Essays From The Program in Writing and Rhetoric

Boothe Prize Winners and Honorable Mentions
INTRODUCTION

First-year writing, one of Stanford’s oldest traditions, has been taught since the founding of the University. The current Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) courses provide a setting for student writers to focus their intellectual energies on the art and craft of writing. PWR’s small, seminar-style classes offer students the opportunity to develop their writing abilities in academic analysis and argument with the meticulous and consistent guidance of an experienced writing instructor.

As we move towards a new curriculum for PWR courses with added emphasis on oral and multimedia rhetoric, many of our students have already begun to incorporate visual rhetoric and analysis of film in their research-based arguments. Several of the essays selected as the Winners and Honorable Mentions for the Boothe Prize Publication represent these new opportunities for writers, and it is our pleasure to share them with the larger Stanford community.

At the same time, PWR is committed to leading students through time-tested strategies in rhetoric and composition, including understanding a writer’s stance, developing a supportable argumentative thesis, deploying cogent proofs, and writing for a range of audiences. Each of these essays demonstrates the way in which PWR courses guide Stanford’s first-year students in presenting their ideas with the intellectual rigor and stylistic force expected of university students.

As Directors of this Program, we have had the privilege of reading all the essays nominated for the Boothe Prizes, and we have been impressed over and over again by how well these beginning University students have met the challenges of first-year writing. We value the intellectual curiosity, freshness of thought and expression, and engagement with the ideas of others represented in the essays published here, and we offer our heartiest congratulations to these writers as well as to their instructors.

Andrea A. Lunsford, Director, PWR

Marvin Diogenes, Associate Director, PWR
Spring 2001 Winner
Anthony Berryhill

Instructor’s Foreword

One bright gray February morning during office hours, Anthony Berryhill and I met to confirm the already excellent topic Mr. Berryhill had chosen for his Research Paper—patterns of race and racism in contemporary New Orleans culture. When Mr. Berryhill finished, he told me his mind had lately been seized by a topic of even grander dimension: parallels between the histories of discrimination against African Americans and gays, respectively, and why it is that American law, as he had learned through his substantial experiences in debate and public speaking, has come to treat the two kinds of discrimination differently, constitutionally prohibiting the one, often expressly endorsing the other. I was once a lawyer, and like a lawyer offered some opinions on the matter, after which Mr. Berryhill sat back for a moment and said something to the effect of: “So, Mr. Mallios, what I think I’d like to write on are the different legal standards that apply to the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution as they distinguish falsely, I will argue, using postmodern theory and contemporary historiography, between discriminatory practices against African Americans and gays in jurisprudence of the past two decades. Would this be a good idea?” I said “No,” because, as every good first-year English instructor knows, the key to a good student research paper is the choice of a narrowed and realistically-proportioned topic, whereas Mr. Berryhill’s topic was so ambitious and extensive, so determined to probe the most difficult issues in so many different fields of study (law, history, critical theory, and more), that it was virtually inconceivable that anyone could complete the caliber of paper which we expected from him in the limited amount of time he had. Then Anthony smiled, thanked me very much for my sage counsel, and utterly ignored me, setting off directly for the law library. The rest is history, or rather the story that is inscribed within this essay: the best first-year essay I have ever seen, or am likely to see. It combines a spirit of fearless intellectual curiosity with a tenacious commitment to making knowledge and thinking matter the twin poles of the extraordinary person that is Mr. Berryhill himself. As Elton John almost said: “Where to now, St. Anthony?”

Peter Mallios
Assistant Professor, University of Maryland
CORRECTING THE BLACK-GAY DISTINCTION IN CURRENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE EQUAL PROTECTION CLAUSE

Anthony Berryhill

Since the U.S. Supreme Court decided Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, the African-American experience of discrimination has served as the benchmark for groups that may warrant civil rights protection under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. Whether or not a victimized group is eligible for protection under the Equal Protection Clause and what legal test will determine how much cautionary protection that group is to be accorded, are determined by the analogy of African-American experience. In recent years, the Supreme Court and society at large have defined criteria for protection that essentially remove homosexuals from protective consideration. When analyzing the specific standards used to exclude homosexuals from equal protection, a legal case for the contrary can be made by showing that the criteria differentiating blacks and gays are flawed, and by demonstrating that despite important differences between the political histories of the two groups, there are relevant similarities in their history of prejudice that make the two groups’ experiences of discrimination synonymous in the eyes of the law.

In terms of civil rights, the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment is the Constitution’s guiding force:

No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (14th Amendment, emphasis added)

This amendment has traditionally been used to address specific issues of discrimination and the justifiability of including specific groups of people for and excluding others from judicially
monitored protection. The legal problem determines the specific criteria for when and how the courts, as interpreters of the law, should interfere in the discriminatory practices found in society at large. The issue here is whether or not, and to what extent the courts should protect gays from discrimination as a matter of upholding their rights to “equal protection” under the laws. The law creates special tests for determining the extent that the courts should respond to a particular type of discrimination under the 14th Amendment. The Supreme Court has established the example of discrimination against blacks as the benchmark and prime analogy for evaluating the extent to which the Equal Protection Clause should provide protection to other groups. As Geoffrey Stone observes in *Constitutional Law*, “[T]he Court’s analysis of discrimination against African Americans has served as a prototype for the development of other constitutional devices” (421).

For African Americans, the Court has come to apply a test of “strict scrutiny” to alleged instances of discrimination; it is a test which places a maximum burden on the defendant—“strictly scrutinizing” his actions—to demonstrate that there were no racist intentions behind his act and that the effect of discrimination was absolutely necessary to the achievement of some crucial social goal. The courts have come to protect African Americans to this strict degree because of several factors relating to their history of and historical vulnerability to discrimination in this country: first, that race is immutable (“defined by genetics”); second, that African Americans have experienced extreme social stereotyping (such as “hyper-sexuality” and “laziness”); and finally, that historically blacks have suffered immense political and legal prejudice, which precluded their ability to effect political influence (Steffan xvi). As such, race discrimination has become the example upon which the Supreme Court has developed its current criteria for determining which social groups will receive “strict scrutiny” protection under the 14th Amendment. These criteria include:

1. there must be a history of discrimination like the African American experience
2. the nature of the distinguishing trait must be immutable and beyond one’s control
3. either the minority in question must be in a politically powerless position or the right in question must be a fundamental right. (*High Tech Gays v. Defense Industrial Security Office*, 668 F. Supp. 1361, 1987)
Currently, homosexuals are given the polar opposite degree of protection: that is to say, virtually no protection under “strict scrutiny” because their cases of discrimination are determined by the “rational basis test.” As the name suggests, the test proceeds on the premise that as long as a defendant can argue a logical reason or “rational basis” for an action that ultimately (but inadvertently) had a discriminatory effect, the Court will allow the defendant’s actions to stand. Hence, one can see why so much depends on the type of test and the degree to which the court will apply an analogy to the African-American experience: i.e., in almost every case, the choice of test, which is dependent upon the degree to which the analogy applies, determines the outcome of the review and whether or not protection is provided. Essentially, saying that gays are protected under the Equal Protection Clause but only under the rational basis test is in reality, no protection at all.

For example, the rational basis test has been used in cases such as the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” as well as in Bowers v. Hardwick (1986), where the Court argued, “[I]t is rational to criminalize the conduct [of homosexuality]. . . it is rational to deny special favor and protection to those with a self-avowed tendency to engage in [homosexual] conduct” (Bowers, 478 U.S. 186, 646). Therefore, the cause to protect homosexuals requires a legal argument that either meets the three criteria in High Tech Gays (analogizing blacks and gays as social groups) or one that rejects the premises of the Bowers v. Hardwick decision by showing that homosexuals have fundamental rights that must be included under the 14th Amendment. This paper will argue both positions, using direct analogies to the African American experience to establish both legal claims.

Of course, in American society, the cause to give homosexuals equal civil rights under the Equal Protection Clause raises tremendous opposition. Opponents to equal protection cite the three criteria in High Tech Gays and explain point by point, why homosexuals and blacks do not have either the same or a substantially similar history of discrimination. Surprisingly, one group that shares this view is a particular segment of the African-American community itself. The title of Eric Brandt’s famous study, Dangerous Liaisons, indicate the competition that blacks and gays share in the goal to earn legal civil rights. Brandt explains that he wrote his book in the context of a common conflict between the two groups concerning which is the more oppressed. Whereas gays claim they lack marriage
rights and employment opportunities, blacks view an analogy to their experience as “offensive” and the history of discrimination against gays as a far cry from the historical experience of slavery (2).

In fact, the current political climate feeds this adversarial attitude over civil rights, and thus the African-American response to equal civil rights. Today, many among the black leadership feel that the political climate is inclined toward taking away civil rights protections by attacking affirmative action while at the same time, in cases such as Romer v. Evans (1995), one finds the judiciary giving consideration to same-sex marriage, anti-discrimination laws in the workplace and a new wave of civil rights (Brandt 5). In other words, many blacks view homosexual civil rights protection as a threat to their own cause for social reform as “rights frameworks require us [...] to prove our belonging by proving [...] victimhood. [Blacks] gain ‘strict judicial scrutiny’ by establishing ourselves as a ‘special [discriminated] class’” (Segrest 55). Therefore, providing homosexuals protection equal to that of blacks means that blacks would be legally less “special” and would have a lower entitlement to special legal consideration and, therefore, civil rights protection.

Ironically, the main arguments made by the African-American leadership echo the sentiments of the Supreme Court: special interest groups such as the NAACP and the institution of the black church claim that there is no relevant link between the prejudices harbored against gays and blacks. Opponents commonly claim that gay and black experiences of discrimination are not identical. Whereas blacks have suffered institutional slavery, extremes of violence like lynching, and political powerlessness (to the extent of de jure denial of voting rights), homosexuals have been significantly immune from such history (Smith 16). The attitude that opponents take (particularly among the African-American leadership) is that gays want “special rights” and that giving them equal coverage is an insult to the civil rights cause. Indeed, special-interest groups deliberately use propaganda to convince blacks that anti-gay prejudice is not like race prejudice, just as movies like The Gay Agenda implicitly argue that gays do not need political help and that they can change their sexual orientation (Solomon 64).

In addition, opponents of equal rights focus on the immutability standard, claiming that homosexuals can choose to opt out of their homosexual behavior, a trait that is not similar to the black experience wherein such adaptation is impossible (i.e. skin color
is virtually static). As a group of Cleveland black special-interest groups have advertised the matter: “[B]eing black is an ontological reality […] [whereas] homosexuality is a chosen life style, defined by behavior” (Smith 20). Henry Louis Gates elaborates, “[T]he repugnance that many people feel toward gays concerns […] the status ascribed to them. . . . Disapproval of a sexual practice is transmuted into the demonization of a sexual species” (qtd. in Brandt 26-27). In other words, the way opponents of equal rights view the issue, the difference between blacks and gays is one of behavior versus status: discrimination against blacks associates a particular behavior to blacks while gay discrimination labels its hatred toward the status of the whole group. The courts also adopt this mindset when refusing to allow equal rights for homosexuals; and this also is the idea behind Clinton’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, wherein discrimination proves justifiable if one demonstrates “homosexual” behavior or otherwise reveals one is gay. As Lois Shawver notes, “Our society has not only made it very dangerous to be a homosexual, it has even made it dangerous to look like one, associate with one, or argue in their behalf” (102-103).

Finally, opponents of equal rights for homosexuals refer to the third criterion for 14th Amendment protection: political powerlessness and proof that a “fundamental right” is at stake. Opponents often claim that gays have a large amount of political influence in Congress and in society as a whole and that they also have a lot of political clout to remedy the discrimination in front of them. Homosexuals are viewed as “uniformly wealthy, highly privileged and politically powerful” (Smith 16). This view often continues with claims that gays have far more economic advantages than African Americans, partly due to the ability to get jobs, promotions and opportunities without necessarily having to deal with prejudice. They “have it better,” as Henry Louis Gates elaborates, pointing to the higher average incomes and educational levels that distinguish gays from blacks. While the national average salary is $32,144, gays enjoy an average of $55,430, while blacks have only $12,166. 59.6% of homosexuals, according to this Wall Street Journal report, attend college compared to the national average of 18% of blacks (Wells-Petry 38). The courts have not ignored this claim when deciding against homosexual civil rights. Judge Oliver Hasch, in his decision against protecting Joseph Steffan from exclusion from the military (based on his sexual orientation), argued that gays do not meet the
political powerlessness criterion because they have political clout in Congress and the ability to publicly rally for issues like AIDS and civil rights (Steffan 180).

Indeed, many of these claims against homosexual civil rights seem accurate. There are indeed substantial differences between blacks and gays economically and politically. It is plausible to think that homosexuals “have it better” in the political climate and that they can “change” their behavior to avoid discrimination. By definition, the two types of discrimination are different: clearly, race and sexual orientation are not identical traits, and different social expectations are attached to each concept. Henry Louis Gates points out this difference as now society knows that African-American prejudice is wrong and legally unjustifiable, while prejudice against gays is highly debatable and subject to discussion (qtd. in Brandt 28).

However, to reach these conclusions without fully analyzing the logical fallacies of each, as current society and the American courts have done, is to reach a hasty conclusion. Although there are substantial differences between blacks and gays, there are also substantial structural similarities to these groups’ histories of discrimination that justify both groups getting protection under “strict scrutiny” because the social methods of prejudice for blacks and gays are virtually identical.

I. Violence based on prejudice

Although homosexuals have not suffered centuries of institutional slavery, they have, like African Americans, been attacked in similar ways for their differences. For example, violence among both groups is steadily increasing. Within months of each other, an African American and a gay man were both killed as a consequence of their minority status. On June 7, 1998, James Byrd was beaten and dragged by a truck because he was black. On October 11th of the same year, Matthew Shepard suffered a similar fate after several homophobic classmates convinced him that they were gay and beat him to death. The pattern of violence is so similar that violence against both gays and blacks is now covered under the category “hate crimes.” The differences in the histories of discrimination are irrelevant as both groups, despite their differences, have increasing levels of hate crime violence (Brandt 3-4). Barbara Smith also makes the same point—that past differences in blacks’ and gays’ histories of discrimination are irrelevant to the social and
physical violence that each group similarly suffers today—in describing how gays are “threatened with the loss of employment, of housing [...] [child] custody and are subject to verbal abuse, gay bashing, and death” (16).

When comparing current societal discrimination against gays and the violent reactions from civil rights protests in the 50s and 60s, each demonstrates similar types of social outrage. Whereas blacks were sprayed with water hoses when fighting for equal rights and labeled with terms such as “coon” and the “N-word,” gays are labeled as “perverts,” child-molesters and other terms. In both examples, such labeling is designed to silence the target groups from protesting their minority status as it provides society quick and convenient terms that require no discussion, evidence or analysis to justify. In fact, such labeling makes opposition to such labeling impossible. As Mab Segrest agrees:

How can gay people persuade others to pass a federal law protecting our civil rights when they are wondering whether we eat shit and rape children, as right-wing videos suggest? How do we have that conversation in any public way, on our terms? (55)

This social labeling also extends to silencing society at large from disagreeing with such social prejudice: just as supporters of black rights were once called “nigger-sympathizers” in today’s society, supporters of gay rights are labeled along with the minority group as “gays” and “queers.”

The social implications of this labeling manifest themselves in many homosexuals’ consistent fear for their physical safety. In a case study of an anonymous Northeast college (called “Clement University”), Robert Rhoads surveyed the entire student body and found that 54% of the students felt that homosexuals would be openly harassed on campus for announcing their sexual orientation. Even more alarming, 33% of the straight population at the college feared even associating with homosexuals out of fear of being labeled as well (Rhoads 16). Of the homosexual population at Clement University, all 2,074 people who testified to being homosexual in the survey said they had been a target of hate crime at some point in their lives because of their sexual orientation (Rhoads 13). Clearly, in terms of violence there is a legal justification for concluding that the black and gay histories of discrimination are not the same, but now they are similar, and ought to be treated so by the 14th Amendment.
Just as all blacks have feared for their well-being when their civil rights have been in question, homosexuals face that same fear as they fight for legal protection while fearing the current societal trend of treating systemic violence against gays as acceptable and not as important as similar violence that happened to blacks.

II. **Immutability is not an appropriate standard to justify excluding homosexuals from equal rights.**

Probably the most difficult commonly advanced argument for gay rights activists to refute is the contention that while race is immutable and cannot be changed, homosexuality is a choice. The truth of this contention is highly debatable and beyond the scope of this paper; however, to question the logic of using such a standard is definitely fair ground.

Immutability as a standard lacks internal logic. The courts have accepted without question the claim that only groups with immutable traits merit special protection, and have used this claim of immutability as proof that prejudice against blacks and gays are distinct. Ironically, arbitrary standards like immutability are key to perceiving the structural similarity to prejudice against both groups. In the African-American experience, the courts have allowed discrimination based on grandfather clauses, literacy tests and the “brown paper bag rule,” in which the proximity of one’s skin color to a brown paper bag determined one’s racial category of black or white (Wright, para. 15). There was also, at one time, the “one drop rule,” which dictated that an individual of 1/16th black heritage was automatically classified as black, without exception (Wright, para. 15). Only recently has the idea of being “multiracial” been accepted in lieu of the strict “black and white” mentality of racist society. In the same way, gays have been treated as a group defined and identified by completely arbitrary criteria. For example, in the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell policy,” people can be excluded even if they are straight. As Louis Fisher points out, individuals suspected of being homosexual are arbitrarily given the burden of proof to show that “the member […] demonstrates that he or she is not a person who engages in, attempts to engage in, has propensity to engage in, or intends to engage in homosexual acts” (1089).

Even worse, immutability as a standard deliberately reinforces the same level of inferiority that the court in Brown v. Board of Education explicitly rejects (Richards 2). It is this legal and social classification that both blacks and gays fight when they want equal
rights. Under both forms of discrimination, prejudice is legally justified by “the construction of an American identity.” For gays, the idea of immutability makes them out to be unnatural, queer, lacking moral value and to be subhuman. Similarly, blacks have faced these same stereotypes as both groups are often seen as “one-dimensional”: as either “means of production” or “immoral sexual creatures [...] interested mostly in sexual gratification” (Richards 5). Therefore, from a legal point of view, it should not matter whether or not homosexuals can “change.” Enforcing such a discriminatory mindset upon deciding rights protection contradicts the precedent in Brown v. Board of Education.

**III. The sociocultural critique of unequal civil rights for gays**

The idea that immutability is a criterion for rights protection is a classic example of the law blindly accepting social norms and codifying those norms into decisions supporting unequal rights. In Bowers v. Hardwick, Justice Blackmun warns against this trend arguing, “A policy of selective application must be supported by a neutral and legitimate interest—something more substantial than a habitual dislike for, or ignorance about, the disfavored group” (Bowers, 478 U.S. 186, 646). In fact, in Justice Powell’s words, segregation of civil rights from homosexuals is no better than racial “animus” (Bowers, 478 U.S. 186, 1093), especially because such a decision relies on premises similar to those that blacks suffered when fighting for civil rights and violates Blackmun’s standard of justifying discrimination on “neutral and legitimate interests.” Specifically, both black and gay experiences of discrimination include a conflict between equal rights and accepted social norms that construct and label each group as “inferior.” Although current society and public exposure make it seem that homosexuality is acceptable, gays are still labeled as having “abnormal behavior [...] [and being] in no way [...] the moral equivalent of heterosexuals” (Fone 411).

