

CONNECTING WITH OTHER TEXTS

1. Read "Living in Two Worlds" (p. 99) and examine Mabry's contrasting worlds—home and university—in terms of Rita's. Write an essay comparing their "between worlds" experiences and their ways of managing an attachment to family and a commitment to their own goals.
2. In "Race is a Four-Letter Word" (p. 108), Arboleda argues that one's race should not ultimately matter, that his identity cannot be defined in terms of race. But Marc seems focused on race and on his experience dating women of diverse ethnicity and cultures. Write an essay contrasting these two positions as you show how Marc is limited in ways that Arboleda is not.

Watching My Back

Jeff Z. Klein

Employed as staff editor of the *New York Times* since 1996, Jeff Z. Klein previously was sports editor of the *Village Voice* for five years and has been an avid ice hockey fan. He is the author of *Mario Lemieux: Ice Hockey Star* (1995) and *Messier* (2004), which "takes readers behind the headlines and statistics for a revealing look at a hockey legend." Klein is also coauthor of *The Coolest Guys on Ice* (1996), *The Death of Hockey* (1998), and two editions of *The Hockey Compendium*. The following essay was first published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2001.

- 1 He charged at me, shouting something in Czech. It was the middle of the night in Prague. My girlfriend and I were there for New Year's, and as we strolled through a deserted business district, two young men came bounding out of a pedestrian underpass. Loud, menacing and drunk, one ran up and shoved me, then missed with a liquor-slow karate kick. I shoved back. We squared off, staring.
- 2 Here I should say that my girlfriend had just completed an advanced self-defense course. She was standing to my left. I couldn't see her, but I could hear her firmly addressing the attacker—"Back off! Go away!"—as she had been taught. I hadn't been in a punch-up since I was 10 and had no idea what to do in an actual fight. But I had seen her in class, whupping two heavily padded mock attackers. I knew what she could do.
- 3 As my assailant and I faced each other, another couple, a big man and a woman, walked unaware onto the scene. My assailant suddenly went after the big guy, who simply threw him to the ground. That was plenty for me. "He's got it," I said to my girlfriend. "Let's go." We backed away, but after a few steps, she stopped and said: "Wait. We should go back. They may need our help."

I wasn't keen on the idea, but back we went. We saw the big guy standing over the assailant, who was down and out. It was over. Everyone dispersed.

4 My girlfriend and I walked down into Wenceslas Square to an all-night cash machine. "I've got your back," she assured me jokingly as I went into the bank. As we waited for a cab, I admitted that I was still pretty wired. "I'm not," she said. "I was ready to fight, but I'm fine now. Of course, I wasn't the one the guy tried to start a fight with."

5 Once we were back where we were staying, I asked my girlfriend how she would have handled it if he had attacked her. "Let's say I'm the guy, and I try to kick you like this," I said.

6 She demonstrated, pantomiming a series of blocks and strikes. "But something worries me," she said as I stood there, utterly blown away. "I'm afraid I'd make a mistake." I thought she meant she was afraid she would forget what to do in the heat of action. But that wasn't it.

7 "We're trained to start fighting as soon as an attacker throws a punch and to keep going until he can't get up again," she said. "But you got out of it without fighting, even though he actually came at you. So I'm worried that I'd start fighting and really hurt the guy—or maim him, or even kill him—when it could've ended without anyone getting hurt at all."

8 Now I was really blown away. Months earlier, while she was taking the basic self-defense course for women, she told me about a man who approached her on a train. "He was kind of creepy," she said, "but I figured it was O.K. because I knew I could beat him up." At the time, I was impressed by how quickly she had absorbed the confidence that the course was supposed to impart, but I wasn't convinced. I was now. Fully.

9 I tried to fall asleep, but I couldn't. So I went to find her. There she was, supercool, soaking her feet in the tub, reading *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

10 The next night, we were out having a drink, still rehashing what happened. "I've got to tell you something," I said. "I know this might sound weird, but do you know how attractive it is that you can do this?"

11 She looked somewhat astonished, because obviously she hadn't learned how to fight to titillate me or anyone else. "I never thought of it in those terms," she said. "I just like knowing that in a situation like the one last night, I can be of help."

