America is a nation of immigrants, and it is common to distinguish between first and second generations—between those who first traveled to and settled in the United States from Europe, Asia, Africa, or Latin America and their children who were born here. The two generations are biologically related to each other as well as to older generations as far back as people can trace their ancestry. Yet first-generation and second-generation Americans often differ in the way they live their lives, in the hopes they have for themselves and their children, and in the ties they feel to the traditions and customs of their places of ancestry.

People are also members of a historical generation that is formed by a common history and common experiences shared by others their age. To be a member of a generation in cultural terms, then, is to belong both to a family you are related to biologically and to a group of people you are related to historically.

In this chapter, you will be asked to read, think, and write about what it means to be a member of and a participant in your historical generation. Whether you are straight out of high school or returning to college after some time off, it can be valuable for you to consider how your own personal experience has been shaped by growing up at a particular moment in a particular historical generation.

The term generation denotes change. It suggests new life and new growth—new styles, new values, and new ways of living. Americans hear generational voices all
the time in everyday conversation, when young people tell their parents not to be “so old-fashioned” and their parents reply, “It wasn’t like that when we were growing up.” Advertisers too, as the Oldsmobile commercial at the beginning of this chapter indicates, like to make consumers believe that the new generation of goods—cars, stereos, computers, household appliances—is smarter, better designed, and more high tech than its predecessors.

Each generation produces its own way of speaking and its own forms of cultural expression. Cultural historian Raymond Williams says that “no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessor.” Young people, for example, use their own slang to recognize friends, to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, to position themselves in relation to the older generation. Whether you say “whatever,” “awesome,” or “far out”; the kind of music that you like to listen to; the way you dance; your style of dress; where you go to hang out—reveals something about you and your relation to the constantly changing styles of youth culture in contemporary America.

How a generation looks at itself is inevitably entangled in the decisive historical events, geopolitical changes, and popular entertainment of its day. The Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, the Reagan years, and the “new prosperity” of the 1990s have each influenced a generation profoundly. To understand what it means to belong to your generation, you will need to locate your experience growing up as a member of your generation in its historical times—to see how your generation has made sense of its place in American history and its relation to past generations.

From the invention of the American teenager and juvenile delinquency in movies such as Rebel Without a Cause and The Wild One in the 1950s to grunge rock and MTV in the 1990s, American media have been fascinated by each new generation of young people. Each generation seems to have its own characteristic mood or identity that the media try to capture in a label—the “lost” generation of the Jazz Age in the 1920s, the “silent” generation of the Eisenhower years in the 1950s, the “baby boomers” of the 1960s, the “yuppies” of the 1980s, or the “slackers” of the 1990s. When people use these labels, they are not only referring to particular groups of people but are also calling up a set of values, styles, and images, a collective feeling in the air. When thinking about your generation, look at how the media have represented it and how these media representations have entered into your generation’s conception of itself.

This is not to say that everyone in the same generation has the same experience and the same feelings. A generation is not a monolithic thing. In fact, every generation is divided along the same lines of race, class, gender, and ethnicity that divide the wider society. But a generation is not simply a composite of individuals either. To think about the mood of your generation—the sensibility that suffuses its lived experience—you will need to consider how the character of your generation distinguishes it from generations of the past, even if that character is contradictory or inconsistent.

Reading the Culture of Generations

This chapter begins with three reading selections. They each present a different writing strategy that examines the relationship between generations. In the first, “Kiswana Browne,” a chapter from the novel The Women of Brewster Place, Gloria Naylor uses fiction to explore the differences and continuities between an African American mother and her daughter. In the next selection, Dave Marsh writes a memoir recounting a moment of revelation while listening to Smoky Robinson sing “You Really Got a Hold on Me.” The third reading, “Youth and American Identity,” an
excerpt from Lawrence Grossberg’s longer study *It’s a Sin*, takes a broader, more analytical perspective on the way post–World War II America invested its hopes in the younger generation as the living symbol of national identity and the American Dream.

The next three selections look at conflicts, differences, and misunderstandings between generations. In “Teenage Wasteland,” Donna Gaines writes as a sympathetic reporter who investigates a teenage suicide pact and the response of local officials in Bergenfield, New Jersey. Thomas Hine’s “Goths in Tomorrowland” explores the fragmentation of teenage subcultures and the alienation of young people from adult society. “Gen X’s Enduring Legacy: The Internet,” by Mike Pope, looks at the world of cybertechnology as a generational divide.

The following pair of readings, “Perspectives: Before and After 9/11,” asks you to consider the impact of September 11, 2001, on a generation’s sense of itself. The first reading, Arlie Russell Hochschild’s “Gen (Fill in the Blank): Coming of Age, Seeking an Identity” appeared before September 11. The second selection, “Generation 9-11” by Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton, appeared in *Newsweek* two months after. Taken together, they give you an opportunity to think about historical events as defining moments in the life of a generation.

The Classic Reading in this chapter is Allen Ginsberg’s anthem of the Beat Generation of the 1950s, “Howl.”

As you read, think, talk, and write about the interpretations presented in this chapter, consider how you would characterize your own generation. What styles of cultural expression mark your generation from your predecessors? What is your generation’s sense of itself? How is your generation portrayed in the media? Perhaps when you have completed your work, you will find a way to define the particular mood and character of your generation.

**KISWANA BROWNE**

Gloria Naylor

Gloria Naylor’s highly acclaimed novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980) tells the stories of several African American women who live in a housing project in an unnamed city. “Kiswana Browne” presents a powerful account of the encounter between a mother and daughter that explores both their generational differences and the aspirations that they hold in common. Naylor’s story reveals how the much-publicized generation gap of the 1960s is never simply a matter of differences in politics and lifestyle but rather is complicated by the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender. The cultural shift signified by Kiswana’s change of name represents both a break with the past and, as Kiswana discovers, a continuation of her family’s resistance to racial oppression.

**SUGGESTION FOR READING** As you read, underline and annotate the passages where the story establishes conflict between the two characters and where (or whether) it resolves the conflict.

1 From the window of her sixth-floor studio apartment, Kiswana could see over the wall at the end of the street to the busy avenue that lay just north of Brewster Place. The late-afternoon shoppers looked like brightly clad marionettes as they moved between the congested traffic, clutching their packages against their bodies to guard them from sudden bursts of the cold autumn wind. A portly mailman had abandoned his cart and was bumping into indignant window-shoppers as he
puffed behind the cap that the wind had snatched from his head. Kiswana leaned over to see if he was going to be successful, but the edge of the building cut him off from her view.

A pigeon swept across her window, and she marveled at its liquid movements in the air waves. She placed her dreams on the back of the bird and fantasized that it would glide forever in transparent silver circles until it ascended to the center of the universe and was swallowed up. But the wind died down, and she watched with a sigh as the bird beat its wings in awkward, frantic movements to land on the corroded top of a fire escape on the opposite building. This brought her back to earth.

Humph, it’s probably sitting over there crap-ping on those folks’ fire escape, she thought. Now, that’s a safety hazard….And her mind was busy again, creating flames and smoke and frustrated tenants whose escape was being hindered because they were slipping and sliding in pigeon shit. She watched their cussing, haphazard descent on the fire escapes until they had all reached the bottom. They were milling around, oblivious to their burning apartments, angrily planning to march on the mayor’s office about the pigeons. She materialized placards and banners for them, and they had just reached the corner, boldly sidestepping fire hoses and broken glass, when they all vanished.

A tall copper-skinned woman had met this phantom parade at the corner, and they had dissolved in front of her long, confident strides. She plowed through the remains of their faded mists, unconscious of the lingering wisps of their presence on her leather bag and black fur-trimmed coat. It took a few seconds for this transfer from one realm to another to reach Kiswana, but then suddenly she recognized the woman.

“Oh, God, it’s Mama!” She looked down guiltily at the forgotten newspaper in her lap and hurriedly circled random job advertisements.

By this time Mrs. Browne had reached the front of Kiswana’s building and was checking the house number against a piece of paper in her hand. Before she went into the building she stood at the bottom of the stoop and carefully inspected the condition of the street and the adjoining property. Kiswana watched this meticulous inventory with growing annoyance but she involuntarily followed her mother’s slowly rotating head, forcing herself to see her new neighborhood through the older woman’s eyes. The brightness of the unclouded sky seemed to join forces with her mother as it high-lighted every broken stoop railing and missing brick. The afternoon sun glittered and cascaded across even the tiniest fragments of broken bottle, and at that very moment the wind chose to rise up again, sending unswept grime flying into the air, as a stray tin can left by careless garbage collectors went rolling noisily down the center of the street.

Kiswana noticed with relief that at least Ben wasn’t sitting in his usual place on the old garbage can pushed against the far wall. He was just a harmless old wino, but Kiswana knew her mother only needed one wino or one teenager with a reefer within a twenty-block radius to decide that her daughter was living in a building seething with dope factories and hang-outs for derelicts. If she had seen Ben, nothing would have made her believe that practically every apartment contained a family, a Bible, and a dream that one day enough could be scraped from those meager Friday night paychecks to make Brewster Place a distant memory.

As she watched her mother’s head disappear into the building, Kiswana gave silent thanks that the elevator was broken. That would give her at least five minutes’ grace to straighten up the apartment. She rushed to the sofa bed and hastily closed it without smoothing the rumpled sheets and blanket or removing her nightgown. She felt that somehow the tangled bedcovers would give away the fact that she had not slept alone last night. She silently apologized to Abshu’s memory as she heartlessly crushed his spirit between the steel springs of the couch. Lord, that man was sweet. Her toes curled involuntarily at the passing thought of his full lips moving slowly over her instep. Abshu was a foot man, and he always started his lovemaking from the bottom up. For that reason Kiswana changed the color of the polish on her toenails every
week. During the course of their relationship she had gone from shades of red to brown and was now into the purples. I’m gonna have to start mixing them soon, she thought aloud as she turned from the couch and raced into the bathroom to remove any traces of Abshu from there. She took up his shaving cream and razor and threw them into the bottom drawer of her dresser beside her diaphragm. Mama wouldn’t dare pry into my drawers right in front of me, she thought as she slammed the drawer shut. Well, at least not the bottom drawer. She may come up with some sham excuse for opening the top drawer, but never the bottom one.

When she heard the first two short raps on the door, her eyes took a final flight over the small apartment, desperately seeking out any slight misdemeanor that might have to be defended. Well, there was nothing she could do about the crack in the wall over that table. She had been after the landlord to fix it for two months now. And there had been no time to sweep the rug, and everyone knew that off-gray always looked dirtier than it really was. And it was just too damn bad about the kitchen. How was she expected to be out job-hunting every day and still have time to keep a kitchen that looked like her mother’s, who didn’t even work and still had someone come in twice a month for general cleaning. And besides...

Her imaginary argument was abruptly interrupted by a second series of knocks, accompanied by a penetrating, “Melanie, Melanie, are you there?”

Kiswana strode toward the door. She’s starting before she even gets in here. She knows that’s not my name anymore.

She swung the door open to face her slightly flushed mother. “Oh, hi, Mama. You know, I thought I’d buy the afternoon paper and start early tomorrow.”

“You know I would have called before I came, but you don’t have a phone yet. I didn’t want you to feel that I was snooping. As a matter of fact, I didn’t expect to find you home at all. I thought you’d be out looking for a job.” Mrs. Browne had mentally covered the entire apartment while she was talking and taking off her coat.

“Well, I got up late this morning. I thought I’d buy the afternoon paper and start early tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Her mother moved toward the window and picked up the discarded paper and glanced over the hurriedly circled ads. “Since when do you have experience as a fork-lift operator?”

Kiswana caught her breath and silently cursed herself for her stupidity. “Oh, my hand slipped—I meant to circle file clerk.” She quickly took the paper before her mother could see that she had also marked cutlery salesman and chauffeur.

“You’re sure you weren’t sitting here moping and day-dreaming again?” Amber specks of laughter flashed in the corner of Mrs. Browne’s eyes.

“Please, have a seat,” she said, attempting the same tones and gestures she’d seen Bette Davis use on the late movies.

Mrs. Browne, lowering her eyes to hide her amusement, accepted the invitation and sat at the window, also crossing her legs. Kiswana saw immediately how it should have been done. Her celluloid poise clashed loudly against her mother’s...
quiet dignity, and she quickly uncrossed her legs. Mrs. Browne turned her head toward the window and pretended not to notice.

“At least you have a halfway decent view from here. I was wondering what lay beyond that dreadful wall—it’s the boulevard. Honey, did you know that you can see the trees in Linden Hills from here?”

Kiswana knew that very well, because there were many lonely days that she would sit in her gray apartment and stare at those trees and think of home, but she would rather have choked than admit that to her mother.

“Oh, really, I never noticed. So how is Daddy and things at home?”

“Just fine. We’re thinking of redoing one of the extra bedrooms since you children have moved out, but Wilson insists that he can manage all that work alone. I told him that he doesn’t really have the proper time or energy for all that. As it is, when he gets home from the office, he’s so tired he can hardly move. But you know you can’t tell your father anything. Whenever he starts complaining about how stubborn you are, I tell him the child came by it honestly. Oh, and your brother was by yesterday,” she added, as if it had just occurred to her.

So that’s it, thought Kiswana. That’s why she’s here.

Kiswana’s brother, Wilson, had been to visit her two days ago, and she had borrowed twenty dollars from him to get her winter coat out of layaway. That son-of-a-bitch probably ran straight to Mama—and after he swore he wouldn’t say anything. I should have known, he was always a snotty-nosed sneak, she thought.

“Was he?” she said aloud. “He came by to see me, too, earlier this week. And I borrowed some money from him because my unemployment checks hadn’t cleared in the bank, but now they have and everything’s just fine.” There, I’ll beat you to that one.

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Mrs. Browne lied. “He never mentioned you. He had just heard that Beverly was expecting again, and he rushed over to tell us.”

Damn. Kiswana could have strangled herself.

“So she’s knocked up again, huh?” she said irritably.

Her mother started. “Why do you always have to be so crude?”

“Personally, I don’t see how she can sleep with Willie. He’s such a dishrag.”

Kiswana still resented the stance her brother had taken in college. When everyone at school was discovering their blackness and protesting on campus, Wilson never took part; he had even refused to wear an Afro. This had outraged Kiswana because, unlike her, he was dark-skinned and had the type of hair that was thick and kinky enough for a good “Fro.” Kiswana had still insisted on cutting her own hair, but it was so thin and fine-textured, it refused to thicken even after she washed it. So she had to brush it up and spray it with lacquer to keep it from lying flat. She never forgave Wilson for telling her that she didn’t look African, she looked like an electrocuted chicken.

“Now that’s some way to talk. I don’t know why you have an attitude against your brother. He never gave me a restless night’s sleep, and now he’s settled with a family and a good job.”

“He’s an assistant to an assistant junior partner in a law firm. What’s the big deal about that?”

“In other words, not like me, huh?”

“Don’t put words into my mouth, young lady. I’m perfectly capable of saying what I mean.”

Amen, thought Kiswana.

“And I don’t know why you’ve been trying to start up with me from the moment I walked in. I didn’t come here to fight with you. This is your first place away from home, and I just wanted to see how you were living and if you’re doing all right. And I must say, you’ve fixed this apartment up very nicely.”

“Really, Mama?” She found herself softening in the light of her mother’s approval.

“Well, considering what you had to work with,” This time she scanned the apartment openly.

“Look, I know it’s not Linden Hills, but a lot can be done with it. As soon as they come and
paint, I’m going to hang my Ashanti print over the couch. And I thought a big Boston Fern would go well in that corner, what do you think?”

“That would be fine, baby. You always had a good eye for balance.”

Kiswana was beginning to relax. There was little she did that attracted her mother’s approval. It was like a rare bird, and she had to tread carefully around it lest it fly away.

“Are you going to leave that statue out like that?”

“Why, what’s wrong with it? Would it look better somewhere else?”

There was a small wooden reproduction of a Yoruba goddess with large protruding breasts on the coffee table.

“Well,” Mrs. Browne was beginning to blush, “it’s just that it’s a bit suggestive, don’t you think? Since you live alone now, and I know you’ll be having male friends stop by, you wouldn’t want to be giving them any ideas. I mean, uh, you know, there’s no point in putting yourself in any unpleasant situations because they may get the wrong impressions and uh, you know, I mean, well…” Mrs. Browne stammered on miserably.

Kiswana loved it when her mother tried to talk about sex. It was the only time she was at a loss for words.

“Don’t worry, Mama.” Kiswana smiled. “That wouldn’t bother the type of men I date. Now maybe if it had big feet…” And she got hysterical, thinking of Abshu.

Her mother looked at her sharply. “What sort of gibberish is that about feet? I’m being serious, Melanie.”

“I’m sorry, Mama.” She sobered up. “I’ll put it away in the closet,” she said, knowing that she wouldn’t.

“Good,” Mrs. Browne said, knowing that she wouldn’t either. “I guess you think I’m too picky, but we worry about you over here. And you refuse to put in a phone so we can call and see about you.”

“I haven’t refused, Mama. They want seventy-five dollars for a deposit, and I can’t swing that right now.”

“Melanie, I can give you the money.”

“I don’t want you to be giving me money—I’ve told you that before. Please, let me make it by myself.”

“Well, let me lend it to you, then.”

“No!”

“Oh, so you can borrow money from your brother, but not from me.”

Kiswana turned her head from the hurt in her mother’s eyes. “Mama, when I borrow from Willie, he makes me pay him back. You never let me pay you back,” she said into her hands.

“I don’t care. I still think it’s downright selfish of you to be sitting over here with no phone, and sometimes we don’t hear from you in two weeks—anything could happen—especially living among these people.”

Kiswana snapped her head up. “What do you mean, these people. They’re my people and yours, too, Mama—we’re all black. But maybe you’ve forgotten that over in Linden Hills.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it. These streets—this building—it’s so shabby and rundown. Honey, you don’t have to live like this.”

“Well, this is how poor people live.”

“Melanie, you’re not poor.”

“No, Mama, you’re not poor. And what you have and I have are two totally different things. I don’t have a husband in real estate with a five-figure income and a home in Linden Hills—you do. What I have is a weekly unemployment check and an overdrawn checking account at United Federal. So this studio on Brewster is all I can afford.”

“Well, you could afford a lot better.” Mrs. Browne snapped, “if you hadn’t dropped out of college and had to resort to these dead-end clerical jobs.”

“Uh-huh, I knew you’d get around to that before long.” Kiswana could feel the rings of anger begin to tighten around her lower backbone, and they sent her forward onto the couch. “You’ll never understand, will you? Those bourgie schools were counterrevolutionary. My place was in the streets with my people, fighting for equality and a better community.”

“Counterrevolutionary!” Mrs. Browne was raising her voice. “Where’s your revolution now,
Melanie? Where are all those black revolutionaries who were shouting and demonstrating and kicking up a lot of dust with you on that campus? Huh? They’re sitting in wood-paneled offices with their degrees in mahogany frames, and they won’t even drive their cars past this street because the city doesn’t fix potholes in this part of town.”

“Mama,” she said, shaking her head slowly in disbelief, “how can you—a black woman—sit there and tell me that what we fought for during the Movement wasn’t important just because some people sold out?”

“Melanie, I’m not saying it wasn’t important. It was damned important to stand up and say that you were proud of what you were and to get the vote and other social opportunities for every person in this country who had it due. But you kids thought you were going to turn the world upside down, and it just wasn’t so. When all the smoke had cleared, you found yourself with a fistful of new federal laws and a country still full of obstacles for black people to fight their way over—just because they’re black. There was no revolution, Melanie, and there will be no revolution.”

“So what am I supposed to do, huh? Just throw up my hands and not care about what happens to my people? I’m not supposed to keep fighting to make things better?”