This assumption spills over into how society and the law treat homosexuals. In Justice White’s concurring opinion in Bowers v. Hardwick, he even argues that the current “majority sentiment about the morality of homosexuality” was acceptable, and subsequently accepts the current discriminatory point of view about gays (Bowers, 478 U.S. 186, 1090). This is similar to courts’ prior acceptance of Jim Crow laws, laws banning interracial marriage and the “Defense
of Marriage Act” (Fone 414) as these laws were intended to keep blacks from questioning and challenging the current social hierarchy of rights and social status. In most case law, such as Brown v. Board of Education, a dominant discriminating group seldom agrees with arguments that challenge its hierarchy of rights: arguments which challenge distinctions between itself and the target group. For example, in segregation, “African Americans had to be kept in their place, one that was inferior to and separate from whites” (Cox 2). In fact, this is one main reason why there was strong social opposition to desegregation: equal education gave African Americans an opportunity to disprove social stereotypes and to have access to create social reform.

The exact same attitude is taken to prevent gays from having anti-discrimination laws and marriage rights. As Richard Mohr explains, the marriage issue is not one of legal justifiability; it a dangerous stepping stone to legitimizing status quo distinctions between heterosexuals and homosexuals (not unlike those between blacks and whites). The idea of limiting marriage rights to heterosexual couples is “circular, lacks any merit and explains nothing [...] Its function is to assure heterosexual supremacy as a central cultural form” (Cox 4). In other words, giving homosexuals marriage rights and other civil liberties endangers social assumptions about the immorality of homosexual relationships, just as equal educational opportunity endangered common views about blacks. Professor Sylvia Law agrees, arguing that “when homosexual people build relationships of caring and commitment, they deny the traditional belief and prescription that stable relations require the hierarchy and reciprocity of male/female polarity” (Cox 5). Therefore, just as the court understood the social implications of preventing equal opportunity to education, there is a substantial legal reason to act similarly for homosexual couples: relying on social norms such as immutability and the arguments made to justify “gay inferiority” is inappropriate in civil rights law.

IV. An analysis using critical postmodernism and positivism to show similarities between race and sexual orientation discrimination.

Both blacks and homosexuals share similar experiences of discrimination as both groups react similarly to their labeling as a “deviant subpopulation” (Rhoads 26). Critical postmodernism is a framework of ideas premised on the assumption that social
expectations are formed from a combination of language, culture, and power in society. Postmodernism explains how minority groups are often treated as outcasts in society because of their lack of power and because of differences such as race and sexual orientation. For example, both blacks and homosexuals respond to social rejection by uniting and forming nationalist groups. While blacks formed the ideas of black nationalism via the “Black Power” movement and the Black Panthers, homosexuals have formed “queer alliances” and the “Pink Panthers” in their crusade for equal rights (16). Critical postmodernism argues that such unification is natural as ostracized groups desire to find an identity in their unified groups, especially when mainstream society rejects them.

How does this relate to the law? Well, it describes the common trend in law in the areas of both black civil rights and gay civil rights, in Rhoads’ phrase, “the norm [that] becomes the prescribed code that societal members must follow” (28). Essentially, the law uses positivistic ideas (lessons from science and empiricism) to justify discriminatory practice, just as books such as the Bell Curve and movies such as Birth of a Nation were used to prevent black equality. Similarly, ideas like ‘immutability’ and studies that establish that homosexuals are not as “rational” as heterosexuals all are positivist constructions (interpretations, inventions) that equally and arbitrarily undermine claims to protection under the Equal Protection Clause. This specific mode of attack is what Michel Foucault calls “normalization”: for blacks, the idea of the white male is normalized as the ideal person, while blacks are marginalized as a “deviant subpopulation” who are naturally inferior, weak, morally corrupt and therefore undeserving of rights protection (qtd. in Rhoads 28). When applying Foucault’s normalization to the current conflict over gay civil rights, the histories of discrimination for both groups are identical. In Boy Scouts v. Dale (2000), the court accepted the Boy Scouts’ contention that, despite Dale’s twelve years of experience as a proven leader and Eagle Scout, he was not “morally straight” and “clean,” terms used to described the “normal, heterosexual male lifestyle.” In Bowers, Justice White similarly accepts the contention that homosexual conduct is immoral. In both cases, because homosexuals (like blacks) are a marginalized group that didn’t fit the social norm, society and the law refuse them equal protection and label them as an outcast group. Therefore, from a cultural postmodern view, the gay experience of discrimination is virtually identical to the black
experience: under both experiences, the victims are marginalized and assumed to be inferior and morally weak; under both experiences the law and the Supreme Court have accepted those contentions with little evidence because of the groups’ respective “deviant subpopulation” role in society. This means that homosexuals have a legal claim that their prejudice fits the first criterion of analogy to the African-American experience of discrimination.

V. Psychological harm as a justification for equal protection.

Finally, the last criterion required by the 14th amendment is that homosexual civil rights must be either fundamental rights or that homosexuals must be politically powerless to change their situation. This paper will not deal with the second standard; however, it is sufficient (as per the tests for strict scrutiny) to prove that denying homosexuals civil rights violates crucial fundamental rights as human beings. First, note that *Brown v. Board of Education* establishes that social and psychological harm is a possible standard to warrant protection by the Equal Protection Clause. Justice Warren, in his concurring opinion, explains that the right to education should be protected because it is “the foundation of good citizenship and the basis for professional training and adjustment to society” (Stone 635). Therefore, all that must be established is that gay civil rights are essential to their good citizenship and status as productive members of society.

There are two reasons why gay civil rights meet this standard. First, allowing discrimination based on sexual orientation or the disclosure thereof causes serious psychological damage, on par with what black children suffered because of segregation. For homosexual children, there is a development process for forming a “healthy homosexual identity”: innocence, a feeling of shame, a need to confess one’s sexual orientation, and finally self-acceptance. The crucial step is confession or disclosure, because that allows homosexual children (and adults) to create inter-personal relationships (both romantic and platonic) and to find a support system with other groups (Shawver 71-77). Legal acceptance of anti-gay laws such as “don’t ask, don’t tell” and sexual orientation discrimination deter all homosexuals from the psychologically necessary stage of disclosure by allowing society to take away civil rights, jobs, and other basic opportunities by engaging in this psychologically natural process. Because it may take years or even a few decades
to realize one’s sexual orientation, this impacts all people because it deters anyone from feeling secure in their civil rights and standing within society. This psychological harm is, in magnitude, on par with Justice Warren’s conception of education as a fundamental right. Because the right to disclose one’s sexual identity is so closely linked to emotional growth and the formation of self-esteem, it follows that refusing to protect sexual orientation under the Equal Protection Clause is similar to allowing African American children to suffer socially, without any legal protection.

VI. Burden of proof

It is crucial to note the premise of arguments in recent Supreme Court case law denying homosexuals full protection under the Equal Protection Clause: that gays must prove without a doubt that their experience is synonymous to the African-American experience. However, as many of the previously mentioned issues are ambiguous and debatable, meeting such a burden is difficult. Issues such as immutability can be claimed both ways, from arguing that it is possible to “hide” homosexual tendencies to claims that homosexuality is genetically based and therefore innate and immutable. Because of this ambiguity, the Supreme Court has, in cases like *Bowers*, made subjective assumptions about the truth of such claims—and usually, the Court agrees with appeals that deny homosexuals equal rights. They defer to social pressures to say that gays are “immoral” and “different.” However, one should question the legitimacy of readily accepting cases like *Bowers* as proof that homosexuals fail the three criteria for protection because of the inherent subjectivity in the Court’s past rulings on the issue. The law should probably assume that because gays can make scientific or social claims that establish that they can make a case that their situation is similar should be sufficient to pass the three criteria. In other words, because gays can make a case that there are ways to prove that they are politically powerless or immutable, we should either reject these questionable criteria or assume that they meet these criteria because the courts will have to make a subjective interpretation either way. The worst case scenario is for the courts to deny rights to homosexuals because of an assumption about the nature of their discrimination. The logic is the same for criminal defendants; they are not imprisoned unless their crimes are proven “beyond a reasonable doubt,” so if the state fails to meet its burden of proof to show convincingly that gays fail one of the
criteria, the powerless person should be protected. Therefore, the courts should reevaluate how it has given homosexuals the burden of proof in this issue.

VII. Conclusion

In sum, the case for protecting gay civil rights under the Equal Protection Clause requires that the Court challenges the legitimacy of current unquestioned assumptions about homosexuality, assumptions that parallel those posed against African Americans. The black and gay experiences of discrimination are synonymous because both experiences have included victimization from the law, from social marginalization and violence in society. Immutability is unacceptable as a criterion for distinguishing between the two groups because it as a standard reinforces the social mindset that people are inferior and weak: it fails to be neutral in its application to gay civil rights, which undermines the decision in Brown v. Board. Finally, despite the Court’s decision in Bowers v. Hardwick, the right to be homosexual and to express that identity to others is a fundamental right because it is necessary for psychological growth, just as equal desegregated education was essential for African-American children. Despite their differences, blacks and homosexuals have structurally relevant similarities that justify “strict scrutiny” for both groups and a new realization that just as W. E. B. Dubois coined that we should reject the “color line,” we should now reject the line that the Supreme Court and legal precedent have drawn—that if you are homosexual, you no longer deserve human, social, or legal rights.
Works Cited


Spring 2001 Honorable Mention
Nicole Wright

Instructor’s Foreword
Nicole created this research project within the context of our Writing 3 theme, “Writing, Identity, and Memory.” I recall that she approached me with a specific dorm room incident in mind. She had “corrected” too quickly, she felt, a fellow student who had asked her if she was of Aboriginal descent. Nicole decided to write her way into this personal moment as a means of exploring her own identity construction. To do so, she discovered she had to push further into the cultural constructions of race and identity in Australia. She began to research a specific historical event that had remained, until recently, in a hidden part of the national memory—the government’s relocation of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families during much of the twentieth century. This event became the focus of her essay, and it proves a very effective means by which to frame the larger debate in Australia of race, power, and remedy. Her active research turns up quotes from government officials about the threat of miscegenation and juxtaposes them with firsthand accounts of Aboriginals who sought to “marry white” and thereby improve their children’s situations. In my view, she does a sensitive and sophisticated assessment of the workings of race, constructions of race, assimilation, and power-sharing in this particular context.

Kevin DiPirro
Lecturer, PWR
Nicole Wright

As a six-year-old at Mandeville Preparatory School in Victoria, Australia, I had the chance to immerse myself in Aboriginal culture via the daily history class: I played the didgeridoo (a native pipe-cum-ooe) in the school concert, sampled “wichety grubs,” and traipsed through the Maori tribal land holdings to Ayers rock as guides explained how to leach the poisons from eucalyptus bark. (When I reenacted the process at home, for some reason, my very American mother wouldn’t let me taste the confection.) Twelve years later in my Stanford dorm room, however, as I unpacked my suitcase after my fifth Australian sojourn, my roommate innocently asked me, “Nicole, are you part Aboriginal?” I vehemently denied this, and then immediately felt ashamed for doing so, even though I have no “Aboriginal blood.” I realized, sadly, that somewhere in my growing-up years, I had adopted the prevalent Australian view that the Aborigines stand for all that is downtrodden: they are the homeless, the disenfranchised (until 1972), and—worst of all—the ones who saw the Australian government remove and relocate thousands of Aboriginal children (the “stolen generation”) from their families over a period spanning several decades of the last century. My surfacing prejudice both mystified and disturbed me, as my father’s Australian relatives are among the least judgmental people I have encountered—they accepted my biracial American mother with open arms. I could only postulate that I had unconsciously subscribed to a submerged national mindset in which anti-Aboriginal sentiment continues to thrive. I decided to challenge my unconscious bias—and my resultant defensiveness—by embarking on an exploration of how the Aboriginal “stolen generation”...
generation” matter has impeded healthy modern Australian race relations. I hoped that judicious study of the matter would reveal what perpetuates Australians’ degrading perspective toward Aboriginal peoples and how the principal parties involved can strive to revamp this mindset.

For Australians, the “stolen generation” remains the focal point of often divisive national debate because mainstream Australians, federal officials, and Aboriginal groups cannot agree how the nation should view the mass removal, and whether the Aboriginals deserve reparations from the government. The Aboriginal and white Australian perspectives clash. On one side an angry native Australian cohort, comprising 1% of Australia’s population (Cunneen 298), accuses the white Australian government of stealing their children and pillaging what remained of Aboriginal cultural cohesion already garroted by the British colonists. On the opposing side, the government retorts that Aboriginal children were taken from their homes with good intent; still others go further and argue that, even if the intent was indeed malevolent, whites should not have to pay for the purported sins of their forebears. Even a tentative factual statement that, between 1905 and 1971, 50,000 Australian Aboriginal children were physically removed from their homes by the Australian government (Read 26) and subsequently placed with white families, would draw fire. The numbers are disputed, and the designation “Australian Aboriginal” remains far more elusive than that of, say, an “African American.”

The conflict at hand, however, extends much deeper than the question of whether whites must shoulder guilt for their part in the deed, and if so, how much forgiveness Aborigines must extend retroactively. The heart of the matter is that Australians must examine the thinking historian’s crucial question: To what extent can good intentions ameliorate bad outcomes? That is, the effect of perceived intent on different groups’ perspective of history must be scrutinized. The debate does not so much concern what happened so much as how the nation should view what occurred. Only by exploring this crucial avenue—which requires sincere apology, forgiveness, and social, if not monetary, reparations—can Australians decide whether the “stolen generation” debacle will remain a tragedy submerged in the national consciousness, or if it will become an acknowledged, cathartic opportunity for what lessons white Australians can learn to facilitate healing on a national level.
Most of the relatively few Aboriginal children removed from their families before 1935 were taken for “practical” reasons; girls, especially, were sought to alleviate the shortage of domestic servants in the Australian Commonwealth (Sabioni 10). However, the practice increased soon after when government officials observed a high rate of miscegenation between Aborigines and whites, one that raised the “spectre of half-caste Aborigines outnumbering whites, and [thus] the threat of moral and cultural degeneration” (van Krieken 304). Many whites, most importantly Cecil Cook, Chief Protector in the Northern Territory, thought it imperative to force acceptance of, and identification with, European civilization onto the Aborigines:

Unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years […] the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black.

(Cook 14)

Thus Cook signed the Native Administration Act in 1936, which authorized government relocation of Aboriginal Children. By the 1950s, the removals were at their peak.

Ironically, instead of improving the Aborigines’ lot via attempts to assimilate their children into white culture, government approval of the Aboriginal removal indelibly skewed mainstream Australia’s view of the Aborigines for the worse: “With denial of the historical nature of the interaction between colonizer and colonized in Australia has been a reinterpretation of Indigenous peoples as simply disadvantaged, ‘less fortunate’ rather than as people who have been dispossessed” (Cunneen 152). The government chooses to view the removal as an act both benign and charitable, if misguided; in order to explain away the strife that the “solution” caused, they blame not their acts, but the nature of the people they were trying to “help.” In order to maintain their positive perspective on their actions, then, mainstream Australia must adopt a negative perspective on the inherent character of the Aborigines. It becomes clear just why it is imperative to carefully reevaluate their view of this event in their recent history, for perspective (a passive state) eventually engenders action—in this case, discriminatory treatment, bias, and, ultimately, sidelining of the Aborigines.

Indeed, the government’s chosen stance on the removal has caused the Aborigines themselves to adopt a negative perspective of the meaning of skin color. For example, many children whose
parents sought them out after removal were told by their new families to tell their parents to “go away, they were too black” (Tucker 198). Thus, a previously non-existent color hierarchy emerged. As Colin Tatz, a University of New England [Australia] Professor of Politics, states:

For the general public […] laws set […] the image of the Aborigines as held by white authority […]. Based on a phoney [sic] biological spectrum of “blood content,” law determined the degree and extent of rights on a scale indicating the lighter the skin the more civilized; the darker, the closer to barbarianism. Given the fallacy which most people subscribe to, the almost-holy writness of law, how does a public demur from these images? It doesn’t. In these senses, then, law gives legitimacy to prejudice, creates notions of difference and inferiority in the minds of an adult public, ordains and perpetuates racism. (Tatz 51)

Margaret Tucker, a relocated Aboriginal and an international Aboriginal activist in the 1970s, said that her new household, where everyone admired her parents’ “golden-haired little girl,” instilled in her a new awareness of the social implications of dark skin color:

The thought came to me to ‘marry a white man’ so that my children would be white-skinned, and have an equal opportunity to live as the white children. How ignorant and wrong I was! (Tucker 156)

Of course, government figures such as Cook would have been pleased that the new Aboriginal generation was self-mandating assimilation with whites. However, since not all Aborigines adopted this implicit “mandate,” the drive to assimilate merely convoluted the social hierarchy into complicated strata that dictated the social position not only of whites and “full-blood” Aborigines, but also of “quadroons, octoroons, mixed breeds” (van Kreikan 128). The net effect was to make race even more relevant in the national consciousness.

Australian Aborigines generally view the removal of Aboriginal children from their native families as a mass kidnapping effected by an ill-intentioned government: “Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families” (Pierce 199). Their general consensus—that the Australian government perpetuated a crime
against humanity “tantamount to genocide” (Cunneen 152)—is shared in recent decades by a sizeable contingent of white sympathizers and was validated in 1997. That year, Aborigines gained a watershed victory when the federally-organized National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (HREOC report; van Krieken 298) recommended fifty-four steps of action to correct what the commission judged to be grievous government wrongdoing in the handling of the affair.

Immediately after the National Inquiry Commission presented its report to Parliament, Prime Minister John Howard addressed that audience with words firmly opposing the report’s recommendations. In his speech, Howard downplayed the existence of agents—and thus of repositories for blame—of the removal of the Aborigines. In fact, his very sentence structure, with his insistent use of the passive, agentless voice, cultivates a “no-fault” attitude toward the affair in the mind of the listener:

The present generation cannot be held accountable for the deeds of earlier generations. The Australian people know that mistakes were made [...] that injustices occurred [...] that wrongs were committed. For the overwhelming majority, there was no personal involvement of them or their parents. (Cunneen 198)

However, while this official party line tempts the listener to admit the disparity of specific legitimate targets of blame among Australians in general, Howard fails to satisfactorily dismiss Australians’ liability for the past. As Crisman and Allen argue in Ten Reasons, all citizens of a nation bear collective responsibility—that is, a shared liability—for ills enacted by members of their national community (1). Just as modern Australians reap the benefits of what are really other peoples’ actions—such as a prosperous national economy and well-established educational system—they must also bear the less palatable parts of the package—such as reparations for the acts of the same predecessors who made possible their boons.

Surely, the level of perceived intent directly influences the amount of reparations the government will make, as Howard has admitted, and this is the reason for his “generic” admission of “regret” (Cunneen 198). If the government can convince the public to curry to its viewpoint, no monies need flow from the
Federal Appropriations Committee’s liquid assets. However, if the Aboriginal peoples and their advocates can play upon the public conscience effectively enough—that is, make a sufficiently alluring case for collective responsibility and guilt—then the financial floodgates will swing open. At center, then, the case of historical wrongs masks the very real issue of cold hard cash.

Although a pool of taxpayer funds is at stake in the debate, white Australians must remember that while Aborigines require better finances in order to improve their quality of life and societal status, money will not heal the social rift. Australian apologists may view monetary reparations as a one-shot method of assuaging what they view as lingering white guilt (Tucker 172). Their admirable intentions conceal a disturbing tendency to see money as a social cure-all. The problem of improving relations between a suspicious native population and a defensive white majority demands a better solution than merely throwing money at the victims. Instead, both sides should strive to open a vein of communication between them that goes beyond name-calling, and more importantly, maintain this stream of dialogue.