12 At that point, I resolved to take the men's course. It turned out, several weeks later, that half the men were in the class precisely because their wives or girlfriends had taken it, and they were dazzled by how capable the women were. Since then I've taken a couple of other courses, both in the company of my girlfriend. Some of the mystery, I must admit, is gone, but I still love the way she moves, and I love the idea that she knows exactly what to do to defend herself.

13 The day after we got back to New York, she offered to do some of my
laundry. "I can't let you," I said. "It's too, I don't know, *traditional*."

14 "Look," she said. "A few days ago, I was willing to beat some guy up for
you. So, come on, I can do your laundry."

15 I happened to be facing away from her as I spoke. "Do you really think," I
asked, "you would've done a better job beating up that guy than I would have?"

16 "Not a *better* job," she said. "But I would've been much less likely to get
hurt doing it. Especially if he wasn't drunk and had been thinking clearly."

17 I turned and looked at her. "I think you're right," I said, and I leaned in
to kiss her. It's nice to have a girlfriend who's got your back.

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. Explain Klein's strategy in opening his essay in the middle of the action—specifically, this unexpected street assault.
2. How does the narrator's initial reaction to the attacker contrast with his girlfriend's immediate response? What are some reasons for this difference?
3. Explain what still worries the narrator's girlfriend about this incident. Why is the narrator "blown away" by her explanation?
4. Rather than being intimidated or embarrassed by his girlfriend's ability to defend them, what does the narrator initially admit about her skill? What is her response? How does her training later influence his behavior?
5. From the title of his essay to his concluding line, analyze the author's attitude toward the changing roles of males and females in a romantic relationship.
6. How does the girlfriend's attitude and behavior resist any attempt to reduce her to a stereotype? Include examples from the essay to show how multifaceted she appears.

 The Work
Dana Beardsley Crotwell

Poet and professor Dana Beardsley Crotwell (b. 1968) earned a BA in English, an MA in world literature, and an MFA in creative writing at Chapman University in California. Her writing has been featured in *Calliope* and *Earth's Daughters*. A full-time professor at El Camino College, Crotwell teaches literature, composition, critical thinking, and poetry courses. She “loves teaching Modern Literature of Latin America and Creative Writing: Poetry” and offers this encouragement to student writers: “It is so freeing to study and write. We often stifle ourselves when writing and forget that it is play; we just need to play sometimes.” The following poem is from *Proposing on the Brooklyn Bridge: Poems About Marriage* published in 2003.

Sometimes marriage is like a dirty refrigerator
 you think about making a change
 but it would be so much work
 taking everything out and examining it
 really checking every corner
 and crevice, the underside of what's there
 not everything can be solved
 with 409 and a sponge

you could defrost
 but that would be really messy
 and taking that bottom grill off
 and seeing what's inside
 could be dangerous and frightening
 it could hurt you
 so you think – how much easier it would be just to
 trash it and get a new one
 thinking you'll never let the new one get this dirty
 you'll devote more time and energy
 you'll watch what you put into it
 and you'll know what's under the grill
 before you get started –

But – looking at this icebox
 studying its contents that
 were distributed by two people
 you realize that five years ago

this was new and clean and white
 just like your wedding dress
 only this box is used many times daily –
 not hung covered and protected in a closet –
 it is open and slammed shut
 sometimes sticky, touched all over
 dumped on, dirty and left unattended
 except for surface touch ups –
 and you decide,
 put on the rubber gloves
 take everything out and cover the floor with towels
 and you defrost.

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. Why does Crotwell open her poem with such a jarring simile—"sometimes marriage is like a dirty refrigerator"?
2. Focusing on specific images in the first stanza, determine how cleaning the refrigerator applies to what is needed throughout marriage.
3. Explain the multiple meanings of "defrost" in this poem. Use details from the poem to show why defrosting is often so "messy" and "frightening" in a relationship.
4. When a relationship is troubled, why might it be tempting to "trash it and get a new one"? Analyze images that show why people think that they will prevent the new partnership from getting "this dirty"?
5. After "looking at this icebox/studying its contents that/were distributed by two people," what are some multiple realizations that partners might discover that prompt them to "defrost"?
6. Why is the second-person perspective—you—so effective in this poem?