“Of course, you can. But you’re going to have to fight within the system, because it and these so-called ‘bourgie’ schools are going to be here for a long time. And that means that you get smart like a lot of your old friends and get an important job where you can have some influence. You don’t have to sell out, as you say, and work for some corporation, but you could become an assemblywoman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighborhood. That way you could really help the community. But what help are you going to be to these people on Brewster while you’re living hand-to-mouth on file-clerk jobs waiting for a revolution? You’re wasting your talents, child.”

“Well, I don’t think they’re being wasted. At least I’m here in day-to-day contact with the problems of my people. What good would I be after four or five years of a lot of white brainwashing in some phony, prestige institution, huh? I’d be like you and Daddy and those other educated blacks sitting over there in Linden Hills with a terminal case of middle-class amnesia.”

“You don’t have to live in a slum to be concerned about social conditions, Melanie. Your father and I have been charter members of the NAACP for the last twenty-five years.”

“Oh, God!” Kiswana threw her head back in exaggerated disgust. “That’s being concerned? That middle-of-the-road, Uncle Tom dumping ground for black Republicans!”

“You can sneer all you want, young lady, but that organization has been working for black people since the turn of the century, and it’s still working for them. Where are all those radical groups of yours that were going to put a Cadillac in every garage and Dick Gregory in the White House? I’ll tell you where.”

I knew you would, Kiswana thought angrily. “They burned themselves out because they wanted too much too fast. Their goals weren’t grounded in reality. And that’s always been your problem.”

“What do you mean, my problem? I know exactly what I’m about.”

“No, you don’t. You constantly live in a fantasy world—always going to extremes—turning butterflies into eagles, and life isn’t about that. It’s accepting what is and working from that. Lord, I remember how worried you had me, putting all that lacquered hair spray on your head. I thought you were going to get lung cancer—trying to be what you’re not.”

Kiswana jumped up from the couch. “Oh, God, I can’t take this anymore. Trying to be something I’m not—trying to be something I’m not, Mama! Trying to be proud of my heritage and the fact that I was of African descent. If that’s being what I’m not, then I say fine. But I’d rather be dead than be like you—a white man’s nigger who’s ashamed of being black!”

Kiswana saw streaks of gold and ebony light follow her mother’s flying body out of the chair. She was swung around by the shoulders and
made to face the deadly stillness in the angry woman’s eyes. She was too stunned to cry out from the pain of the long fingernails that dug into her shoulders, and she was brought so close to her mother’s face that she saw her reflection, distorted and wavering, in the tears that stood in the older woman’s eyes. And she listened in that stillness to a story she had heard from a child.

“My grandmother,” Mrs. Browne began slowly in a whisper, “was a full-blooded Iroquois, and my grandfather a free black from a long line of journeymen who had lived in Connecticut since the establishment of the colonies. And my father was a Bajan who came to this country as a cabin boy on a merchant mariner.”

“I know all that,” Kiswana said, trying to keep her lips from trembling.

“Then, know this.” And the nails dug deeper into her flesh. “I am alive because of the blood of proud people who never scraped or begged or apologized for what they were. They lived asking only one thing of this world—to be allowed to be. And I learned through the blood of these people that black isn’t beautiful and it isn’t ugly—black is! It’s not kinky hair and it’s not straight hair—it just is.

“It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother’s name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for ‘not knowing his place.’ Yet you needed to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud.

“When I brought my babies home from the hospital, my ebony son and my golden daughter, I swore before whatever gods would listen—those of my mother’s people or those of my father’s people—that I would use everything I had and could ever get to see that my children were prepared to meet this world on its own terms, so that no one could sell them short and make them ashamed of what they were or how they looked—whatever they were or however they looked. And Melanie, that’s not being white or red or black—that’s being a mother.”

Kiswana followed her reflection in the two single tears that moved down her mother’s cheeks until it blended with them into the woman’s copper skin. There was nothing and then so much that she wanted to say, but her throat kept closing up every time she tried to speak. She kept her head down and her eyes closed, and thought, Oh, God, just let me die. How can I face her now?

Mrs. Browne lifted Kiswana’s chin gently. “And the one lesson I wanted you to learn is not to be afraid to face anyone, not even a crafty old lady like me who can outtalk you.” And she smiled and winked.

“Oh, Mama, I…” and she hugged the woman tightly.

“Yeah, baby,” Mrs. Browne patted her back. “I know.”

She kissed Kiswana on the forehead and cleared her throat. “Well, now, I better be moving on. It’s getting late, there’s dinner to be made, and I have to get off my feet—these new shoes are killing me.”

Kiswana looked down at the beige leather pumps. “Those are really classy. They’re English, aren’t they?”

“Yes, but, Lord, do they cut me right across the instep.” She removed the shoe and sat on the couch to massage her foot.

Bright red nail polish glared at Kiswana through the stockings. “Since when do you polish your toenails?” she gasped. “You never did that before.”

“Well…” Mrs. Browne shrugged her shoulders, “your father sort of talked me into it, and, uh, you know, he likes it and all, so I thought, uh, you know, why not so…” And she gave Kiswana an embarrassed smile.

I’ll be damned, the young woman thought, feeling her whole face tingle. Daddy into feet! And she looked at the blushing woman on her couch and suddenly realized that her mother had trod through the same universe that she herself was now traveling. Kiswana was breaking no new trails and would eventually end up just two feet away on that couch. She stared at the woman she had been and was to become.
“But I’ll never be a Republican,” she caught herself saying aloud.

“What are you mumbling about, Melanie?” Mrs. Browne slipped on her shoe and got up from the couch.

She went to get her mother’s coat. “Nothing, Mama. It’s really nice of you to come by. You should do it more often.”

“Well, since it’s not Sunday, I guess you’re allowed at least one lie.”

They both laughed.

After Kiswana had closed the door and turned around, she spotted an envelope sticking between the cushions of her couch. She went over and opened it up; there was seventy-five dollars in it.

“Oh, Mama, darn it!” She rushed to the window and started to call to the woman, who had just emerged from the building, but she suddenly changed her mind and sat down in the chair with a long sigh that caught in the upward draft of the autumn wind and disappeared over the top of the building.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Gloria Naylor tells this story from Kiswana Browne’s point of view. How would the story be different if Naylor had chosen to tell it from Kiswana’s mother’s point of view? What would be gained? What lost?

2. Consider how Naylor has organized this story—how she establishes a central conflict, leads up to the story’s climax, and finally resolves the conflict. Does this type of plot seem familiar? Does the story achieve a of closure or does it seem open ended? What kinds of satisfaction do readers derive from plots such as this one? What, if anything, do such plots leave out or ignore?

3. Is Naylor making a judgment, whether implicit or explicit, of her characters? Explain your answer.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Take the perspective of either Kiswana Browne or her mother and write an essay that explains how the character you have chosen sees the other. If you wish, write the essay in the voice of the character. Or you may choose to comment on the character’s perceptions of the other and their generational differences in your own voice. In either case, be specific in your use of detail to define generational differences between the two women.

2. On one level, the chapter “Kiswana Browne” seems to be concerned with a generation gap between Kiswana and her mother. At the same time, other factors—race, class, and gender—affect the way generational differences are played out between the two characters. Write an essay that explains to what extent the chapter presents a version of the generation gap and to what extent other factors determine what happens between Kiswana and her mother. Do Kiswana and her mother have things in common, as well as generational differences? How do these factors influence the outcome of the story?

3. “Kiswana Browne” tells of the encounter between a young woman and her family and explores generational differences that have to do with issues such as lifestyle, names, and politics. Can you think of an encounter that you have had with your parents, or that someone you know has had with his or her parents, that involves such telling generational conflicts? (The conflict should be something that highlights differences in generational attitudes, values, or styles—not just “normal” disagreements about using the car or what time curfew should be.) Write an essay that explores such a conflict and explains what generational differences are at stake.
Dave Marsh is one of today’s leading rock-and-roll critics. He is the author of books on Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Presley, and The Who. The following selection introduces *Fortunate Son* (1985), a collection of Marsh’s shorter critical essays and reviews. In his introduction, Marsh offers a memoir—a remembering—of his adolescence in Pontiac, Michigan, and how listening to rock and roll as a teenager in a working-class community led him to question “not just racism but all the other presumptions that ruled our lives.”

Notice that Marsh has divided his memoir into two parts. Part I tells the story of why Marsh’s family moved from Pontiac to the suburbs, but Part II is about living in Pontiac before the move. As you read, consider why Marsh has organized his memoir this way. How does Part II comment on what takes place in Part I? Where does Marsh explain the moment of revelation—or epiphany—that stands at the center of his memories?

**INTRODUCTION I**

This old town is where I learned about lovin’
This old town is where I learned to hate
This town, buddy, has done its share of shoveling
This town taught me that it’s never too late

*Michael Stanley, “My Town”*

When I was a boy, my family lived on East Beverly Street in Pontiac, Michigan, in a two-bedroom house with blue-white asphalt shingles that cracked at the edges when a ball was thrown against them and left a powder like talc on fingers rubbed across their shallow grooves. East Beverly ascended a slowly rising hill. At the very top, a block and a half from our place, Pontiac Motors Assembly Line 16 sprawled for a mile or so behind a fenced-in parking lot.

Rust-red dust collected on our windowsills. It piled up no matter how often the place was dusted or cleaned. Fifteen minutes after my mother was through with a room, that dust seemed thick enough for a finger to trace pointless, ashy patterns in it.

The dust came from the foundry on the other side of the assembly line, the foundry that spat angry cinders into the sky all night long. When people talked about hell, I imagined driving past the foundry at night. From the street below, you could see the fires, red-hot flames shaping glowing metal.

Pontiac was a company town, nothing less. General Motors owned most of the land, and in one way or another held mortgages on the rest. Its holdings included not only the assembly line and the foundry but also a Fisher Body plant and on the outskirts, General Motors Truck and Coach. For a while, some pieces of Frigidaires may even have been put together in our town, but that might just be a trick of my memory, which often confuses the tentacles of institutions that monstrous.

In any case, of the hundred thousand or so who lived in Pontiac, fully half must have been employed either by GM or one of the tool-and-die shops and steel warehouses and the like that supplied it. And anybody who earned his living locally in some less directly auto-related fashion was only fooling himself if he thought of independence.

My father worked without illusions, as a railroad brakeman on freight trains that shunted boxcars through the innards of the plants, hauled grain from up north, transported the finished Pontiacs on the first leg of the route to almost anywhere Bonnevilles, Catalinas, and GTOs were sold.

Our baseball and football ground lay in the shadow of another General Motors building. That building was of uncertain purpose, at least to me. What I can recall of it now is a seemingly reckless height—five or six stories is a lot in the flatlands around the Great Lakes—and endless walls
of dark greenish glass that must have run from floor to ceiling in the rooms inside. Perhaps this building was an engineering facility. We didn’t know anyone who worked there, at any rate.

Like most other GM facilities, the green glass building was surrounded by a chain link fence with barbed wire. If a ball happened to land on the other side of it, this fence was insurmountable. But only very strong boys could hit a ball that high, that far, anyhow.

Or maybe it just wasn’t worth climbing that particular fence. Each August, a few weeks before the new models were officially presented in the press, the finished Pontiacs were set out in the assembly-line parking lot at the top of our street. They were covered by tarpaulins to keep their design changes secret—these were the years when the appearance of American cars changed radically each year. Climbing that fence was a neighborhood sport because that was how you discovered what the new cars looked like, whether fins were shrinking or growing, if the new hoods were pointed or flat, how much thinner the strips of whitewall on the tires had grown. A weird game, since everyone knew people who could have told us, given us exact descriptions, having built those cars with their own hands. But climbing that fence added a hint of danger, made us feel we shared a secret, turned gossip into information.

The main drag in our part of town was Joslyn Road. It was where the stoplight and crossing guard were stationed, where the gas station with the condom machine stood alongside a short-order restaurant, drugstore, dairy store, small groceries and a bakery. A few blocks down, past the green glass building, was a low brick building set back behind a wide, lush lawn. This building, identified by a discreet roadside sign, occupied a long block or two. It was the Administration Building for all of Pontiac Motors—a building for executives, clerks, white-collar types. This building couldn’t have been more than three-quarters of a mile from my house, yet even though I lived on East Beverly Street from the time I was two until I was past fourteen, I knew only one person who worked there.

In the spring of 1964, when I was fourteen and finishing eighth grade, rumors started going around at Madison Junior High. All the buildings on our side of Joslyn Road (possibly east or west of Joslyn, but I didn’t know directions then—there was only “our” side and everywhere else) were about to be bought up and torn down by GM. This was worrisome, but it seemed to me that our parents would never allow that perfectly functioning neighborhood to be broken up for no good purpose.

One sunny weekday afternoon a man came to our door. He wore a coat and tie and a white shirt, which meant something serious in our part of town. My father greeted him at the door, but I don’t know whether the businessman had an appointment. Dad was working the extra board in those years, which meant he was called to work erratically—four or five times a week, when business was good—each time his nameplate came to the top of the big duty-roster board down at the yard office. (My father didn’t get a regular train of his own to work until 1966; he spent almost twenty years on that extra board, which meant guessing whether it was safe to answer the phone every time he actually wanted a day off—refuse a call and your name went back to the bottom of the list.)

At any rate, the stranger was shown to the couch in our front room. He perched on that old gray davenport with its wiry fabric that bristled and stung against my cheek, and spoke quite earnestly to my parents. I recall nothing of his features or of the precise words he used or even of the tone of his speech. But the dust motes that hung in the air that day are still in my memory, and I can remember his folded hands between his spread knees as he leaned forward in a gesture of complicity. He didn’t seem to be selling anything; he was simply stating facts.

He told my father that Pontiac Motors was buying up all the houses in our community from Tennyson Street, across from the green glass building, to Baldwin Avenue—exactly the boundaries of what I’d have described as our neighborhood. GM’s price was more than fair; it doubled what little money my father had paid in
the early fifties. The number was a little over ten thousand dollars. All the other houses were going, too; some had already been sold. The entire process of tearing our neighborhood down would take about six months, once all the details were settled.

The stranger put down his coffee cup, shook hands with my parents and left. As far as I know, he never darkened our doorstep again. In the back of my mind, I can still see him through the front window cutting across the grass to go next door.

“Well, we’re not gonna move, right, Dad?” I said. Cheeky as I was, it didn’t occur to me this wasn’t really a matter for adult decision-making—or rather, that the real adults, over at the Administration Building, had already made the only decision that counted. Nor did it occur to me that GM’s offer might seem to my father an opportunity to sell at a nice profit, enabling us to move some place “better.”

My father did not say much. No surprise. In a good mood, he was the least taciturn man alive, but on the farm where he was raised, not many words were needed to get a serious job done. What he did say that evening indicated that we might stall awhile—perhaps there would be a slightly better offer if we did. But he exhibited no doubt that we would sell. And move.

I was shocked. There was no room in my plans for this…rupture. Was the demolition of our home and neighborhood—that is, my life—truly inevitable? Was there really no way we could avert it, cancel it, delay it? What if we just plain refused to sell?

Twenty years later, my mother told me that she could still remember my face on that day. It must have reflected extraordinary distress and confusion, for my folks were patient. If anyone refused to sell, they told me, GM would simply build its parking lot—for that was what would replace my world—around him. If we didn’t sell, we’d have access privileges, enough space to get into our driveway and that was it. No room to play, and no one there to play with if there had been. And if you got caught in such a situation and didn’t like it, then you’d really be in a fix, for the company wouldn’t keep its double-your-money offer open forever. If we held out too long, who knew if the house would be worth anything at all. (I don’t imagine that my parents attempted to explain to me the political process of condemnation, but if they had, I would have been outraged, for in a way, I still am.)

My dreams always pictured us as holdouts, living in a little house surrounded by asphalt and automobiles. I always imagined nighttime with the high, white-light towers that illuminated all the other GM parking lots shining down upon our house—and the little guardhouse that the company would have to build and man next door to prevent me from escaping our lot to run playfully among the parked cars of the multitudinous employees. Anyone reading this must find it absurd, or the details heavily derivative of bad concentration-camp literature or maybe too influenced by the Berlin Wall, which had been up only a short time. But it would be a mistake to dismiss its romanticism, which was for many months more real to me than the ridiculous reality—moving to accommodate a PARKING LOT—which confronted my family and all my friends’ families.

If this story were set in the Bronx or in the late sixties, or if it were fiction, the next scenes would be of pickets and protests, meaningful victories and defeats. But this isn’t fiction—everything set out here is as unexaggerated as I know how to make it—and the time and the place were wrong for any serious uproar. In this docile midwestern company town, where Walter Reuther’s trip to Russia was as inexplicable as the parting of the Red Sea (or as forgotten as the Ark of the Covenant), the idea that a neighborhood might have rights that superseded those of General Motors’ Pontiac division would have been regarded as extraordinary, bizarre and subversive. Presuming anyone had had such an idea, which they didn’t—none of my friends seemed particularly disturbed about moving, it was just what they would do.

So we moved, and what was worse, to the suburbs. This was catastrophic to me. I loved the city, its pavement and the mobility it offered even to kids too young to drive. (Some attitude for a Motor City kid, I know.) In Pontiac, feet or a
bicycle could get you anywhere. Everyone had
cars, but you weren’t immobilized without them,
as everyone under sixteen was in the suburbs. In
the suburb to which we adjourned, cars were the
fundamental of life—many of the streets in our
new subdivision (not really a neighborhood) did-

Even though I’d never been certain of fitting
in, in the city I’d felt close to figuring out how to.
Not that I was that weird. But I was no jock and
certainly neither suave nor graceful. Still, toward
the end of eighth grade, I’d managed to talk to a
few girls, no small feat. The last thing I needed
was new goals to fathom, new rules to learn, new
friends to make.

So that summer was spent in dread. When
school opened in the autumn, I was already in a
sort of cocoon, confused by the Beatles with their
paltry imitations of soul music and the biz a r re
emotions they stirred in girls.

Meeting my classmates was easy enough,
but then it always is. Making new friends was
another matter. For one thing, the kids in my
new locale weren’t the same as the kids in my
classes. I was an exceptionally good student
(quite by accident—I just read a lot) and my
neighbors were classic underachievers. The kids
in my classes were hardly creeps, but they
weren’t as interesting or as accessible as the peo-
ple I’d known in my old neighborhood or the
ones I met at the school bus stop. So I kept to
myself.

In our new house, I shared a room with my
brother at first. We had bunk beds, and late that
August I was lying sweatily in the upper one, lis-
tening to the radio (WPON-AM, 1460) while my
mother and my aunt droned away in the kitc h e n .

Suddenly my attention was riveted by a
record. I listened for two or three minutes more
intently than I have ever listened and learned
something that remains all but indescribable. It
wasn’t a new awareness of music. I liked rock
and roll already, had since I first saw Elvis when
I was six, and I’d been reasonably passionate
about the Ronettes, Gary Bonds, Del Shannon,
the Crystals, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke, the
Beach Boys and those first rough but sweet
notes from Motown: the Miracles, the Tempta-
tions, Eddie Holland’s “Jamie.” I can remember
a rainy night when I tuned in a faraway station
and first heard the end of the Philadelphia War-
rriors’ game in which Wilt Chamberlain scored a
hundred points and then found “Let’s Twist
Again” on another part of the dial. And I can
remember not knowing which experience was
more splendid.

But the song I heard that night wasn’t a new
one. “You Really Got a Hold on Me” had been a
hit in 1963, and I already loved Smokey Robin-
son’s voice, the way it twined around impossibly
sugary lines and made rhymes within the
rhythms of ordinary conversation, within the lim-
its of everyday vocabulary.