In this sense, some Aboriginal activists espouse that a national apology is the ideal first step toward righting relations between the Aborigines and Australians of European descent. Researchers Chris Cunneen and Terry Libesman prescribe a federal apology as a therapeutic necessity for healing beleaguered inter-ethnic relations in Australia:

> Widespread public support for reconciliation and an apology, and the continued controversy over the failure of the Commonwealth to apologize, are indicative of a national trauma. (Cunneen 149)

Apology expresses contrition and resolve for improved behavior in the future more effectively than any cold, impersonal expression of “regret.” Stephen Dunham, a CLP (Commonwealth Law Partisan), unwittingly revealed the purpose of apology for historical travesties while he argued for the government’s side in the Parliamentary debates over whether or not to adopt the HREOC’s action plan: “I am sorry the Titanic sunk, I am sorry about World War One, but I feel no need to apologize for any of these occurrences” (Cunneen 150). Durham and his colleagues fail to realize that apology is not a means of correcting a wrong—it is a means of healing the wound incurred by the wrong.
As long as mainstream Australia continues to perceive a federal apology as a stamp of their own culpability, however, Aborigines' demands for an apology—and, indeed, the efficacy of such an apology, as it would not be supported by a vast number of white Australians—will amount to naught. As one young "mainstream" man stated to me in an informal interview, "There's no way you can tell me that I, personally, did this injustice to these people [the Aborigines]." Even some native peoples perceive a federal apology as insulting and indicative of a stigmatizing "victim" status: James R. Corbett, a male Aborigine, explained, "[Apology would be] validation of Aboriginal subjugation and Aboriginal acceptance of such. Instead we should try to make the best of a harsh reality" (van der Berg 157). A viable compromise would be a federal admission and renouncement of wrongs. In this case, the government would acknowledge that its mass assimilation attempt, which removed the "stolen generation" from their Aboriginal families, was both ill-conceived and misguided, and also that the current federal laissez-faire attitude toward native concerns play a major role in sustaining the Aboriginals' socioeconomic malaise. Such a formal public announcement, with reference to past debacles but with emphasis on future action, would enable Australians to make a transition in perspective from guilt and blame to a pragmatic admission of past wrongs and reparation of these wrongs. The apology would be an olive branch (or, more fitting, a eucalyptus leaf) extended from whites to Aborigines, and, although admission of wrongs is always painful, it is the just and constructive action. An admission of wrongs would be instrumental in advancing Australians from stagnation in guilt and resentment to realization of their potential as a united nation.

Words unsupported by actions, however, will do nothing to improve the Aborigines' situation; both the government's defenders and Aboriginal activists fail to perceive this consideration. The clamorous debate concerning the necessity for a formal federal apology for the "stolen generation" period has obscured urgent future considerations: the need for collaborative government and Aboriginal action at the social, economic, and political levels in order to help Aborigines gain control and mobility in national society has been overlooked to a disturbingly large extent. Few researchers, recent publications, or even Aboriginal activist and official Commonwealth websites suggest practical ways of realizing the meaning of a potential apology via concrete action; most of the
predominant researchers and pundits from the 1970s up to the present year limit their discussion of the matter to the apology, while others vaguely propose increased funding for Aboriginal concerns. This apparently widespread shortsightedness may indicate a lack of sincerity about alleviating the native peoples’ straits on the government’s part, a lack of consensus on the Aborigines’ part regarding what action to take, or a general uncertainty about how to approach the matter.

In informal interviews with several subjects about the Aboriginal reparations debate, I have observed that almost all subjects questioned the inability of the native peoples to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. It is likely that the Horatio-Alger self-sufficiency principle, so pervasive in Western Protestant cultures, compelled one of my subjects to ask, “Why can’t the Aborigines just grab the power for themselves?” (Personal Interview). Unfortunately, the conscious or subconscious sidelining of Aborigines in the collective mainstream Australian mindset has perpetuated a self-fulfilling cycle in which Aborigines remain entrenched in political sluggishness. Over the last few decades of Aboriginal suffrage, each national election has consistently drawn only ten percent of the already miniscule native population (Tatz 20). Since the attempts of the federal government to rectify the situation have been half-hearted at best, the numbers remain stagnant. The government has only sporadically tried the obvious solutions—they have held few get-out-the-vote campaigns and rarely provide voting booths in remote locations (Tatz 20). Thus, Aboriginals’ lackadaisical turnout at the polls, compounded by the group’s small size, has hampered the formation of an Aboriginal power-broker coalition. Indeed, the native voting bloc has appeared to be a virtual non-issue in national elections. Australian political candidates must reason that they can safely disregard Aboriginal concerns. On none of my five visits to Australia have I observed Aboriginal people portrayed in election posters or featured in candidates’ television advertisements. The natives’ measly electoral stature starkly contrasts the favorable position of the more vocal American minority groups, such as Blacks and Latinos, who maintain their visibility and publicity with an eye to ensuring that no savvy politician will forget their needs.

Socially conscious mainstream Australians—that is, non-Aboriginal Australians—should assist native groups in regaining their autonomy. The past efforts of the federal government have
fragmented the collective Aboriginal sociopolitical consciousness at several levels, so that native groups lack the wherewithal and internal motivation to work toward improvement of their sociopolitical status. Just as the “stolen generation” relocation of children fragmented the integrity of the individual family unit, government land seizures precipitated infighting and increased often violent interaction between native tribes. As C. D. Rowley, Director of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, states, “The basic assumption in pre-literate society [was] that kinsmen should stand together. This is a constant theme—the unity of a group in a hostile world” (24). This sentiment was fractured by the fragmentation of the family unit and by the division of Aboriginal lands, which precipitated tribal infighting. Plausible remedies for the native groups’ fragmented unity include federal subsidies for creating Aboriginal residence and business communities within major cities and towns. Intracultural solutions include formation of, and increased recruitment for, native cultural groups.

Why haven’t these ideas already been implemented? Some “mainstream Australians” might argue that the government’s past actions should not preclude Aboriginal political mobilization in the present. Various factors, however, continue to contribute to native people’s seemingly intractable political lethargy. Although modern Australia is much less overtly biased towards its Aboriginal citizens, the government’s minimal outreach to native groups, combined with the Aborigines’ own lack of mobilization, have preserved Aborigines’ perennial position at the lowest level of the nation’s power structure.

Interested parties may probe the reasons for the paucity of federal outreach via consideration of Paulo Freire’s thought-provoking work Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Freire postulates that a “possessive consciousness” is propagated in nations, of which Australia is a prime example, where colonizers’ descendants maintain the elite socioeconomic status, while the native peoples remain an impoverished minority. In order to justify their continued dominance of the class structure, Freire theorizes, the elite adopt a mindset in which the lower class becomes a collection of virtual possessions, who must perform lower-level tasks of society maintenance and who could graduate from their minimal status only if they worked hard enough. This idea pertains to Australians’ national perspective, and indeed the international perspective, toward the “stolen generation” in that many members of the
Australian and American "mainstream," whom I consulted in the interviews previously referenced, wonder why Aborigines can't better their situation on their own.

The concept of "possessive consciousness," according to Freire, must be coupled with an emphasis on individual—not group—achievement in order to discourage the lower class from attaining improved status on a widespread level and thus endangering the elite's rarified position. The "oppressed" must believe in "the possibility of ascent" as individuals alone and not as a collective (Freire 144). In an act of what Freire terms "cultural invasion," the elite convinces the lower class to internalize the elite's philosophy because they model a desirable way of life.

In Australia, this outlook has manifested itself in the rampant dissolution of the traditionally communal Aboriginal values, customs, and way of life. A community that once esteemed the extended family, community property, and an overarching destiny has exchanged these standards for single-parent families, individual property rights (O'Roarke), and a decidedly fragmented sense of self. The root cause of the Aborigines' political inactivity—and thus of the "stolen generation's" failure to thrive in modern Australia—becomes visible upon contemplation of the Aborigines' wholesale severance from their previous values and lifestyle, which the government expedited by removing the Aboriginal children and encouraging their adoption of the mainstream way of life. No wonder that Freire calls this instance of "cultural invasion"—the forcing of one's own values onto another culture—"an act of violence." Freire's hyperbolic tone is understandable in light of the magnitude of integral damage sustained by the culture of the "stolen generation."

If Australia's mainstream citizens are ever to share a symbiotic perspective with the native peoples, they must relinquish both their perception of the Aborigines as primitive and rough, and the attendant subconscious desire to civilize the Aborigines or to convert them to the mainstream way of life. Early twentieth-century sociologist Norbert Elias theorized that "civilization" is a process that leads to the de-escalation of violence, while "decivilization" incurs the propagation of violence and disorder, which results in cultural instability. Another sociologist, Robert van Krieken, has expanded on this idea, showing how the idea of civilization skews the mainstream Australian perspective on the attempts to assimilate the "stolen generation."

Observing the case
of the removal of the Aboriginal children, van Krieken notes:

These “civilizing offenses” have revolved around essentially violent policies and practices [...]. This intersection of welfare and violence raises the possibility that civilization and decivilization interpenetrate each other so that, under certain circumstances, societies are “barbaric” precisely in their movement toward civilization. (1)

Conversely, one can use this concept to view some federal actions in a more positive light. Indeed, the Commonwealth government’s dismantling of the assimilation program was, arguably, an action conducive to civilization, as it revealed “increasing recognition of the human rights of Australian Aborigines” (1). Perhaps, then, the Australian government should relax its continued efforts to effect native assimilation and simply let the Aborigines attempt to reclaim their customs and unity while living and working, as they must, within the larger mainstream society.

Mainstream Australians may initially find it difficult to reject—and maintain distance from—their disdainful attitude toward the Aborigines and adopt a more empathetic (not pitying or sympathetic) perspective toward the “stolen generation” and its descendants. If Australia is to better its chances at national harmony and justice, white Australians must question their view of Aborigines as savages, just as Aborigines should concede that their widespread belief that all whites are oppressors does not always hold true. With effort, this new perspective can be achieved. Angela Davis, in conversation with Anna Deveare Smith concerning interethnic strife three thousand miles from Sydney—the August 1991 Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, New York—said that although individuals may remain “anchored in their own communities [...] the rope attached to that anchor should be long enough to allow us to move into other communities to understand and learn” (qtd. in Smith 32). Tentative steps toward mutual understanding are visible in many milieus. In the aforementioned BBC broadcast, white supporters tooted signs in step with Aboriginal activists in a march for land rights, while a white newscaster expressed shock that a federal official’s crony was lobbying the government to insert a sterilizing agent into Aboriginal drinking water (O’Roarke). On the entertainment front, which forms no small part of a nation’s popular culture identity, Archie Roach, a native songwriter and one of the “stolen generation,” was surprised by whites’ favorable
reception of a song he performed, which detailed his memory of being taken from his family by government officials at the age of six. He said he wrote the song because:

We can’t measure the depth of each other’s suffering. When I first wrote “Took the Children Away,” I thought, “I’m writing for my people.” But [now] non-Aboriginal people are coming up to me and saying it means so much to them because they don’t have to be Aboriginal to understand the experience of being taken from your mother. (Davies 3)

As evidenced by these examples, with determination, Aborigines and mainstream Australians are capable of reevaluating their negative perspectives of each other.

In the end, then, a federal admission of wrongs, in tandem with government funding for burgeoning Aboriginal businesses, art, and communities, and increased mobilization within the native contingent itself, constitute the most promising remedy for eventual Aboriginal autonomy and increased national harmony. In time, hopefully, mainstream Australians and native peoples will come to share a perspective of Australia’s multiethnic makeup not as a reminder of guilt and past travesties, but as one of the chief prerequisites for a dynamic, pluralistic culture in an increasingly “mixed-up” world. Having struggled with its own interethnic strife, Australia may attain a choice position as a model for other countries attempting to reconcile their own varying contingents. However, the realization of Australia’s potential depends on a united devotion to a more inclusive meritocracy, one in which everyone has something to gain: whites garner neighbors and an expanded commercial market, while Aboriginals finally reach an empowered position in their native land. All hinges on whether mainstream Australia can adopt a philosophy of something just a bit more than benign neglect toward its native peoples as well as on whether the Commonwealth can stop trying to civilize its earliest residents and, at long last, learn to perceive the Aborigines on their own terms.
Appendix 1

Recourse

Methods of reparation and means of correcting the social and economic standing of “stolen generation” Aborigines, and their descendants, in modern Australia, as proposed by the Torres Strait Islander inquiry, from the group’s report “Bringing Them Home.”

REMEDIES - Provision of effective remedies, recourse, redress, [compensatory] and other measures at the national, regional and international levels:

55. At the domestic level, remedies include:
   • recognition of rights by governments, in particular the inherent rights of self-determination and of ownership, and control of the territories and resources of Indigenous people;
   • restitution and, where that is not possible, compensation for lost lands and for disruption and destruction of Indigenous society;
   • apology, and acknowledgement of past injustices as the basis for genuine reconciliation and co-existence;
   • entrenchment of non-discrimination through Constitutional or Treaty provisions;
   • adequate funding and resources to overcome Indigenous social and economic disadvantage;
   • education through training and public information programs to counter prejudice and discrimination against Indigenous peoples; and
   • laws to prohibit the dissemination of racist and hate material.

56. At the international level, remedies include:
   • speedy resolution and adoption of the “UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” without further equivocation over the application of the right of self-determination;
   • support for the newly-established Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to establish a forum at the highest levels of the UN to provide a space for dialogue and
partnership between Indigenous peoples and member States of the UN;

• continuation of the mandate of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations;
• adequate resources for the UN treaty bodies; and
• genuine acceptance of the monitoring and compliance role of these bodies by member States.

Appendix 2

The Australian National Apology in Vignette

Margaret Tucker, among the oldest members of the “stolen generation,” remembers a white woman’s public apology to her for Australia’s past wrongs at a formal gathering:

To my surprise [...] a lady got to her feet, and everybody quietened [sic] down to listen: ‘I am glad to have the opportunity to say from my heart how sorry I am for my superiority as a white Australian, and for our treatment, as whites, of the Australian Aboriginal race. Would you please forgive us?’ She said further that she felt that black and white Australians could work together to help make Australia the land that God meant it to be. They were words I shall never forget. It was the first time I had heard such words said to us Aborigines. It touched my heart and the hearts of many there that evening. It was the beginning of a friendship between dark and white Australians. (Tucker 172)

Notes

1 “Dreamland” is the Aboriginal term for pre-colonial Australia.
2 According to Gardner, “[I]n South Australia, the variation in the distribution of one parent families ranged from 12.7 per cent of Aboriginal families in Outer Adelaide to 31.2 per cent in Murray Lands” (1991 census 8). The percentage of single-parent Aboriginal families outpaced the percentage of non-Aboriginal single-parent families by anywhere from 7 to 15 percent.
Works Cited


Autumn 2001 Winner
Christine Ghatan

Instructor’s Foreword

In the following essay, written for my PWR course, “Happily Ever After? The Rhetoric of the 1950s American Family and its Legacy,” Christine argues that racist federal policies in the postwar era played a crucial role in contributing to the extreme poverty experienced by “inner-city” African-American families today. In the 1950s, she notes, many white families benefited from unprecedented affluence and the federal government’s willingness to channel an enormous amount of funding towards the development of suburbs, highways, and other improvements geared towards the middle class family. Meanwhile, their African-American counterparts were both forced to witness money previously earmarked for urban housing and public transportation disappear and legally excluded from the new neighborhoods their own taxes were financing. Christine draws upon many compelling pieces of evidence, including a Federal Housing Authority manual that mandated that racial homogeneity was essential to neighborhood stability. In so doing, she makes a complex, thought-provoking, and highly convincing case for how many poor African-American communities, left behind at a time when white neighborhoods were given a tremendous push forward, continue to pay the price for the prosperity in which they were never allowed to partake.

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THE ROOTS OF POVERTY IN URBAN AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Christine Ghatan

Although popular belief maintains that the 1950s represent a decade of nationwide unprecedented economic growth and all-around improvement in the quality of life following the difficulties of the World War II era, in truth, such was not the case for the whole of the American population. Significant segments of society were trapped in gritty urban areas, prevented largely by policy and by society from having any hope of enjoying many of the rapidly-developing changes in American life. While middle-class America enjoyed the most fruitful decade in recent memory, many urban African-American communities had little hope of any economic or social improvement as they suffered under biased and often discriminatory government policies intended to benefit the development of white suburbia at the expense of the welfare of inner city areas. In this regard, although African Americans have long had a troublesome history of significant economic and social disadvantage in the United States, the federal government during the 1950s was complicit in perpetuating the culture of despondency and hopelessness that continues to grip a significant population of urban African Americans in a vicious cycle of poverty as it exists today.

The most recent United States Census offers a tangible representation of the state of poverty in the nation today. Although the prevalence of economic disadvantage has come a long way since data examining poverty were first collected by the Census Bureau in 1959, the numbers indicate that the issue is still troublesome enough to merit serious consideration. To define poverty, the Bureau “uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is poor. If a family’s total income is less than that family’s threshold, individual in it, is considered poor” (Dalaker 11). As of the year 2000, the nationwide poverty rate indicates that 11.3% of the total population is poor. The rate of poverty within central cities alone is five
percentage points higher than that of the national average at 16.1%, indicating that the poverty rate in big cities easily exceeds the rate in the nation as a whole. Along racial lines comparing white and African Americans, as seen in Figure 1, blacks remain “disproportionately poor” when compared to white individuals (7): while only 7.5% of white Americans are poor, three times as many African Americans—one fifth of the entire African-American population—are living in poverty. Furthermore, the average African-American income is 65.5% that of the average white income, making the average African-American salary the lowest of all racial groups in the United States, as seen in Figure 2.


Housing has consistently been polarized along racial lines as well. Despite all the progress of the civil rights movement during the 1960s, as late as 1970, African Americans comprised a mere 5% of the total suburban population, while in central cities 20.5% of residents were African Americans (Lake 3). Across the U.S. today, the majority of African Americans are not homeowners, while nearly 70% of whites own a home (Callis 5). The discrepancies along racial lines are clear and present a valid problem in the struggle to achieve equality.

The significant economic and class distinction between African Americans and white Americans as evinced by such statistics immediately raises questions as to why this might be. In this land of supposedly equal opportunity, it remains to be explained why one particular group should remain at a significant disadvantage relative to another group. The concern is that this trend is often explained away by concluding that there must be some inherent quality specific to that group that limits members from moving up and out of poverty. Essentially, this is one of the most pernicious ways that the urban poverty problem among African Americans can be explained, as it neatly places the blame for the economic and social lot of African Americans on their character and values. However, it is wholly unjustified to ignore the history of immense governmental and social obstacles that has played a significant part in giving rise to the current culture of lost hope and mounting frustrations within the poorest inner cities across the nation. As one of the most recent eras of systematic disadvantage that has gone largely unnoticed and underestimated by society at large, the 1950s deserves genuine consideration in evaluating some of the latest trends and policies that have exacerbated the state of poverty among inner-city African Americans.

The availability and condition of housing in the United States play an important role in the overall quality of life in the African-American community. Housing and suburbanization became issues of high importance during the postwar period, as the process towards meeting the growing demand for houses clearly shaped the distribution of types of living spaces today. Understanding the response in the 1950s requires an examination of the years before and during World War II. During the Great Depression, the severe economic downturn curtailed the construction of residential property by 95% within five years of its onset (Jackson 193). While the construction of new living spaces slowed even more steeply
through World War II due to a lack of both manpower and building materials on the home front (Sugrue 41), more and more African Americans began migrating up from the last vestiges of the Jim Crow South, bringing with them hopes for racial tolerance and acceptance as well as a better quality of life in finding wartime jobs in urban factories and manufacturing plants. This influx, compounded with the return of thousands of World War II veterans and the sudden population growth in the ensuing “Baby Boom,” resulted in a critical and widespread housing shortage during the 1950s (41-42). In response to the shortage, the government instituted several housing policies that were intended to bolster domestic growth and meet Americans’ needs but simultaneously served to encourage the development of further disadvantages within urban African-American communities.

