women in broomstick skirts and fancy embroidered blouses; a newspaper reporter from the *Rocky Mountain News* who had interviewed Linda a couple of weeks earlier about her Colorado Book Award and Lannan Literary Prize; and Sherman Alexie, the next reader in the room, another writer whom I had come to meet.

The room was too large, yet I felt as if I was in class. Linda was only about 82
five feet away, and her soothing voice reassured me. She read from *Dwellings*, a book of essays about nature she had just completed, then several poems from *The Book of Medicines*. She read well, slowly, yet with a rhythmic cadence. I blinked with surprise when it was over.

The question and answer session that followed was fairly straightforward: 83
How long have you been writing? Who have been your influences? What procedure do you follow when you write? Do you write on a computer or longhand? What inspires your writing? etc. . . . etc. . . .

Then, suddenly, one of the men in denim, a throwback, an anachro- 84
nistic cowboy, asked "the question." His tone of voice was skeptical, as if he thought he was exposing a fraud: a woman who identifies herself as a Native American writer, but who is really white. He asked, "What kind of Indian are you, if you are an Indian . . . and do you pray . . . How do you pray?"

Linda took a deep breath, and I saw the anger flash briefly across her eyes. 85
This all occurred in less than a second.

I have felt the same twisting in my gut, the blood burning in my veins, at 86
being labeled a fake by those who have read my writing and thought my work "exploitive" and "presumptuous," that I am cashing in on the popularity of minority literature.

I have often felt an odd sort of guilt, as well. For by being labeled white by 87
others when I know myself to be part Asian, I have been granted privileges my friends have not. I have felt like an impostor or a spy.

Linda's answer was one I wish I could emulate at times like these, full of 88
grace and dignity. She did not get into a lengthy argument. She described herself in terms of the culture with which she most closely identifies. She responded in an even tone of voice, "I am Chickasaw, and my poems are my prayers."

Palo Alto, California
April 13, 1996

Filling out applications in order to teach English Composition in local com- 89
munity colleges, I find the following at the end of each questionnaire:

90 The information that you provide will be used for statistical record keeping and reporting only. You will not be identified by name when these statistics are reported, and this information will not be forwarded as part of your application materials.

What is your Racial/Ethnic Group? (Check one)

○ Caucasian ○ Black ○ Native American
○ Hispanic/Latino ○ Asian/Pacific Islander

91 I could check Asian/Pacific Islander and Caucasian. I am both, but the instructions clearly say, "Check one." And what does it mean to be Asian/Pacific Islander anyway? The cultures in this region, the "Pacific Rim," are as different and unique from one another as Canada, the United States and Mexico are from each other. Within these countries there are many distinct linguistic and cultural differences.

92 According to U.S. Census Statistics, published in a February 13, 1995 article in *Newsweek*, there were 310,000 interracial married couples in 1970. In 1993 that number grew to 1,195,000 (72). It is estimated by the National Center for Health Statistics that the total number of interracial births from 1970 to 1990 has increased from 39,012 to 124,468 (Sandor 39). "If current trends continue, minorities will be approaching half of the total U.S. population as early as 2050" (Sandor 37).

93 Race is an artificial category, imposed by governments or political interest groups—easily altered and incapable of fully classifying everyone. Should this be an argument to abolish race or race-based issues in America? While race is an artificial categorization of a group of people by another group of people, it is still an inescapable issue in a country that wants to ignore what it is not willing to confront or understand.

94 I add the following to some of the applications:

95 __Multiracial or __Multiethnic.

96 On others, if there is room, I list my entire ethnic heritage. I check these twelve boxes in dark ink and press the pen down firmly.