But if I’d heard those tricks before, I’d neve r
understood them. And if I’d enjoyed rock and ro l l
music previously, certainly it had never grabbed
me in quite this way: as a lifeline that suggested—
no, insisted—that these singers spoke for me as
well as to me, and that what they felt and were
able to cope with, the deep sorrow, remorse,
anger, lust and compassion that bubbled beneath
the music, I would also be able to feel and con-
tain. This intimate revelation was what I gleaned
from those three minutes of music, and when
they were finished and I climbed out of that bunk
and walked out the door, the world looked differ-
ent. No longer did I feel quite so powerless, and
if I still felt cheated, I felt capable of getting my
own back, some day, some way.

TRAPPED II
It seems I’ve been playing your game way too long
And it seems the game I’ve played has made you
strong

Jimmy Cliff, “Trapped”

That last year in Pontiac, we listened to the radio
a lot. My parents always had. One of my most
shattering early memories is of the radio blast-
ing when they got up—my mother around four-

That last year in Pontiac, we listened to the radio
a lot. My parents always had. One of my most
shattering early memories is of the radio blast-
ing when they got up—my mother around four-

30 thirty, my father at five. All of my life I’ve hated
early rising, and for years I couldn’t listen to
country music without being reminded almost
painfully of those days.
But in 1963 and 1964, we also listened to WPON in the evening for its live coverage of city council meetings. Pontiac was beginning a decade of racial crisis, of integration pressure and white resistance, the typical scenario. From what was left of our old neighborhood came the outspokenly racist militant anti–school busing movement.

The town had a hard time keeping the shabby secret of its bigotry even in 1964. Pontiac had mushroomed as a result of massive migration during and after World War II. Some of the new residents, including my father, came from nearby rural areas where blacks were all but unknown and even the local Polish Catholics were looked upon as aliens potentially subversive to the community’s Methodist piety.

Many more of the new residents of Pontiac came from the South, out of the dead ends of Appalachia and the border states. As many must have been black as white, though it was hard for me to tell that as a kid. There were lines one didn’t cross in Michigan, and if I was shocked, when visiting Florida, to see separate facilities labeled “White” and “Colored,” as children we never paid much mind to the segregated schools, the lily-white suburbs, the way that jobs in the plants were divided up along race lines. The ignorance and superstition about blacks in my neighborhood were as desperate and crazed in their own way as the feelings in any kudzu-covered parish of Louisiana.

As blacks began to assert their rights, the animosity was not less, either. The polarization was fueled and fanned by the fact that so many displaced Southerners, all with the poor white’s investment in racism, were living in our community. But it would be foolish to pretend that the situation would have been any more civilized if only the natives had been around. In fact the Southerners were often regarded with nearly as much condescension and antipathy as blacks—race may have been one of the few areas in which my parents found themselves completely in sympathy with the “hillbillies.”

Racism was the great trap of such men’s lives, for almost everything could be explained by it, from unemployment to the deterioration of community itself. Casting racial blame did much more than poison these people’s entire concept of humanity, which would have been plenty bad enough. It immobilized the racist, preventing folks like my father from ever realizing the real forces that kept their lives tawdry and painful and forced them to fight every day to find any meaning at all in their existence. It did this to Michigan factory workers as effectively as it ever did it to dirt farmers in Dixie.

The great psychological syndrome of American males is said to be passive aggression, and racism perfectly fit this mold. To the racist, hatred of blacks gave a great feeling of power and superiority. At the same time, it allowed him the luxury of wallowing in self-pity at the great conspiracy of rich bastards and vile niggers that enforced workaday misery and let the rest of the world go to hell. In short, racism explained everything. There was no need to look any further than the cant of redneck populism, exploited as effectively in the orange clay of the Great Lakes as in the red dirt of Georgia, to find an answer to why it was always the next generation that was going to get up and out.

Some time around 1963, a local attorney named Milton Henry, a black man, was elected to Pontiac’s city council. Henry was smart and bold—he would later become an ally of Martin Luther King, Jr., of Malcolm X, a principal in the doomed Republic of New Africa. The goals for which Henry was campaigning seem extremely tame now, until you realize the extent to which they haven’t been realized in twenty years: desegregated schools, integrated housing, a chance at decent jobs.

Remember that Martin Luther King would not take his movement for equality into the North for nearly five more years, and that when he did, Dr. King there faced the most strident and violent opposition he’d ever met, and you will understand how inflammatory the mere presence of Milton Henry on the city council was. Those council sessions, broadcast live on WPON, invested the radio with a vibrancy and vitality that television could never have had. Those hours
of imprecations, shouts and clamor are unforgettable. I can’t recall specific words or phrases, though, just Henry’s eloquence and the pandemonium that greeted each of his speeches.

So our whole neighborhood gathered round its radios in the evenings, family by family, as if during wartime. Which in a way I guess it was—surely that’s how the situation was presented to the children, and not only in the city. My Pontiac junior high school was lightly integrated, and the kids in my new suburban town had the same reaction as my Floridian cousins: shocked that I’d “gone to school with niggers,” they vowed they would die—or kill—before letting the same thing happen to them.

This cycle of hatred didn’t immediately elude me. Thirteen-year-olds are built to buck the system only up to a point. So even though I didn’t dislike any of the blacks I met (it could hardly be said that I was given the opportunity to know any), it was taken for granted that the epithets were essentially correct. After all, anyone could see the grave poverty in which most blacks existed, and the only reason ever given for it was that they liked living that way.

But listening to the radio gave free play to one’s imagination. Listening to music, that most abstract of human creations, unleashed it all the more. And not in a vacuum. Semiotics, the New Criticism, and other formalist approaches have never had much appeal to me, not because I don’t recognize their validity in describing certain creative structures but because they emphasize those structural questions without much consideration of content: And that simply doesn’t jibe with my experience of culture, especially popular culture.

The best example is the radio of the early 1960s. As I’ve noted, there was no absence of rock and roll in those years between the outbreaks of Presley and Beatles. Rock and roll was a constant for me, the best music around, and I had loved it ever since I first heard it, which was about as soon as I could remember hearing anything.

In part, I just loved the sound—the great mystery one could hear welling up from “Duke of Earl,” “Up on the Roof,” “Party Lights”; that pit of loneliness and despair that lay barely concealed beneath the superficial bright spirits of a record like Bruce Channel’s “Hey Baby”; the nonspecific terror hidden away in Del Shannon’s “Runaway.” But if that was all there was to it, then rock and roll records would have been as much an end in themselves—that is, as much a dead end—as TV shows like Leave It to Beaver (also mysterious, also—thanks to Eddie Haskell—a bit terrifying).

To me, however, TV was clearly an alien device, controlled by the men with shirts and ties. Nobody on television dressed or talked as the people in my neighborhood did. In rock and roll, however, the language spoken was recognizable my own. And since one of the givens of life in the outlands was that we were barbarians, who produced no culture and basically consumed only garbage and trash, the thrill of discovering depths within rock and roll, the very part that was most often and explicitly degraded by teachers and pundits, was not only marvelously refreshing and exhilarating but also in essence liberating—once you’d made the necessary connections.

It was just at this time that pop music was being revolutionized—not by the Beatles, arriving from England, a locale of certifiable cultural superiority, but by Motown, arriving from Detroit, a place without even a hint of cultural respectability. Produced by Berry Gordy, not only a young man but a black man. And in that spirit of solidarity with which hometown boys (however unalike) have always identified with one another, Motown was mine in a way that no other music up to that point had been. Surely no one spoke my language as effectively as Smokey Robinson, able to string together the most humdrum phrases and effortlessly make them sing.

That’s the context in which “You Really Got a Hold on Me” created my epiphany. You can look at this coldly—structurally—and see nothing more than a naked marketing mechanism, a clear-cut case of a teenager swaddled in and swindled by pop culture. Smokey Robinson wrote and sang the song as much to make a buck
as to express himself; there was nothing of the purity of the mythical artist about his endeavor. In any case, the emotion he expressed was un-fashionably sentimental. In releasing the record, Berry Gordy was mercenary in both instinct and motivation. The radio station certainly hoped for nothing more from playing it than that its listeners would hang in through the succeeding block of commercials. None of these people and institutions had any intention of elevating their audience, in the way that Leonard Bernstein hoped to do in his *Young People’s Concerts* on television. Cultural indoctrination was far from their minds. Indeed, it’s unlikely that anyone involved in the process thought much about the kids on the other end of the line except as an amorphous mass of ears and wallets. The pride Gordy and Robinson had in the quality of their work was private pleasure, not public.

Smokey Robinson was not singing of the perils of being a black man in this world (though there were other rock and soul songs that spoke in guarded metaphors about such matters). Robinson was not expressing an experience as alien to my own as a country blues singer’s would have been. Instead, he was putting his finger firmly upon a crucial feeling of vulnerability and longing. It’s hard to think of two emotions that a fourteen-year-old might feel more deeply (well, there’s lust…), and yet in my hometown expressing them was all but absolutely forbidden to men. This doubled the shock of Smokey Robinson’s voice, which for years I’ve thought of as falsetto, even though it really isn’t exceptionally high-pitched compared to the spectacular male sopranos of rock and gospel lore.

“You Really Got a Hold on Me” is not by any means the greatest song Smokey Robinson ever wrote or sang, not even the best he had done up to that point. The singing on “Who’s Loving You,” the lyrics of “I’ll Try Something New,” the yearning of “What’s So Good About Goodbye” are all at least as worthy. Nor is there anything especially newfangled about the song. Its trembling blues guitar, sturdy drum pattern, walking bass and call-and-response voice arrangement are not very different from many of the other Miracles records of that period. If there is a single instant in the record which is unforgettable by itself, it’s probably the opening lines: “I don’t like you/But I love you…”

The contingency and ambiguity expressed in those two lines and Robinson’s singing of them was also forbidden in the neighborhood of my youth, and forbidden as part and parcel of the same philosophy that propounded racism. Merely calling the bigot’s certainty into question was revolutionary—not merely rebellious. The depth of feeling in that Miracles record, which could have been purchased for 69¢ at any K-Mart, overturned the premise of racism, which was that blacks were not as human as we, that they could not feel—much less express their feelings—as deeply as we did.

When the veil of racism was torn from my eyes, everything else that I knew or had been told was true for fourteen years was necessarily called into question. For if racism explained everything, then without racism, not a single commonplace explanation made any sense. *Nothing* else could be taken at face value. And that meant asking every question once again, including the banal and obvious ones.

For those who’ve never been raised under the weight of such addled philosophy, the power inherent in having the burden lifted is barely imaginable. Understanding that blacks weren’t worthless meant that maybe the rest of the culture in which I was raised was also valuable. If you’ve never been told that you and your community are worthless—that a parking lot takes precedence over your needs—perhaps that moment of insight seems trivial or rather easily won. For anyone who was never led to expect a life any more difficult than one spent behind a typewriter, maybe the whole incident verges on being something too banal for repetition (though in that case, I’d like to know where the other expressions of this story can be read). But looking over my shoulder, seeing the consequences to my life had I not begun questioning not just racism but all of the other presumptions that ruled our lives, I know for certain how and how much I got over.
That doesn’t make me better than those on the other side of the line. On the other hand, I won’t trivialize the tale by insisting upon how fortunate I was. What was left for me was a raging passion to explain things in the hope that others would not be trapped and to keep the way clear so that others from the trashy outskirts of barbarous America still had a place to stand—if not in the culture at large, at least in rock and roll.

Of course it’s not so difficult to dismiss this entire account. Great revelations and insights aren’t supposed to emerge from listening to rock and roll records. They’re meant to emerge only from encounters with art. (My encounters with Western art music were unavailing, of course, because every one of them was prefaced by a lecture on the insipid and worthless nature of the music that I preferred to hear.) Left with the fact that what happened to me did take place, and that it was something that was supposed to come only out of art, I reached the obvious conclusion. You are welcome to your own.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Marsh uses the Smokey Robinson and the Miracles’ song “You Really Got a Hold on Me” to anchor his memoir. In fact, it is Marsh’s recollection of listening to this song that provides the grounds for the “intimate revelation” or “epiphany” that Marsh sets up at the end of Part I and then explains more fully in Part II. What exactly is this revelation, and how does it emerge from Marsh’s experience of listening to rock and roll?

2. In Marsh’s view, racism is connected to the powerlessness felt by members of the white working-class community in Pontiac. Explain that connection. What does Marsh mean when he talks about racism as the “great trap”? How does Marsh’s understanding of racism divide him from the older generation in Pontiac?

3. Marsh explains that rock-and-roll singers “spoke for as well as to me.” Can you think of other examples of singers speaking for you or for some other individual or group? Explain what the singer gave voice to in your own or others’ experience.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING**

1. Dave Marsh’s memoir about growing up in Pontiac, Michigan, serves as the introduction to a collection of his essays and reviews of rock and roll. In this sense, the introduction is meant to present his reasons for writing about rock and roll. At the end of the memoir, Marsh says: “I reached the obvious conclusion. You are welcome to your own.” Write an essay that explains what conclusions Marsh reaches and why. Do his conclusions seem persuasive to you? Assess how well Marsh enables you to understand his perspective on growing up in Pontiac. What conclusions do you draw?

2. One of the striking features of Dave Marsh’s memoir about growing up in Pontiac is his attention to class. As Marsh shows, the sense of powerlessness rock and roll spoke to in his experience grows out of the relation between his working-class community in Pontiac and the dominant economic interests in society, represented by General Motors. Depending on class position, people’s feelings can range from the sense of powerlessness that Marsh describes to the persistent anxieties of the middle classes about maintaining their socioeconomic status to the self-confidence of the economically secure and their sense of entitlement to society’s rewards. Write an essay that analyzes how the class character of your family and the community in which you grew up has shaped your own sense of power or powerlessness and your expectations about what you are entitled to in life. Note whether there are significant differences in expectations between generations. If there are, how would you explain them? If not, how would you explain the continuity between generations?

3. As you have seen, Marsh uses the Smokey Robinson song “You Really Got a Hold on Me” to trigger the central revelation of the memoir, the moment when “the veil of racism was torn from my eyes” and everything “was necessarily called into question.” Use an
encounter that you have had with a song, an album, a live performance, a movie, or some other form of popular culture to write a memoir explaining such a moment of insight in your experience. The revelation doesn’t have to change everything, as it does for Marsh, but it does need to indicate something notable—a new outlook, a shift in attitude, a discovery of one sort or another—that you can link to your encounter. Following Marsh’s example, your task is to tell a story in sufficient detail that explains how and why the encounter had such a powerful impact on you. What was it that gave the song, album, movie, or other thing such force? What was it about the circumstances at the time that made you especially open to such influence?

YOUTH AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

Lawrence Grossberg

Lawrence Grossberg is the Morris Davis Professor of Communication at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. A cultural critic who writes about popular culture and rock music, his essays have been collected in two volumes, Bringing It All Back Home (1997) and Dancing in Spite of Myself (1997). This selection appears in the latter volume. It is taken from “It’s a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics, and Culture,” a study of the connections between politics and popular culture in the Reagan era. In the following excerpt, Grossberg explains how after World War II, young people came to be seen as a living symbol of a unified national identity.

SUGGESTION FOR READING

As you read, notice that Lawrence Grossberg has organized this section from his longer essay in a problem-and-solution format. To follow Grossberg’s line of thought, underline and annotate the passages where he defines what he sees as the problem of American national identity and where he explains how American young people were represented as the solution in the post–World War II period.

1 The meaning of “America” has always been a problem. Except for rare moments, Americans have rarely had a shared sense of identity and unity. Rather, the United States has always been a country of differences without a center. The “foreign” has always been centrally implicated in our identity because we were and are a nation of immigrants. (Perhaps that partly explains why Americans took up anti-communism with such intensity—here at least was an “other,” a definition of the foreign, which could be construed as non-American, as a threatening presence which defied integration.) It is a nation without a tradition, for its history depends upon a moment of founding violence which almost entirely eradicated the native population, thereby renouncing any claim to an identity invested in the land. And despite various efforts to define some “proper” ethnic and national origin, it is precisely the image of the melting pot, this perpetual sense of the continuing presence of the other within the national identity, that has defined the uniqueness of the nation. It is a nation predicated upon differences, but always desperately constructing an imaginary unity. The most common and dominant solution to this in its history involved constituting the identity of the United States in the future tense; it was the land of possibility, the “beacon on the hill,” the new world, the young nation living out its “manifest destiny.” Perhaps the only way in which the diversity of populations and regions could be held together was to imagine itself constantly facing frontiers. It is this perpetual ability to locate and conquer new frontiers, a sense embodied within “the American dream” as a recurrent theme, that has most powerfully defined a national sense of cultural uniqueness.
After what the nation took to be “its victory” in the second world war it anxiously faced a depressing contradiction. On the one hand, the young nation had grown up, taking its “rightful” place as the leader of the “free world.” On the other hand, what had defined its victory—its very identity—depended upon its continued sense of difference from the “grown-up” (i.e., corrupt, inflexible, etc.) European nations. It was America’s openness to possibility, its commitment to itself as the future, its ability to reforge its differences into a new and self-consciously temporary unity, that had conquered the fascist threat to freedom. The postwar period can be described by the embodiments of this contradiction: it was a time of enormous conservative pressure (we had won the war protecting the American way; it was time to enjoy it and not rock the boat) and a time of increasingly rapid change, not only in the structures of the social formation but across the entire surface of everyday life. It was a time as schizophrenic as the baby boom generation onto which it projected its contradictions. Resolving this lived dilemma demanded that America still be located in and defined by a future, by an American dream but that the dream be made visible and concrete. If the dream had not yet been realized, it would be shortly. Thus, if this dream were to effectively define the nation in its immediate future, if there was to be any reality to this vision, it would have to be invested, not just in some abstract future, but in a concrete embodiment of America’s future, i.e., in a specific generation. Hence, the American identity was projected upon the children of those who had to confront the paradox of America in the postwar years. But if the dream was to be real for them, and if it were to be immediately realizable, people would have to have children and have children they did! And they would have to define those children as the center of their lives and of the nation; the children would become the justification for everything they had done, the source of the very meaning of their lives as individuals and as a nation.

The baby-boom created an enormous population of children by the mid-fifties, a population which became the concretely defined image of the nation’s future, a future embodied in a specific generation of youth who would finally realize the American dream and hence become its living symbol. This was to be “the best fed, best dressed, best educated generation” in history, the living proof of the American dream, the realization of the future in the present. The American identity slid from a contentless image of the future to a powerful, emotionally invested image of a generation. America found itself by identifying its meaning with a generation whose identity was articulated by the meanings and promises of youth. Youth, as it came to define a generation, also came to define America itself. And this generation took up the identification as its own fantasy. Not only was its own youthfulness identified with the perpetual youthfulness of the nation, but its own generational identity was defined by its necessary and continued youthfulness. But youth in this equation was not measured simply in terms of age; it was an ideological and cultural signifier, connected to utopian images of the future and of this generation’s ability to control the forces of change and to make the world over in its own images. But it was also articulated by economic images of the teenager as consumer, and by images of the specific sensibilities, styles and forms of popular culture which this generation took as its own (hence, the necessary myth that rock and roll was made by American youth). Thus, what was placed as the new defining center of the nation was a generation, an ideological commitment to youth, and a specific popular cultural formation. Obviously, this “consensus” constructed its own powerfully selective frontier: it largely excluded those fractions of the population (e.g., black) which were never significantly traversed by the largely white middle class youth culture. Nevertheless, for the moment, the United States had an identity, however problematic the very commitment to youth was and would become, and it had an apparently perpetually renewable national popular; it had a culture which it thought of as inherently American and which it identified with its own embodied image of itself and its future.