The argument for the federal government’s complicity is largely found in the policies that led to the postwar expansion of American suburbia (Beauregard 132). Government involvement in housing assistance principally began during the New Deal era of the difficult 1930s, when housing problems were first recognized. During this time, President Roosevelt signed into law the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) in order to provide loans and federal mortgage assistance to protect small homeowners from foreclosure (Jackson 195-6) and to provide construction companies with the capital to build new projects. Aside from enabling thousands of Americans to purchase and maintain single-family homes, the HOLC was also responsible for developing a nationwide appraisal system to determine where and how the loans and refinanced mortgages would be distributed. The HOLC devised a system in which neighborhoods were assigned ratings of A through D (A being most favorable) based on “the occupation, income, and ethnicity of the inhabitants and the age, type of construction, price range, sales demand, and general state of repair of the housing stock” (Jackson 197). Individuals were given assistance in accordance with the potential they represented—the higher the rating of the area from which they came, the more likely they would be in securing financial support, as their status was deemed more “durable” (197). In this way, the HOLC exercised remarkable control over the housing policies of the nation, and by offering aid to Americans across the country, the HOLC also greatly stimulated domestic expansion from the cities outward.
In addition to the HOLC, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) of 1934 also contributed significantly to the suburban expansion that began in the 1930s and exploded after World War II. As another aid agency born of the New Deal, the highly influential FHA “used federal dollars to insure mortgage loans, promising to repay the bank should the home buyer default. This meant that home loans suddenly became very safe and desirable for America’s bankers” (Hanchett 164), enabling thousands to have the money to buy single-family homes. In this way, the FHA was instrumental in encouraging eligible families to move out of the high-density urban areas into growing suburban developments. Within a decade, The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (better known as the GI Bill) and the Veterans’ Administration program supplanted the New Deal housing programs to a great degree and propelled domestic expansion to new heights following the end of the war. Thousands of returning veterans were greeted with exceedingly generous insurance that encouraged them to buy homes. Government policy had provided bankers with such great incentives to impart loans to families that they “actively sought projects to bankroll, the bigger the better” (Hanchett 165), offering loans to families with little to even no down payment. The result was that thousands more Americans across the country were suddenly presented with a very attractive opportunity to own a home, and as suburbia seized the interest of the American majority, suburban expansion remained a priority for the federal government.

However, these policies purposefully did not extend such privilege to the whole of American society, effectively contributing to the racial polarization in the nation’s largest cities and surrounding areas. In determining an individual’s eligibility for a loan or mortgage, agencies relied on the neighborhood classification standards that were heavily influenced by racism and the desire to maintain segregated neighborhoods. In essence, by “red-lining” entire inner-city neighborhoods, the federal policies “gave official sanction to discriminatory real estate sales and bank lending practices” in that “most important in determining a neighborhood’s classification was the level of racial, ethnic, and economic homogeneity, the absence or presence of a ‘lower grade population’” (Sugrue 43-44). In fact, the FHA’s Underwriting Manual explicitly stated that discrimination based on class and race must be taken
into consideration when assigning federal housing aid: “If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes” (qtd. in Hanchett 166). It thus comes of no surprise that from 1945 to 1959, less than 2% of all federally-backed home loans went to African Americans (166). As residents of C or D rated neighborhoods, African Americans simply were unable to qualify for the mortgages and loans that would enable them to move out of the destitute urban districts. The FHA also considered rental housing, which dominated economically-disadvantaged areas, to be a riskier investment relative to private homes, to the effect that builders and developers could not expect much financial backing if they chose to develop or improve destitute areas. Therefore, new units of the most accessible type of housing to blacks plummeted from 44% of total new developments in the late 1920s to a mere 8.3% by 1956 (Gelfand 217). In this way, new developments of the decade were focused almost exclusively on suburban single-family home construction.

Although both blacks and whites suffered from the housing shortage of the postwar period, “blacks bore a disproportionate share of the burden […] [as the] population expanded much more rapidly than the available housing stock in the small neighborhoods to which they had been confined” (Sugrue 42). A very small minority of African Americans did in fact acquire the means to move into largely white suburban areas, but almost all were staunchly and sometimes violently prevented from making permanent settlement by community members intent on preserving the homogeneity of their neighborhoods. Powerful homeowners’ associations fought against African-American “invasion” and drove unwanted newcomers out of areas designated for white Americans only as Figure 3 illustrates. For the most part, however, African Americans from dense urban areas were not able to reach the point where moving to the suburbs would even be a possibility. Thus by offering African Americans neither improvements in urban areas nor new places to go to be free of the inner-city, the appraisal practices of the HOLC trapped African Americans in segregated and impoverished neighborhoods, perpetuating the vicious circle of urban decline and “set[ting] into motion a chain reaction that reinforced patterns of racial inequality (41, 34).

Like the many policies aimed at facilitating white, middle-class expansion into the suburbs, the postwar federal highway develop-
ments represent another example of a government policy designed to promote suburban growth with little consideration as to how it might negatively effect the largely disenfranchised urban African-American community. Aside from being another program that funneled precious federal funding and attention away from the inner-cities towards the suburbs, highway construction placed a further burden on poor African Americans by worsening the housing crisis and fostering greater racial segregation. Recognizing the need to provide greater access between the urban and suburban areas of big cities, the government passed the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, under which Washington would foot the bill for 90% of construction costs for several thousand miles of multilane highways with states supplying the remaining 10% (Beauregard 134). These measures would not only enable suburban residents to commute to their jobs in the central cities, but they also promised to stimulate the economy and bolster commercial growth (Sugrue 47). Within the next twenty years, over forty thousand miles of highway would be built (Jackson 249), drastically altering the face of urban areas by carving out huge strips of land upon which the roads were built as well as enabling thousands of whites to flee inner city areas while maintaining their jobs in industry and other businesses.

Figure 3. Signs of Exclusion. Some all-white communities made it clear that minorities were not welcome in their neighborhoods, and the government did nothing to protect minority individuals’ civil rights from outright discrimination and racial prejudice.

Aside from facilitating greater residential access to the outlying suburban areas, the construction of highway networks also prompted a shift in the state of the country’s commerce and industry. The changes in the landscape of metropolises across the country transformed the cities’ economies. The “white flight” prompted smaller businesses and services to flee the big city and establish themselves in more lucrative suburban strip malls and commercial districts. As improvements in transportation, communication, and technology prompted decentralization in the nation’s largest cities, these same factors prompted deindustrialization—plants and even whole industries downsized, closed, or relocated to areas that were previously unsuitable or too rural for industry.

During the 1950s in particular, the federally-funded highway systems “made central industrial location less necessary by facilitating the distribution of goods over long distances” as trucking became a very fast and efficient means of transporting industrial products (Sugrue 127). Additionally, the federal government encouraged industry to move out of big cities as a precautionary measure in case of air attack during the Cold War. This, combined with many employers’ prejudiced aversion to hiring black workers, left a significant population of African Americans without jobs and unable to relocate. “As industry fled the city, a large number of white workers were willing and able to follow” (177), trapping blacks in decaying urban areas and effectively perpetuating the vicious circle of poverty without any apparent means of escape.

The placement of the highways themselves came at an immediate and heavy expense to long-established inner-city neighborhoods and drastically reduced the already problematic housing availability for African Americans as seen in Figure 4. The construction of huge networks of roadway devastated the urban landscape, as the highways cut through densely-populated urban communities at the convenience and benefit of the suburban residential areas. For example, in Detroit, “the Oakland-Hastings Freeway blasted through the Lower East Side, Paradise Valley, and Hastings Street business districts, wiping out many of the city’s most prominent African-American institutions, from jazz clubs to […] the YMCA […]. Left behind was […] a ‘no man’s land’ of deterioration and abandonment” (47). Not only were the urban areas disfigured and interrupted by the new highways, but the construction took place with little consideration for the dislocation of tens of thousands of African-American families whose homes and
businesses were in the paths of the proposed highways. When the projects were announced, property owners in the line of construction found themselves unable to sell properties marked for government acquisition and unable to move without the money generated from such a sale. Further exacerbating the critical housing shortage in urban areas, the government offered little, if any, assistance to families forced to relocate within a thirty-day period (46). In having such concern for the welfare and prosperity of new urban developments, the government once again turned its back on the urban poor, providing additional strain on destitute living conditions.

The attitude towards the construction of highways through inner-city areas coincided with the government’s unofficial take on the best solution to the urban poverty problem. Recognizing the unattractiveness of the deplorable conditions in urban areas, the government decided to undertake an “urban renewal” policy to eliminate physically the slums in which the state of poverty was confined. The government viewed major highway construction through inner-city areas in major American centers as “a handy device for razing slums” (47), one of several methods upon which the government would rely to “improve” big cities. The plan was to destroy dilapidated inner-city housing to revitalize downtown

Figure 4. Intercity highway. Highways often came to serve as demarcation lines between white and black neighborhoods. On the left side of this Chicago freeway lies public housing complexes for African Americans, and on the right, the bungalows of the white working class.

areas. City officials believed that large-scale high-rise building projects would bolster the social and economic prospects of the city by cleaning up the grittiest of “blighted” areas. In order to facilitate this, Washington passed the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Housing Act in 1949 as part of a plan for urban redevelopment. This policy was intended above all to mandate the construction of a great number of residential complexes in the place of the razed slums, thereby improving land value while providing sufficient housing. However, within a few years the lucrative prospects of the cleared land lent way not to housing affordable to the families its construction replaced, but to luxurious apartments, office buildings, and shopping centers (Biles 145). The results were that out of the 425,000 housing units that were torn down between 1949 and 1968 as part of the urban redevelopment program, only 125,000 units were constructed in their place, the majority of which were luxury apartments (Biles 153). This forced the severely disadvantaged, ousted residents to relocate themselves without any government assistance during a time when the availability of housing was already limited.

As no provisions were made as to where displaced residents too poor to afford such improved housing would relocate, the policy of eliminating “blighted areas” simply did not adequately address the needs of the disadvantaged population. In 1954, a policy for urban renewal was added to the 1949 measure, calling for the construction of 35,000 public housing units in communities that had been altered by slum clearance (146). The addition of this program effectively launched a full-scale national effort to eradicate poverty-stricken urban areas and meet the demands of the housing crisis by replacing the slums with high-rise, low-rent housing. However, this effort was fraught with resistance and failure at its inception. To begin with, white communities refused to allow public housing with African-American residents to be situated in locations proximal to their neighborhoods and “fought zoning charges that allowed for the construction of apartment buildings, even on marginal land that bordered commercial or industrial areas” (Sugrue 51). Their resistance severely curtailed the actual construction of housing accessible to disadvantaged African Americans. As affordable housing became even more scarce for relocated black families, landlords taking advantage of the situation made conditions even more difficult. Public housing became too expensive for many families, and often housing was illegally subdivided
to provide occupancy for more people than originally intended, also at relatively high cost. Conditions in such apartments were often poor and in need of repair. "As long as the rental housing shortage for blacks persisted, black apartment dwellers suffered from rent gouging" (54), and often were at the mercy of demanding landlords who were quick to evict tenants late in their payments. Under such conditions, displaced African Americans continued to suffer as the federal government, with full interest in the welfare of white middle-class suburbia, continued to turn a deaf ear. With affordable housing so scarce, often the only option for poor black families was simply to move to adjacent poverty-stricken districts, further concentrating poverty in specific inner areas. The areas that fell under the government's plans of urban redevelopment and renewal improved, but only at the grave expense of the poor.

Furthermore, public housing itself was not limited to minorities or those displaced by slum-razing; rather, it was available to all Americans, including whites who searched for decent homes but whose economic situations required low-rent housing. This interracial availability extended segregation into the public housing complexes as well. In an effort to keep certain districts racially homogeneous, potentially "inharmonious" housing candidates were screened out during the application process. In fact, between 1947 and 1952, 56,758 white families applied for public housing along with 37,382 black families. Of this, 41% of the white families made it onto the waiting list, while only 24% of black families did. In the end, 9,908 white families secured public housing, while a mere 1,126 African-American families were provided with similar homes. Again, the half-hearted effort to provide economically-disadvantaged blacks with decent housing gave way to racism and prejudice, ultimately failing to afford any real improvement. The government's discriminatory policies effectively kept many African-American families out of public housing (58), deepening racial inequality through segregation.

In preventing African Americans from migrating out of inner-city neighborhoods and providing white Americans with ample opportunity and incentive to move into the suburbs, the policies of government programs effectively cultivated an atmosphere of destitution and hopelessness in urban ghettos that compounded the tangible economic problems faced by African-American residents. In areas segregated by race, class, and economic status, the individual experience of poverty is exacerbated by the social
isolation brought on by residing in neighborhoods that offer few opportunities to interact with individuals and institutions representing mainstream society. Ghetto residents lack contact with regularly employed persons, who could provide social support [...] and the aspirations of youth [...] are directly affected by the joblessness and other social dislocations that pervade these communities. (Wilson, Quane, and Rankin 63)

Generations of African Americans raised in such environments without the obvious possibility of any degree of social or economic upward mobility easily lost the will to strive for improvement. This unquantifiable psychological impact drew African Americans still deeper into the vicious cycle of poverty and, in keeping with racial bias, led many outsiders to believe that the attitudes and behaviors that reflected this hopelessness were the causes of the poverty problem rather than the effects of restrictive policy. Through the national policies of the 1950s, programs established and overseen by the federal government systematically denied the basic rights and equal opportunities of economically-disadvantaged African Americans, perpetuating the vicious cycle that would continue to fence in the urban poor for decades to come.

However, the harsh conditions and injustices endured by African Americans in the 1950s made way for the explosive changes of the following decade. The mid- to late-1960s represented a period of intense racial unrest, such as one featured in Figure 5, in many of the nation's largest cities as a response to mounting frustrations throughout the previous decade. “Growing resentment,

Figure 5. Urban riot. Young black men riot in the streets of Detroit during the summer of 1967.

fueled by increasing militancy in the black community, especially among youth, who had suffered the brunt of economic displacement” ignited the devastating urban riots that exploded in cities with large poor black communities like Harlem, Los Angeles, and Detroit in the summers of 1964, 1965, and 1967, respectively (Sugrue 260). The determination of many members of the African-American community to effect change also manifested itself in the revitalization of the civil rights movement during the late 1950s and early 1960s, a response that took on both non-violent and violent forms. Newly founded or reinvigorated groups fought against discrimination, segregation, and racism as the impediments to social change. The decades, although turbulent, produced remarkable improvements for the rights of African-American men and women across the country. Rates of employment, average wages, housing conditions, and poverty levels improved, and continue to improve, since the end of the 1950s. Whereas 55% of African Americans lived in poverty in 1959, that percentage has dropped by 30 points and in the year 2000 reached an all-time low (Dalaker 11). African Americans now hold prominent positions in all levels of government and are experiencing greater levels of economic and social opportunity and mobility than ever before. Most suburban areas today represent a level of diversity unheard of in the past half-century. The country most certainly has come a long way since the 1950s.

Still, much needs to be done before equality for African Americans can be fully realized in all areas. The circle of poverty still maintains a significant presence in current society and large communities of African Americans remain trapped in destitute inner-city areas. Vestiges of old attitudes regarding why African Americans remain in a state of poverty continue to hinder the effort to effect change. Upon close examination it becomes evident that the federal government during the 1950s played a significant role in developing the culture of despondency that persists in inner-city neighborhoods to this day. For these groups, the 1950s represented not white picket fences and manicured lawns of the suburban sprawl, but an era of red tape and growing resentment as the disenfranchised urban population suffered under the government policies and social attitudes determined to keep mainstream America moving forward without ever looking back on the lives of those left behind.
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Instructor's Foreword

Myles wrote the following essay for my PWR course, “Happily Ever After? The Rhetoric of the 1950s American Family and its Legacy.” The author’s own experience instigated this thoughtful examination of the myths surrounding an institution that is consistently implicated in the demise of the American family. Coming from what many would classify as a “broken home,” Myles argues that divorced households are, in fact, often the healthiest solutions for all family members. In his essay, he shows how the scapegoating of divorce can be traced to an unrealistic, highly nostalgic view of what is often perceived as the content, stable family of the postwar era. He then argues that our increased divorce rate is actually an indication that family dynamics have improved since the 1950s—an era in which many married couples would sooner tolerate an enormous amount of dissatisfaction and, in some cases, a highly destructive home environment, rather than risk the stigma and financial hardship associated with divorce. In this sophisticated and persuasive essay, Myles draws upon a variety of cultural, historical, and sociological sources to produce an argument that, in lesser hands, might appear fairly commonplace. He successfully provides fresh insight into a phenomenon that continues to shape American family life.

Stacey Stanfield Anderson
Lecturer, PWR
THE ROLE OF DIVORCE IN AMERICAN FAMILY LIFE

Myles Morrison

Much is made in the American media of the so-called collapse of the traditional family. Politicians and pundits pin a variety of social ills on the rampant increase of divorce in our nation and point to the 1950s as a time when “family values” were properly appreciated. Such vague and unsubstantiated blanket statements do little to improve the status of the American family, though they do tend to garner attention for the individual decrying the family’s demise while making those Americans who live in non-traditional families feel uneasy. Though the term “family values” is never clearly defined, and politicians rarely, if ever, expand upon their visions of how families used to be, implicit in attacks on the modern family is a desire to return to the way that things “once were.” While divorce statistics are an easy way for those who believe in the family’s demise to make a comparison between modern American families and those of the 1950s, any conclusions drawn from such a comparison are both misleading and, in most cases, false. Though the proportion of marriages ending in divorce has risen sharply since the 1950s, the number of unhappy marriages, contrary to what many argue, has not changed significantly (Cherlin 23; Coontz 36; see Figure 1). Indeed, in a number of ways, the prevalence of divorce, though undesirable in and of itself, reflects quantifiable improvements in American social and familial dynamics, as Americans seem less willing to stay in unhappy marriages that are ultimately detrimental to all involved.

Those who push for a return to the “family values” of the 1950s conveniently forget that the period they hold in such high regard is marked not only by low divorce rates, but also by unhappy marriages and what many would now view as unhealthy gender dynamics (Coontz 36). An examination of the factors that contributed to the anomalously low divorce rates of the 1950s supports the conjecture that the proliferation of divorce in America reflects
positive rather than negative changes in family dynamics; in most cases, the changes that have resulted in increased divorce are now viewed as encouraging social developments. First, a brief analysis of gender roles and expectations in the 1950s shows that the perceived peacefulness and tranquility of marriages in that decade are a result of the expectation that wives subvert their individual wills to those of their husbands. The unhealthiness of such constant appeasement of others and the subversion of individuality are reflected in the exponential increase in the use and abuse of such numbing drugs as alcohol and tranquilizers among suburban housewives. Moreover, an exploration of the role that the lack of socially acceptable and financially viable alternatives to marriage played in keeping divorce rates low throughout the 1950s, in conjunction with the other factors noted, demonstrates that fewer divorces are not necessarily synonymous with happier marriages. Finally, perhaps because of the end of the Second World War and the start of the Cold War, religion seemed to hold greater importance in the lives of most Americans in the 1950s than it does today. A study of the relative influence of religion in the 1950s and
today is pertinent to the increased divorce rate because many of America's influential religions frown upon divorce to some extent. Even those who concede that increased divorce is an unintended consequence of a number of positive changes in American society often argue that parents in an unhappy or even unhealthy marriage should stick together for the sake of their children. Social commentators who decry the demise of the nuclear family often note that, relative to children whose parents are married, children of divorced parents fare less well socially, academically, and emotionally. For such observers, this statistic serves a justification for urging parents to stay in unhappy relationships to protect their children's welfare; indeed, some particularly self-righteous pundits go so far as to imply that parents who divorce are deliberately and decisively undermining the welfare of their children. An analysis of a number of exhaustive clinical studies reveals the flaws in this argument. Contrary to popular misconceptions, the current body of research does not pin all of the ills of modern society on divorce. An examination of the studies that explore the effects of parents' marital discord on various aspects of children's lives seems to indicate that children are harmed in a number of ways when parents do not get along. These studies, in conjunction with a study that analyzes family environment and adolescent well-being both before and after divorce, suggest that there is little reason for parents in unhappy marriages to "stick it out" for the sake of the children. Indeed, the current body of research on the topic actually suggests that, in the long run, children tend to benefit when their parents choose to end an unhappy or contentious marriage.