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Gordon Parks

Flavio's Home

Gordon Parks emerged from the poverty and racial isolation of a large Midwestern family to become one of the most influential photographers in American history. The youngest of 15 children, Parks departed home at the age of 16 after his mother died. He supported himself through odd jobs until the early 1930s, when he became inspired by the work of the social documentary photographers of the Great Depression. He bought an inexpensive camera and obtained a position taking photographs for the federal government. Working his way up through jobs at *Vogue* and *Life* magazines, he gradually built a reputation for himself. By the time he wrote "Flavio's Home" in 1961, he was already one of the most admired photographers in the nation. On its publication with its accompanying photographs, "Flavio's Home" elicited a groundswell of public support that eventually allowed Flavio to be brought to the U.S. for treatment and to buy a new home for his family.

I'VE NEVER LOST MY FIERCE GRUDGE AGAINST POVERTY. It is the most savage of 1
all human afflictions, claiming victims who can't mobilize their efforts against it, who often lack strength to digest what little food they scrounge up to survive. It keeps growing, multiplying, spreading like a cancer. In my wanderings I attack it wherever I can—in barrios, slums and favelas.

Catacumba was the name of the favela where I found Flavio da Silva. It 2
was wickedly hot. The noon sun baked the mud-rot of the wet mountainside. Garbage and human excrement clogged the open sewers snaking down the slopes. José Gallo, a *Life* reporter, and I rested in the shade of a jacaranda tree halfway up Rio de Janeiro's most infamous deathtrap. Below and above us were a maze of shacks, but in the distance alongside the beach stood the gleaming white homes of the rich.

Breathing hard, balancing a tin of water on his head, a small boy climbed 3
toward us. He was miserably thin, naked but for filthy denim shorts. His legs resembled sticks covered with skin and screwed into his feet. Death was all over him, in his sunken eyes, cheeks and jaundiced coloring. He stopped for breath, coughing, his chest heaving as water slopped over his bony shoulders.

ple of a woman being stalked by her ex-boyfriend. Turns out Susan is also stalking the boyfriend and—here's the sexual frisson—has slept with him only days ago. In fact Susan is neck deep in trouble without any help from the boyfriend: She's serving a year-long stretch of home incarceration for assaulting another woman, and home is the tiny trailer she shares with her nine-year-old daughter.

3 But no one is applauding this life spun out of control. Montel scolds Susan roundly for neglecting her daughter and failing to confront her role in the mutual stalking. A therapist lectures her about this unhealthy "obsessive kind of love." The studio audience jeers at her every evasion. By the end Susan has lost her cocky charm and dissolved into tears of shame.

4 The plot is always the same. People with problems—"husband says she looks like a cow," "pressured to lose her virginity or else," "mate wants more sex than I do"—are introduced to rational methods of problem solving. People with moral failings—"boy crazy," "dresses like a tramp," "a hundred sex partners"—are introduced to external standards of morality. The preaching—delivered alternately by the studio audience, the host and the ever present guest therapist—is relentless. "This is wrong to do this," Sally Jessy tells a cheating husband. "Feel bad?" Geraldo asks the girl who stole her best friend's boyfriend. "Any sense of remorse?" The expectation is that the sinner, so hectored, will see her way to reform. And indeed, a Sally Jessy update found "boy crazy," who'd been a guest only weeks ago, now dressed in schoolgirlish plaid and claiming her "attitude [had] changed"—thanks to the rough-and-ready therapy dispensed on the show.

5 All right, the subjects are often lurid and even bizarre. But there's no part of the entertainment spectacle, from *Hard Copy* to *Jade*, that doesn't trade in the lurid and bizarre. At least in the talk shows, the moral is always loud and clear: Respect yourself, listen to others, stop beating on your wife. In fact it's hard to see how *The Bill Bennett Show*, if there were to be such a thing, could deliver a more pointed sermon. Or would he prefer to see the reckless Susan, for example, tarred and feathered by the studio audience instead of being merely booed and shamed?

6 There *is* something morally repulsive about the talks, but it's not anything Bennett or his co-crusader Senator Joseph Lieberman has seen fit to mention. Watch for a few hours, and you get the claustrophobic sense of lives that have never seen the light of some external judgment, of people who have never before been listened to, and certainly never been taken seriously if they were. "What kind of people would let themselves be humiliated like this?" is often asked, sniffily, by the shows' detractors. And the answer, for the most part, is people who are so needy—of social support, of education, of material resources and self-esteem—that they mistake being the center of attention for being actually loved and respected.