But this was, to say the least, a problematic solution to America’s search for an identity, not merely because any generation of youth has to
grow up and, one assumes, renounce their youthfulness, but also because “youth” was largely, even in the fifties, an empty signifier. As [Carolyn] Steedman says, “children are always episodes in someone else’s narratives, not their own people, but rather brought into being for someone else’s purpose.” Youth has no meaning except perhaps its lack of meaning, its energy, its commitment to openness and change, its celebratory relation to the present, and its promise of the future. Youth offers no structure of its own with which it can organize and give permanence to a national identity. That is, youth itself, like America, can only be defined apparently in a forever receding future. How could this generation possibly fulfill its own identity and become the American dream—become a future which is always as yet unrealized and unrealizable? How could a generation hold on to its own self-identity as youthful, and at the same time, fulfill the responsibility of its identification with the nation? What does it mean to have constructed a concrete yet entirely mobile center for a centerless nation? Perhaps this rather paradoxical position explains the sense of failure that characterizes the postwar generations, despite the fact that they did succeed in reshaping the cultural and political terrain of the United States.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Define the problem of American national identity as Grossberg poses it early in this selection. How and in what sense did American young people become a “solution” to this “problem” in the post–World War II period?

2. Grossberg notes that the national commitment to youth set up its own “powerfully selective frontier,” excluding, among others, young African Americans. Examine the claim that Grossberg makes here that the image of youth in the popular imagination after World War II was largely a white middle-class one—marked in the media as white “teenagers” but “black youth.” Explain why you do or do not find the claim persuasive. What further evidence could you offer, one way or the other? If you agree with the claim, does it still hold true?

3. At the end of this selection, Grossberg suggests that youth is a “problematic solution to America’s search for identity.” What makes the solution problematic? What is the “sense of failure that characterizes the postwar generations, despite the fact that they did succeed in reshaping the cultural and political terrain of the United States”?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Lawrence Grossberg quotes Carolyn Steedman’s remark that “children are always episodes in someone else’s narratives, not their own people, but rather brought into being for someone else’s purposes.” Apply this quote to your own experience growing up. Write an essay that explains how your life might be seen as an “episode” in “someone else’s narrative.” Take into account the hopes your parents and other significant adults invested in you and your future.

2. Grossberg opens this selection by saying that “the United States has always been a country of differences without a center.” He describes American national identity as one “predicated upon differences, but always desperately constructing an imaginary unity.” Write an essay that explains how you would describe America’s national identity. To do this, consider whether you see a “shared sense of identity and unity” or whether, as Grossberg suggests, American identity should be characterized according to its diversity and the “continuing presence of the other within the national identity.”

3. Gloria Naylor in “Kiswana Browne,” Dave Marsh in “Fortunate Son,” and Lawrence Grossberg in “Youth and American Identity” have written of the issue of generational identity, though in quite different ways. Naylor has written a fictional account, which is a chapter from her novel The Women of Brewster Place; Marsh has written a memoir
based on his own experience; and the selection from Grossberg’s “It’s a Sin” takes an analytical perspective on the emotional and cultural investments made in American youth in the post–World War II period. Because each of these writers uses such a different writing strategy, he or she is likely to have different effects on his or her readers. Write an essay that compares the writing strategies. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of each writer’s attempt to address the issue of generational identity? What effects are the writers’ various strategies likely to have on readers?

TEENAGE WASTELAND

Donna Gaines

Donna Gaines writes regularly for the Village Voice. She also writes regularly for Rolling Stone and SPIN. She holds a Ph.D. in sociology, has worked as a social worker with teenagers, and teaches at Barnard College. The following selection is taken from Gaines’s book Teenage Wasteland (1990), an investigative report on the suicide pact carried out by four “heavy metal” kids in the working-class suburbs of northern New Jersey in 1987. Gaines does not believe in the traditional neutrality of the reporter toward her subjects but instead aligns herself with the “burnouts” and takes on the task of telling their side of the story.

SUGGESTION FOR READING

This selection is set on the first anniversary of the suicide pact—a time of reckoning with the event and what it meant for the Bergenfield community. Notice how Gaines treats the explanations of “why they did it” offered by various adults, journalists, and officials.

III

1 On the first anniversary of the suicide pact, a number of special follow-up news reports aired on local and national television. We saw many of the same faces—officials, loyal students of Bergenfield High School, mental health administrators. Over the year the town had gained a certain moral authority—it had survived the suicide pact as well as the media invasion. The community had learned something and had grown. By now, Bergenfield’s representatives also knew how to work media.

On WABC’s Nightline, we would learn of Bergenfield’s “new awareness,” its comprehensive battery of preventive services. We would see signs advertising “help” posted in store windows all over town, wherever kids might hang around. There was a hot line, and Bergenfield police were getting special training for suicide calls. Bergenfield High School would implement a “peer leadership” program. Parents would get involved at the school. There was an aggressive youth out-reach program. The town would take pride in itself as a model for other towns to follow. Officials would seek out federal and state funding so that these programs could continue to help Bergenfield’s youth. The town had been successful with its rational responses to a serious social problem. This is how Bergenfield would present itself to the television world.

On a local news program, there was a brief clip of a follow-up visit to Bergenfield High, on the anniversary of the suicide pact. Wholesome and alert students selected to represent the school sat around a table with their principal, Lance Rosza, and reiterated what had become the story about the Bergenfield suicide pact. The four kids “had nothing to do with the school.” They had “chosen” to drop out. They committed suicide because they had “personal problems.”

Police lieutenant Donald Stumpf, who had also served as school board president, admitted that Bergenfield was “weak on dropouts.” A juvenile officer, Stumpf noted that once the kids drop
out, “they go to never-neverland.” Maybe that’s where they came from, since the school took every opportunity to point out that it had nothing to do with its students’ dropping out. Suddenly the “burnouts” appeared in this state of social dislocation, as if by magic. They had no involvement with the school or the town. By choice they turned their backs on all the available support, concern, and care. They were self-made outcasts, disengaged atoms floating in space somewhere over Bergenfield. There was no discussion of the process, only the product.

In the end, Bergenfield High School would be vindicated by its more devoted students, honored for its “involvement” with potential dropouts and their families. Supposedly, the town’s “new awareness” and the preventive services had paid off: a few dropouts had been saved, or at least temporarily reprogrammed. In fact, Bergenfield officials had implemented programs so successfully they were now deemed worthy of replication in communities across America. And finally, everybody agreed Lisa, Cheryl, Tommy Rizzo, and Tommy Olton had committed suicide because they had personal problems.

Once the event was understood, explained under the banner of personal problems, entire sets of questions could be logically excluded. Yes, the four kids did have personal problems. But maybe there was more to it than that.

Some explanations for “why they did it” were formulated with compassion and sincerity others were handed down contemptuously, callously. There was no organized conspiracy to keep “the burnouts’” own story silent. But it was kept silent—it was now outside the discourse which framed the event. In a sense, the burnouts’ story, their view of things, was evacuated from the social text.

Once we all agreed that the four kids had banded together in a suicide pact because they had personal problems, we no longer needed to ask what “the burnouts” were alienating themselves from. Or what role their identification as “burnouts” played in the way they felt about themselves, their families, their school, or their town.

With the suicide pact explained away as the result of personal problems, it would be reasonable to believe that aided by Satan, drugs, and rock & roll, four “troubled losers” pulled each other down, deeper and deeper, into an abyss of misery until they finally idled themselves out of it.

If we understood the Bergenfield suicide pact as the result of personal problems, we would then have to remove the event from its social context. And once we did that, the story according to “the burnouts” would never be known; it would be buried with the four kids.

There were other reasons why “the burnouts” themselves weren’t being heard. First, they had little access to the media. They weren’t likely to be on hand when Bergenfield High School authorities needed bright, articulate youth to represent the school or the town to reporters. “Alienated youth” don’t hang around teachers or shrinks any longer than they have to.

Second, to the chagrin of their caretakers, “burnouts” aren’t particularly “verbal.” The basic life-world shared by teenage suburban metalheads is action-oriented: best understood in context, through signs and symbols in motion. It would be hard to convey one’s thoughts and feelings to reporters in the succinct lines that make up the news.

In the beginning “the burnouts” did talk to reporters, but things got twisted around—“the papers got the story all fucked up”—and besides, they really hated hearing their friends and their town maligned by strangers. So they clammed right up.

The kids everybody called burnouts understood this: Once you open the door, they’ve got you. You’re playing their language game. Whatever you say can be held against you. At the very least, it changes meaning once it’s out of the context created by you and your friends. Better to keep it to yourself. So programs existed in Bergenfield but “the burnouts” didn’t dare use them. They may have been outcasts, but they weren’t stupid. They knew to avoid trouble.

Kids who realize that they are marginal fear reprisals. Over and over again I was asked not to
mention names. And no pictures. As a rule, teenagers love performing for the media. It’s a game that lets adults think they understand “kids today,” and it’s fun. But “the burnouts” were now media wise. They knew better. They wanted complete control or they weren’t saying shit.

So by design and by default, nobody really got to hear what “the burnouts” had to say. Like any other alienated youth since the conceptualization of “youth” as a social category, they don’t like to talk to adults. About anything. After the suicide pact a few “burnouts” told reporters they were reluctant to confide in school guidance counselors because the counselors might tell their parents and “they’d be punished or even sent to a psychiatric hospital.”

The idea of troubled youth doing themselves in was especially disturbing to a town that boasted over thirty active programs for its youth prior to the suicide pact of March 11. Yet Lieutenant Stumpf noted that the Bergenfield kids who most needed the services would not make use of them.

Authorities had acknowledged that the more “alienated” or “high-risk” youth of Bergenfield would not voluntarily involve themselves with the town’s services. But the kids weren’t talking about what it was that held them back, why they weren’t looking to confide in the adults.

In the local papers, experts called in to comment on the tragedy referred to this as “the conspiracy of silence”—the bond of secrecy between teenage friends. While there was some acknowledgment that this reflected kids’ terror of “getting in trouble,” nobody questioned whether or not this fear might be rational.

Yet it was becoming clear that for Bergenfield’s marginally involved youth, the idea of going to see a school guidance counselor or really “opening up” to parents, shrinks, and even clergy was inconceivable. It was apparent that even if they had done nothing wrong, they felt guilty.

On those rare occasions when “burnouts” spoke to reporters, it was obvious that any brush with authority carried the promise of trouble, fear of punishment, of getting snagged for something. Enemy lines were drawn. “Burnouts” articulated little confidence that they could be understood by their appointed caretakers, and they assumed that fair treatment was unlikely. Even being able to relate on any level of natural comfort was out of the question.

By now it was also apparent that the “burnouts,” as a clique, as carriers of a highly visible “peer-regulated” subculture, posed a threat to the hegemony of parents, teachers, and other mandated “agents of socialization” in Bergenfield. The initial blaming of the suicide victims’ friends for whatever had gone wrong did take some of the pressure off the parents and the school. This was predictable—after all, “Where’d you learn that from, your friends?” is a well-traveled technique adults use to challenge and suppress a kid’s dissenting view.

While some “burnouts” did complain to reporters about feeling neglected by the town, the school, and their parents, some were just as happy to be left alone. This was a loosely connected network of friends and acquaintances who appeared to live in a world of their own, almost discontinuous from the rest of the town.

Readings of youth, from the Rebel Without a Cause 1950s to The River’s Edge 1980s, have explored the young person’s long-standing critique of the adult world: Nobody talks about what is really going on. Especially not parents, and never at school. The “burnouts” seemed to understand that very well. Yet the “insularity” of this group of outcasts frustrated adults everywhere. It annoyed them as much as “explosive inside views” might have titillated them.

These kids were actively guarding their psychic space because the adults controlled everything else. Yet the experts on the scene continued to urge the “burnouts” to purge. Forget about it. It’s no secret, you give them an inch and they’ll take a self. Bergenfield’s alienated youth population already had a different way of seeing things. How could they reach out and speak up? When every day up until the suicide pact, and shortly thereafter, they were encouraged to suppress what they perceived to be reality? When living means having to deny what you feel, disassociating yourself to survive, you better stay close to your friends or you could start to believe the bull-
shit. Yes, the “burnouts” carried the news, they knew the truth. They all understood what that “something evil in the air” was. Alone, it made them crazy. Together, it made them bad.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Donna Gaines notes that school officials, mental health workers, and others from Bergenfield explained the suicide pact as the result of “personal problems.” Why do you think this explanation became the dominant response to the suicides? Why would this explanation appeal to those in positions of authority? What, in Gaines’s view, does this explanation of the suicides evade?

2. Gaines puts considerable emphasis on the suspicion of the “burnouts” toward the media, schools, and the world of adults in general. How does she explain this suspicion? To what extent does it seem reasonable or unreasonable?

3. The media have sensationalized teenage suicide by linking it to heavy-metal music and Satanism. Groups such as Black Sabbath, Ozzy Osborne, Iron Maiden, Judas Priest, and Metallica have been blamed for instigating suicides among heavy-metal fans. At the same time, teens such as the Bergenfield “burnouts” in part define their group identity as “metalheads”—which sets up a classic case of young people versus adults. What do you know about heavy-metal music? Do you listen to it or know people who do? Why has heavy-metal music become so controversial? Work with two or three other students to answer these questions. Pool the information that you have about heavy-metal music. If you are not familiar with the music, you may want to interview a heavy-metal fan.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. One of Gaines’s key points is that adults’ tendency to explain the suicides as the result of “personal problems” evades some deeper questions about what it is the “burnouts” are alienated from and how their identities as “burnouts” shape their relations to each other, their families, their schools, and their communities. She wants us to think about them, in other words, not as isolated individuals but as a social phenomenon—a coherent subculture of “metalheads.” Take Gaines’s point seriously by using it to analyze a group or subculture of alienated teenagers you know something about. Follow Gaines’s model for this assignment by writing an account that is sympathetic to troubled or marginalized young people. Imagine that your task is to explain to readers why the group of young people is alienated from the official system and what holds together their subculture.

2. The media have been fascinated by teenage suicide and its sensationalistic connection to heavy-metal music and Satanism. Write a report that explains how adult culture represents heavy-metal music and what, in your view, is at stake for the relationship between generations.

   You might, for example, visit the Web site of the Parents Music Resource Group, which was established by Tipper Gore to monitor teenage listening preferences. Or you might investigate the 1990 trial in which a $6.2 million product liability suit charged Judas Priest with inspiring the suicides of two Nevada teenagers. (Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature should provide you with the sources that you need.)

3. Gaines says that “burnouts” in Bergenfield systematically avoided social services and youth programs directed at “high-risk” young people. Their suspicion of adult culture was simply too high. Write an essay that explains what kinds of programs might succeed. How could they overcome young people’s fears and suspicions? You don’t have to limit yourself to the Bergenfield “burnouts” for this assignment. Draw on your knowledge, observations, and experience with troubled young people in other settings.
GOTHS IN TOMORROWLAND

Thomas Hine


SUGGESTION FOR READING

Hine begins with an anecdote about the goth “invasion” of Disneyland in 1997 and the “zero tolerance” policy adopted by Disney’s security forces. Notice that Hine wants to do more than just tell his story. He sees in it a larger issue about how the “mere presence of teenagers threatens us.” As you read, keep in mind this general theme of the alienation of teenagers from adult society, how adults enforce it, and how teenagers maintain it.

I feel stupid and contagious.


In the summer of 1997, the security forces at Disneyland and the police in surrounding Anaheim, California, announced a “zero tolerance” policy to fend off a new threat.

Horde of pale, mascaraed goths—one of the many tribes of teendom—were invading. It was an odd onslaught. Unlike their barbarian namesakes, they weren’t storming the gates of the walled Magic Kingdom. They had yearly passes, purchased for $99 apiece. Many of them had not even been goths when their parents dropped them off at the edge of the parking lot. Rather, they changed into their black sometimes gender-bending garments, applied their white makeup accented with black eyeliner and gray blush-on. The punkier among them accessorized with safety pins and other aggressively ugly, uncomfortable-looking piercings. And most important of all, they reminded themselves to look really glum. Once inside, they headed for Tomorrowland, Disneyland’s most unsettled neighborhood, and hogged all the benches.

It was a sacrilege. Disneyland, said those who wrote letters to the editor, is supposed to be “the happiest place on earth,” and these young people with their long faces clearly didn’t belong. The presence of sullen clusters of costumed teens showed, some argued, that Disney had given up its commitment to family values. It was no longer possible to feel safe in Disneyland, came the complaints, and that was about the last safe place left.

Actually, the safety of Disneyland was part of the attraction for the goth teens. They told reporters that their parents bought them season passes because the theme park’s tight security would assure nothing bad would happen to them. In the vast sprawl of Orange County, California, there are very few safe places where teens are welcome, and Disneyland has always been one of them.

Those who complained spoke of the goths as if they were some sort of an alien force, not just white suburban California teenagers. Only a few years earlier, they had been kids who were delighted to go with their parents to meet Mickey. And only a few years from now, they will be young adults—teaching our children, cleaning our teeth, installing our cable television. But now they insist on gloom. And the adult world could not find a place for them—even in Tomorrowland.

Unlike Minnesota’s Mall of America—which became a battleground for gang warfare trans-
planted from Minneapolis and which eventually barred unescorted teenagers from visiting at night—the perceived threat to Disneyland was handled in a low-key way. Teenagers were arrested for even the tiniest infractions outside the park and forced by security guards to follow Disneyland’s quite restrictive rules of decorum within the park. After all, the theme park’s administrators had an option not available to government; they could revoke the yearly passes. While Disneyland doesn’t enforce a dress code for its visitors, it can keep a tight rein on their behavior.

Yet, despite its lack of drama, I think the situation is significant because it vividly raises many of the issues that haunt teenagers’ lives at the end of the twentieth century. It is about the alienation of teenagers from adult society, and equally about the alienation of that society from its teenagers. The mere presence of teenagers threatens us.

It is also a story about space. How, in an environment devoid of civic spaces, do we expect people to learn how to behave as members of a community? And it is about the future. Is a meaningful tomorrow so far away that young people can find nothing better to do than engage in faux-morbid posturing? (Even Disney’s theme parks are losing track of the future; they are converting their Tomorrowlands into nostalgic explorations of how people used to think about the future a century and more ago.)

And even its resolution—a stance of uneasy tolerance backed by coercion and force—seems symptomatic of the way Americans deal with young people now.

Inevitably, a lack of perspective bedevils efforts to recount the recent past, but the problem is more than that. The last quarter of the twentieth century has, in a sense, been about fragmentation. Identity politics has led to a sharpening of distinctions among the groups in the society, and a suspicion of apparent majorities. Postmodern literary theory warns us to mistrust narratives. Even advertising and television, which once united the country in a common belief in consumption, now sell to a welter of micromarkets. Thus we are left without either a common myth, or even the virtual common ground of The Ed Sullivan Show.

It seems crude now to speak of teenagers and think of the white middle-class, heterosexual young people that the word “teenager” was originally coined to describe. The “echo” generation of teenagers, whose first members are now entering high school, is about 67 percent non-Hispanic white, 15 percent black, 14 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian or American Indian. The proportion of Hispanic teens will grow each year, and the Census Bureau also reports significantly greater numbers of mixed-race teens and adoptees who are racially different from their parents.

Even the word “Hispanic” is a catch-all that conceals an enormous range of cultural difference between Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other groups whose immigration to the United States has increased tremendously during the last quarter century. Urban school systems routinely enroll student populations that speak dozens of different languages at home.

Differences among youth do not simply involve differences of culture, race, income, and class—potent as these are. We now acknowledge differences in sexual orientation among young people. Today’s students are also tagged with bureaucratic or medical assessments of their abilities and disabilities that also become part of their identities.

There are so many differences among the students at a high school in Brooklyn, Los Angeles, or suburban Montgomery County, Maryland, that one wonders whether the word “teenager” is sufficient to encompass them all. Indeed, the terms “adolescent” and “teenager” have always had a middle-class bias. In the past, though, working-class youths in their teens were already working and part of a separate culture. Now that the work of the working class has disappeared,
their children have little choice but to be teenagers. But they are inevitably different from those of the postwar and baby boomer eras because they are growing up in a more heterogeneous and contentious society.