Whether it is viewed as a symbol of weakness in the American family or as an indication of Americans refusing to remain in unhealthy relationships, divorce is clearly on the rise. Statistical comparisons between the 1950s and today are misleading because the family dynamics that existed in the 1950s differ from those of any other time (Espenshade 195). However, an examination of the expectations for and roles of women in 1950s families helps to elucidate some of the changes that have occurred since then, and it is thus useful in demonstrating the role such changes have played in the rising divorce rate. American families of the 1950s conform closely to a patriarchal model. The wife was expected to submit to her husband's will and societal expectations also forced her to suppress her emotions so as not to trouble her husband. A Life magazine article from the 1950s reflects contemporary societal views
in describing the “place” of women as follows: “They should use [their minds] in every conceivable way […] so long as their primary focus of interest is in the home” (Women’s Roles 1). After noting that women should remain in the home, the article goes on to say, “If they are truly feminine women, with truly feminine attitudes, they will […] accept their wifely functions with good humor and pleasure” (1). Women were thus expected to find happiness and fulfillment in their prescribed roles of wife and mother.

Elaine Tyler May’s analysis of the Kelly Longitudinal Study, which asked married couples numerous detailed questions about their relationships, reveals the extent to which women were forced to subordinate their emotions and lower their expectations for marriage in order to conform to societal expectations. The men involved in the study seem to have been much more satisfied with their marriages than the women were, as most men felt that they had given up relatively little but had gained a great deal by marrying (May 193). Moreover, when the men surveyed talked of problems, the problems were generally work-related ones that were mollified by the solace of the home. For the women in the study, the home often was the workplace, and most of these women had no escape from the problems they faced (193). In this regard, women’s attitudes toward their marriages in this survey tended to mirror men’s attitudes toward work, as many women claimed to be satisfied with their marriages but noted that they definitely would not marry the same person again (194). The comments of survey respondent Norma Wells, who insinuated that the status that she enjoyed as a married woman would not have been available to her as a single or divorced woman, reflect the attitudes of many women of the 1950s (198). After detailing numerous problems in her marriage and noting that she longed for more excitement in her life, Wells concluded that “inadequate as it seems in some respects, [our marriage] will last us ‘till death us do part’ and we’ll live on an even keel” (199). Interestingly, May notes that many younger Americans who felt as unfulfilled by their marriages as some of the survey respondents would be filing for divorce rather than giving their marriages the highest possible marks. The fact that so many of the survey respondents who detailed serious problems in their relationships nonetheless gave their marriages the highest possible marks when asked to empirically rank them demonstrates the extent to which 1950s families valued the appearance of happiness and tranquility. This apparent inconsistency thus causes May to
conclude that “it cannot be assumed that fewer divorces necessarily means fewer unhappy marriages,” as she notes that compared to their parents, baby boomers are less inclined to “scale down their expectations to sustain unsatisfying unions” (185, 222).

Furthermore, just as changing gender dynamics within relationships seem to have contributed to the increased divorce rate, a number of societal changes have made divorce a more practical solution for women in unhappy marriages. The sum effect of these changes has been to make divorce a financially viable option for many more women. The educational and vocational opportunities now available to women mean that married women are no longer unable to support themselves economically. Stephanie Coontz notes that “women’s retreat to housewifery [during the 1950s] [...] was in many cases not freely chosen,” as fewer jobs were available to them after World War II (31). Moreover, she indicates that the jobs that were open to women lacked the pay and challenges necessary to persuade women to do without family life (31). Now, however, because of the rising marital age, many more women have significant education or work experience before marrying. Furthermore, marriage is no longer synonymous with forgoing a career, as more and more women elect to remain in the workforce after their marriages (Cherlin 49). Indeed, historian Arthur Calhoun noted in 1919 that “the fact of woman’s access to industry must be a prime factor in opening to her the possibility of separation from her husband” (qtd. in Cherlin 53). A number of studies have shown a correlation between women who work and increased divorce; the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics concluded in 1967 that “on balance, a woman’s income reduces her dependency on her husband and makes it easier for a couple to end an unhappy marriage” (53). These studies do not suggest that women’s employment is the sole cause of divorce, but rather they indicate that the greater independence afforded to married women by continued participation in the workforce enables unhappy couples to separate. Historian Carl N. Degler thus concludes that expanding economic opportunities for women were a necessary condition to allow for a sustained, long-term increase in the divorce rate (qtd. in Cherlin 53).

In addition to the greater opportunities available to women, societal attitudes toward divorce and single parenthood have evolved as divorce has become more common. Throughout the 1950s, most women felt they had little choice but to remain
in unhappy marriages. For example, Kay Johnson, one of the respondents to the Kelly Longitudinal Study who noted numerous problems with her marriage, stated that she had never seriously considered divorce because “we have always had to consider that no one else would shoulder our problems” (qtd. in May 186). In other words, because marriage in the 1950s usually meant giving up other sources of income and loosening ties with familial sources of support, married women in unhappy relationships were faced with the harsh reality of having nowhere to turn. Moreover, even women subjected to physical abuse had difficulty finding support to deal with their problems. Though psychology was commonly practiced by the 1950s, wife battering was not even considered a “real crime,” as psychiatrists “regarded the battered woman as a masochist who provoked her husband into beating her” (Coontz 35). Similarly, despite extensive evidence to the contrary, incest was defined as a problem of female “sex delinquency” and victims were often told that they were “fantasizing their unconscious oedipal desires” (35). Though researchers continue to find that negative stereotypes regarding divorce exist, societal attitudes toward women have changed dramatically over the last fifty years and divorce has been “destigmatized” to an extent (xxv). The destigmatization of divorce, along with greater societal empathy for the problems faced by women in abusive relationships, has further facilitated increases in the divorce rate. Whereas independent women were once seen as “a contradiction in terms,” women who are able to manage as single parents now tend to be respected for their strength and accomplishments (Cherlin 64).

Changes in society’s expectations for women are mirrored in the evolution of television shows through the latter part of the twentieth century. Leave It to Beaver reflects the expectations faced by women during the 1950s, as June Cleaver fills the role of the “typical” housewife and loving mother (see Figure 2). The Mary Tyler Moore Show, which ran from 1970 until 1977, serves as an overt rejection of the model portrayed in Leave It to Beaver; its protagonist is a career

Figure 2. Cleaver family.
woman in her early thirties who rarely talks of getting married or having children (Fuller; see Figure 3). The lyrics to theme song of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, which changed after the show’s first season, clearly reflect the development of societal expectations for women:

**First Season**
How will you make it on your own?
This world is awfully big,
Girl this time you’re all alone.
But it’s time you started living
It’s time you let someone else do some giving
Love is all around, no need to waste it
You can have a town, why don’t you take it
You might just make it after all
You might just make it after all

**Later Seasons**
Who can turn the world on with her smile?
Who can take a nothing day,
And suddenly make it all seem worthwhile?
Well it’s you girl, and you should know it
With each glance and every little movement you show it
Love is all around, no need to waste it
You can have a town, why don’t you take it
You’re gonna make it after all
You’re gonna make it after all (Fuller)

Figure 3. Mary Tyler Moore.
Source: Sitcom Online,
<www.sitcomsonline.com>
The contrast between the two sets of lyrics is very interesting. While the original lyrics begin with a question of how Mary will “make it on [her] own,” in later seasons, this question no longer needs to be asked. Moreover, rather than proclaiming that Mary (and women everywhere) should “start living,” the second theme song suggests that women should already be keenly aware of their value, saying, “Well it’s you girl and you should know it.” Finally, the new lyrics express greater confidence that women will be successful, as the song closes with the assurance that single career women like Mary are “gonna make it after all” instead of hoping that such women “might just make it after all.” Clearly, the initial lyrics represent an explicit rejection of the societal expectations of the 1950s, noting that women should “start living” rather than continuously “giving,” as they had done throughout that decade. The altered lyrics, conversely, demonstrate the extent to which societal attitudes changed between the late 1950s and the early 1970s; the move to more affirming, less reactionary lyrics is in keeping with society’s gradual acceptance of women in a variety of “non-traditional” roles. Thus, changes in societal attitudes toward women, as reflected by changes in the portrayal of women on television, have contributed to the rising divorce rate by lessening the social stigma once attached to single career women.

Finally, because many of the major organized religions practiced in the United States frowned upon divorce, the diminished influence of religion today relative to the 1950s is significant. Though surveys indicate that religious activity in America is both remarkably stable and unusually high relative to other Western nations, there is reason to believe that Americans are gradually becoming less religious. While reports of church attendance in the 1950s were relatively accurate, the figure that is often quoted in disputing the “secularization” of America—that some 42% of Americans attend worship each week—is a gross overstatement (Hadaway 742). This figure has often been called into question because while Americans continue to report their worship attendance as relatively constant, most major denominations have seen precipitous drops in membership and attendance over the last fifty years. Indeed, an exhaustive study that compares actual church attendance with expected attendance based on self-reported survey results indicates that, for a number of reasons, Americans greatly overreport their religiosity. Even overestimating the influence of a number of factors, the study found that less than 16%
of Americans actually attend a worship service during any given week (742). This discrepancy is significant not only because it demonstrates survey respondents' tendency to overreport "social desirability" factors in surveys, but also because it shows that Americans still feel a need to appear religious regardless of their actual beliefs and practices. Moreover, the study reflects a significant decrease in the influence of religion in American society in the last fifty years (748). Since many major religions frown upon divorce, the diminished influence of religion in American society has likely contributed to the weakening of the negative social stigma associated with divorce.

Clearly, then, a number of sociological and economic factors, most of which are generally viewed in a positive light, are primarily responsible for the increased divorce rate in America. Many argue that this increase in divorce has unacceptably weakened the American family by destroying the traditional nuclear family model. A number of exhaustive studies emphatically refute the notion that divorce itself is responsible for weakness in the American family. Such opponents of divorce cite misleading statistics that seem to establish a link between divorce and numerous problems among children in affected families. Moreover, commentators often attempt to add to the concern over the rising divorce rate by drawing comparisons between current statistics and those of the 1950s. These comparisons are misleading because, as Elaine Tyler May notes in her account of American families during the Cold War era, the divorce rate plummeted during the 1950s because of a number of unique circumstances (May 4-5). She further notes that divorce and marriage practices during the 1950s, when viewed in their historical context, represent a disruption of a long-term trend toward increased divorce (8). Similarly, those opposed to women in the workplace often point to the declining birthrate as a way in which the feminist movement will ultimately spell the demise of the nuclear family (Cherlin 45). This prophecy and other such drastic predictions based on comparisons with families of the 1950s are often articulated but never fulfilled because they fail to account for the unusual circumstances of that decade (35-37). Indeed, just as divorce has long been on the rise, the birth rate has been declining for over two hundred years (45). While changes in gender dynamics and increased opportunities for women in the workplace seem to have accelerated these longstanding trends, it is misleading for opponents of women's rights to blame the women's movement for
preexisting historical trends on the basis of dubious statistical analysis.

In many cases, these individuals go on to blame divorce (and, implicitly, the women responsible for its proliferation) for a wide range of social ills. Phyllis Schlafly is well known for such pronouncements, and she goes so far as to equate the “feminism” responsible for divorce with “radical [...] and often lesbian ideology and behavior” (Schlafly 1; see Figure 4). Conservative columnist Maggie Gallagher has made similarly accusatory statements. For example, in discussing last spring’s school shooting outside of San Diego, Gallagher notes that the shooter’s parents were divorced. Without any reference to statistics that would support her claim, she writes, “Surely Mom and Dad must be wondering now if they had only stayed together, worked together, maybe one of them might have noticed and averted this horrible tragedy, this heinous crime” (Gallagher 1). Implicit in such statements is the conjecture that divorce constitutes a rejection of marriage and the “family values” with which it is associated. Clearly, though, divorce does not represent a rejection of marriage as an institution, but rather reflects a refusal to sustain unhealthy, unhappy marriages. The rate of remarriage among divorcees demonstrates that even those who have experienced bad marriages tend to remain optimistic about the role of marriage in American society, as about five out of six men and three out of four women eventually remarry (Cherlin 29). Moreover, half of these individuals remarry within three years of their divorce, and divorcees of all ages are more likely to wed than are their peers who have never been married (May 222). Other
statements intended to show that young Americans are rejecting marriage altogether are similarly flawed. For example, some point to the increasingly common practice of cohabitation as an indication that marriage as we know it will cease to exist if drastic measures are not taken to ensure a return to traditional “family values,” referring with concern to the conjecture of Ibiathaj Arafat and Betty Yorburg that “the living together relationship may come to represent a universal substitute for marriage for adults of all ages” (qtd. in Cherlin 14). Although this study was conducted in 1973 and sociologists have since found that cohabitation is generally a brief stage that postpones but does not take the place of marriage, commentators like Schlafly continue to point to cohabitation as a precipitator of divorce and as an indication of the vulnerability of the American family (14).

In fact, a number of recent studies suggests that marital discord, rather than divorce itself, is responsible for the problems often associated with the dissolution of marriages. For example, a study conducted by Paul Amato and Alan Booth of Pennsylvania State University found that parents’ marital discord had a definite impact on their children’s “marital quality.” In effect, their study provides statistical support for the logical conclusion that unhappy marriages are harmful to the children involved regardless of whether the marriages ultimately end in divorce. Amato and Booth conducted a seventeen-year longitudinal study of 2,033 married persons and their children. The study focused especially on a sample of 274 offspring who were married at the time of a 1997 interview and who had lived with both biological parents at the time of the 1980 survey (Amato and Booth 630). The study asked a number of questions that enabled its designers to establish a relationship between parents’ marital discord and children’s marital quality. Furthermore, the study was designed in such a way as to account for other possible factors that might account for a correlation between marital discord of parents and children, such as genetics, education, income, and religiosity (629). Though other studies have established a link between parents’ marital discord and children’s marital quality, no previous study clearly demonstrated this link to be causal rather than spurious. Amato and Booth’s study, however, clearly shows that conflict, problems, and instability in parents’ marriages are strong predictors of trouble for children’s marriages. Moreover, the study notes that the “parental control
variables,” which were intended to show the influence of other factors that could have contributed to the observed correlation, “accounted for virtually none of the association between parents’ and offspring’s marital discord” (633). The study thus clearly establishes that unhealthy or contentious marriages are harmful for the children involved, as children of such families seem to end up in unhappy marriages of their own. Finally, the study notes that intergenerational transmission of marital discord is far more common than intergenerational transmission of marital harmony (635). In other words, from a statistical standpoint, the negative impact of growing up around a contentious marriage is far more significant than the positive impact of growing up around a happy marriage, as children are more likely to notice and emulate behaviors that are clearly atypical.

Further weakening the argument that parents should “stick it out for the kids’ sake” and simultaneously calling into question the statistics used by those who preach so-called “traditional family values” is a study conducted by Yongmin Sun at Ohio State University that appears in the Journal of Marriage and Family. In summarizing the results of the study, Sun notes that “even before the disruption, [...] adolescents from families that subsequently dissolve exhibit more academic, psychological, and behavioral problems than peers whose parents remain married” (697). In other words, Sun found that almost all of the differences between children of divorce and their peers—the differences commonly blamed on divorce—are present well before the dissolution of the parents’ marriage. Sun’s research thus convincingly refutes the common conclusion that anyone benefits from sustaining unhappy marriages. Furthermore, Sun’s study supports the conclusion that marital unrest, rather than the divorce itself, is primarily responsible for the differences between children of broken families and those of nuclear families (697). Such statistical information thus diminishes the influence of those who argue that parents in unhappy marriages do their children a disservice by getting divorced. On the contrary, studies seem to indicate that in the long run, children are harmed by living with parents who do not get along; such children are far more likely than are children of divorced parents to end up in unhappy marriages of their own (Amato and Booth 628). At the same time, the positive implications of divorce, such as happier second marriages, closer
inter-sibling relationships, and a greater propensity for discussion of serious issues between parents and children, are rarely acknowledged (Espenshade 193).

Despite calls to return to “family values” of the 1950s, marriages have never been without problems. It is understandable that the increased number of divorces is often viewed as an indication of problems in the American family, but such problems are not new. Rather, divorce is simply becoming a more common way to deal with familial discord. An objective analysis of contemporary studies on the subject convincingly refutes the notion that the proliferation of divorce in America is directly responsible for our nation’s social problems. Though arguments that marriage as an institution will soon cease to exist appear exaggerated and lacking in factual basis, a number of factors have undeniably altered the role of marriage in American society. Stephanie Coontz argues that marriage is becoming “less permanent but more satisfying” (16), and this assessment is generally accurate. Because of changes in gender roles and the existence of socially acceptable and economically viable alternatives, marriage is no longer absolutely necessary as an economic partnership (Cherlin 75). Since the practical functions once associated with marriage can now be fulfilled in other ways, and since the negative social stigma associated with divorce has greatly diminished, the personal and emotional aspects of marriage have gained importance. Today’s couples are more likely than ever before to evaluate their marriage based on how well it satisfies their emotional needs; they are also far more willing and far more able than previous generations to dissolve a marriage that is unsuccessful on these grounds (75).

While some still view divorcees as “selfish, irresponsible, and immature,” clinical research and common sense seem to indicate that the dissolution of troubled marriages is beneficial to all involved (May 204). Despite the information to the contrary, “broken homes” continue to be associated with negative consequences for the children involved and, by extension, the institution of the American family. Indeed, the common use of the term “broken home” to describe the non-nuclear families that result from divorce is an indication of the extent to which divorce remains socially undesirable if not unacceptable. Ironically, judging by the current body of sociological research, one could argue that, in many ways, divorce is a way of mending rather than creating
“broken homes.” Divorce is undeniably a difficult process for children to deal with and accept, but the role of divorce in bringing about the demise of American “family values” has been greatly exaggerated. In fact, divorce is a symptom of rather than a cause of weakness in families, and this weakness is not unique to modern families (Coontz 34-38). And while most people are aware of the many (and often exaggerated) negative effects of divorce, relatively few are aware of its accompanying positive aspects. In many cases, given the research indicating that marital discord is generally more harmful to affected children than the dissolution of the marriage, divorce is simply the most practical and effective way to remedy an unfortunate situation (Heatherington 148). Increased divorce, then, does not portend the collapse of society as we know it, nor does it foreshadow the imminent demise of the family.