7 What the talks are about, in large part, is poverty and the distortions it visits on the human spirit. You'll never find investment bankers bickering on *Rolonda*, or the host of *Gabrielle* recommending therapy to sobbing professors. With few exceptions the guests are drawn from trailer parks and tenements, from bleak streets and narrow, crowded rooms. Listen long enough, and you hear references to unpaid bills, to welfare, to twelve-hour workdays and double shifts. And this is the real shame of the talks: that they take lives bent out of shape by poverty and hold them up as entertaining exhibits. An announcement appearing between segments of *Montel* says it all: The show is looking for "pregnant women who sell their bodies to make ends meet."

This is class exploitation, pure and simple. What next—"homeless people so hungry they eat their own scabs"? Or would the next step be to pay people outright to submit to public humiliation? For $50 would you confess to adultery in your wife's presence? For $500 would you reveal your thirteen-year-old's girlish secrets on *Ricki Lake?* If you were poor enough, you might. 8

It is easy enough for those who can afford spacious homes and private therapy to sneer at their financial inferiors and label their pathetic moments of stardom vulgar. But if I had a talk show, it would feature a whole different cast of characters and category of crimes than you'll ever find on the talks: "CEOs who rake in millions while their employees get downsized" would be an obvious theme, along with "Senators who voted for welfare and Medicaid cuts"—and, if he'll agree to appear, "well-fed Republicans who dithered about talk shows while trailer-park residents slipped into madness and despair." 9

Gish Jen

Challenging the Asian Illusion

A novelist and short story writer, Gish Jen's work has been called "stunning," "startling," "funny," and "heartrending." Her fiction work has received tremendous acclaim. Her first book, *Typical American*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle award. More recently, she was awarded the prestigious Lannan Award for Literary Fiction. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *Best American Short Stories of the Century*. The following selection originally appeared in the *New York Times*.

FOR A VERY LONG TIME, when people talked about race, they talked about black America and white America. Where did that put Asian-Americans? 1

Spike Lee touches on the Asian-American dilemma in *Do the Right Thing* 2

when the Korean grocer, afraid of having his business attacked by rioting blacks, yells: "I not white! I black! Like you! Same!"

3 Unlike the grocer, though, my family and I identified mostly with white America, which, looking back, was partly wishful thinking, partly racism and partly an acknowledgment that, whatever else we did face, at least we did not have to contend with the legacy of slavery.

4 Yet we were not white. We were somehow borderline; we did not quite belong. Now, not only has the number of Asian-Americans in this country doubled in the last decade, we are growing faster than any other ethnic group. How meaningful it will ultimately prove to lump the Hmong with the Filipinos with the Japanese remains to be seen. Still, to be perceived as a significant minority is a development for which I, at least, am grateful.

5 There is a sense that to be perceived at all, a minority group must be plagued with problems—a problem in itself, to be sure. But what about our problems—were they significant enough to warrant attention? Who cared, for instance, that we did not see ourselves reflected on movie screens? Until recently, it did not occur to most of us that the absence of Asian and Asian-American images was symptomatic of a more profound invisibility.

6 Today, though, it is shocking to behold how little represented we have been, and in how blatantly distorted a manner. There has been some progress now that more Asian-Americans like David Henry Hwang and Philip Kan Gotanda have begun to write for stage and screen: also, some recent Caucasian-directed television shows, including *Shannon's Deal* and *Davis Rules*, are breaking new ground.

7 For the most part, however, film, television and theater, from *Miss Saigon* to *Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles*, have persisted in perpetuating stereotypes. Mostly this has been through the portrayal of Asian characters; Asian-Americans have rarely been represented at all.

8 This invisibility is essentially linked to the process by which fanciful ideas are superimposed onto real human beings. How are everyday Asians transformed into mysterious "Orientals," after all, if not by distance? Americans can be led to believe anything about people living in a far-off land, or even a distinctly unfamiliar place like Chinatown. It is less easy with a kid next door who plays hockey and air guitar.