What follows, then, is not a single unified narrative but, rather, a sort of jigsaw puzzle. Many pieces fit together nicely. Others seem to be missing. It’s easier to solve such a puzzle if you know what picture is going to emerge, but if I were confident of that, I wouldn’t be putting you, or myself, to such trouble.

These discussions do have an underlying theme: the difficulty of forging the sort of meaningful identity that Erik Erikson described at mid-century. But if we look for a picture of the late-twentieth-century teenager in these fragments, we won’t find it. That’s because we’re expecting to find something that isn’t there.

The goths who invaded Tomorrowland are examples of another kind of diversity—or perhaps pseudo-diversity—that has emerged gaudily during the last two decades. These are the tribes of youth. The typical suburban high school is occupied by groups of teens who express themselves through music, dress, tattoos and piercing, obsessive hobbies, consumption patterns, extracurricular activities, drug habits, and sex practices. These tribes hang out in different parts of the school, go to different parts of town. Once it was possible to speak of a youth culture, but now there is a range of youth subcultures, and clans, coteries, and cliques within those.

In 1996 a high school student asked fellow readers of an Internet bulletin board what groups were found in their high schools. Nearly every school reported the presence of “skaters,” “geeks,” “jocks,” “sluts,” “freaks,” “druggies,” “nerds,” and those with “other-colored hair,” presumably third-generation punks. There were also, some students reported, “paper people,” “snobs,” “band geeks,” “drama club types” (or “drama queens”), “soccer players” (who aren’t counted as jocks, the informant noted), “Satanists,” “Jesus freaks,” “industrial preps,” “techno-goths,” and “computer dweebs.” Several took note of racial and class segregation, listing “blacks,” “Latinos,” “white trash,” and “wannabe blacks.” There were “preppies,” who, as one writer, possibly a preppie herself noted, “dress like the snobs but aren’t as snobbish.” “Don’t forget about the druggie preps,” another writer fired back.

This clearly wasn’t an exhaustive list. Terms vary from school to school and fashions vary from moment to moment. New technologies emerge, in-line skates or electronic pagers for instance, and they immediately generate their own dress, style, language, and culture.

The connotations of the technologies can change very quickly. Only a few years ago, pagers were associated mostly with drug dealers, but now they’ve entered the mainstream. Pagers became respectable once busy mothers realized that they could use them to get messages to their peripatetic offspring. Young pager users have developed elaborate codes for flirtation, endearment, assignation, and insults. They know that if 90210 comes up on their pager, someone’s calling them a snob, and if it’s 1776, they’re rebelling, while if it’s 07734, they should turn the pager upside down and read “hELLO.”

Most of the youth tribes have roots that go back twenty years or more, though most are more visible and elaborate than they once were. Many of these tribes are defined by the music they like, and young people devote a lot of energy to distinguishing the true exemplars of heavy metal, techno, alternative, or hip-hop from the mere poseurs. Hybrid and evolutionary versions of these cultures, such as speed metal, thrash, or gangsta rap make things far more confusing.

One thing that many of these subcultures have in common is what has come to be known as modern primitivism. This includes tattooing, the piercing of body parts, and physically expressive and dangerous rituals, such as the mosh pits that are part of many rock concerts. Young peo-
people use piercing and tattoos to assert their maturity and sovereignty over their bodies.

“Can this be child abuse?” Sally Dietrich, a suburban Washington mother, asked the police when her thirteen-year-old son appeared with a bulldog tattooed on his chest. “I said, ‘What about destruction of property?’ He’s my kid.” Her son was, very likely, trying to signal otherwise. Nevertheless, Dietrich mounted a successful campaign to bar tattooing without permission in the state of Maryland, one of many such restrictions passed during the 1990s.

It may be a mistake to confuse visible assertions of sexual power with the fact of it. For example, heavy-metal concerts and mosh pits are notoriously male-dominated affairs. And the joke of MTV’s “Beavis and Butt-head” is that these two purported metalheads don’t have a clue about how to relate to the opposite sex. Those whose costumes indicate that they have less to prove are just as likely to be sexually active.

In fact, visitors to Disneyland probably don’t need to be too worried about the goths, a tribe which, like many of the youth culture groups, has its roots in English aestheticism. As some goths freely admit, they’re pretentious, and their morbid attitudes are as much a part of the dress-up games as the black clothes themselves.

The goth pose provides a convenient cover. For some males, it gives an opportunity to try out an androgynous look. The costumes, which emphasize the face and make the body disappear, may also provide an escape for young women and men who fear that they’re overweight or not fit. Black clothes are slimming, and darkness even more so. “Until I got in with goths, I hadn’t met other people who are depressed like I am and that I could really talk to,” said one young woman on an Internet bulletin board. Another said being a goth allowed her relaxation from life as a straight-A student and a perfect daughter.

Although young people recognize an immense number of distinctions among the tribes and clans of youth culture and are contemptuous of those they regard as bogus, most adults cannot tell them apart. They confuse thrashers with metalheads and goths because they all wear black. Then they assume that they’re all taking drugs and worshipping Satan.

The adult gaze is powerful. It classes them all as teenagers, whether they like it or not. The body alterations that young people use to assert that they are no longer children successfully frighten grown-ups, but they also convince them these weird creatures are well short of being adults. The ring through the lip or the nipple merely seems to demonstrate that they are not ready for adult responsibility. What they provoke is not respect but restrictions.

Tribes are about a yearning to belong to a group—or perhaps to escape into a disguise. They combine a certain gregariousness with what seems to be its opposite: a feeling of estrangement. The imagery of being alone in the world is not quite so gaudy as that of modern primitivism, yet it pervades contemporary youth culture.

While youthful exploration of the 1920s, 1940s, 1950s, or 1960s often took the form of wild dancing, more recently it has been about solitary posing. This phenomenon is reflected, and perhaps encouraged, by MTV, which went on the air in 1981. In contrast with the rudimentary format of American Bandstand, in which the viewer seemed simply to be looking in on young people having fun dancing with one another, MTV videos tend to be more about brooding than participation. They are highly subjective, like dreams or psychodramas. They connect the viewer with a feeling, rather than with other people.

And while the writhing, leaping, and ecstatic movement of the mosh pit seems to be an extreme form of American Bandstand-style participation, it embodies a rather scary kind of community. One’s own motions have little relationship to those of others. And there’s substantial risk of injury. The society implied by
the dance is not harmonious and made up of couples. Rather, it is violent and composed of isolated individuals who are, nevertheless, both seeking and repulsing contact with others. If this sounds like a vision of American society as a whole, that’s not surprising. Figuring out what things are really like is one of the tasks of youth. Then they frighten their elders by acting it out.

When a multinational company that sells to the young asked marketing psychologist Stan Gross to study teenagers around the country, he concluded after hundreds of interviews and exercises that the majority of young people embraced an extreme if inchoate individualism. Most believe that just about every institution they come in contact with is stupid. When asked to choose an ideal image for themselves, the majority selected a picture that depicted what might be described as confident alienation. The figure sits, comfortably apart from everything, his eyes gazing out of the image at something unknown and distant.

Such studies are done, of course, not to reform the young but to sell to them. And the collective impact of such knowledge of the young has been the proliferation of advertising that encourages young people not to believe anything—even advertising—and to express their superiority by purchasing the product that’s willing to admit its own spuriousness.

The distance between spontaneous expression and large-scale commercial exploitation has never been shorter. Creators of youth fashion, such as Nike, go so far as to send scouts to the ghetto to take pictures of what young people are wearing on the streets and writing on the walls. Nike seeks to reflect the latest sensibilities, both in its products and its advertising. The company feeds the imagery right back to those who created it, offering them something they cannot afford as a way of affirming themselves.

One result of this quick feedback is that visual symbols become detached from their traditional associations and become attached to something else. Rappers, having made droopy pants stylish in the suburbs, began to wear preppie sportswear, and brand names like Tommy Hilfiger and Nautica became badges of both WASP and hip-hop sensibilities. Thus, even when the fashions don’t change, their meaning does. Such unexpected shifts in the meaning of material goods cannot be entirely manipulated by adults. But marketers have learned that they must be vigilant in order to profit from the changes when they come.

More overtly than in the past, many of today’s young are looking for extreme forms of expression. This quest is just as apparent in sports, for example, as in rock culture. The 1996 Atlanta Olympics began with an exhibition of extreme cycling and extreme skating. These and other extreme sports, categorized collectively as "X-Games," have become a cable television fixture because they draw teenage males, an otherwise elusive audience. “Extreme” was one of the catchwords of the 1990s, and it became, by 1996, the most common word in newly registered trade names, attached either to products aimed at youth or which sought to embody youthfulness.

Young people are caught in a paradox. They drive themselves to extremes to create space in which to be themselves. Yet the commercial machine they think they’re escaping is always on their back, ready to sell them something new.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Thomas Hine uses the opening anecdote about goth teens and Disneyland to announce the theme of this passage. As Hine presents it, what is this story meant to represent about the relations between teenagers and adults? What further examples and evidence does Hine offer in the rest of the selection to reinforce his point?

2. Hine suggests that the terms teenager and youth culture no longer have one common meaning. If anything, he sees a diversity of teenagers and “tribes of youth” defined by
different styles of dress, music, body ornamentation, extracurricular activity, drug use, and sexual practices as well as racial and ethnic markers. Consider your high school and college. What “tribes” are represented? Develop a classification of the various groups. What do you see as the leading ways in which groups of young people define themselves? What are the meanings of the identities they take on? What are the relationships among the various groups?

3. Hine points to a social dynamic in which “extreme” forms of cultural expressions, such as tattooing, body piercing, music, and sports, are meant to affirm group identities but, from an adult perspective, only reinforce the view that young people “are not ready for adult responsibility.” What is the lure, for young people, of such extreme expressions? How, from the perspective of adults, do the various forms of extreme style and behavior get lumped together?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Write an essay that classifies the various groups (or “tribes”) of youth culture at the high school you attended or your college. Describe the leading groups, their styles, behaviors, values, and attitudes. After providing an overview of the groups, explain their relationship to each other and to the adult society that surrounds them.

2. Hine suggests that some of the groupings of youth culture represent a threat to adult society. Consider what Hine thinks is the source of this fear. Why would adults be so worried about young people? What exactly is at stake in the fears and anxieties of the older generation?

3. At the end of this selection, Hine says that young people are “caught in a paradox”: No matter how much they rebel against adult society to create a space for themselves, the “commercial machine” they’re trying to escape from reincorporates their cultural styles in the form of new products and merchandise. Do you think this is a reasonable assessment? Why or why not? Write an essay that explains your answer—and whether you think young people can establish their own way of doing things, independent of the market and the workings of adult society.

GEN X’S ENDURING LEGACY: THE INTERNET

Mike Pope

Mike Pope is the letters editor of the Tallahasee Democrat. The following column of opinion appeared as an op-ed piece in several newspapers across the country on November 13, 2001. Pope is trying to come to terms with the meaning of his generation, which has been labeled, he says, in “our cultural vocabulary,” as “Generation X.” In demographic terms, Generation X refers to those born between 1963 and 1981. The real question Pope poses is the meaning of this generation—how it views itself and how others view it. Pope makes the Internet the key defining feature that separates his generation from the generation of baby boomers that came before.

SUGGESTION FOR READING

As you read, observe how Mike Pope notes the “transformations” Generation X has gone through in the public eye. In an interesting stroke, he also links the first George H.W. Bush administration (1988–1992) to the second George W. Bush administration (2000– ) to provide historical context.
It’s been 10 years since Douglas Coupland introduced “Generation X” into our cultural vocabulary; many people my age still wince at the phrase. To many folks born between 1963 and 1981, the phrase seems more like a marketing ploy than a rallying cry.

“How can we sell them our product,” the overpaid executives muse. “None of our silly marketing tricks are working on them, so let’s tap into their sense of existential cynicism and unending pessimism.”

Witness Coca-Cola’s advertising strategy for OK Soda that featured slogans such as “Don’t be fooled into thinking there has to be a reason for everything” and “What’s the point of OK? Well, what’s the point of anything?” (Incidentally, there is a very elaborate theory circulating on the Internet that the CIA and conservative editor William Kristol worked together on the marketing strategy of OK to brainwash young people into being “neoconservatives.”)

During the last 10 years, the reputation of Generation X has undergone several transformations. In the beginning, many viewed us as whining slackers, lost in a sea of economic mediocrity. The first Bush recession had saddled us with wage stagnation, unchecked corporate greed, an enormous Cold War national debt, a glut of low-wage service jobs and the skyrocketing cost of college and home ownership. (In case you are wondering, I’m still paying off my student loan and I don’t own a house.)

But then something dramatic happened to Generation X: the Internet. It changed how we viewed ourselves and how the world viewed us. Suddenly, baffled baby boomers were asking us how to e-mail their friends or download Beatles tunes. Low-wage service jobs gave way to high-tech industry jobs. Irony became hip.

Giddy with revolutionary fever and ungodly amounts of caffeine, Generation X finally had something to do. And boy did we do it—for 18 hours a day. Blessed with this new communication medium and an opportunity to do something truly radical, we formed bold start-up companies and ordered expensive, ergonomically designed office furniture.

Then, of course, the bottom fell out of the market and now you can buy ergonomically designed office furniture secondhand. As we Gen Xers like to say, “Whatever.”

As the second Bush recession continues to tighten its grip and the sins of the CIA have blessed us with gas masks and sky marshals, Internet companies such as Netradio continue to fold (the Minneapolis-based corporation closed this month, laying off 50 employees). The age of irony is over. Nobody wants to buy banner ads anymore.

For the past 10 years, the phrase “Generation X” has been loaded with cynical subtext and subtle derision. It has graced the market strategies of Fortune 500 companies and fueled academic complaints about “self-absorption and materialism.” It has downloaded itself onto the hard drive of America and America has responded, “Whatever.”

Okay, so maybe we oversold the Internet by promising that the old media would soon be obsolete. Maybe the recently outdated New Economy works from many of the economic paradigms of the Old Economy. Maybe we shouldn’t expend so much of our energy crying into our lattes.

But during the past 10 years, Generation X has imbued the world with its enduring legacy: the Internet. History may not reward us as the “greatest” generation, but it’s no small accomplishment to revolutionize communication, education and commerce. Sure the Internet bubble may have burst—for now. But don’t dismiss the possibility that Internet IPOs will once again burst upon the scene, just like the Old Economy theory of “economic cycles” predicts.

And don’t be so quick to dismiss irony. It will make a comeback.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This piece relies on readers recognizing immediately the term Generation X. Mike Pope gives a couple of ways to understand Generation X as it changes in meaning. Begin by describing your own sense of what Generation X means. Who are these people? In what
sense are they a generation? What are the most visible representations of Generation X (think of music, movies, TV shows, and advertising). Now compare this understanding of Generation X with Pope’s. How do they differ? How are they similar? How can you account for differences and similarities?

2. Pope says that one of the distinguishing features of Generation X is its sense of irony. What does this mean? Consider Pope’s examples of how advertisers picked up on this sense of irony.

3. The generational divide—what separates Generation X from the baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1962)—in Pope’s view is the Internet. What is the impact of the Internet? Is it just a matter of knowing how to e-mail or download music? Is there another step to take here to explain how the Internet shapes the lived experience of Generation X?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. Pope notes that “Gen Xers like to say, “Whatever.”” Write an essay that explains the attitude behind the use of the word “Whatever.” Or substitute another term that somehow embodies the attitude of a generation.

2. Write an essay about the influence of the Internet on generations in contemporary America. Think here in terms not only of whether people of different generations can easily operate the Internet but also on their experience of it.

3. Imagine you’ve been asked to write an essay called “Generation Y’s Enduring Legacy:” What would you put on the other side of the colon? Think of Generation Yers as those born after 1981 who are the late teens and early twenty-year-olds today. Your task, much as Pope defines his, is to distinguish this generation from the one that preceded it.

PERSPECTIVES Before and After 9/11

As everyone is aware, the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, loom as a defining moment in American culture. It’s easy to see what has taken place subsequently—George W. Bush’s “war against terrorism,” a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of the United States to attack, the military campaign in Afghanistan, and perhaps a new sense of how the United States is interconnected to world politics. At publication time, the Bush administration is considering whether to invade Iraq. These are the geopolitical realities of our time.

These two readings focus on the domestic scene—to raise questions about young people’s understanding of what 9/11 means for their generation and its sense of identity. As Arlie Russell Hochschild notes in “Gen (Fill in the Blank): Coming of Age, Seeking an Identity,” Americans who grew up in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1960s were “branded by large events—the Depression, World War II, Vietnam—and the collective moods they aroused.” To see how 9/11 has affected the “collective mood” of a generation consider first, Hochschild’s article, which appeared in the New York Times on March 8, 2000, well before 9/11, and second, the excerpt from “Generation 9/11” by Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton, two months after the terrorist attacks. Both readings rely on the notion of a defining moment in the life of a generation. These two views of the current generation offer a way for you to assess how 9/11 has influenced a generation.
Arlie Russell Hochschild

Arlie Russell Hochschild is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, where she codirects the Center for Working Families; she is also the author of such sociological studies as *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (2001) and *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feelings* (1985). This article appeared in a special section of the *New York Times* on “Generations” on March 8, 2000.

SUGGESTION FOR READING

Arlie Russell Hochschild, unlike the other writers in this chapter, provides a definition of the idea of a generation based on sociologist Karl Mannheim’s classic 1927 essay, “The Problem of Generations.” As Hochschild notes, according to Mannheim, “a generation is a cohort of people who feel the impact of a powerful historical event and develop a shared consciousness about it.” As you read, pay attention to how Hochschild uses this definition to analyze the generation of twenty- and thirty-year-olds and how she finds, in the absence of a large historical crisis in the life of this generation before 9/11, an underlying trend.

1 “I’m not part of the 1960’s generation,” said Sandy de Lissovoy. “I don’t feel part of Gen X or Gen Y. I’m sure not part of the ‘Me Generation.’ Who made up that term? I hate it. What’s really in front of me is my computer, but even with it, I’m between the generation that barely tolerates computers and the one that treats them like a member of the family.”

Mr. de Lissovoy, a 29-year-old graphic designer in San Francisco, was expressing as well as anyone the feelings that, as a sociology professor, I frequently hear during office hours. At this moment he was having a hard time defining his generation. He raised his eyebrows quizically, smiled and said, “Call me the @ Generation One and a Half.”

Can we make up our generation, as Mr. de Lissovoy playfully did, or is it imposed upon us, like it or not?

These are questions that the German sociologist Karl Mannheim took up in his classic 1927 essay, “The Problem of Generations.” Is a generation a collection of people born in the same span of years? No, he thought, that is a cohort, and many cohorts are born, come of age and die without becoming generations. For Mannheim, a generation is a cohort of people who feel the impact of a powerful historical event and develop a shared consciousness about it. Not all members of a generation may see the event the same way, and some may articulate its defining features better than others. But what makes a generation is its connection to history.

Americans who came of age in the 1930’s, 40’s and 60’s have been branded by large events—the Great Depression, World War II, Vietnam—and the collective moods they aroused. But from the 70’s through the 90’s, history’s signal events happened elsewhere. Communism collapsed, but not in the United States. Wars raged in Rwanda, the Balkans and elsewhere, but they had little effect here. The forces in the United States have been social and economic, and they have shifted the focus to personal issues—matters of lifestyle that are shaped by consumerism, the mass media and an increasing sense of impermanence in family and work.

“There is no overarching crisis or cause for our generation,” Mr. de Lissovoy said. “It’s more a confusing, ambiguous flow of events. There’s a slow, individual sorting out to do.”

But underneath this confusing, ambiguous flow of events is a trend toward a more loosely
jointed, limited-liability society, the privatizing influence of that trend and the crash-boom-bang of the market, which, in the absence of other voices, is defining generations left and right.