Notes

1 Amato and Booth’s study demonstrates that parents’ “marital quality” (tendency to argue, prevalence of conflict, presence of jealousy, and quality and frequency of communication, among other things) predicts offspring’s reports of happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and psychological distress in young adulthood. The study also proves that parents’ “marital quality,” when poor, is directly linked to problems in children’s marriages.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


Instructor’s Foreword

One of the most difficult and intangible rhetorical tools to teach is that of voice. When I talk to students about the importance of the personal voice in their writing, it is invariably digested as a call for personal opinion or the narrating of private experience. I try to stress the rhetorical effectiveness of having something at stake in writing and that making the writing matter to an audience starts with making it matter to you. When Amrit told me that he was thinking about writing on Bollywood cinema, we talked about the difficulty involved. He would have to make a somewhat unfamiliar topic tangible to a wide audience, while managing to keep the essay complex in its aims; he would have to examine his own place in the narrative, without collapsing into pure subjectivity; and, he would have to highlight the important issues of history, diaspora, and identity involved in the project. Amrit succeeded admirably on all fronts. I am proud of this essay for being conceptually risky and for its use of complex forms: notice especially the organization of the essay. Here the form reflects nicely the complexity of its context. This is, I think, an exemplary and even moving research essay.

Daniel Contreras
Lecturer, PWR
The Indian Diaspora in Hindi Cinema

Amrit K. Rao

Preface

My parents tell me that the first words I ever spoke were in Kannada, the most prevalent language of their village in India. The reason why they must convince me of this is that I no longer speak that language, nor any other Indian dialect. In fact, I find it extremely hard to believe that I was actually fluent, let alone competent in it. Despite my supposed proficiency in Kannada, my early childhood was for the most part marked with only a modicum of appreciation for Indian culture, and this was apparently by design. But I guess it makes sense that my parents should be more concerned with my adjusting to my American surroundings as opposed to worrying about my Indian cultural literacy. In preschool and kindergarten, this formula seemed to pay off: I had no trouble making friends, and in terms of academics, I was at the top of my class. My teachers even wanted me to skip a couple of grades.

This, of course, all happened before I could begin to understand and appreciate the small things in life such as friendship and culture. My life was very simple back then—I would study because my parents told me to do so, make friends because I found solitude boring, and go to Indian cultural events because that was where my parents took me. Indeed, this ignorant lifestyle suited my seven-year-old psyche, but as I grew older, I started to question what I saw around me. For example, I would mull over why I was so different from my classmates. Even though I was as “American” as they, there were subtle things in my life that suggested that I was not. I did not, for instance, eat pasta at home like my other friends did, and not a single person my age could accurately pronounce my Sanskriti name. Not surprisingly, this contemplative phase in my life inevitably led to my discovery of an artificial yet quite potent human construction—that of race.

I noticed that none of my friends were as brown as I was, and, for some reason, these admittedly superficial differences troubled me. This concern led me to actively seek relationships with people who were members of my own race. Little did I know then that this
choice would forever change both my attitudes toward my culture and the relationships I have had with Indian peers.

I arbitrarily chose a classmate named Neil to be my first Indian friend. When I initially approached him, he was talking with some other desis (Indians). I couldn’t understand what they were saying, and at the time, I assumed that they were discussing something about cheese. When I asked them why they were talking about dairy products, I was met with awkward looks followed by an explanation that they were chatting about a Hindi song from the movie Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast Mast. I was astonished. How could anyone who lived in America tolerate, let alone embrace, Hindi popular culture? “How absurd!” I thought.

Until then, I maintained a dislike of Hindi films. I couldn’t stand them, so my parents and I made a deal in which I would get to rent a Hollywood movie whenever they rented a Bollywood one (“Bollywood” refers to Bombay, the Hollywood of Indian cinema). Even though I obviously benefited from my parents’ watching these films, I could never understand how they could sit through such ridiculous stories. In fact, the entire genre of Hindi cinema baffled me. Even at such a young age, I could think of numerous reasons to substantiate my claim.

First, there was the acting. Even though I had no idea what the characters were saying, I could nevertheless tell that the performers were definitely not playing their part. They couldn’t have been. It seemed to me that overacting was an unfortunate Indian tradition. For instance, whenever a person does something in Hindi films, he completely overdoes it. There is no such thing as subtlety in Hindi film. When an actress cries, she bawls uncontrollably. When an actor is hurt, he moans incessantly. This type of acting didn’t sit well with me when I was young. I was thirteen, and I assumed that I was above such “garbage.” In retrospect, I find it quite ironic that I felt too smart for Hindi movies while intellectually content with Jim Carrey’s antics in Dumb and Dumber. I suppose the ridiculous fight scenes in Hindi movies didn’t help either.

Bollywood fight scenes are notorious for their lack of realism. While a few movies include guns, a majority of onscreen fighting is done with even more primitive weaponry. In fact, I am pretty sure that most everyday blunt objects have been used at least once in Indian fight scenes. I remember one movie in which a man was attacked by twelve men armed with metal rods. Though normal human beings would have been put into a coma after the
thrashing he sustained, the superman protagonist somehow managed to escape—but only after giving the villains a beating of their own.

Even if the unrealistic nature of such victories were to be excused, the sheer quality of the fight scenes must be taken into consideration. For example, the sound effects: for some reason, Bollywood foley artists would like their audience to believe that fist fights contain a series of Dishoom-Bishoom sounds. Almost every Bollywood movie has a fight scene, and nearly every one of these features the infamous Dishoom-Bishoom; if not, the alternative sound effects appear straight out of Street Fighter II. Also, within the Indian film industry, there is a general lack of regard for the laws of physics. In one movie, for example, when the villain punches the hero’s left cheek, the hero’s head is magically jolted leftward (toward the enemy’s fist)! I still do not understand how this happened, and I have a feeling that Sir Isaac Newton is with me on this one. Add to that the numerous times in which the villain’s fist clearly misses the hero’s body (yet the hero insists on pretending to be hit) and it becomes painfully obvious that what is taking place onscreen is too stupid to watch, especially for a little Amrit. You can imagine how lame the fighting was if it couldn’t even captivate a young boy. I wish I could say that such examples of Indian fight scenes aren’t the norm, but my conscience does not let me make such outrageous claims.

Indians in general like to think that they are getting the most for their money, and this usually means that quantity trumps quality. This is probably why Indian movies typically last more than three hours. To fill this time, Bollywood directors refuse to limit themselves to only one type of genre or a single plotline. It appears to me that the idea of having just one theme is simply preposterous in Indian cinema. Indeed, rather than create mysteries, action thrillers, comedies, or romantic movies, producers make combinations of the four, often with entirely different sets of characters in each subplot. To tie the several different subplots together, directors include obligatory, miniature music videos, and they are as confusing as the movies themselves.

The reason why I call these musical sequences “obligatory” is that every movie has them, even the serious ones. The good directors try to find a way to include them while maintaining some level of continuity throughout the movie, but usually these tiny musicals are purely diversions from an already confusing soap opera. To add
to the lack of unity, these music videos are set in entirely different places than the rest of the movie. For example, while most movies are set in India, the musical portion is typically filmed at the Swiss Alps or Australia. Moreover, each musical scene includes bizarre dancing sequences in which thirty to forty background dancers participate. Also, even though the film’s hero typically stays in the same clothes throughout each song, a heroine will wear up to five different outfits in each sequence. At a time when I could hardly understand why any boy should like a girl, such random acts of weirdness were beyond my mind’s comprehension. I searched for meaning but couldn’t find any.

There were many ways in which I could find faults in Bollywood movies, but as I grew older these shortcomings seemed more and more trivial. In addition, with the advent of subtitles, what once seemed to be random started to actually make some sense. As I learned to shed my ego and forgot that I was too smart for Indian cinema, I started to accept the movies for what they were (chances to escape into a magical world for a few hours) and thus gained a newfound appreciation for what I used to deem intolerable. I even began to relate to the characters onscreen. No matter how fanciful the outrageous love stories and songs were, I could be whisked away to an imaginary India in which everyone was happy and life became exciting. Pretty soon, I was the one forcing the family to see the latest Bollywood film, not my parents.

Despite all of my internal transformations, the most important factor in my change in attitude was friends like Neil. Through them, I found the type of camaraderie that was lacking in my previous relationships, for I discovered a whole new group of people whom I could befriend. Even though Hindi movies united us, our common culture kept us together. We spent hours joking about what we saw on our TV screen and this led to even more time talking about our own lives. We laughed at the silly characters even though we were really laughing at ourselves. Through this window into our other pop culture, we found ways to find hilarity and comfort in the traditions of our parents’ homeland. For example, it was through Hindi movies that we concluded that we must all find wives before our parents find ones for us! In short, we found a way to talk about things that our non-Indian friends could not understand.

Even though I am now miles away from my childhood friends, I can still find desis to talk to about the latest Bollywood “cheese.”
Although not all Indians like Hindi movies, at least we all have pretty strong opinions about them or are aware of the genre. Furthermore, our discussions about these films often lead to more general topics, and before I know it, I have found even more new friends like Neil. Indeed, my knowledge of Hindi cinema has proved to be a very potent social tool that I wield with great pride, for it is also my key to a culture that I now cherish and respect.

**The Brain Drain**

As far as I am concerned, my parents are a testament to the fact that America is “the land of opportunity.” As schoolchildren in India, my mother and father worked hard on their assignments, winning awards for their diligence. When it came time to apply for college, my dad aced his entrance exams and was admitted to the elite Indian Institute of Technology (where the acceptance rate was less than two percent), while my mother, who was living with her family in America by that time, won a full scholarship to her college. After his undergraduate years, my dad left India to earn his Ph.D. in America. He followed up on his scholastic efforts with even more hard work in his job at Exxon in New Jersey. Within ten years of living in America, my parents bought their first house, and by age 50, my father was named “Engineer of the Year” by a trade magazine.

My parents are only two of the numerous Indians who have gained their accomplishments in Western nations. Born and raised in India, they left their mother country to pursue bigger and better things in the Western world. Although India’s competitive environment gave them their work ethic, America and other Western countries continue to reap the benefits of this home-grown diligence. In many cases, American graduate schools and companies feed off India by taking their most educated citizens. During the high tech boom, for example, more American H1B visas (workers’ visas) were issued to people from India than any other country in the world (Conway and Stone 36). Indeed, it seems that a cycle has already been established: India gives, the countries of the West take. Not surprisingly, such statistics have made many Indians resent the achievements of their country’s citizens who live abroad. They see this mass emigration of technical workers as a stain on their country’s reputation and a threat to their wealth. Without the guidance of their nation’s brightest, Indians are justifiably concerned that their land will never become the economic superpower that it has the potential to become.
These worries have led numerous Indians to refer to this mass migration of educated workers as the “brain drain,” and, in recent years, this drain has been growing more and more. Even though the emigration numbers were highest in the past few years, this phenomenon has been taking place for decades. First starting in the sixties, the “brain drain” was actually thriving by the 1980’s, proving that Indian immigration was not always centered around computers as many suspect today. A 1977 report claims, for instance, that as many as 4600 scientists and other professionals left India for the United States alone (Swani). Furthermore, in 1980, more than ninety percent of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) graduates left India for Western countries such as the U.S. and United Kingdom (Swani). This mass migration is particularly hurtful to many Indians since their taxes heavily subsidize the cost of attending IIT. Initially, these subsidies were thought to be a great investment, as the graduates of IIT were supposed to bolster the Indian economy through their brilliant work; instead, IIT graduates appear to be the most eager to leave India and create wealth abroad.

Even when Indians amass the wealth that they desire, many still fail to give back to their motherland. There is a general agreement among the Indian professional elite, it seems, that whatever money they give to India will not amount to any good, so any effort on their part to improve India will be inherently futile. Kanwal Rekhi, a well-known multi-millionaire, spoke to a group of Stanford students earlier this year and voiced similar sentiments. He denounced what he considered to be “handouts to India” and explained that only India can help herself. What was his way of giving back to the country that gave him an identity? Not only has he given money to the Indian Institute of Technology (the same institution that churns out future American immigrant engineers), but he is also a vital financial supporter of TiE, an Indo-American group of entrepreneurs (Rekhi speech). It is as if successful Indians like Kanwal Rekhi are taking an active role in ensuring that India’s economy remains in the third world by encouraging the brain drain as opposed to investing in India’s future.

To arrest this huge departure of Indian talent, the government of India has employed several policies that have thus far proven to be unsuccessful. The 1958 proposal to offer well-paying jobs to newly minted engineers has accomplished little because the graduates know that whatever an Indian job pays, a foreign job will pay...
even more. This same idea has also been responsible for other failures such as the international recruiting plan, wherein non-resident Indians (NRI’s) would be wooed to go back home by Indian officials; generous tax-breaks for professional workers; and foreign exchange concessions, in which Indians would be allowed to study abroad but on the condition that they promise to return for employment (Qasim).

Interestingly, like the term “brain drain,” the seemingly innocuous acronym “NRI” appears to have gained a similar negative connotation among the Indian community. The acronym is especially divisive, as it generates a sort of “us versus them” attitude between people who live within and outside Indian borders. This intra-racial division is seemingly absent from other ethnic communities, adding to the emotionally charged nature of the word. Despite this apparent stigma, the term does not always prove harmful to NRI’s when they visit India. Since the label “NRI” is often synonymous with wealth, for example, shopkeepers are usually exceedingly eager to do business with their non-resident customers. Indeed, this subservient attitude that many businessmen have with NRI’s may provide more insight into why many resident Indians find NRI wealth despicable.

To cater to this anti-NRI sentiment, the Indian film industry appears to have joined the government in its fight against emigration. What makes Bollywood’s involvement in this struggle particularly special is its virtual domination over Indian popular culture. This entertainment industry after all produces as many as one thousand movies per year, far more than Hollywood makes. Unlike American movies, Indian movies also typically enjoy soundtracks that can overshadow the movie itself. Indeed, the word “Bollywood” does not just entail films, it represents an entire music recording industry as well (Groubert). An examination of the top ten Hindi songs in India, for example, reveals that all ten originate from film as opposed to formal recording artists (“Top 10 Hindi Songs”).

By trying to convince viewers that life in America will lead to nothing more than poor family relations and disgraceful behavior, the Bollywood film industry has apparently tried to shame NRI’s back to India and discourage current resident Indians from moving to Western countries. This anti-NRI tactic seems a bit unusual, since a significant portion of Bollywood’s annual revenue is gained in Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States (Mishra). Nevertheless, the depth of anti-Western, especially
Anti-American sentiment in Indian film is obvious to even the least discerning viewer. In particular, case studies of the 1997 movie *Pardes* ("Foreign Land") and the current blockbuster *Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham* expose some of the varying ways in which Indian film demonizes the West and places India on a pedestal.

**Pardes and Las Vegas**

*Pardes* opens with a man named Kishorilal traveling to India for the first time in ten years. The narrator reveals that he left India thirty-five years before with only ten dollars in his pocket and that he is now returning home with a net worth of 550 million dollars. He is not going on vacation as most NRI’s do when they go back to India—Kishorilal is on a mission to get his son married to a longtime friend’s daughter. He explains to his friend (and to the audience), “What we NRI’s need are girls like yours,” blatantly implying that Western girls, even those of Indian descent, are incomparable to “real” Indian girls like Ganga, the sought-after daughter. He further elaborates that true Indian women possess the right blend of beauty, morals, and traditions that other girls lack and NRI boys need.

Interestingly, while the NRI Kishorilal is trying to bring Indian values to his Western son, the children of the village want to leave India and experience the American lifestyle for themselves. Several, for instance, actually beg Kishorilal to take them to America. Rather than appreciating the cuteness of the adorable village kids, Kishorilal becomes concerned with their apparent jealousy. The Western-clothed Kishorilal promptly leaves and returns to the children in a kurtha and pajama. He then sings in a musical jamboree that Ganga later joins, “I have seen London, Paris, and Japan. I have met Michael Jackson, Elvis and other [Western] stars. After all of this, I still know that India is the best. I love India. I love my India.”

The nationalistic overtones of this scene are blatantly obvious. Many resident Indians dream of going to places like America where they can get rich (indeed, this is how the brain drain perpetuates), and here is an NRI—a billionaire no less—who confesses that India will always be the closest to his heart. Furthermore, various Indian landmarks such as the birthplace of Lord Krishna and the Red Fort are shown during Kishorilal’s musical oratory, adding to the “commercial” atmosphere of this mini music video. It is as if the producers of *Pardes* are trying to sell plane tickets to India during
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their film. In addition, the display of deities such as Lord Krishna implies that India is especially unique in that it has a spiritual significance as well. After all, Kishorilal and Ganga even mention in their song that “God lives [in India].” India also wins a mini musical battle between the East and West, for the “Do-Re-Mi’s” of the Western-loving children are overshadowed by the beauty of Ganga’s “Sa-Re-Ga-Ma’s.” This onscreen victory serves to reinforce the notion that India is also culturally superior to countries like America.

As soon as Kishorilal successfully persuades his friend to consent to the marriage (arranged marriages still prevail after all), he calls his American-born son to tell him the good news. This offers the producers a chance to juxtapose American rebelliousness with Indian filial piety, a concept that will be repeated constantly throughout Pardes and in other films as well. Not surprisingly, after all, the modest and good-natured Indian Ganga can barely wait to see her future husband while Rajiv, the arrogant son of Kishorilal, does everything he can to stop this age-old Indian tradition from hindering his bachelor lifestyle. In order to persuade Rajiv to marry Ganga, Kishorilal must enlist the help of Arjun, his adopted but Indian-born son.

Unlike Rajiv, Arjun was born in India and, despite his American residence, still maintains a love and respect for India that is rarely found in NRI children. Arjun is a musician and, true to his Indo-philic nature, is also the author of the “I Love India” song that Kishorilal sings to the village children. Furthermore, in keeping with the Indian theme of filial piety, Arjun is portrayed as an ideal son who puts the interests of his father before his own. In one scene, for example, he is shown leaving an important interview with a journalist simply because he gets paged by his father. Just before he exits the room, however, Arjun confesses that once he gains enough wealth, he will move back to India to dedicate his life to helping the poor. The pathos of his words is great, especially when his attitude is compared with that of the majority of successful Indians in the U.S. who rarely give back to India.

Like a good Indian son, Arjun takes his brother to India in an effort to fulfill his father’s wish that Rajiv be married to Ganga. To ensure his success, Arjun meets Ganga’s family a couple of days before so that the family can adequately prepare for the arrival of the would-be hero, Rajiv. After the mood is right, Rajiv finally arrives, only he shows himself not to be as princely as he was
initially thought to be. India, it seems, proves to be too hard for the American desi (a term implying Indian heritage) to handle, as poor Rajiv’s allergies cannot tolerate the dust and pollen that go along with India’s tropical climate. Despite Rajiv’s weak showing, the beautiful Ganga still looks forward to the impending marriage with her betrothed; Rajiv, on the other hand, maintains his uncooperative attitude. Even during his first meeting with the future bride, Rajiv has the audacity to insult Ganga’s intelligence in front of her family friends. This arrogance almost leaves him when Ganga saves Rajiv’s life from an aggressive cobra, but it conspicuously resumes once the couple arrives in America as fiancées.

During Rajiv’s visit to India, the issue of class-consciousness arises, and the producers of Pardes choose to deal with it in a very unconventional way. Rather than admitting that India is a country in which there is a great divide among the various social classes, the movie appears to contend the opposite. For example, when Arjun helps Ganga’s family prepare for Rajiv’s arrival, he orders that all the cattle and servants be “hid” from Rajiv’s sight. The principled Ganga scolds Arjun for suggesting such a thing. “India,” she claims, “is where the animals, servants, and masters all have equal value.” Barring the unrealistic nature of her argument, Ganga again “proves” why India is superior to America (especially for NRI’s); within her statement is the implicit argument that Indians will never achieve the social status of the natives (Jensen) in the West but will always be treated well in India (Chatterjee).