WRITING FROM THE TEXT

1. Write an analysis of this poem that explains its key images, word choices, and meanings. Be careful to develop your essay fully and to employ the sandwich strategy to incorporate all quotations. (See 319–333.) Focus on a strong thesis that you can support throughout your essay. (See Poetry Analysis, pp. 436–444.)
2. Focusing on the main simile, "sometimes marriage is like a dirty refrigerator," write a narrative about a marriage familiar to you that needed this cleaning and "defrosting." Dramatize how it became so "dirty" and what

was done to get it clean again. Illustrate scenes from before and after the “cleaning.” (See Narration, pp. 382–396.)

3. Taking the poet’s advice to be creative and “play,” write your own poem, beginning with your own simile to complete her first line: “Sometimes a marriage is like . . .” Find an image that is unexpected and fresh, as Crotwell did. You might choose to be humorous, ironic, playful, or somber throughout your poem, but follow her example and extend the image through various word choices and related images. You might also choose a different word for “marriage,” if you prefer to write your poem about friendship, childhood, dating, or having a job, for example. Aim for concrete, vivid language.

CONNECTING WITH OTHER TEXTS

1. Read “Through the Cracks” (p. 386) and use the images in Crotwell’s poem to analyze the “work” that needed to be done in “Through the Cracks.” Illustrate what was “under the grill” when the narrator explored more deeply, why the family had shut the door on certain issues, and why the family needed more than “surface touch ups” (66). What did it take to “defrost” in this family and how successful was the work?
2. After reading “Time Lost and Found” (p. 239), write an essay analyzing how both Lamott and Crotwell, in very different works and genres, emphasize that lasting relationships require time, energy, and effort that sometimes may get neglected. Include specific details from both works to illustrate the similar values and attitudes that both writers promote.

When a Woman Says No

Ellen Goodman

A widely syndicated columnist whose home paper was the *Boston Globe*, Ellen Goodman (b. 1941) has won a Pulitzer Prize for her outstanding journalism. Goodman believes that she writes about issues more important than politics, like the “underlying values by which this country exists . . . the vast social changes in the way men and women lead their lives and deal with each other.” The essay included here, first published in the

by both Roger Ebert and A. O. Scott. Teja Arboleda cautions against sorting people according to race or ethnicity, and certainly it would be a mistake to stereotype the illegal, migrant farmworker Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa, who was able to achieve the extraordinary in education and his life's work. M. Carl Holman's poem satirizes people's efforts to deny race and culture in order to create an artificial persona, and Luis Valdez's short play satirizes the use and abuse of Latinos.

Most people would agree that the United States has been enriched by multiculturalism. American art, music, literature, food, sports, dance, clothing—and so much more—all reflect the contributions of a diverse society. This chapter celebrates those contributions without ignoring the controversies.

Living in Two Worlds

Marcus Mabry

After completing his BA in English and French literature at Stanford, Marcus Mabry (b. 1967) also earned a BA in international relations and an MA in English, all within the four years of his scholarship agreement. He has served as a correspondent for *Newsweek* at the State Department and in Paris and Johannesburg. In addition to freelance writing for *Emerge* and *Black Collegiate*, Mabry also conceived, wrote, produced, and narrated a documentary on African American families for French television. His 1995 memoir, *White Bucks and Black-Eyed Peas: Coming of Age Black in White America*, examines Mabry's decision to live in the white world where he decides he is "more comfortable" because "it demanded less role-playing" of him. In "No Father, and No Answers," an essay appearing in *Newsweek* in 1992, Mabry addresses the concerns he has had in trying both to understand and to establish a relationship with the father he only recently met (who twenty years earlier left Mabry's unwed mother to raise her son without emotional or economic support). Mabry is currently the international business editor of the *New York Times* and the author of *Twice as Good: Condoleezza Rice and Her Path to Power* (2008). The selection included here also appeared in *Newsweek on Campus*.