9 Over the years, Asians have been the form onto which white writers have freely projected their fears and desires. That this is a form of colonialism goes almost without saying; it can happen only when the people whose images are appropriated are in no position to object.

10 For certainly anyone would object to being identified with a figure as heartlessly evil and preternaturally cunning as Fu Manchu, a brilliant but diabolical force set on taking over the world. The character's prototype was invented in 1916, in a climate of hysteria over the "threat" that Asian workers

posed to native labor. We behold its likeness in figures like Odd Job in *Goldfinger* (1964); his influence can be seen in depictions of Chinatown as a den of iniquity in movies like *The Year of the Dragon* (1985) and *True Believer* (1988). *Chinatown* (1974) used it as a symbol of all that is rotten in the city of Los Angeles, despite the fact that no Chinese person had much to do with the evil turnings of the plot.

What fuels these images is xenophobia. In periods of heightened political 11
tension, they tend to recur; in more secure times, they are replaced by more benign images. Charlie Chan for example, arose in 1926, shortly after the last of a series of laws restricting Chinese immigration had been passed and the "Yellow Peril" seemed to be over.

The benign images, however, are typically no more tied to reality than 12
their malign counterparts; vilification is merely replaced by glorification. The aphorism-spouting Charlie Chan (played by Warner Oland, a white actor in yellow-face) is godlike in his intelligence, the original Asian whiz kid; you would not be surprised to hear he had won a Westinghouse prize in his youth. More message than human being, he recalls the ever-smiling black mammy that proliferated during Reconstruction: Don't worry, he seems to say, no one's going to go making any trouble.

One Good Guy, But He's a Rat

In today's social climate of multi-culturalism, movies like *Rambo*, which made 13
the Vietnamese out to be so much cannon fodder, seem to be behind us, at least temporarily. Instead, reflecting the American preoccupation with Japan, there is *Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Here the Japanese enemy gang leader is once again purely demonic and bestial, a hairless, barbaric figure who wears a metal claw for ornament. What gives the movie a more contemporary stamp is the fact that Master Splinter, the good-guy rodent leader of the Mutant Turtles, is also Japanese. It is as if Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan were cast into a single movie—seemingly presenting a balanced view of the Japanese as good and bad.

But the fact that the "good" Japanese is a rat means that slanty eyes belong 14
to the bad guy. And as individuals the Japanese are still portrayed as sub- or superhuman, possessing fabulous abilities and arcane knowledge that center on (another contemporary twist) martial arts.

Is it a sign of a fitness-crazed age that this single aspect of Asian culture is 15
so enthralling? So perennially popular are movies like *The Karate Kid* (1984) and this year's *Iron and Silk* that one begins to wonder whether Asian males pop out of the womb doing mid-air gyrations. The audience marvels: How fantastic, these people! Meanwhile, the non-Asian roles are the more recognizably human ones.

16 Real humanity similarly eludes the Asian characters in the Broadway play *Miss Saigon*. As in *Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles*, they are either simply evil or simply good, with the possible exception of the Engineer (Jonathan Pryce) who, loathsome as he is, seems more self-interested than evil. Half-white, he seems to be, correspondingly, halfway human. In contrast, Thuy, the major Vietnamese character, is portrayed as so inhuman that he would kill a child in cold blood. Is this what Communists do? Asians? When Kim (Lea Salonga), the heroine, shoots her erstwhile loyal fiancé, the audience applauds, feeling no more for him than for Rambo's victims. The subhuman brute has got what he deserved.

17 At the same time, the audience does feel, horribly, for Kim, who has been forced to pull the trigger and now must live with blood on her hands. What a fate for a paragon of virtue! She is Madame Butterfly unpinned from her specimen board and let loose to flutter around the room again: abandoned, virtuous, she waits faithfully for her white lover, only to discover that he has married. He returns for his son (it's always a son); she kills herself.