Because Rajiv wants Ganga to experience American life before she agrees to spend the rest of her life there, he tentatively consents to the marriage proposal. While in America, Ganga meets Rajiv’s enormous extended family and immediately feels a little intimidated. Unfortunately, her aloof fiancé does little to calm her fears; in fact, it appears as if he were almost forcing a kind of culture shock on his future wife. Rather than escort Ganga to innocuous places such as restaurants or museums, he takes his girlfriend (who has likely never left her peaceful village in India) to rowdy places such as nightclubs and dance parties—and even ignores her while they are there.

Good-natured Arjun, by contrast, tries his best to make Ganga’s visit as pleasurable as possible. He sticks by her side and consoles her when Rajiv is mean. Due to the promise he made to his father, Arjun’s role as Rajiv’s advocate, however, must take precedence over his friendship with Ganga. Unfortunately, this means that Arjun
must conceal the fact that Sanjay drinks, smokes, and is no longer a virgin, three qualities that cannot coexist with traditional Indian values. Despite Arjun’s best efforts, Ganga always manages to discover Rajiv’s vices, and when she does, her relationship with Arjun grows stronger. At this point, Arjun and Ganga have developed a strong bond that some, including Kishorilal, consider converges on love. To make sure that his biological son Rajiv wins Ganga’s heart, Kishorilal slyly gives Arjun a job in far-off Los Angeles and coaxes Ganga to spend more time alone with Rajiv.

Forcing Ganga to spend “quality” time with Rajiv in the famed city of sin, Las Vegas, is probably the worst thing Kishorilal can do for their relationship. Rajiv drinks and gambles without restraint, and he practically ignores his fiancée in the mean time. Their final night together is particularly damaging. Alone in their room, Rajiv begins the evening by trying to get the chaste Ganga to sleep with him. When his words prove unsuccessful, he begins to rant on what he considers to be “Indian hypocrisy.” He exclaims, “You bloody Indians start whining and crying when someone mentions the word ‘sex,’ yet you manage to have the world’s [second] largest population! Such hypocrisy!” When told to stop insulting the motherland of his parents, he replies, “Your India is nothing but a shithouse!” Being the courageous woman that she is, Ganga manages to fight off this drunken Westerner and escape his lustful wrath.

This scene is particularly indicative of Bollywood’s anti-Western message, and it can be interpreted in multiple ways that lead to this same conclusion. While on face value the plot is that an NRI unsuccessfully rapes the virginal Ganga, this scene can imply other concepts as well. The idea that the West is trying to take advantage of India’s labor resources is, for example, prevalent within the context of the rape. The West (Rajiv), after all, is trying to exploit India (Ganga), by using her to meet its carnal demands. Furthermore, there is the idea that the West’s economic dominance over India is reprehensible and that it should be stopped. No matter how this scene is evaluated, however, a negative view of the West emerges.

As in other movie industries, protagonists in Hindi films have a lot of luck by their side, and Arjun is no different. When Ganga runs off to a nearby train station, for example, Arjun is inexplicably there (even though he is supposed to be in Los Angeles). The two fly back to India together, and the whole story is narrated to
Ganga’s family, all of whom, except Ganga’s father, believe the tale. In the only scene in which the movie examines Indian culture with a critical eye, Ganga’s father actually tries to kill Ganga and Arjun for, what he considers, defaming the family name. During all of this madness, Kishorilal and his son Rajiv manage to contribute their own acts of aggression to the already emotionally charged event. The hero Arjun, however, manages to rise above such strife and deliver a moving oratory in which he denounces the acts of Indo-Americans like Rajiv. “These sons of Indians are sons—yes; Indians—no!” he exclaims. In response to all of this drama, Kishorilal decides that only Arjun can marry Ganga; his biological son has been too polluted by the Western world to deserve such a pure gem like Ganga.

The fact that Arjun practically strips away the cultural citizenship of numerous first generation NRI’s is indicative of the attitude that the producers of Pardes have toward NRI children. The fact that their general characterization throughout the movie is that of a sinful brat makes this last reprimand very appropriate, and this is exactly how the filmmakers wanted it. Furthermore, the moral triumph that Arjun has in the end also demonstrates the implicit bias toward India. After all of this America-bashing, it is only appropriate that India should win out in this metaphorical onscreen battle. Although the level of anti-Western sentiment is obvious within Pardes, other films, including the current box office hit Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, have traces of similar messages within their plot.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham

Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham ("Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness") deals with the Indian diaspora in a much different way than Pardes does, even though the conclusion of the movie entails a similar negative view of NRI’s. This particular story revolves around the class-conscious Raichand family that has made billions of dollars from their Indian-based business empire. Steeped in tradition, the family prides itself on togetherness and family honor; the two sons, Rahul and Rohan, went to the “family business school” in the United Kingdom, and they are destined to head the family company once their father retires. When the sons are of marriageable age, the elders within the family will decide who their appropriate brides should be. That is the way things were for their predecessors, and such a life will be the same for the two boys.
Rahul, however, breaks tradition by falling in love with Anjali, his nanny's daughter and a member of a lower social class. Yash, the patriarch of the family, cannot tolerate such insolence (he had already promised that Rahul would marry a family friend's daughter) and forces Rahul to choose between his family or his girlfriend. Rahul does not comprehend the gravity of Yash's ultimatum; he elopes with Anjali and asks for his father's blessings afterward. The now infuriated Yash vows to never speak with Rahul again and, in great Bollywood style, banishes Rahul from the household. With nowhere else to go, Rahul moves to England and starts a new life there with his wife.

Here, the writers of K3G are indirectly making a bold statement about NRI's in general—because they cannot withstand the cultural pressures and expectations of their strong-principled parents, they must cowardly leave India to live in the non-tradition oriented West. A less sweeping message can be found by taking the plot for its face value—the separation of a son from his parents. Rahul could have easily gone to a different part of India, but some unexplained emotion makes him flee the country entirely. In real life, this same emotional scene is prevalent in many households when a son goes off to America in search of more economic opportunity; the dramatization of this spectacle reemphasizes the idea that to leave one's motherland is indeed unnecessary (no matter how accurate that assumption is). Furthermore, it highlights the level of emotional pain that the international move inflicts on family members. Arguably, the filmmakers' idea is to play on the sympathies of viewers and dissuade them from destroying their families as Rahul did.

The plotline flashes forward roughly ten years, when Rohan (who is eight years younger than Rahul) is now grown up and ready for college. Just as his tradition mandates, he will attend business school in UK, so he gets ready for his journey. Once he arrives in London, he luckilly discovers that his long-lost brother Rahul resides near his university, so he decides to befriend Pooja (Anjali's sister), who happens to live with Rahul, Anjali, and their son Krishna. By persuading Rahul to let him stay in his house, Rohan can finally see how his beloved brother is doing, and he makes many discoveries regarding NRI life in UK that he finds quite startling.

Much of the Westernization of Rahul's family is shown through the eyes of Anjali, the devoted wife who incessantly complains about not living in India. She wears her traditional saris like a dutiful
Indian girl but notices that her white-washed sister wears strictly Western clothing and very little of that. To add to the fact that she dresses more immodestly than her “real” Indian counterparts, Pooja is portrayed as a superficial buffoon. In fact, when she is asked what she looks for in men (already a taboo topic in Indian culture, for sexuality is rarely discussed), she delivers one of her most famous lines by responding, “Three things: good looks, good looks, and good looks!” The lack of depth of her personality makes the Indian audience immediately identify her with Western culture.

Not surprisingly, many NRI teenagers treat such characterizations of them as a form of defamation; indeed, when I first saw K3G, I patiently waited to hear the infamous line that made all my friends complain. Even today, when my friends and I discuss the movie, someone always seems to offer the obligatory comment on how stupid Pooja looked with her scantily clad body and her outrageously shallow dialogue. We all know that India, as evidenced by its portrayal in Pardes, is characterized as the most spiritual of lands, and when Western-born children are shown as people preoccupied by external sources of pleasure (makeup, good-looking men, etc.), it reflects badly on our mini community. It is as if the writers of K3G are warning resident Indians that their children will end up like Pooja (and therefore like us) if they leave the moral security of India.

The very fact that my group of friends, some of whom have not even been to India, like to talk about these foreign film stars is indicative of the immense celebrity status that many Bollywood actors and actresses enjoy. As in America, there is an entire genre of magazines devoted to gossip about Indian movie stars; at Indian stores in America, some of these periodicals sell for as much as seven dollars. News about Salman Khan and Aishwarya Rai’s off-screen love affair, for example, is still a favorite topic in magazines such as Stardust and Filmfare despite the fact that their relationship is allegedly over (“Court Martial”). For many Indians in particular, reading such articles possibly serves as a kind of liberating activity, as traditional Indian values prohibit the discussion of sexually related topics (Doraiswamy). Regardless of the causes of such popularity, Indian film stars benefit from a fan base that many Hollywood actors lack. The public response after Amitabh Bachchan’s (Yash Raichand in K3G) near-fatal injury while shooting the movie Coolie No. 1 is especially revealing. Not only did people all across India pray for his recovery (“Debashish’s Tribute”) but
the VHS cassettes of Coolie No. 1 that were subsequently sold contained a banner across the bottom of the screen that alerted viewers when the infamous scene was being shown. Arguably, no Hollywood actor enjoys a similar level of devotion from his fans as Bachchan.

This contention is further supported when Rohan finally succeeds in taking Rahul back to his motherland. Upon her arrival to India, Pooja completes a 180 degree transformation from fashion-conscious Westerner to culture-conscious Indian. For the first time in her teenage life, she is shown as a fully clothed woman decked in a gorgeous salwar kameez (an Indian dress that is similar to the kurtha pajama but more ornate). Moreover, she folds her hands and even recites the aarthi, a sacred Hindu prayer that involves offering a flame to God. She is a new person, and the producers of K3G evidently want the audience to associate this positive change with her Indian environment.

Now that Rahul is back home, he and his father finally reconcile. The father even goes as far as apologizing for banishing his son, and, not surprisingly, he is forgiven. In Indian culture, elders, especially men, rarely apologize for anything, so his apology is particularly significant given this tradition. The family is now united, and Anjali is welcomed into the family. In light of Bollywood’s stress on NRI-India relations, this last scene can be viewed as a sort of conciliatory gesture on behalf of India to NRI’s who felt as if they “had” to leave for economic reasons. It is almost as if the producers are saying that the economic situation within India has changed and that India will welcome NRI’s back in open arms (as Yash does for his son Rahul). This, after all, proves to be the ultimate situation that India is working toward—technologist NRI’s actually moving back to India.

Closing Thoughts

Pardes and Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham are just two of the numerous Hindi films that discuss NRI issues with a bias toward Indian concerns. They represent Bollywood’s patriotic contribution to putting a stopcock on the brain drain that harms much of India’s technology sector. Unfortunately, this solution has thus far proven unsuccessful, as the rate of Indians immigrating to the U.S. has been steadily increasing until last year’s stock market bust. Hopefully this lull in the U.S. economy will inspire innovation in India so that its economy can at least prosper.
Appendix: Annotated Filmography

The following are a few of the most successful Indian movies that provide a window into the world of Hindi cinema.

Hum Aapke Hain Koun—In 1994, this movie set the all-time box office record (which was later broken by Lagaan) for overall sales by a Hindi film. Like most other films, this is a love story that involves a widowed man and his sister-in-law.

Lagaan—This is arguably the greatest film ever produced by an Indian. This year, in fact, it became the first Hindi film to be nominated for the Best Foreign Film Oscar. Interestingly, the film is more about colonial rule and cricket (a British sport) than it is a love story.

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge—My personal favorite love story, in which two NRI’s fall in love with each other. Their love, however, is challenged by the Indian tradition of arranged marriage, as the girl’s father has selected another man to be her husband.

Mohabbatein—A love story that involves three college boys who worry more about girls than they do about their schoolwork. This film includes 1994 Miss World Aishwarya Rai.

Author’s Note on Film Distribution

Since Lagaan received an Oscar nomination, copies of this movie can be found at mainstream video rental chains such as Blockbuster Video. Indian stores are a reliable source of other Hindi movies, and their addresses and phone numbers can be found in a telephone book. Be careful to only rent DVDs; VHS cassettes often have extremely poor picture quality as they must be converted into the NTSC format from PAL.
Notes

1 This trend appears to have changed ever since the Gujurat earthquake of January 2001. Hopefully this charity will still continue without the provocation of a national disaster.

2 A kurtha is a collarless and lengthened full-sleeved shirt that extends down to one's knees. A pajama is a drawstring pant that is tightly fit around the legs and waist.

3 All translations are taken from the movie's subtitles unless otherwise noted.

4 These musical notes belong to Indian Classical Vocals.

5 As shall be seen later, Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham addresses the issue of class-consciousness in a more accurate way.

6 Rajiv must do this because Indian values deem it improper for a woman to be with a man to whom she is not betrothed

7 The movie's subtitles say that this was supposed to be “Your India is no better than shit!” The translation provided is from Bollywood Cinema author Vijay Mishra. “Shit,” by the way, is a common word in India, that does not carry the stigma that is attached to it in America. Little kids, for example, freely say the word, and their parents do not care.

8 Rejecting a marital proposal or an engagement is considered very serious in rural India. In Ganga's case, the fact that she went to America meant that she was practically married to Rajiv and, therefore, when she came back, it was as if she divorced him.

9 Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham is also known as “K3G.” Many multi-worded movie titles turn into acronyms.

10 Interestingly enough, Rahul is a foster child who is played by Shah Rukh Khan, the same man who played the foster son in Pardes.

11 Even though this may appear surprising to many Westerners, such hospitality is the norm among Indians.

12 A “cooler” is a man who carries people's luggage (similar to bellhops, only these workers can be found at airports, train stations, and sometimes shopping malls).

Works Cited and Consulted


“Debashish’s Tribute to Amitabh Bachchan.”


Winter 2002 Honorable Mention

Jack Chung

Instructor's Foreword

Jack Chung’s writing in PWR has been all about taking risks. From the very beginning of my course on “Purposeful Laughter: Comic Persuasion in Classical and Contemporary Rhetoric,” Jack honed his skills as a rhetorician by experimenting with a humorous and satiric persona. But when he turned to the research paper, Jack voiced a desire to take new challenges—to risk the inflammatory content of Chris Rock’s racial comedy, to risk a creative organizational design for an academic paper, and to risk confronting head-on the controversy surrounding a figure Jack paints as nothing less than a public intellectual speaking out about race through the vehicle of laughter. In this way, while Jack’s paper emphasizes Chris Rock’s courage as a comic performer, Jack demonstrates his own brand of courage in tackling such explosive questions with insight, balanced analysis, and grace. As he reflected in his memo to the class, “There’s a whole history behind African-American humor that finds its roots in slavery, and it’s worth noting how humor has been used to ease some of that anger and venom that stems from such a tragedy.”

Structured as a series of miniature performances, Jack’s essay delves deep into the complicated history of Blackface minstrelsy, “coon” stereotypes, and “Jim Crow” humor as strategic responses to institutionalized slavery. Each turn of the argument offers new insights, increased richness of analysis, and a marked mastery of academic writing. Indeed, in this essay, Jack Chung fights ignorance his way, risking his own interpretation through engaging a range of scholarly and popular debates on racial humor in America to provide a provocative look into the serious social purpose behind the laughter.

Alyssa J. O’Brien
Lecturer, PWR
THE BURDEN OF LAUGHTER: CHRIS ROCK FIGHTS IGNORANCE HIS WAY

Jack Chung

You see TV, you see white people pissed off. White people think they losing everything. "We're fuckin losin the country, man!" Shut the fuck up! White people ain't losin shit. If ya'll losin, who the fuck is winning? It ain't us! (Rock, Bigger and Blacker)

Adorned in an expensive black leather jacket, the skinny comedian with the well-trimmed goatee spits out these controversial insights in his angry, signature shrill voice that echoes throughout the spacious theater. The hoot and holler of the sold-out audience are intermingled with the frenzied applause. The man of the hour, the man who basks in the laughter is black comedian Chris Rock. Performing in Apollo Theater in Harlem only a few blocks away from where he grew up, Rock holds the audience of both blacks and whites spellbound with his pin-point delivery and outrageous comic material. This particular stand-up routine, entitled Bigger and Blacker, is Rock's third HBO special and it comes after the years of performing in smoky comic clubs, after his unfruitful years at SNL, after his landmark HBO special Bring the Pain, and after the two Emmy wins. It is 1999, and Chris Rock is on top of the comedic world.

Chris Rock! Chris Rock! Chris Rock! The comedian has become a household name in America, and he is seen everywhere from movies to talk shows to TV commercials. More importantly, he has become arguably the most talked-about comedian of today, and he has intellectual defenders and critics who both agree that the man holds a significant role in the debate over sociopolitical issues of race that rage across the nation. Interestingly, throughout the discussion of Rock's importance in affecting the public's perspective of race relations, the comedian himself has noticeably downplayed his role. He has persistently answered to both admirers and critics that he is nothing more than a "Jokeman," and that his only concern is to be funny (qtd. in Powell 4). However, whether
or not Rock is sincere in devaluing his position as a social commentator, his comic material and activities off the stage suggest that he is indeed one of the forerunners in shaping Americans' perception of African Americans as a race, and he is a leader, though an unwilling one, in tearing down the stereotypes that both whites and black have of each other. With his painfully honest and often angry humor of the plight of the black people, Rock upholds the traditional African-American humor that originates from the days of slavery, and he pioneers that humor to a new direction with his conscious efforts to portray the diversity of Black America.

Nothing more racist than an old black man. Because old black men went through real racism. He didn’t go through that “I can’t get a cab” shit. He was the cab. The white man would jump on his back and say, “Main Street.” “Left, nigga! Left, you fuckin nigga!” (Rock, Bigger and Blacker)

Forty minutes into his special Bigger and Blacker, Rock introduces this bit on the injustices that blacks suffered during the heyday of the civil rights era, and although the laughter continues to pour freely in the theater, there is a twinge of discomfort among the audience members. To emphasize the absurdity of the situation, Rock mimics a white man by bulging his eyes, grinning his mouth, and riding up and down an imaginary black person while shouting at the top of his lungs, “Left, nigga!” Such a purgative depiction receives a standing ovation from the crowd who recognizes the exaggerated truth of the imitation, but it is exactly the kind of rhetoric that provokes Harvard psychologist A. Poussaint to say that such “street” comedy encourages the acceptance of white superiority (1). The New Republic goes further by deriding it as a humor that is “attempting to shuck, jive, grin, shout, and bulge [its] eyes all the way back to the days of minstrelsy” (Driver 29). Such comments are not light criticism, for it states that Rock’s comedy reverts to the politically incorrect Jim Crow humor of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it therefore undermines the progress that blacks had worked so hard for several decades to shed such prejudiced images of themselves.

In order to validate his argument that Chris Rock is reminiscent of the “coons” of the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, Justin Driver gives a short history lesson of the blackface minstrels in his New Republic article. The minstrel shows were
popularized in the 1830s by white performers who mimicked blacks wearing black face paint, and eventually by the 1850s blacks had formed their own troupes of minstrels through which they presented the ignorant “coon” that shucked and jived (Driver 29). In the case of Rock, his buffoonish gestures of the white man riding a black man are reminiscent of the minstrel who once bulged his eyes and gave his grin, but Driver goes further by critiquing Rock’s voice as “The Voice—a high-pitched, piercing shrill that seems to work most effectively when shouted through a grotesquely enormous grin” (29). He also complains that “The Voice” is used as nothing more than a device to convey the profanity that is crucial to Rock’s angry delivery (30).