1 A round, green cardboard sign hangs from a string proclaiming, "We built a proud new feeling," the slogan of a local supermarket. It is a souvenir from one of my brother's last jobs. In addition to being a bagger, he's worked at a fast-food restaurant, a gas station, a garage and a textile factory. Now, in the icy clutches of the Northeastern winter, he is unemployed. He will soon be a father. He is 19 years old.

2 In mid-December I was at Stanford, among the palm trees and weighty chores of academe. And all I wanted to do was get out. I joined the rest of

the undergrads in a chorus of excitement, singing the praises of Christmas break. No classes, no midterms, no finals . . . and no freshmen! (I'm a resident assistant.) Awesome! I was looking forward to escaping. I never gave a thought to what I was escaping to.

3 Once I got home to New Jersey, reality returned. My dreaded freshmen had been replaced by unemployed relatives; badgering professors had been replaced by hard-working single mothers, and cold classrooms by dilapidated bedrooms and kitchens. The room in which the "proud new feeling" sign hung contained the belongings of myself, my mom and my brother. But for these two weeks it was mine. They slept downstairs on couches.

4 Most students who travel between the universes of poverty and affluence during breaks experience similar conditions, as well as the guilt, the helplessness and, sometimes, the embarrassment associated with them. Our friends are willing to listen, but most of them are unable to imagine the pain of the impoverished lives that we see every six months. Each time I return home I feel further away from the realities of poverty in America and more ashamed that they are allowed to persist. What frightens me most is not that the American socioeconomic system permits poverty to continue, but that by participating in that system I share some of the blame.

5 Last year I lived in an on-campus apartment, with a (relatively) modern bathroom, kitchen and two bedrooms. Using summer earnings, I added some expensive prints, a potted palm and some other plants, making the place look like the more-than-humble abode of a New York City Yuppie. I gave dinner parties, even a *soirée française*.

6 For my roommate, a doctor's son, this kind of life was nothing extraordinary. But my mom was struggling to provide a life for herself and my brother. In addition to working 24-hour-a-day cases as a practical nurse, she was trying to ensure that my brother would graduate from high school and have a decent life. She knew that she had to compete for his attention with drugs and other potentially dangerous things that can look attractive to a young man when he sees no better future.

7 Living in my grandmother's house this Christmas break restored all the forgotten, and the never acknowledged, guilt. I had gone to boarding school on a full scholarship since the ninth grade, so being away from poverty was not new. But my own growing affluence has increased my distance. My friends say that I should not feel guilty: what could I do substantially for my family at this age, they ask. Even though I know that education is the right thing to do, I can't help but feel, sometimes, that I have it too good. There is no reason that I deserve security and warmth, while my brother has to cope with potential unemployment and prejudice. I, too, encounter prejudice,

but it is softened by my status as a student in an affluent and intellectual community.

8 More than my sense of guilt, my sense of helplessness increases each time I return home. As my success leads me further away for longer periods of time, poverty becomes harder to conceptualize and feels that much more oppressive when I visit with it. The first night of break, I lay in our bedroom, on a couch that let out into a bed that took up the whole room, except for a space heater. It was a little hard to sleep because the springs from the couch stuck through at inconvenient spots. But it would have been impossible to sleep anyway because of the groans coming from my grandmother's room next door. Only in her early sixties, she suffers from many chronic diseases and couldn't help but moan, then pray aloud, then moan, then pray aloud.

9 This wrenching of my heart was interrupted by the 3 A.M. entry of a relative who had been allowed to stay at the house despite rowdy behavior and threats toward the family in the past. As he came into the house, he slammed the door, and his heavy steps shook the second floor as he stomped into my grandmother's room to take his place, at the foot of her bed. There he slept, without blankets on a bare mattress. This was the first night. Later in the vacation, a Christmas turkey and a Christmas ham were stolen from my aunt's refrigerator on Christmas Eve. We think the thief was a relative. My mom and I decided not to exchange gifts that year because it just didn't seem festive.

10 A few days after New Year's I returned to California. The Northeast was soon hit by a blizzard. They were there, and I was here. That was the way it had to be, for now. I haven't forgotten; the ache of knowing their suffering is always there. It has to be kept deep down, or I can't find the logic in studying and partying while people, my people, are being killed by poverty. Ironically, success drives me away from those I most want to help by getting an education.