People in their 20’s and early 50’s are often called Gen X’ers, a term derived from a novel by Douglas Coupland. The book, “Generation X,” was followed by a film, “Slacker,” directed by Richard Linklater, about a group of overeducated, underemployed oddballs who drop to the margins of society. But for Jim Kreines, a 32-year-old graduate student of philosophy at the University of Chicago, the label fit loosely, if at all.

When I asked him what generation he belonged to, Mr. Kreines replied, “I’m not sure I care enough to argue about this.” He had read the Coupland book and seen the film. But did the Gen X’er label apply to him? He was not sure it mattered.

Many Gen X’ers may be trying to sort out a certain cultural sleight of hand. They feel luckier than previous generations because they enjoy many more options. In the 50’s, said Charles Sellers, a 28-year-old urban planner in Portland, Ore., there was only one choice. “If you were a woman you were a housewife,” he said. “If you were a man you married and supported your family. Today, except for the Mormons, Americans have a long cultural menu to choose from. If you’re a woman, you can be a single woman, a career woman, a lesbian, a single mom by choice, a live-in lover, a married-for-now wife, a married-forever wife. And the same for work: I’m on my third career.”

But the wider menu of identities comes with a decreasing assurance that any particular identity will last. This is because a culture of deregulation has slipped from our economic life into our cultural life. Gen X’ers, at least in the middle class, can be more picky in finding “just the right mate” and “just the right career.” But once you’ve found them, you begin to wonder if you can keep them.

In his book “The New Insecurity,” Jerald Wal lulis, a philosopher at the University of South Carolina, observed that in the last 30 years, people have shifted the way they base their identity: from marriage and employment to marriage-ability and employability. Old anchors no longer hold, and a sense of history is lost. For the generations of the 80’s and 90’s, this rootlessness is their World War II, their Vietnam. And it presents a more difficult challenge than the one faced by the 60’s generation.

Mr. de Lissovoy’s parents divorced when he was a baby and now live on opposite coasts. Consider, too, the shifting family ties of a 27-year-old computer programmer in Silicon Valley, who asked that her name be withheld. “My mother divorced four times and is living on uncertain terms with her fifth,” she said, “so I’m not sure if she’ll stay with him either. I haven’t gotten attached to any of my stepdads. My dad remarried four times, too, only now he’s married to a woman I like.”

When her parents divorced, she spent every other weekend with her father. “My dad was glad to see me, but I’d have to remind him of the name of my best friends,” she said. “He didn’t know what mattered to me. After a while it just got to be dinner and a video, and after that, I didn’t feel much like going to his apartment.”

Talking about her love life, she said: “If I meet someone I really like, I become shy and tied up in knots. I can’t talk about anything personal.” It was as if she did not dare to begin a relationship for fear of ending it.

After the parents of another young woman divorced, her father married a woman as young as his daughter, and is very involved with his new, young children who are the same age as his grandchildren. Now, when his daughter tries to arrange a visit between her father and his grandchildren, he is often too pinched for time to see them. His daughter feels hurt and angry—first to miss out on a father, then a grandfather.

Reflecting on these generational jumbles, Mr. de Lissovoy commented: “Today’s hype is that ‘You can get it if you really want it’—a mate, career and love still sells a lot of tickets. We’re the Generation of Individual Choice. Which? Which? Which? But the bottom can fall out from some of those choices. And in the end, we’re orphans.
We’re supposed to take care of ourselves. That’s our only choice.”

Not every young person I have talked with has felt so adrift. The 20-somethings of the 90’s have more material resources than their predecessors—ample job opportunities, for example.

Still, Mr. de Lissovoy’s feelings reflect something true about America these days. Despite the recent economic miracle, we are experiencing a care deficit. Social services have been cut; hospitals release patients 24 hours after surgery to recover at home. But who is home to do the caring? Two-thirds of mothers are working. One-quarter of households are headed by single mothers; they need help, too. Paradoxically, American individualism and pride in self-sufficiency lead us to absorb rather than resist this deficit: “Care? Who needs care? I can handle it,” thus adding one problem to another.

If in previous decades large historic events drew people together and oriented them to action, the recent double trend toward more choice but less security leads the young to see their lives in more individual terms. Big events collectivize, little events atomize. So with people facing important but private problems, and thinking in individual, not collective, terms, the coast became clear in the 80’s and 90’s for the marketplace to stalk into this cultural void and introduce generation-defining clothes, music and videos.

Generations X and Y function as market gimmicks nowadays. The market dominates not just economic life, as the economist Robert Kuttner argues in “Everything for Sale,” but our cultural life as well. It tells us what a generation is—a Pepsi generation, a Mac generation, an Internet generation. And a magazine about shoot-em-up computer games calls itself NextGen.

Advertisers are appealing to children over the heads of their parents. Juliet B. Schor, an economics lecturer at Harvard, suggests that the younger generation is the cutting edge of a full-blown market culture. More than $2 billion is spent on advertising directed at them, 20 times the amount spent a decade ago. Most of the advertising is transmitted through television; it is estimated that youngsters increased their viewing time one hour a day between 1970 and 1990. Three out of five children ages 12 to 17 now have a TV in their bedroom. Advertisers are trying to enlist children against their parents’ better judgment, Dr. Schor said recently, and overworked parents sometimes give in and go along. If Dr. Schor is correct, Generation Y might be defined even more than Generation X by what its members buy than by what they do or who they are.

Marketing strategists, meanwhile, are turning over all the generations faster, slicing and dicing the life cycle into thinner strips. In the computer industry, an advertising generation is nine months; in the clothing industry, a season. In department stores, between the displays for girls in their preteens and teens, is a new age, “tweens.” The identity promised by a style or a brand name for one generation is marked off from an increasing number of others. And the styles continually replace old with new.

This creates a certain consumer logic. Older consumers buy what makes them feel young, while young consumers, up to a point, buy what makes them feel older. So the preteenager will buy the tween thing while the teenager will buy the 20-something jacket, and the 40-year-old will browse in the racks for 30-year-olds.

To be sure, every American decade has fashion marketeers define generational looks and sounds, but probably never before have they so totally hijacked a generation’s cultural expression. Allison Pugh, a 33-year-old married mother of two and a graduate student in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, said: “I definitely feel like people just two or three years younger than me are the beginning of another generation. But I can only say why by pointing to superficial things, like how many pierces they have, how high their shoes are and what kind of music they listen to. I roomed with a girl just two years younger and she listened to Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana and Hole. I was ‘old’—as in out of it—even just a few years out of college. I started to sound like my mother: ‘That’s not music; what is that noise?’ ”
Like Ms. Pugh, Mr. de Lissovoy is considered old to the generation at his heels. He is wired, but feels ambivalent about it. “What I don’t like is disposability, hyperspeed, consumption,” he said. “I’d like to reduce these. What I want more of is face-to-face interaction, a value on repair, families living nearby each other. I’d love to live in a multigenerational, multiracial cohousing project. And a more leisurely pace of life. I want some pretty old-fashioned things.”

The 60’s generation is hitting 60, and with some computer nerds striking it rich, 60’s-era protests are not defining the new generation. But that era’s flame is not dead. In front of a large gathering at the Pauley ballroom on the Berkeley campus a few months ago, the Mario Savio Young Activist Award for 1999—named after the leader of the 1964 Free Speech Movement—was given to Nikki Bas, a 31-year-old American of Filipino descent who coordinates Sweatshop Watch, a campaign against the poor pay and working conditions of third-world workers who make football uniforms and other clothing sold on American college campuses. Mr. de Lissovoy remembers hearing about Mr. Savio from his 60’s activist mother, but he does not know Nikki Bas, is no longer a student and is under time pressure at work. So he is not signing up.

Still, from a distance he watched the protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization late last year, and they kindled a sense of the importance of history that he feels the market is driving out. “I hated the mindless anarchists who broke shop windows,” he said. “But the other protesters who went there to speak up against mega-corporations running the show, and for the family farm, local communities, monarch butterflies and sea turtles—they are taking the long view of the planet. We usually think it’s the older generation that wants to preserve the past, and it’s the young who don’t mind tearing things up. In Seattle, the young environmentalists had their eye on history, and it was the old who had an eye on their pocketbooks.”

Ultimately, market generations are generations of things, and they can make us forget generations of people. “My generation doesn’t know how globalization will turn out,” Mr. de Lissovoy said. “But we won’t see how globalization is messing us up if we’ve forgotten how the world used to be. Whichever way, we don’t see that what we are doing is forgetting the past. And we’re nobodies without a sense of history.”

He recalled how baseball caps with X’s became popular with teenagers, especially in Detroit, after Spike Lee’s film on Malcolm X came out. “When a TV interviewer asked a kid about the X on his cap, he didn’t know who Malcolm X was,” Mr. de Lissovoy said. “He didn’t even know he was a person. We need to appreciate the work it takes to get us where we are. Otherwise we aren’t anywhere.”

**GENE**

**RATION 9-11**

*Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton*

Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton are writers for *Newsweek*. This article appeared in the November 12, 2001 edition, almost exactly two months after the terrorist attacks. Here is an excerpt from the article, the opening section that presents the view that “kids who grew up with peace and prosperity are facing their defining moment.” The rest of the article consists of reporting on what happened at the University of Michigan in the days immediately following 9/11.

**SUGGESTION FOR READING**

Notice that Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton use roughly the same idea of a generation that Arlie Russell Hochschild does—an age group that finds its collective identity in a decisive historical moment. As you read, pay attention to how Kantrowitz and Naughton set up the problem of generational identity.
It was a sleepy, gray afternoon—a challenge to any professor. And for the first few minutes of class last week, University of Michigan sociologist David Schoem had some trouble rousing the 18 freshmen in his seminar on “Democracy and Diversity.” One student slurped yogurt while another stretched his arms wide and yawned. A few others casually took notes. But the lassitude ended abruptly when Schoem switched the discussion to America’s war on terrorism. For the rest of the hour, the students argued passionately and articulately about foreign policy, racism and media coverage. Then, New Yorker Georgina Levitt offered one view that stopped the debate cold. “September 11 has changed us more than we realize,” she said. “This just isn’t going to go away.”

At Michigan and campuses all around the country, the generation that once had it all—peace, prosperity, even the dot-com dream of retiring at 30—faces its defining moment. College students are supposed to be finding their place in the world, not just a profession but also an intellectual framework for learning and understanding the rest of their lives. After the terrorist attacks, that goal seems more urgent and yet more elusive than ever. In the first week, they prayed together, lit candles and mourned. Now they’re packing teach-ins and classes on international relations, the Mideast, Islamic studies, even Arabic. Where they once dreamed of earning huge bonuses on Wall Street, they’re now thinking of working for the government, maybe joining the FBI or the CIA. They’re energized, anxious, eager for any information that will help them understand—and still a little bit in shock.

It’s too soon to tell whether 2001 will be more like 1941, when campuses and the country were united, or 1966, the beginning of a historic rift. So far, there have been only scattered signs of a nascent antiwar movement; at Michigan and other campuses, students’ views are in sync with the rest of the country’s. In the NEWSWEEK Poll conducted last week, 83 percent of young Americans said they approved of President George W. Bush’s job performance and 85 percent favored the current military action. These figures are consistent across all age groups. But students also understand that the future is increasingly unpredictable and that long-held beliefs and assumptions will be severely tested in the next few years. “Our generation, as long as we’ve had an identity, was known as the generation that had it easy,” says Greg Epstein, 24, a graduate student in Judaic studies at Michigan. “We had no crisis, no Vietnam, no Martin Luther King, no JFK. We’ve got it now. When we have kids and grandkids, we’ll tell them that we lived through the roaring ’90s, when all we cared about was the No. 1 movie or how many copies an album sold. This is where it changes.”

What will they make of their moment? It’s always tricky to generalize about a generation, but before September 11, American college students were remarkably insular. Careers were their major concern both during the high-tech boom (how to cash in) and after (how to get a job). According to the annual survey of college freshmen conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, only 28.1 percent of last year’s freshman class reported following politics, compared with a high of 60.3 percent in 1966. Nationwide, campus activism has been low key through the 1990s. That was true even at Michigan, the birthplace of SDS and a hotbed of antiwar protest during Vietnam. Alan Haber, a 65-year-old peace protester and fixture on the Ann Arbor campus since his own student days in the 1960s, says that before September 11, there was no central issue that ignited everyone, just a lot of what he describes as “little projects”: protests against sweatshops or nuclear weapons. He thinks that may change as these campus activists begin questioning the U.S. military efforts. “This situation,” he says, “bangs on the head and opens a heart.”

Despite their perceived apathy and political inexperience, this generation may be uniquely qualified to understand the current battle. “I think they realize more than the adults that this is a clash of cultures,” says University of Pennsylvania president Judith Rodin, “something we haven’t seen in a thousand years.” While their parents’ high-school history lessons concentrated almost exclusively on Western Europe, they’ve learned about Chinese
dynasties, African art, even Islam. They are more likely than their parents to have dated a person from another culture or race, and to have friends from many economic and ethnic backgrounds. Their campuses as well are demographically very different from those of a generation ago. “It’s gone from a more elite institution to more of a micro-cosm of the population,” says David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, a national association of colleges and universities.

Others argue that this spirit of tolerance can have a downside, particularly now. When author David Brooks, who wrote a widely discussed Atlantic Monthly article on rampant pre-professionalism at Princeton last year, returned there after September 11, he found a surging interest in global affairs and issues of right and wrong—but also a frustration with the moral relativism of much of the curriculum (see this week’s Web Exclusive at Newsweek.MSNBC.com). One student told him that he had been taught how to deconstruct and dissect, but never to construct and decide.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Written before 9/11, Arlie Russell Hochschild calls attention to the fact that twenty- and thirty-year-olds in the 1990s did not face a defining historical event such as the Depression, World War II, or Vietnam. Nonetheless, she suggests that “underneath this confusing, ambiguous flow of events is a trend toward a more loosely jointed, limited-liability society, the privatizing influence of that trend and the crash-boom-bang of the market” as the defining feature of a generation. What exactly does she mean by this trend? In what sense does it produce a shared consciousness, just as the historical events she lists have done for earlier generations? Think here in particular of how marketing creates generations.

2. Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton’s “Generation 9-11” seems to assume that September 11, 2001, represents a defining historical moment in the life of a generation. Notice, however, that they leave the meaning of this defining moment open-ended, asking “whether 2001 will be more like 1941, when campuses and the country were united, or 1966, the beginning of a historic rift.” Clearly, they are using 1941 to refer to the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the onset of U.S. involvement in World War II, on one hand, and 1966 to refer to beginnings of an antiwar movement and the deep split in the American public over the Vietnam War, on the other. You are reading this excerpt several years after 9/11. Looking back, to what extent does that defining moment of September 11, 2001, now resemble 1941 or 1966? Consider whether these historical analogies are helpful at all in understanding the impact of 9/11. Are there other, different historical precedents that might be clarifying?

3. What is your view of the influence of 9/11? Is it a defining moment? If so, how? If not, why not?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING**

1. Read Barbara Kantrowitz and Keith Naughton’s entire article in the November 12, 2001 Newsweek. Jot down your own account of what happened in your school or community immediately following 9/11. But don’t stop there. Step back and ask, from your own perspective several years later, what the meaning of those events is. Write an essay that both describes what happened around 9/11 and what you now see as its meaning.

2. Arlie Russell Hochschild links two notions—personal choice and personal insecurity. Write an essay that begins by explaining what she means by this linkage. Give examples from your own experience or draw on what you’ve read and what you know. To what extent does the link help to explain the collective mood of a generation?

3. Update the two readings. Write an essay that explains the impact of 9/11 on your generation.
Allen Ginsberg

Allen Ginsberg (1926–97) is one of greatest American poets of the twentieth century. Drawing on Walt Whitman and William Blake for inspiration, Ginsberg wrote “Howl” over a period of time in 1955 and 1956. It quickly became both the anthem of the Beat Generation and the source of an obscenity court case (in which “Howl” was judged “legal” in 1957). Ginsberg subsequently published books of poetry such as Planet News (1963), The Fall of America (1971), and Plutonian Ode (1980). Along with Jack Kerouac’s novel On the Road, “Howl” defines the sensibility of the Beat Generation of the 1950s and forms a key link to Bob Dylan, the antiwar movement, and the counterculture of the 1960s.

“Howl” is divided into three parts. Notice that Part I is actually one long sentence, linked by clauses that begin with “who.” Part II focuses on Moloch, the pagan deity in the Old Testament to whom children were sacrificed. Part III uses direct address—to Carl Solomon, to whom the poem is dedicated: “I am with you in Rockland,” the mental institution where Ginsberg met Solomon (and where perhaps the theme “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness” begins).

1

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed
by madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro
streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the
ancient heavenly connection to the starry
dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed
and high sat up smoking in the supernatural
darkness of cold-water flats floating across the
tops of cities contemplating jazz.

5

who bared their brains to Heaven under the
El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on
tenement roofs illuminated,
who passed through universities with radi-
ant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-
light tragedy among the scholars of war,
who were expelled from the academies for
crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows
of the skull,

10

who got busted in their pubic beards return-
ing through Laredo with a belt of marijuana for
New York,

who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpen-
tine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their
torsos night after night

with dreams, with drugs, with waking night-
mares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,

incomparable blind streets of shuddering
cloud and lightning in the mind leaping toward
poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the
motionless world of Time between.

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree
cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the
rooftops, storefront boroughs of tethead joyride
neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree
vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brook-
lyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind,

who chained themselves to subways for the
endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on ben-
zedrine until the noise of wheels and children
brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked
and battered bleak of brain all drained of bril-
liance in the drear light of Zoo,
who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford’s floated out and sat through the stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi’s, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox, who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge, a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon, yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars, 
whole intellects disgorged in total recall for seven days and nights with brilliant eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement, who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall, suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark’s bleak furnished room, who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts, who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night, who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas, who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian angels who were visionary indian angels, who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy, who jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on the impulse of winter midnight streetlight smalltown rain, who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa, who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico leaving behind nothing but the shadow of dungarees and the lava and ash of poetry scattered in fireplace Chicago, who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets, who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism, who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed, who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons, who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication, who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts, who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love, who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may, who hiccuped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blond & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword, who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman’s loom, who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on
the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness,
who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barns and naked in the lake,
who went whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars, N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver—joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses’ rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings & especially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys too,
who faded out in vast sordid movies, were shifted in dreams, woke on a sudden Manhattan, and picked themselves up out of basements hungover with heartless Tokay and horrors of Third Avenue iron dreams & stumbled to unemployment offices,
who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steamheat and opium,
who created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion,
who ate the lamb stew of the imagination or digested the crab at the muddy bottom of the rivers of Bowery,
who wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of onions and bad music,
who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and rose up to build harpsichords in their lofts,
who coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology,
who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish,
who cooked rotten animals lung heart feet tail borsht & tortillas dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom,
who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg,
who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,
who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried,
who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,
who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks, not even one free beer,
who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street, danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles,
who barreled down the highways of the past journeying to each other’s hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz incarnation, who drove crosscountry seventy-two hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity,
who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver & waited in vain, who watched over Denver & brooded & loned in Denver and finally went away to find out the Time, & now Denver is lonesome for her heroes, who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each other’s salvation and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second,
who crashed through their minds in jail waiting for impossible criminals with golden heads
and the charm of reality in their hearts who sang sweet blues to Alcatraz,
who retired to Mexico to cultivate a habit, or Rocky Mount to tender Buddha or Tangiers to boys or Southern Pacific to the black locomotive or Harvard to Narcissus to Woodlawn to the daisychain or grave,
who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left with their insanity & their hands & a hung jury,
who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,
and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia,
who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong table, resting briefly in catatonia,
returning years later truly bald except for a wig of blood, and tears and fingers, to the visible madman doom of the wards of the madtowns of the East,
Pilgrim State’s Rockland’s and Greystone’s foetid halls, bickering with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon,
with mother finally *****, and the last fantastic book flung out of the tenement window, and the last door closed at 4 A.M. and the last telephone slammed at the wall in reply and the last furnished room emptied down to the last piece of mental furniture, a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet, and even that imaginary nothing but a hopeful little bit of hallucination—
ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you’re really in the total animal soup of time—
and who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipse the catalog the meter & the vibrating plane,
who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head, the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death,
and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio
with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.