Isn't this a beautiful story? Annette Kolodny, a feminist critic, has observed that when the Western mind feels free to remake a place and people according to its liking, it conceives of that place and people as a woman. This has been nowhere so true as in the case of the "Orient," and correspondingly, no woman, it seems, has been portrayed as more exquisitely feminine than an Oriental.

18 Take any play in which both Oriental and Caucasian women appear—say, *South Pacific*—and it is immediately obvious which is more delicate, more willing to sacrifice for her man, more docile. Never mind that there are in the world real women who might object to having their image appropriated for such use.

19 But of course, women do object. I object, especially since the only possible end for this invented Butterfly is suicide. For how would the white characters go on with their lives?

20 It is an irony of stage history that a musical as conventional in its use of the Butterfly story should follow so closely on the heels of another play that turns the same narrative on its head. The 1988 Broadway play *M. Butterfly* offers not just the "beautiful story" itself, but also a white man who has been taken in by it. So enthralled is René Gallimard by the idea of his Butterfly, the projection of his own desire, that he forgets there is a real person—Song Liling, a man and a spy—upon which his notions are imposed.

21 Ultimately, *M. Butterfly* makes clear that for the "game" of Orientalism, there is a price to pay, not only by those whose images are appropriated, but by the appropriators.

22 Do stereotypes lurk even here? It might seem so, but would a stereotype wonder, as does Song Liling, whether he and Gallimard might not continue on together, even after the truth has been revealed. When Song asks, "What do I do now?" he conveys how helpless he is too, how powerless. This is a human being. That he should be is maybe not so surprising, given that he was invented by David Henry Hwang, an Asian-American.

One Step Forward: Spoof the Stereotype

Are Asian-American writers the only hope for new forms of characterization? 23
Perhaps, when even directors as intelligent as Woody Allen portray Chinatown as having opium dens. In his most recent movie, *Alice*, Mr. Allen's recycling of an Asian sage is likewise problematic. Could he not have created a spoof of a sage—a character who winked at the stereotype even as he played it—without any damage to the plot?

Spoofing the stereotype was the strategy taken last spring in an episode of 24
the now-cancelled television series *Shannon's Deal* that featured a pony-tailed Korean immigrant. Here were clear signs for hope: the immigrant at first appeared to be an all-knowing Charlie Chan, but turned out to be at once less and more. At moments way ahead of the investigator Shannon, he proved to be way behind at others; he knew all the aphorisms but had trouble passing the bar exam, and discussed his own tendency to drop pronouns.

Other signs of change include a jeans-wearing, face-making, poker-playing 25
Japanese character in *Davis Rules*. Unexotic Mrs. Yamagami (Tamayo Otsuki) even shows a sense of humor, characterizing a coworker as "a rebel without a car." Similarly, in *Twin Peaks*, the figure of Jocelyn (Joan Chen), evil as she is, does not stand in contrast to the good, white characters the way a female Fu Manchu—a dragon lady—might. Neither, certainly, is she any Butterfly. She is, within the show's offbeat context, just one of the gang.

All these characters are heartening, since they are not simply unexamined 26
projections onto the Asian race. Still, as might be expected, directors like Wayne Wang and playwrights like Philip Kan Gotanda are not only more likely to present Asian-Americans in their work, but to present Asian-Americans who are not of the immigrant generation. In Mr. Wang's movie *Dim Sum* (1987) and Mr. Gotanda's film *The Wash* (1988), Asian-Americans are presented in far greater complexity than is typical of the mainstream media; the characters seem more captured than constructed, more like flesh-and-blood than cartoons. This is partly a matter of their status as protagonists rather than peripheral figures.

And more images are needed if the few that exist now are not to become 27
new stereotypes. Since the much publicized success of Connie Chung, for example, Asian-American anchorwomen have become a staple in films like *Year of the Dragon* and *Moscow on the Hudson*. With real-life repercussions: the San Francisco newscaster Emerald Yeh tells of an interview with CNN, during