11 Somewhere in the midst of all that misery, my family has built, within me, "a proud feeling." As I travel between the two worlds it becomes harder to remember just how proud I should be—not just because of where I have come from and where I am going, but because of where they are. The fact that they survive in the world in which they live is something to be very proud of, indeed. It inspires within me a sense of tenacity and accomplishment that I hope every college graduate will someday possess.

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. Describe Mabry's university world and his role in it. Then contrast the university world with details from his family's home.

What conclusions can you draw about the “cultural tug of war”?

2. Compare and contrast the home and college environments of Rita Simmons in “Peaches” (p. 49) with those of Mabry. Use specific details from each essay to support your points.
3. Write an essay contrasting the high achievements of Marcus Mabry, Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa (below), and Brent Staples (p. 164) with their family’s and peers’ low expectations for them.

Terra Firma—A Journey from Migrant **Farm Labor to Neurosurgery**

Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa

An illegal immigrant when he crossed into the United States in the mid-1980s, Alfredo Quiñones-Hinojosa (b. 1966) is an assistant professor of neurosurgery and oncology, director of the brain-tumor stem-cell laboratory at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, and director of the brain-tumor program at the Johns Hopkins Bayview campus.

In an interview which you can hear at www.nejm.org, Quiñones-Hinojosa discusses his concerns about how immigrants today face discrimination and often feel unwelcome in emergency rooms, where they may come too late for appropriate medical treatment. Quiñones-Hinojosa's inspiring personal narrative below appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on August 9, 2007.

- 1 "You will spend the rest of your life working in the fields," my cousin told me when I arrived in the United States in the mid-1980s. This fate indeed appeared likely: a 19-year-old illegal migrant farm worker, I had no English language skills and no dependable means of support. I had grown up in a small Mexican farming community, where I began working at my father's gas station at the age of 5. Our family was poor, and we were subject to the diseases of poverty: my earliest memory is of my infant sister's death from diarrhea when I was 3 years old. But my parents worked long hours and had always made enough money to feed us, until an economic crisis hit our country in the 1970s. Then they could no longer support the family, and although I trained to be a teacher, I could not put enough food on the table either.
- 2 Desperate for a livable income, I packed my few belongings and, with \$65 in my pocket, crossed the U.S. border illegally. The first time I hopped the fence into California, I was caught and sent back to Mexico, but I tried again and succeeded. I am not condoning illegal immigration; honestly, at the time, the law was far from the front of my mind. I was merely responding to the dream of a better life, the hope of escaping poverty so that one day I could return home triumphant. Reality, however, posed a stark contrast to the dream. I spent long days in the fields picking fruits and vegetables, sleeping under leaky camper shells, eating anything I could get, with hands bloodied from pulling weeds—the very same hands that today perform brain surgery.
- 3 My days as a farm worker taught me a great deal about economics, politics, and society. I learned that being illegal and poor in a foreign country could be more painful than any poverty I had previously experienced. I learned that our society sometimes treats us differently depending on the places we have been and the education we have obtained. When my cousin told me I would never escape that life of poverty, I became determined to prove him wrong. I took night jobs as a janitor and subsequently as a welder that allowed me to attend a community college where I could learn English.
- 4 In 1989, while I was working for a railroad company as a welder and high-pressure valve specialist, I had an accident that caused me to reevaluate my life once again. I fell into a tank car that was used to carry

liquefied petroleum gas. My father was working at the same company. Hearing a coworker's cry for help, he tried to get into the tank; fortunately, someone stopped him. It was my brother-in-law, Ramon, who climbed in and saved my life. He was taken out of the tank unconscious but regained consciousness quickly. By the time I was rescued, my heart rate had slowed almost to zero, but I was resuscitated in time. When I awoke, I saw a person dressed all in white and was flooded with a sense of security, confidence, and protection, knowing that a doctor was taking care of me. Although it was clear to me that our poverty and inability to speak English usually translated into suboptimal health care for my community, the moment I saw this physician at my bedside, I felt I had reached terra firma, that I had a guardian.