II

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jail-house and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long
streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!

Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cock sucker in Moloch! Lack love and manless in Moloch!

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible mad houses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!

They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!

Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!

Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!

Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years’ animal screams and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!

III

1 Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland where you’re madder than I am

I’m with you in Rockland where you must feel very strange

I’m with you in Rockland where you imitate the shade of my mother

I’m with you in Rockland where you’ve murdered your twelve secretaries

5 I’m with you in Rockland where you laugh at this invisible humor

I’m with you in Rockland where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter

I’m with you in Rockland where your condition has become serious and is reported on the radio

I’m with you in Rockland where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses

I’m with you in Rockland where you drink the tea of the breasts of the spinsters of Utica

10 I’m with you in Rockland where you pun on the bodies of your nurses the harpies of the Bronx

I’m with you in Rockland where you scream in a straightjacket that you’re losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss

I’m with you in Rockland where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse

I’m with you in Rockland where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void

I’m with you in Rockland where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha

15 I’m with you in Rockland where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb

I’m with you in Rockland where there are twenty five thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale

I’m with you in Rockland where we hug and kiss the United States under our bed sheets the United States that coughs all night and won’t let us sleep

I’m with you in Rockland where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls’ airplanes roaring over the roof they’ve come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself
imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run
outside O starry-spangled shock of mercy the
eternal war is here O victory forget your under-
wear we’re free

I’m with you in Rockland in my dreams you
walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway
across America in tears to the door of my cottage
in the Western night

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. After you’ve read “Howl,” write for a five minutes or so. What is your overall reaction to
the poem? Pick out two or three especially striking lines or images in the poem. Now,
meet in a group of four or five. Compare your reactions to the poem. How would you
account for differences and similarities? What lines or images did you and other group
members pick out? What do these selections from the poem reveal about it?

2. As noted above Moloch (in Part II) is a pagan deity in the Old Testament who demands
the sacrifice of children. How does the sacrifice of children form a major theme in the
poem?

3. “Howl” defined the sensibility of a generation. What poem, song, or other form of cul-
tural expression does that work today?

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. “Howl” is filled with anxiety, fear, desire, and hope. Write an essay that sorts out the
conflicting feelings in the poem.

2. Who would or could write a version of “Howl” today?

3. Write your own version of “Howl.” Begin with “I have seen the best minds of my gener-
ation….” and go from there. Write a poem or an essay, as you see fit.

CHECKING OUT
THE WEB

1. As Michael Pope suggests in “Gen X’s Enduring Legacy: The Internet,” the
meanings ascribed to Generation X have changed over time. Do a Web search
using “Generation X” as the keywords. Surf through several sites, paying
attention to the representation of Generation X that comes to the surface.
What meanings and characteristics of the generation appear in each? What
do they have in common? What differences do you see? How would you
account for these differences and similarities?

2. The readings in this chapter reveal how adults represent young people. To get
a sense of how young people today represent themselves on-line, check out
a number of teen e-zines. YO: Youth Outlook at http://www.youthoutlook.org
and About Teens at http://www.aboutteens.org are places to start, but there
are many others e-zines for youth and college-age students. How do teens and
college students represent themselves, their concerns, and their interests?

3. Allen Ginsberg was a spokesman for the Beat Generation of the 1950s. You’ve
read his poem “Howl.” Do a Web search to put the poem in the historical
context of the Beat Generation and bring the results to class.
The identity of a generation takes shape in part through the movies. Since the 1950s, movies about teenagers and youth culture have explored generational identities and intergenerational conflicts. In The Wild One, Blackboard Jungle, and Rebel Without a Cause (the 1950s); The Graduate and Easy Rider (the 1960s); Saturday Night Fever and American Graffiti (the 1970s); River's Edge, The Breakfast Club, and Fast Times at Ridgemont High (the 1980s); and Do the Right Thing, Boyz'n the Hood, Slackers, and Clerks (the 1990s), to name some of the best-known movies, Hollywood and independent filmmakers have fashioned influential representations of young people.

This section considers how movies represent various youth cultures and their relations to adult culture. Think about what the term representation means. A key term in cultural analysis, it is more complex than it appears. At first glance, it seems to mean simply showing what is there, reflecting life as it occurs. But the complexity comes in because the medium of representation—whether language or moving images—has its own codes and conventions that shape the way people see and understand what is being shown. By the same token, representation is not just the result of a writer's or filmmaker's intentions. Readers and viewers make sense of the codes and conventions of representation in different ways, depending on their interests and social position. So to think about the representation of youth cultures in films in a meaningful way, consider how the images of youth culture in film have been filtered through such conventions as the feature film, the Hollywood star system, and the available stock of characters and plots viewers will recognize and respond to.

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY FILMS

James Gilbert

James Gilbert is an American historian at the University of Maryland. The following selection is taken from Gilbert's book A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to Juvenile Delinquency in the 1950s (1988). Here, Gilbert traces the emergence in the 1950s of juvenile delinquency films and popular responses to them. This selection consists of the opening paragraph of Gilbert's chapter “Juvenile Delinquency Movies” and his analysis of The Wild One, Blackboard Jungle, and Rebel Without a Cause.

Notice how Gilbert sets up his dominant theme in the opening paragraph, when he explains that widespread public concern with juvenile delinquency presents Hollywood with “dangerous but lucrative possibilities.” Take note of how Gilbert defines these “possibilities” in the opening paragraph and then follow how he traces this theme through his discussion of the three films.

Whereas, shortly after the screening of this movie the local police had several cases in which the use of knives by young people were involved and at our own Indiana Joint High School two girls, while attending a high school dance, were cut by a knife wielded by a teenager who by his own admission got the idea from watching “Rebel Without a Cause.”

Now Therefore Be It Resolved by the Board of Directors of Indiana Joint High School that said Board condemns and deplores the exhibition of pictures such as “Rebel Without a
The enormous outpouring of concern over juvenile delinquency in the mid-1950s presented the movie industry with dangerous but lucrative possibilities. An aroused public of parents, service club members, youth-serving agencies, teachers, adolescents, and law enforcers constituted a huge potential audience for delinquency films at a time when general audiences for all films had declined. Yet this was a perilous subject to exploit, for public pressure on the film industry to set a wholesome example for youth remained unremitting. Moreover, the accusation that mass culture caused delinquency—especially the “new delinquency” of the postwar period—was the focus of much contemporary attention. If the film industry approached the issue of delinquency, it had to proceed cautiously. It could not present delinquency favorably; hence all stories would have to be set in the moral firmament of the movie Code. Yet to be successful, films had to evoke sympathy from young people who were increasingly intrigued by the growing youth culture of which delinquency seemed to be one variant.

Stanley Kramer’s picture, The Wild One, released in 1953, stands in transition from the somber realism of “film noir” pessimism and environmentalism to the newer stylized explorations of delinquent culture that characterized the mid-1950s. Shot in dark and realistic black and white, the film stars Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin as rival motorcycle gang leaders who invade a small California town. Brando’s character is riven with ambiguity and potential violence—a prominent characteristic of later juvenile delinquency heroes. On the other hand, he is clearly not an adolescent, but not yet an adult either; belonging to a suspended age that seems alienated from any recognizable stage of development. He appears to be tough and brutal, but he is not, nor, ultimately, is he as attractive as he might have been. His character flaws are appealing, but unnerving. This is obvious in the key symbol of the film, the motorcycle trophy which he carries. He has not won it as the townspeople assume; he has stolen it from a motorcycle “scramble.” Furthermore, he rejects anything more than a moment’s tenderness with the girl he meets. In the end, he rides off alone, leaving her trapped in the small town that his presence has so disrupted and exposed. The empty road on which he travels leads to similar nameless towns; he cannot find whatever it is he is compelled to seek.

Brando’s remarkable performance made this film a brilliant triumph. Its moral ambiguity, however, and the very attractiveness of the alienated hero, meant that the producers needed to invoke two film code strategies to protect themselves from controversy. The first of these was an initial disclaimer appearing after the titles: “This is a shocking story. It could never take place in most American towns—but it did in this one. It is a public challenge not to let it happen again.” Framing the other end of the film was a speech by a strong moral voice of authority. A sheriff brought in to restore order to the town lectures Brando on the turmoil he has created and then, as a kind of punishment, casts him back onto the lonesome streets.

Aside from Brando’s stunning portrayal of the misunderstood and inarticulate antihero, the film did not quite emerge from traditional modes of presenting crime and delinquency: the use of black and white; the musical score with its foreboding big-band sound; the relatively aged performers; and the vague suggestions that Brando and his gang were refugees from urban slums. Furthermore, the reception to the film was not, as some might have predicted, as controversial as what was to come. Of course, there were objections—for example, New Zealand banned the film—but it did not provoke the outrage that the next group of juvenile delinquency films inspired.

The film that fundamentally shifted Hollywood’s treatment of delinquency was The Blackboard Jungle, produced in 1955, and in which
traditional elements remained as a backdrop for contemporary action. The movie was shot in black and white and played in a slum high school. But it clearly presented what was to become the driving premise of subsequent delinquency films—the division of American society into conflicting cultures made up of adolescents on one side and adults on the other. In this film the delinquent characters are portrayed as actual teenagers, as high school students. The crimes they commit are, with a few exceptions, crimes of behavior such as defying authority, status crimes, and so on. Of most symbolic importance is the transition in music that occurs in the film. Although it includes jazz numbers by Stan Kenton and Bix Beiderbecke, it is also the first film to feature rock and roll, specifically, “Rock Around the Clock” played by Bill Haley.

The story line follows an old formula of American novels and films. A teacher begins a job at a new school, where he encounters enormous hostility from the students. He stands up to the ringleader of the teenage rowdies, and finally wins over the majority of the students. In itself this is nothing controversial. But Blackboard Jungle also depicts the successful defiance of delinquents, who reject authority and terrorize an American high school. Their success and their power, and the ambiguous but attractive picture of their culture, aimed at the heart of the film Code and its commitment to uphold the dignity of figures and institutions of authority.

Still cautious, the studio opened the film with a disclaimer. It also used a policeman as a voice of authority who explained postwar delinquency in this way: “They were six years old in the last war. Father in the army. Mother in a defense plant. No home life. No Church life. No place to go. They form street gangs....Gang leaders have taken the place of parents.”

Despite this protective sermonizing, the film aroused substantial opposition. It did so for many reasons, but principally because it pictured a high school with unsympathetic administrators and teachers in the grip of teenage hoodlums. Given contemporary fears of just such a situation, and the belief that such was the case throughout the United States, the film’s realistic texture was shocking. But other elements distressed some audiences. For example, the leading adolescent character is a black student, played with enormous sympathy and skill by Sidney Poitier. And the clash of cultures and generations, which later became standard in juvenile delinquency films, was in this, its first real expression, stated with stark and frightening clarity. For example, in one crucial scene, a teacher brings his precious collection of jazz records to school to play for the boys, hoping, of course, to win them over. His efforts to reach out to them fail completely. The students mock and despise his music and then destroy his collection. They have their own music, their own culture, and their own language.

Public response to Blackboard Jungle provided a glimpse of the audience division between generations and cultures. Attending a preview of the film, producer Brooks was surprised, and obviously delighted, when young members of the audience began dancing in the aisles to the rock and roll music. This occurred repeatedly in showings after the film opened. But other reactions were more threatening. For example in Rochester, New York, there were reports that “young hoodlums cheered the beatings and methods of terror inflicted upon a teacher by a gang of boys” pictured in the film. But box office receipts in the first few weeks indicated a smash hit, and in New York City the first ten days at Loew’s State theater set a record for attendance.

Nevertheless, the film caused an angry backlash against the film industry. Censors in Memphis, Tennessee, banned it. It was denounced by legal organizations, teachers, reviewers like Bosley Crowther of the New York Times, and even by the Teenage Division of the Labor Youth League (a communist organization). The National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the Girl Scouts, the D.A.R., and the American Association of University Women disapproved it. The American Legion voted Blackboard Jungle the movie “that hurt America the most in foreign countries in 1955.” And the Ambassador to Italy, Clare Booth Luce,
with State Department approbation, forced the film’s withdrawal from the Venice Film Festival.

Following swiftly on this commercial success was Rebel Without a Cause, a very different sort of film, and perhaps the most famous and influential of the 1950s juvenile delinquency endeavors. Departing from the somber working-class realism of Blackboard Jungle, Rebel splashed the problem of middle-class delinquency across America in full color. Moreover, its sympathy lay entirely with adolescents, played by actors James Dean, Natalie Wood, and Sal Mineo, who all live wholly inside the new youth culture. Indeed, this is the substantial message of the film: each parent and figure of authority is grievously at fault for ignoring or otherwise failing youth. The consequence is a rebellion with disastrous results.

Once the script had been developed, shooting began in the spring of 1955, during the height of the delinquency dispute and following fast on the heels of the box-office success of Blackboard Jungle. Warner Brothers approved a last minute budget hike to upgrade the film to color. In part this was a response to the box office appeal of the star, James Dean, whose East of Eden was released to acclaim in early April.

When it approved the film, the Code Authority issued two warnings. Geoffrey Shurlock wrote to Jack Warner in March 1955: “As you know, we have steadfastly maintained under the requirements of the Code that we should not approve stories of underage boys and girls indulging in either murder or illicit sex.” He suggested that the violence in the picture be toned down. Furthermore, he noted: “It is of course vital that there be no inference of a questionable or homosexual relationship between Plato [Sal Mineo] and Jim [James Dean].” A follow-up commentary suggested the need for further changes in the area of violence. For example, Shurlock noted of the fight at the planetarium: “We suggest merely indicating that these high-school boys have tire chains, not showing them flaunting them.”

Despite these cautions, the film, when it was released, contained substantial violence: the accidental death of one of the teenagers in a “chickie run”; the shooting of another teenager; and Plato’s death at the hands of the police. Furthermore, there remained strong echoes of Plato’s homosexual interest in Jim.

The film also took a curious, ambiguous position on juvenile delinquency. Overtly, it disapproved, demonstrating the terrible price paid for misbehavior. Yet the film, more than any other thus far, glorified the teenage life-styles it purported to reject. Adult culture is pictured as insecure, insensitive, and blind to the problems of youth. Teenagers, on the other hand, are portrayed as searching for genuine family life, warmth, and security. They choose delinquency in despair of rejection by their parents. Indeed, each of the three young heroes is condemned to search for the emotional fulfillment that adults deny: Dean for the courage his father lacks; Natalie Wood (as his girlfriend) for her father’s love; and Plato for a family, which he finds momentarily in Dean and Wood. Instead of being securely set in adult society, each of these values must be constructed outside normal society and inside a new youth-created world. What in other films might have provided a reconciling finale—a voice of authority—becomes, itself, a symbol of alienation. A policeman who befriends Dean is absent at a decisive moment when he could have prevented the tragic ending. Thus no adults or institutions remain unscathed. The ending, in which adults recognize their own failings, is thus too sudden and contrived to be believable. It is as if the appearance of juvenile delinquency in such a middle-class setting is impossible to explain, too complex and too frightening to be understood in that context.

And also too attractive, for the film pictures delinquent culture as an intrusive, compelling, and dangerous force that invades middle-class homes and institutions. The producers carefully indicated that each family was middle class, although Plato’s mother might well be considered wealthier than that. Teenage, delinquent culture, however, has obvious working-class origins,
symbolized by souped-up jalopies, levis, and T-shirts that became the standard for youth culture. In fact, when Dean goes out for his fateful “chickie run,” he changes into T-shirt and levis from his school clothes. Furthermore, the film presents this delinquent culture without judgment. There is no obvious line drawn between what is teenage culture and what is delinquency. Is delinquency really just misunderstood youth culture? The film never says, thus reflecting public confusion on the same issue.

A second tactic of the filmmakers posed a philosophic problem about youth culture and delinquency. This emerges around the symbol of the planetarium. In the first of two scenes there, Dean’s new high school class visits for a lecture and a show. The lecturer ends his presentation abruptly with a frightening suggestion—the explosion of the world and the end of the universe. He concludes: “Man existing alone seems an episode of little consequence.” This existential reference precedes the rumble in which Dean is forced to fight his new classmates after they puncture the tires of his car. The meaning is clear: Dean must act to establish an identity which his parents and society refuse to grant him. This is a remarkable translation of the basic premise of contemporary Beat poets, whose solitary search for meaning and self-expression tinged several of the other initial films in this genre also.

Another scene at the planetarium occurs at night, at the end of the film. The police have pursued Plato there after he shoots a member of the gang that has been harassing Dean. Dean follows him into the building, and, in a reprise of the earlier scene, turns on the machine that lights the stars and planets. The two boys discuss the end of the world. Dean empties Plato’s gun, and the confused youth then walks out of the building. The police, mistaking his intent, gun him down. Once again tragedy follows a statement about the ultimate meaninglessness of life.

By using middle-class delinquency to explore questions of existence, this film undeniably contested the effectiveness of traditional family and community institutions. There is even the hint that Dean, Wood, and Mineo represent the possibility of a new sort of family; but this is only a fleeting suggestion. In the end it is family and community weakness that bring tragedy for which there can be no real solution. Without the strikingly sympathetic performances of Dean, Wood, and Mineo, this picture might have fallen under the weight of its bleak (and pretentious) message. As it was, however, Rebel Without a Cause was a box office smash, and Dean’s short, but brilliant career was now assured.

As with Blackboard Jungle, the MPAA was the focus of furious reaction to the film. Accusations of copycat crimes, particularly for a stabbing in Indiana, Pennsylvania, brought condemnations and petitions against “pictures which depict abnormal or subnormal behavior by the youth of our country and which tend to deprave the morals of young people.” The MPAA fought back against this accusation in early 1956 as Arthur DeBra urged an investigation to discover if the incident at the Indiana, Pennsylvania, high school had any relationship to the “juvenile delinquency situation in the school and community.” As one writer for the Christian Science Monitor put it, “the new Warner Brothers picture will emerge into the growing nationwide concern about the effects on youth of comics, TV, and movies.” This prediction was based upon actions already taken by local censors. The Chicago police had ordered cuts in the film, and the city of Milwaukee banned it outright.

On the other hand, much of the response was positive. As Variety noted in late 1955, fan letters had poured in to Hollywood “from teenagers who have identified themselves with the characters; from parents who have found the film conveyed a special meaning; and from sociologists and psychiatrists who have paid tribute to the manner in which child-parent misunderstanding is highlighted.”

Quite clearly, the film became a milestone for the industry. It established youth culture as a fitting subject for films, and created some of the most pervasive stereotypes that were repeated in later films. These included the tortured, alienated, and misunderstood youth and intolerant parents
and authority figures. It did not, however, lead to more subtle explorations of the connections between youth culture and delinquency. If anything, the opposite was true. For one thing, Dean was killed in an auto accident shortly after this enormous success. Furthermore, it was probably the seriousness of *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel* that provoked controversy, and the movie industry quickly learned that it could attract teenage audiences without risking the ire of adults if it reduced the dosage of realism. Thus the genre deteriorated into formula films about teenagers, made principally for drive-in audiences who were not particular about the features they saw.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Gilbert notes that *Rebel Without a Cause* became a “milestone” for the film industry, establishing youth culture as a fitting (and profitable) subject and creating stereotypes of alienated youth and intolerant adults that recurred in later movies. Consider to what extent these stereotypes continue to appear in movies. How would you update their appearance since the 1950s? List examples of movies that use the conventionalized figures of alienated youth and intolerant adults. What continuity do you see over time? In what ways have the portrayals changed?