Regarding the profanity that pervades throughout Rock’s performances, Driver is not the only critic who finds it irrelevant; legendary comedian Bill Cosby, offended by the vulgar language in Rock’s comedy, asked Rock to remove his comedy album from Rock’s opening act of the Bring the Pain special (Kamp 9). However, another legendary comedian in his own right, Jerry Seinfeld, defends Rock’s rhetorical usage of his voice by claiming, “It’s the yelling that makes it special” (qtd. in Farley 67). Indeed, when Rock shouts out the vulgar words “Left, nigga!” in his routine, it is almost as if they are meant to purposely grate against the ear and create the caustic pain and laughter that Rock seeks. The profanity, too, is used to invoke the raw emotions that stem from poignant humor; when he repeats the line “Left, nigga!” the second time with the word “fuckin” thrown in, it drives into the listener the ridiculousness of the racism that is portrayed. An exasperated Chris Rock points this out to those who cannot comprehend his use of foul language in an interview by yelling, “You ignorant people, grow up. Cursing is used for emphasis; it’s never the joke” (qtd. in Nelson 2).

Paradoxically, even with his supposed “reactionary” comedic style that conjures up images of the “coons” past, Chris Rock is extremely popular with black audiences. Justin Driver dismisses this popularity by stating that African Americans have come to enjoy such politically incorrect gestures of minstrelsy because they have endured “coon” comedy for such a long time (32). Dexter B. Gordon, author of the article “Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression” in Journal of Black Studies, disagrees with Driver, and, although he never alludes to Chris Rock in his article, his analysis of African comic traditions makes the best
argument in defense of Rock’s rhetorical strategies on stage. Gordon argues that at its core, African-American humor is a diverse product that ranges from the quaint and delightful to the most often obscene, bitter, and sardonic (2). He goes on to claim that much of what Driver finds offensive in Rock’s presentation—the jiving, the shouting, and the shuckin—are actually distinctive “games” of African-American culture (Gordon 3). And whereas Driver sees these characteristics as traits used to “assuage white concerns about the moral propriety of slavery” (Driver 30), Gordon sees them as “part of the humor that continues to fulfill the need for a sense of power in the midst of misery, the need for both a morale booster and amusement in Black culture” (Gordon 3).

His assertion that “shuckin” and “jiving” is part of African-American lore supports the idea that Chris Rock’s rhetorical strategies are not a return to “coon comedy”—rather they are part of a continuation of African-American humor that keeps intact its unique methods of delivering humor.

There ain’t a white man in this room who’d change places with me. None of ya! And I’m rich! That’s how good it is to be white [...] When you white, the sky’s the limit, and when you black, the limit’s the sky. (Rock, Bigger and Blacker)

As Rock continues his monologue on race, he tones down the exaggerated facial expressions and gestures, but the tension in the audience members remains as they try to laugh away the bitterness of his words. The sadness associated with some of Rock’s observations about the class structure involved with race seems almost inappropriate as humor, but Gordon would argue that Rock fulfills the traits of African-American humor not only in his rhetorical devices but also in his choice of scathing content as well. In presenting his definition of African-American humor, Gordon first states that it goes against Plato and Aristotle’s original claim that humor at its core should be good-natured and free of anger or ridicule (1). He then theorizes that African-American humor brims with anger and rage because it originates from the tragedy of American slavery (Gordon 2-3). The humor that results is a “safety valve” that does “violence to the [white] oppressor in return for injustice” (Gordon 3). In his book Rock This, Chris Rock addresses slavery in a derisive voice that carries the vengeful humor of the old-time slaves by sarcastically musing, “If there was one person in
your life whose ass you could beat when you felt like shit, do you know how happy you would be?” (30). It is doubtful that Rock is aware of Gordon’s definition of African-American humor and its connection to slavery, but by discussing the psychological effects slavery has had on the white superiority/black inferiority complex, Rock proves himself to be a keen social observer who understands that the origins of the damaged black psyche greatly affect African-American thought and its angry humor.

One of the reasons that Rock is so successful in transforming the boundless rage of his material into a product of digestive laughter is his keen understanding that his humor carries seriousness and shame that Gordon links to African-American humor. Gordon says, “At its base, then, African American humor is very serious” (2), and Rock reveals this insight when he reflects on his own work: “I don’t think anything I ever said onstage isn’t something I first said in a conversation being perfectly serious” (qtd. in Nelson 3). Gordon also mentions that an important aspect of African-American humor is self-deprecation (2), and Rock uses this tool in a sophisticated manner that is developed through various aspects of his comedy. For instance, in his book, Rock tackles the controversial subject of the word “Nigger” that both blacks and whites would prefer to shy away from, and he says, “Of course, ‘nigger’ is just a word. White people could call us anything, like ‘butter.’ ‘Hey you fucking butter! Pick that cotton, butter!’” By discussing the “N” word in the comedic form of the word “butter,” he reduces the dignity of blacks as the “N” word is originally meant to, but he does it in a way so that readers are able to comprehend that he mocks the word and not black people. He doesn’t stop there, however; he carries that joke further in his TV show, The Chris Rock Show, by playing a pseudo-commercial in which blacks rave about a cereal called “Nigga Please.” At first glance, the casual use of the word in the parody seems derogatory to black people, but Rock uses self-degradation and even extends it to social degradation to derail the vulgarity of the word “nigger.” Of course, not all of the audience gets the complex joke, and some come away offended by the coarse satire, but Rock accepts this as part of his ongoing attempt to stray from the “good-natured” humor of Aristotle and Plato: “Somebody should always be offended. Somebody in your life should always be like, ‘Why did you do that?’ Always. That’s just being a real artist. That’s the difference between Scorsese and Disney” (qtd. in Farley 68). The quote by itself is a memorable sound bite, but
when Rock says on stage that a white busboy would not change positions with even a rich black man, the quote becomes the centerpiece of a philosophy of a man who has dedicated his life to bring out the wincing grimace of his spectators.

The question then arises as to why Rock turns to potentially controversial humor in his comedic acts. Why is it that he's not afraid of the angry bee's hive he might stir up when he says on stage, “There ain't a white place in this room who’d change places with me”? Much of his bold and perhaps even reckless courage in choosing his subject matters comes from his own personal experience. As a teenager growing up in Brooklyn, New York of the post-civil rights 1970s, Rock was sent to an all-white school in Bensonhurst by a mother who wanted a better education for her son (Farley 68). At the high school Rock claims that he was beaten regularly and called “nigger” everyday by “white toxic waste” (Hammer 1, 3), and it is from such hellish torture that “he came away with a kind of sad wisdom that will never leave him and thoroughly inhibits his humor” (Schruers 40). Friend and actor Joe Pesci explains that Chris Rock feels entitled to poke fun of both blacks and whites because he experienced racism directly (qtd. in Nelson 2), and the result is a comedian who sounds off incisive remarks to both races. In Rock This, Rock says of white people, “Broke-ass white people have it bad. I'll bet you a set of black satin sheets that 80 percent of the Ku Klux Klan makes less than $13,000 a year” (29). It is debatable whether Rock truly has the liberty to denigrate another race based on his past school experience, but it is an unimportant debate; in answering the original question of the source of Rock’s fearlessness, the point is that he feels he has the right to show the failings of both white and black people.

As much of an impact Rock’s schooling had on his willingness to find the humor in the matters of all groups of people, it did not affect his work as much as the death of his father. His father Julius died in 1989 from a ruptured ulcer after spending 55 years of his life holding two jobs as a union trucker and a cab driver (Schruers 42). Rock had been a struggling comedian who was bouncing around New York comedy clubs trying to establish a name at the time of his father’s death, and something changed with his sudden departure. Looking back at the time, Rock says, “The only time I ever wanted to give it up is when my dad died and I didn’t have any money” (qtd. in Chappell 168). Rock, however, did not give up; instead, he came away from the experience with a new sense of
urgency to take risks in his work before he eventually faced his own
death. In the Rolling Stone interview with Fred Schruers, Rock
shares some of his thoughts: “You could be played out tomorrow
and it’s no fault of your own [...]. Work as hard as you can, and let
the chips fall where they may, and go out swinging. If you’re
going to make mistakes, make aggressive mistakes” (qtd. in Schruers
64). With his father’s passing, Rock realized that worries of
presenting politically incorrect material were trivial in the face of
death, and this epiphany freed Rock to produce the edgy comedic
sketches that paved his claim to fame. Rock’s good friend and Chris
Rock Show writer Lance Crouther summarizes the importance of
Rock’s father when he says, “I honestly believe that when his father
passed, that kind of made him a little more steely about [his hu-
mor], like, ‘I’m going to take risks.’ You just go, ‘People die;
I might die; why am I stressing about saying things like ‘niggas vs.
black people’ onstage?’” (qtd. in Schruers 64). In an ironic, cruel
twist of fate, the death of Rock’s close father may have been
his greatest gift; Rock was now finally ready to unleash his most
insightful fury out in the spotlight.

There’s, like, a civil war going on with black people, and there’s
two sides: there’s black people[...] and there’s niggas. And niggas
have got to go! Every time black people want to have a good time,
ign’ant-ass niggas fuck it up! Can’t do shit without some ign’ant-
ass niggas fuckin it up! (Rock, Bring the Pain)

“Niggas vs. Black People.” The notorious comic sketch from his
1996 HBO special remains his most divisive and brilliant piece of
work, and it is repeated and discussed to this day. When Chris Rock
proclaimed this manifesto in front of a large viewing audience,
he floored everyone, blacks and whites, by unveiling the long
undisclosed thoughts that blacks had of each other. Can’t do
nothing! Can’t keep a disco open more than three weeks. Grand opening
closing! The white media was amazed by the new revelation that
blacks were critical of some members of their own community, and
they praised Rock for his daring monologue (Farley 69). Blacks,
on the other hand, were divided on the piece; some loved it for the
honest portrayal of the black mentality while others hated it for the
possibility that it could open up to further stereotypical thinking
of blacks by white people. Can’t go to a movie the first week it comes
out! Why, cause niggas are shooting at the screen! What kind of ign’ant
The opinions on “Niggas vs. Black People” vary greatly, but no one can deny the importance of the piece in explaining Rock’s views on race, and it has been dissected and analyzed many times over by politicians, journalists, and professors in order to place Rock in his rightful position in America’s social landscape on race issues.

When Chris Rock presented “Niggas vs. Black People” in Bring the Pain, he believed that he was merely speaking to his mostly African-American audience about the “gangsta” blacks that all other blacks despised for the negative image they portrayed to the media. Even after the backlash Rock received for the routine, he held steadfastly to his notion that there were a minority “Niggas” in the black community who undermine much of the positive values that the majority of black hold (qtd. in Marriott 188). Fellow comedian Mario Joiner agrees with Rock’s perspective by commenting on the sketch, “Every black person can relate to it—hell, you got cousins you don’t want to be around” (qtd. in Kamp 6). Support also came in the form of Rock’s mother in a 1998 60 Minutes interview with Ed Bradley when she defended her son’s monologue by saying, “I love my people. I don’t want to live next door to niggers either” (qtd. in 60 Minutes).

However, Ed Bradley, a black man himself, was unsatisfied by Ms. Rock’s input on the matter and demanded to know the difference between “niggers” and black people (60 Minutes). His grilling of the comedian’s mother seemed to imply that he disapproved of Rock’s performance because it fails to divide a clear line between the supposed two distinct groups of people, and the confusion may lead to racial stereotypical thinking in which all blacks are regarded as having some “nigga” characteristics. If this was Bradley’s thinking, he was not the only one who feared that Rock’s commentary on “niggas vs. black people” weakened the necessary barriers that prevent people from casual racial discrimination. In his study of the “Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals of African Americans on Person Perception” T. E. Ford cites professors Gaertner and Dovidio in saying that while whites “are consciously concerned with maintaining an egalitarian, nonprejudiced self-concept” and as a result do not blatantly discriminate, discrimination may in fact occur when “nonracial justifications for discriminatory behavior are available” and that disparaging humor (such as “Niggas vs. Black
People”) is a form of “nonracial justification” which “may create a climate in which the norms defining acceptable behavior are temporarily relaxed, and discrimination against out-groups is no longer socially acceptable” (Ford 4-5). Justin Driver applies this theory directly to Chris Rock by arguing that Rock’s well-intentioned but unconvincing separation of “niggas” from black people “legitimates [certain whites’] racist view of the world” (Driver 31). He then concludes his article by saying that Rock belongs to a group of comedians and rappers who feed stereotypes of blacks by “extolling negative behavior among African Americans as the only genuine blackness” and that his work “obscures the rich and varied truth about black life in America today” (Driver 33).

As adamant as some critics are in their belief that Rock tarnishes the image of blacks in the eyes of the rest of America, there are those who would counter that such bits as “Niggas vs. Black People” shed light into the elasticity of the black experience. In response to The New Republic’s searing criticism, Time writer Bruce Handy defends Rock by saying, “I would wager that Rock is making a point about how street culture celebrates boorish behavior, and how that can feed racist stereotypes, and how dispiriting that is” (67). With this statement, Handy directly contradicts Driver with his opinion that Rock does not perpetrate stereotypes with his comedy but rather seeks to help the black majority discard the negative labels brought on by the “gangsta” nihilism of a handful of blacks who are overly represented in television and music. Jill Nelson echoes similar sentiments when she says that the black majority that Rock supposedly wants to reveal to the public is a broad range of working-class people who seek to move forward, not backwards (1). Moreover, Bill Stepney, head of Stepsun Records, emphasizes the significance of Rock in the black community by noting that Rock’s viewpoint comes from old-fashioned values that are reflective of a group of people who are in need of a spokesperson: “If Nixon’s supporters were the silent majority, then Chris’s black audience sort of mirrors that—without saying that Chris is Nixon” (qtd. in Kamp 5). In one particular segment of Rock This, Rock is especially apparent as the frustrated voice of the “silent black majority” when he exclaims, “White people don’t know how to tell the difference between one black man and another. If they could, we’d all get along [...]. To white people, even Ed Bradley and Bryant Gumbel hanging out, waiting to cross the street together, is potentially scary” (11).
Even if Rock fights rather than encourages stereotyping, there remains the criticism of his “Niggas vs. Black People” riff that it exposes the taboo subjects spoken amongst only blacks out into the public for full disclosure. In his interview with *60 Minutes*, Rock deduces that much of his criticism from black people on the use of the “N” word comes because he says it where white people could hear it (*60 Minutes*). Black professor of Depaul University and cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson discusses his disapproval of Rock’s revelation of black thought to white audiences when he says:

> Rock signifies an unwillingness to among the younger black generation to abide by the dirty-laundry theory. That theory suggests you don’t say anything self-critical or negative about black people where white people can hear it. But the hip-hop generation believes in making money off the publication of private pain and agony. (qtd. in Farley 69)

Dyson’s concerns seem legitimate, but *Time* writer Chris Farley contends that it is precisely because Rock refuses to uphold the “dirty-laundry theory” that his comedy becomes a powerful agent to advance blacks on the social ladder. He debates that although *Bring the Pain* was aired on HBO and not on BET, it was a comedy routine made about blacks, for blacks (Farley 69). It was a momentous event, for it was one of the first times that whites were ignored in the scheme of the situation, and Farley predicts that more undisclosed aspects of the black community will be revealed on the national stage because blacks no longer care about the image they may relay to white people (Farley 70). In the larger context of the history of African-American humor, Rock’s “Niggas vs. Black People” follows the formula of crudely bitter self-denigrating humor, but it is elevated to something African-American humor had not been before. Whereas in the past such humor had served as a quiet vent of anger and aggression for blacks who acknowledged white superiority in the open, Rock shared that humor with his fellow African Americans in a medium that white audiences could observe but not play a role, and the result was that much of the black inferiority complex associated with African-American culture was absolved. In speaking of the long range effects of such an emancipation, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons chuckles, “Now [members of the mainstream media] have to live with [Rock] even though he makes them uncomfortable, and I think that’s fabulous”
For the first time, African-American humor disassociated itself from any kind of white involvement, and the pieces of such a shake-up are still falling today as African-American humor continually reshapes its role in black culture.

The breadth of passionate debate that Rock’s comedy elicits from intellectuals is evidence enough that he is advancing discussion of the foibles of black America, but Rock continually insists that he has no political aims: “Really, really at the end of the day, the only important thing is being funny. I don’t go out of my way to be political” (qtd. in Bogosian 58). His unwillingness to view himself as a black leader triggers Justin Driver to say, “[Rock] wants to be caustic and he wants to be loved” (32). Even supporters wistfully sigh, “One wishes Rock would own up to the fact that he’s a damned astute social critic” (Kamp 7). Although Rock would at first seem merely content to let his comic material speak for itself, his activities have shown him to be carrying out his mission to increase black diversity in the entertainment industry. In the fall of 1998, he started a college humor magazine entitled the Ilttop Journal at Howard University to create an “infrastructure” through which young black talent could hone their humorous writing skills (Powell 2, Kamp 3). He has also used The Chris Rock Show as a political forum for notable black leaders such as Jesse Jackson and Marion Barry to voice their opinions. When the show ended its run in year 2000, activist Reverend Al Sharpton remarked that there should be “a national day of mourning,” for the show “provided a forum where people like me could talk to a different part of America that did not necessarily get exposure to us” (“Chris Rock Pulls Plug”). Regarding the purpose of the show, Rock himself has been proud of the way it broadened the range of black humor, and in the Vanity Fair interview, he boasts, “One thing we do well is, it’s the only time in history you’ve seen a black guy do something dry” (qtd. in Kamp 9). Even though Rock may never admit that he is more than a comedian, he uses the Ilttop Journal and The Chris Rock Show to reveal to America of the multiple dimensions of black life. While denying his importance to Papermag’s Kevin Powell, he secretly hints at his personal social aims when he compares comedian/activist Dick Gregory and comedian Bill Cosby by saying, “Dick Gregory is an activist and Bill Cosby stuck to his joke thing so much that he’s probably accomplished more than Gregory at the same thing just by being a comedian. So if you just sick to your thing then you can really [...] it’s easier to get your shit done”
Perhaps, then, Rock is not an unwilling leader as originally stated in one of the opening paragraphs but a leader in the disguise of a mere comedian.

I think we need a new leader. We haven't had a leader in awhile. Someone to move you. (Rock, Bigger and Blacker)

With these words, Rock slowly works his way to the closing remarks of his race sketch in Bigger and Blacker. As he peers into the dark of the Apollo Theater, he must realize that the invisible faces staring back at him regard him as one such leader. He is not the leader in the mold of Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X, but he is a leader nonetheless, for he carries with him the burden of carrying on the tradition of a painful yet treasured humor that has long been intricately woven into fabric of African-American culture. As the curtains draw down at the end of show to drown out the standing ovation, Rock knows that his work for the day is done, but tomorrow he will arrive at his office of The Chris Rock Show to continue his work of portraying the eclectic characteristics of black people. The teaching never stops, and he does it under the façade of humor because he understands that the purpose of his humor, African-American humor, is to make “visible the invisible while masking its own anger and rage” (Gordon 11). Rock gives the adoring crowd one last crooked grin, and the audience is unsure as to whether the grin was a smile or a smirk as they watch his shadow trail off the stage.
Works Cited


Handy, Bruce. “Chris Rock: Even when cracking jokes that make us cringe, he shows us that laughter can be the best revenge.” Time. 9 July 2001: 67.