- 5 After community college, I was accepted at the University of California, Berkeley, where a combination of excellent mentorship, scholarships, and my own passion for math and science led me to research in the neurosciences. One of my mentors there convinced me, despite my skepticism, that I could go anywhere I wanted for medical school. Thanks to such support and encouragement, I eventually went to Harvard Medical School. As I pursued my own education, I became increasingly aware of the need and responsibility we have to educate our country's poor.
- 6 It is no secret that minority communities have the highest dropout rates and the lowest educational achievement levels in the country. The pathway to higher education and professional training programs is not "primed" for minority students. In 1994, when I started medical school, members of minority groups made up about 18% of the U.S. population but accounted for only 3.7% of the faculty in U.S. medical schools. I was very fortunate to find outstanding minority role models, but though their quality was high, their numbers were low.
- 7 Given my background, perhaps it is not surprising that I did not discover the field of neurosurgery until I was a medical student. I vividly remember when, in my third year of medical school, I first witnessed neurosurgeons peeling back the dura and exposing a real, live, throbbing human brain. I recall feeling absolute awe and humility—and an immediate and deep recognition of the intimacy between a patient and a doctor.
- 8 That year, one of my professors strongly encouraged me to go into primary care, arguing that it was the best way for me to serve my Hispanic immigrant community. Although I had initially intended to return to Mexico triumphant, I had since fallen in love with this country, and I soon found myself immersed in and committed to the betterment of U.S. society. With my sights set on neurosurgery after medical school, I followed my heart and

instincts and have tried to contribute to my community and the larger society in my own way. I see a career in academic medicine as an opportunity not only to improve our understanding and treatment of human diseases but also to provide leadership within medicine and support to future scientists, medical students, and physician scientists from minority and nonminority groups alike.

- 9 My grandmother was the medicine woman in the small town in rural Mexico where I grew up. As I have gotten older, I have come to recognize the crucial role she played not only in instilling in me the value of healing but also in determining the fate and future of others. She was my first role model, and throughout my life I have depended on the help of my mentors in pursuing my dreams. Like many other illegal immigrants, I arrived in the United States able only to contemplate those dreams—I was not at that point on solid ground. From the fields of the San Joaquin Valley in California to the field of neurosurgery, it has been quite a journey. Today, as a neurosurgeon and researcher, I am taking part in the larger journey of medicine, both caring for patients and conducting clinical and translational research on brain cancer that I hope will lead to innovative ways of fighting devastating disease. And as a citizen of the United States, I am also participating in the great journey of this country. For immigrants like me, this voyage still means the pursuit of a better life—and the opportunity to give back to society.

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. What specific details of Quiñones-Hinojosa's account are most characteristic of an illegal immigrant's life?
2. What features of his life contributed to his eventually becoming a medical doctor and professor of neurosurgery and oncology?
3. This narration of an amazing personal history does not have an explicit thesis. What position is implicit in Quiñones-Hinojosa's inspiring account?
4. What does the title "Terra Firma" mean? In what ways does the term have significance in the author's life story?

WRITING FROM THE TEXT

1. Write an essay to encourage someone to come to the United States. Use details of Quiñones-Hinojosa's life story to inspire your reader.



M. Carl Holman

A poet, professor, and civil rights activist, M. Carl Holman (1919–1988) taught at Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1949 to 1962. He also worked as an editor on the *Atlanta Inquirer* and was on the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights. He served as president of the National Urban Coalition from 1971 until his death in 1988. Throughout his life, he won numerous awards for public service and for his poetry. The following poem, written in 1967, demonstrates his ability to meld his two passions—poetry and civil rights.

5 Taught early that his mother's skin was the sign of error,
He dressed and spoke the perfect part of honor;
Won scholarships, attended the best schools.
Disclaimed kinship with jazz and spirituals;
Chose prudent, raceless views for each situation.
Or when he could not cleanly skirt dissension
Faced up to the dilemma, firmly seized
Whatever ground was Anglo-Saxonized.

10 In diet, too, his practice was exemplary;
Of pork in its profane forms he was wary;
Expert in vintage wines, sauces and salads.
His palate shrank from cornbread, yams and collards.

15 He was as careful whom he chose to kiss;
His bride had somewhere lost her Jewishness.
But kept her blue eyes; an Episcopalian
Prelate proclaimed them matched chameleon.
Choosing the right addresses, here, abroad,
They shunned those places where they might be barred;
Even less anxious to be asked to dine
20 Where hosts catered to kosher accent or exotic skin.

And so he climbed, unclogged by ethnic weights,
An airborne plant, flourishing without roots.
Not one false note was struck—until he died;
His subtly grieving widow could have flayed
25 The obit writers, ringing crude changes on a clumsy phrase:
“One of the most distinguished members of his race.”

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. The opening line reveals that Mr. Z was “taught early that his mother’s skin was the sign of error” (1), as if it were a mistake, something to correct or avoid. Why does the poet emphasize that this was “taught?” How can readers be sure what “his mother’s skin” symbolizes? What does he shun?
2. List all the details that support the poet’s claim that Mr. Z “dressed and spoke the perfect part of honor” (2). What does “perfect part” imply? What other words are used to show that every decision is calculated?
3. How does Mr. Z’s bride seem ideal for him? What is she denying and avoiding? Why are they described as “matched chameleon”? What is telling about the contrast in the emotion that she exhibits over his death and the emotion that she feels for the “obit writers” who change his obituary?
4. Explain the significance of these lines: “And so he climbed, unclogged by ethnic weights, / An airborne plant, flourishing without roots” (21–22).
5. How is this poem a satire and what is the poet satirizing?
6. Irony is key to this poem. The poem reads like a list of praises, but what is the attitude of the poet toward Mr. Z? How can the reader be sure? Explain the irony in the last line.

The Myth of the Latin Woman

Judith Ortiz Cofer

Born in Puerto Rico in 1952, poet, essayist, and novelist Judith Ortiz Cofer has written extensively on being reared with her parents' traditional island culture while growing up in New Jersey. In an interview, Cofer described the contradictions in her cultural identity: "I write in English, yet I write obsessively about my Puerto Rican experience. . . . I am a composite of two worlds." A professor of English at the University of Georgia, Cofer has published essays, poems, and fiction. Her work includes *Woman in Front of the Sun: On Becoming a Writer* (2000), *The Meaning of Consuelo* (2003), *Call Me Maria* (2004), and *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish: Poems* (2005). The piece included here is from *The Latin Deli*, published in 1993.

- 1 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.
- 2 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 a tropical paradise but an Alcatraz, a place nobody wants to visit. As a Puerto Rican girl living 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.
- 3 Growing up in a large urban center in New Jersey during the 1960s, I suffered from what I think of as "cultural schizophrenia." Our life was designed by my parents as a microcosm of their *casas* on the island. We spoke in Spanish, ate Puerto Rican food bought at the *bodega*, and practiced strict Catholicism at a church that allotted us a one-hour slot each week for mass, performed in Spanish by a Chinese priest trained as a missionary for Latin America.
- 4 As a girl I was kept under strict surveillance by my parents, since my virtue and modesty were, by their cultural equation, the same as their honor.

As a teenager I was lectured constantly on how to behave as a proper *senorita*. But it was a conflicting message I received, 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" and flashy. The difference 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.

- 5 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 Puerto Rican girls "dressing up" meant wearing their mother's ornate jewelry and clothing, 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. 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 these choices. But I remember a comment my friend (an Italian American) made in later years that coalesced my impressions of the 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 cultural 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."
- 6 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 "bossmen" talked to them as if sexual innuendo was all they understood,

and worse, often gave them the choice of submitting to their advances or being fired.

7 It is custom, however, not chromosomes, that leads us to choose scarlet over pale pink. As young girls, it was our mothers who influenced our decisions about clothes and colors—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.

8 My mother has told me about dressing in her best party clothes on Saturday nights and going to the town’s plaza to promenade with her 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 myself 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. I remember the boy who took me to my first formal dance leaning over to plant a sloppy, over-eager kiss painfully on my mouth; when I didn’t respond with sufficient passion, he remarked resentfully: “I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early,” as if I were expected to *ripen* like a fruit or vegetable, not just grow into womanhood like other girls.

9 It is surprising to my professional friends that even today some people, including those who should know better, still put others “in their place.” It happened to me most recently during a stay at a classy metropolitan hotel favored by young professional couples for weddings. Late one evening after the theater, as I walked toward my room with a colleague (a woman with whom I was coordinating an arts program), a middle-aged man in a tuxedo, with a young girl in satin and lace on his arm, stepped directly into our path. With his champagne glass extended toward me, he exclaimed “Evita!”

10 Our way blocked, my companion and I listened as the man half-recited, half-bellowed "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina." When he finished, the young girl said: "How about a round of applause for my daddy?" We complied, hoping this would bring the silly spectacle to a close. I was becoming aware that our little group was attracting the attention of the other guests. "Daddy" must have perceived this too, and he once more barred the way as we tried to walk past him. He began to shout-sing a ditty to the tune of "La Bamba"—except the lyrics were about a girl named Maria whose exploits rhymed with her name and gonorrhea. The girl kept saying "Oh, Daddy" and looking at me with pleading eyes. She wanted me to laugh along with the others. My companion and I stood silently waiting for the man to end his offensive song. When he finished, I looked not at him but at his daughter. I advised her calmly never to ask her father what he had done in the army. Then I walked between them and to my room. My friend complimented me on my cool handling of the situation, but I confessed that I had really wanted to push the jerk into the swimming pool. This same man—probably a corporate executive, well-educated, even worldly by most standards—would not have been likely to regale an Anglo woman with a dirty song in public. He might have checked his impulse by assuming that she could be somebody's wife or mother, or at least *somebody* who might take offense. But, to him, I was just an Evita or a Maria: merely a character in his cartoon-populated universe.

11 Another facet of the myth of the Latin woman in the United States is the menial, the domestic—Maria the housemaid or counter girl. It's true that work as domestics, as waitresses, and in factories is all that's available to women with little English and few skills. But the myth of the Hispanic menial—the funny maid, mispronouncing words and cooking up a spicy storm in a shiny California kitchen—has been perpetuated by the media in the same way that "Mammy" from *Gone with the Wind* became America's idea of the black woman for generations. Since I do not wear my diplomas around my neck for all to see, I have on occasion been sent to that "kitchen" where some think I obviously belong.

12 One incident has stayed with me, though I recognize it as a minor offense. My first public poetry reading took place in Miami, at a restaurant where a luncheon was being held before the event. I was nervous and excited as I walked in with notebook in hand. An older woman motioned me to her table, and thinking (foolish me) that she wanted me to autograph a copy of my newly published slender volume of verse, I went over. She ordered a cup of coffee from me, assuming that I was a waitress. (Easy enough to mistake my poems for menus, I suppose.) I know it wasn't an intentional act of cruelty. Yet of all the good things that happened later, 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. In fact, I have almost always taken any doubt in my abilities as a challenge, the result most often being the satisfaction of winning a convert, of seeing the cold, appraising eyes warm to my words, the body language change, the smile that indicates I have opened some avenue for communication. So that day as I read, I looked directly at that woman. Her lowered eyes told me she was embarrassed at her faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, 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 entire incident, but maybe not.

13 Yet I am one of the lucky ones. There are thousands of Latinas without the privilege of an education or the entrees into society that I have. For them life is a constant struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina. My goal is to try to replace the old stereotypes 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 that will get my audience past the particulars of my skin color, my accent, or my clothes.

14 I once wrote a poem in which I called all 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."

THINKING ABOUT THE TEXT

1. What is the author's strategy in opening her essay with the anecdote about the bus passenger singing to her? What does the author mean when she claims that "you can leave the island" and travel to distant places, "but if you are Latina . . . the island travels with you" (118)? Do you think her awareness reflects the experience of members of other ethnicities as well?
2. Cofer describes the "cultural schizophrenia" of growing up in New Jersey but living in a home that reflected her family's Puerto Rican heritage. In which specific areas did this between-worlds schizophrenia appear?
3. The author is aware that most adolescents feel "out of step much of the time" (119), but how did the codes of her Puerto Rican family intensify the separation she felt from the Anglo culture she lived in?
4. The author writes that "mixed cultural signals have perpetuated certain stereotypes" (119) about the Hispanic woman. What are those stereotypes?