2. Gilbert says that by “using middle-class delinquency to explore questions of existence,” *Rebel Without a Cause* “contested the effectiveness of traditional family and community institutions.” Explain what Gilbert means. Can you think of other films that “contest” family and community institutions?

3. Watch the three films Gilbert discusses—*The Wild One, Blackboard Jungle,* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. Working together with a group of classmates, first summarize Gilbert’s discussion of how each film handles the dilemma of evoking viewers’ sympathy for young people while in no way presenting delinquency in a favorable light. Next, develop your own analysis of how (or whether) each film creates sympathy for young people in their confrontations with the adult world. To what extent do you agree with Gilbert’s line of analysis? Where do you differ with or want to modify his analysis?

**SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENT**

Pick a film or group of films that in some way characterizes a generation of young people. For example, analyze how *The Graduate* captures something important about youth in the 1960s. Or look at how a cluster of three or four films portrays the “twentysomething” generation of the 1990s. Or you can follow *Newsweek*’s example in “Raging Teen Hormones” and put together a timeline that reveals some trend in youth films. (Notice how the thermometer registers how “hot” the film is.)

Write an analysis of how the film or films represent youth. Do not decide whether the portrayal is accurate, but analyze how it constructs a certain image of youth culture and what might be the significance of the representation.
Here are some suggestions to help you examine how a film represents youth culture:

- **How does the film portray young people?** What in particular marks them as “youth”? Pay particular attention to the characters’ clothing, hairstyles, body posture, and ways of speaking.

- **How does the film mark young people generationally?** Are the characters part of a distinctive youth subculture? How would you characterize the group’s collective identity? What is the relation of the group to the adult world and its institutions? What intergenerational conflicts figure in the film?

- **How does the film portray a particular historical moment or decade?** What visual clues enable viewers to locate the era of the film? What historical events, if any, enter into the film?

- **How does the soundtrack contribute to the representation of youth culture that is projected by the film?**

- **How do the stars of the film influence viewers’ perceptions of youth culture?** Do they enhance viewers’ sympathies? Are the main characters cultural icons like James Dean or Marlon Brando?

**FIELDWORK**

**Ethnographic Interviews**

Music is one of the keys to generational identities. Songs carry the emotional power to define for their listeners what it means to be alive at a particular moment. Singers and musicians evoke generations and decades—Frank Sinatra’s emergence as a teen idol in the big band era of the 1940s; Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, and early rock and roll in the 1950s; the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Motown, and the Memphis sound of Aretha Franklin and Otis Redding in the 1960s; the funk of Parliament and War, disco, and punk bands such as the Clash and Sex Pistols in the 1970s; the megastars Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Michael Jackson, the rap of Public Enemy and NWA, alternative, and the grunge groups of the 1980s and 1990s.

One way to figure out how people experience their lives as part of a generation is to investigate what music means to them. The fieldwork project in this chapter investigates how people across generations use music daily to create, maintain, or subvert individual and collective identities. The method is the ethnographic interview, a nondirective approach that asks people to explain how they make sense of music in their lives. “Ethnographic” means literally graphing—getting down in the record—the values and practices of the ethnos, the tribe or group.

**MY MUSIC**

*Susan D. Craft, Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil*

The following three ethnographic interviews come from the Music in Daily Life Project in the American Studies program at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The project’s goal was to use open-ended ethnographic interviews to find out what music means to people and how they integrate music into their lives and identities. Two undergraduate classes conducted
EDWARDO

Edwardo is fifteen years old and is enrolled in an auto mechanics program at a vocational high school.

Q: What kind of music do you like to listen to?
A: Basically, I listen to anything. I prefer rap and regular…R and B and rock.

Q: What groups do you listen to when you get a choice?
A: When I’m by myself, I listen to rap like Eric B, MC Hammer, and KRS I. People like that. When I’m with my friends, I listen to Ozzie, and Pink Floyd, Iron Maiden, Metallica. You know, groups like that.

Q: Why do you listen to different stuff when you’re by yourself? Different than when you’re with your friends?
A: Usually when I’m over at their house they have control of the radio, and they don’t like to listen to rap that much.

Q: What kind of things do you do when you are listening to music by yourself?
A: I lip-synch it in the mirror. I pretend I’m doing a movie. Kind of embarrassing, but I do that. And I listen to it while I’m in the shower. And…that’s about all.

Q: Would you like to be a professional musician?
A: Kind of. Yeah.

Q: If you pictured yourself as a musician, how would you picture yourself? What kind of music would you play?
A: I’d probably rap. If I didn’t, I’d like to play the saxophone.

Q: When you’re walking along, do you ever have a song going through your head? Do you have specific songs that you listen to and, if not, do you ever make up songs?
A: Yes. I rap a lot to myself. I make up rhymes and have one of my friends give it a beat. Sometimes we put it on tape. Sometimes we don’t.

Q: Could you give me an example of some of the stuff you have put together on your own?
A: I made up one that goes something like, “Now I have many mikes/stepped on many floors./Shattered all the windows/knocked down all the doors.” That’s just a little part of it. This is hard for me. I’m nervous.

Q: So what kind of things do you try to put together in your songs? What kinds of things do you try to talk about in your songs?
A: I make up different stories. Like people running around. Sometimes I talk about drugs and drinking. Most of the time I just brag about myself.

Q: Do you have any brothers and sisters who listen to the same sort of stuff?
A: Yes. My older brother…he’s the one who got me into rap. We’re originally from the Bronx, in New York, and he doesn’t listen to anything else. My cousin, he listens to heavy metal but he’s kind of switched to late-seventies, early-seventies rock. He listens to Pink Floyd and all them, so I listen with him sometimes. I listen with my friends. That’s about all.

Q: How long have you been listening to rap?
A: For about seven or eight years.

Q: What kind of stuff were you listening to before that?
A: Actually, I don’t remember. Oh yeah. We used to live in California and I was listening to oldies…like the Four Tops and all them. In California…the Mexicans down there, they only listen to the oldies and stuff like that.

Q: Why would you say you changed to rap?
A: When I came down here, everything changed. People were listening to different kinds of music and I was, you know, behind times. So I just had to switch to catch up.

Q: So you would say that your friends really influence you and the kind of music you listen to by yourself?

A: Yeah. I would say that.

Q: When you’re listening to music by yourself, what kinds of things go through your mind? Are you concentrating on the words or what?

A: Sometimes I think about life, and all the problems I have. Sometimes I just dwell on the lyrics and just listen to the music.

Q: Do you ever use music as a way to change your mood? If you’re really depressed, is there a record you put on?

A: No. Usually when I listen to music and it changes me is when I’m bored and I don’t have anything to do or I just get that certain urge to listen to music.

RALPH

Ralph is thirty-three years old, an experienced truck driver working as a bus driver for a city transit authority when he was interviewed by a male friend.

I was weaned on the music of the fifties. My musical taste began to form in about…well, my first record album was Chubby Checker’s “Let’s Do the Twist”…that was 1961. I begged my mom for it. I saw it up at a grocery store here; I had to have it. So she bought it for me. I really dug that.

I still really dig those old rhythm and blues bands back then. I was mainly a product of the Beatles–Rolling Stones–Dave Clark Five era. You know, I never really cared for the Rolling Stones when they first came out. My big group was the Dave Clark Five. I thought they were it until I heard they died in a plane crash somewhere in France, which was a big rumor of the day; but two or three weeks later we found out they didn’t die.

I was a Beatles generation kid. I can still remember most of the lyrics of most of the songs they put out. It’s a result of constant repetition of it being drummed into my head constantly…just as I’m sure that like somebody who was born in the seventies…David Bowie…I’m sure that a teenager in the seventies would know the words to his songs—“Ziggy Stardust,” the early Bowie stuff.

Did the Beatles direct me? Yes, they had some influence on my life. I hate to admit it, but they did. They always painted a rosy picture when I was growing up. It was all love and peace, the flower-child movement. But at that time someone who had a big influence on my musical life was my big brother. He was bringing home stuff like the Supremes at the A-Go-Go…blues…which I really think is the Lord’s music. Today you can’t find it anymore; there is very little of it coming out, if any.

Today’s music just depresses me; it’s like the doldrums between 1973 to about 1978…before the new pop or new wave scene arrived…the punkies, the pop stars. I can see things leading that way now too with all this techno-pop. Basically I was into jazz at the time; that’s when I got my jazz influences with Monk, Bird, and Coltrane. I used to listen to those people heavily back in the early 1970s. I really loved groups like the Mahavishnu Orchestra. I love jazz fusion and Jeff Beck, but there’s some people I really don’t care for…Pat Metheny. I never cared for him; why, I don’t know. Maybe he has no character in his guitar. It’s like a bland speed shuffle. Whereas people like Larry Coryell and John McLaughlin and Jeff Beck, Jan Akkerman…it’s just so distinct…their own personal signature. But guys like Pat Metheny and that guy who played with Chick Corea, Al Di Meola, they just don’t sign their work; it’s all just mumbo-jumbo to me. Other people like them; they sell, right? I don’t know; that’s my personal taste. I really appreciated any band with a truly outstanding guitarist, somebody you can say: Ah, now this is him…I really appreciate that, the signatures.

I like to hear music that I’m not going to hear anywhere else; judge it for myself. Another phase of my life I went through, I really appreciated the blues. From about ’67 to ’72 was really my blues era, when I was in college. Of course, a lot of peo-
people were blues addicts then. Everybody was getting drafted for Vietnam...the blues were very popular back then. You had a lot of English blues groups coming out, like the original Fleetwood Mac, Peter Green...who I thought was a phenomenal blues guitar player, phenomenal!...different groups like the Hedgehogs. A lot of groups shucked it off and went commercial; that really turned me off to them. I also happen to like Beach Boy music...all a rip-off of black history, all a rip-off of black music...but white fun...black fun translated into white fun. Surf music was big around '65 or '66. I'll admit it; we were punks.

Ah, let's see...punk. Where did punk start out? Malcolm McLaren? Malcolm McDowell in Clockwork Orange?...when he played the ultimate punk, Alex? Was it Richard Hell in 1974 in New York City with ripped T-shirts and safety pins? Punk is kind of a quaint way of expressing yourself. It hasn't come to murder yet; I wonder if it's gonna come down to murder-rock? You've got savage beating and stuff like that; I wonder if it's ever going to get there. It'll be interesting to see where it goes in the future...looking ahead.

These days I like to go into a bar with a quality jukebox...go in there, dump some quarters in the box, and listen to the old songs.

STEVE

Steve is fifty-seven years old and works as a salesman. He was interviewed by his daughter.

Q: Dad, what does music do for you?
A: What does music do for me? Well, music relaxes me. In order for me to explain, I have to go back and give you an idea exactly how my whole life was affected by music. For example, when I was five or six years old, my mother and father had come from Poland, so naturally all music played at home was ethnic music. This established my ethnic heritage. I had a love for Polish music. Later on in life, like at Polish weddings, they played mostly Polish music...since we lived in Cheektowaga and there is mostly Polish people and a Polish parish. My love for Polish music gave me enjoyment when I was growing up and it carried on all these years to the present time.

But naturally as I got educated in the English language I started going to the movies. I was raised during the Depression and, at that time, the biggest form of escape was musicals...people like Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, and Shirley Temple. These were big stars of their day and in order to relax and forget your troubles...we all went through hard times...everybody enjoyed musicals, they were the biggest thing at that time. A lot of musicals were shows from Broadway so, as I was growing up in the Depression and watching movie musicals, I was also getting acquainted with hit tunes that came from Broadway. In that era, Tin Pan Alley was an expression for the place where all these song writers used to write and compose music, and these songs became the hits in the musicals.

Later on these writers went to the movies and it seemed as if every month there was a new hit song that everyone was singing. Some of the writers, like Irving Berlin, Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Harry Warren, and Sammy Kahn...some of these songs are the prettiest songs that were ever written. Even though I never played a musical instrument or was a singer, I was like hundreds of thousands of people in my era who loved music. In fact, radio was very popular at that time, so you heard music constantly on the radio, in the musicals, and all my life I could sing a song all the way through, knowing the tune and knowing the words.

Later on in life, when we get to W.W. II, music used to inspire patriotism, and also to bring you closer to home when overseas. For example, one place that just meant music was the Stage Door Canteen in Hollywood. All the stars of the movies and musicals used to volunteer their services and entertain everybody. Later on, as these stars went overseas and performed for the G.I.s, I had a chance to see a lot of these stars in person—stars that I really enjoyed, seeing their movies and listening to their music. So it was like bringing home to overseas. Of course, there was a lot of patriotic songs that stirred us...we were young...say, the Air Force song like...
“Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.” There was sentimental songs like “There’ll Be Blue Birds Over the White Cliffs of Dover,” “I Heard a Nightingale Sing Over Berkeley Square.” But it was actually music that helped you through tough times like W.W. II, the way music helped you feel better during the Depression…in days that I was younger.

When I came back from overseas…now I’m entering the romantic part of my life, in my early twenties…it was the era of the big bands. One of the greatest events in music history were bands like Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman, the Dorsey Brothers and Sammy Kaye…big bands were popular at the time you used to go to local Candy Kitchens and play the jukebox, and, just like some of the songs said, it was a wonderful time to be with your friends. Good clean entertainment; you listen to the jukebox, dance on the dance floor.

In the big band era, we get into the popular singers who used to sing with the big bands. They went on their own and the era of the ballads was born, and to me this was my favorite era of music in my life. I’ll mention some of the big singers just to give you an idea of what I mean—singers like Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Margaret Whiting, Jo Stafford, and Perry Como.

The time of your life when you meet the “girl of your dreams.” I was fortunate that we had the Canadiana. It was just like the Love Boat of its time. They used to have a band, and you used to be able to dance on the dance floor. If they didn’t have a dance band that night, they would play records, and you could listen to music riding on the lake at night under the stars and moon. It was unbelievable, that particular part of life. It’s a shame the younger people of today couldn’t experience, not only the boat, but a lot of the things we went through. We thought it was tough at that time, but it was the music that really made things a lot happier and the reason why it’s so easy for someone like myself to hear a song and just place myself back in time, at exactly where I was. Was I in the Philippines, or Tokyo, or on the boat? What were the songs that were playing when I first met my wife, what were they playing when I was a young recruit in the Air Force? All I have to do is hear the songs and it’ll just take me back in time and I will relive a lot of the parts of my life and, of course, you only remember the good parts! (laughing) You don’t remember the bad.

Music to me is very important. One thought that I wanted to mention, about going back in time: when I was just five or six years old, my parents, because they were from the old country, played Polish music, so that when I did meet the girl I was going to marry…every couple has a favorite song and ours was one that was very popular at that time…it was a Polish song to which they put American lyrics. The song was “Tell Me Whose Girl You Are,” and I think it was because my wife and I came from a Polish background that Polish music was still a very important part of our life.

Q: What music really did for you was to make you get through bad times and made you think of good things mostly, right?
A: Well, yes, and I would say that music became part of my personality. I use music to not only relax, I use it to relieve tension. About thirty percent of the time I am singing, and it has become part of my personality because it has given me a certain amount of assurance. Not only does it relax me but I think it also bolsters my confidence in being a salesman where you have to always be up. You can’t be depressed. Otherwise, you’re just going to waste a day. I think music to me is also something that bolsters my spirit.

Q: Does music amplify your mood or does it change your mood? For example, when you’re in a depressed mood do you put on something slow or something happy to get you out of that mood?
A: Well, when I was single, if my love life wasn’t going right, I used to play sad songs. Well, I guess like most young kids when their love life isn’t going right they turn to sad music. I know that after I’m married and have children and more
experience, if I get in a depressed mood then I switch to happier music to change the mood.

Q: What do you think about today’s music?
A: (laughing) I could give you enough swear words….No, seriously, I will answer you. I can do it right off the top of my head because I was in a restaurant this morning and I heard a song being played on the radio, which was supposedly a big hit by a new big star. Supposedly this fellow is just as big as Michael Jackson. I think his name is Prince, singing “All Night Long” [Lionel Richie], and, my God when I heard that record where they kept repeating the words over and over, I said to myself, “God, how terrible it is that these kids are not getting benefit of the music that we had when I was younger,” because I can take one phrase and write a modern song. I could do the lyrics. And I’m not musical. Say, “Let’s Go Mud Wrestling Tonight, Let’s Go Mud Wrestling Tonight, You and I, Let’s Go Mud Wrestling Tonight. We will be in the mud, we will be in the mud. After the day is over, it’s night so Let’s Go Mud Wrestling Tonight!”

I really felt very sorry because I realize that the music that I’m telling you about now…music of my era…not only gave me relaxation, not only gave me a certain amount of stimulation…the lyrics of the songs actually educated me. I would say thirty percent of what I know about life today was gleaned from songs. You remember what you learned from a song. Today I heard Paul Robeson singing “Ol’ Man River,” and I remember seeing the movie with Paul Robeson—the best singer of all time, and the story where it had a mixed marriage, things going on now…the problems of the black people. He sang, “take me away from the White Man Boss.” That phrase stuck in my mind because as I heard the song today…and this song was sung thirty or forty years ago…I had also read in the editorial page why Reagan isn’t the best candidate for the blacks because they are losing a lot of what they have gained, and I began to realize what a long struggle these people are having.

Q: So, in other words, some of the music you listen to taught you about the people singing it and gave you knowledge…?
A: Well, not only taught me about the people singing, but about life in general, conditions. For example, during the Depression there was a big hit, “Brother Can You Spare A Dime?” and the words went, “…once I built a railroad…now I’m asking for a hand-out.”

It wasn’t just the person singing the song but the times. For example, during the war era we sang songs that were not only patriotic, but they taught us a lot about what we were fighting for, what was so important about saving America. In a lot of cases, the songs weren’t written by the religious but they had some religious overtones and brought in some sense of faith.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Edwardo’s responses to the interviewer’s questions are much shorter than Ralph’s or Steve’s. One senses the pressure that the interviewer must have felt to keep the conversation going. Ralph’s interview, though, is one long response. Steve’s contains an extended statement that is followed by question and answer. Take a second look at the questions that the interviewers ask of Edwardo and Steve. What do their purposes seem to be? Try to get a sense of how and why the interviewer decided to ask particular questions. What alternatives, if any, can you imagine?

2. Notice that the interviewees do not fall easily into one distinct musical subculture. Each talks about a range of music. How do Edwardo, Ralph, and Steve make sense of these various forms of musical expression?

3. Each of the interviewees relates his musical tastes to particular social groups or moments in time. How do they connect music to their relationship with others and/or their memories of the past?
Fieldwork Project
Work with two or three other students on this project. Each group member should interview three people of different ages to get a range of responses across generations. Use the opening question “What is music about for you?” from the Music in Daily Life project. Tape and transcribe the interview.

As a group, assemble and edit a collection of the interviews and write an introduction that explains the purpose of the interviews and their significance.

Editing
An edited interview is not simply the transcribed tape recording. It’s important to capture the person’s voice, but you also want the interview to be readable. Taped interviews can be filled with pauses, um’s and ah’s, incomplete or incoherent thoughts, and rambling associations. It is standard practice to “clean up” the interview, as long as doing so does not distort or change the subject’s meanings. Cleaning up a transcript may include editing at the sentence level, but you may also leave out some of the taped material if it is irrelevant.

Writing an Introduction
In the introduction to the edited interviews, explain your purpose in asking people about the role that music plays in their lives. Follow this with some observations and interpretations of the results. Remember that the interviews have a limited authority. They don’t “prove” anything about the role of music in daily life and the formation of individual or group identity. But they can be suggestive—and you will want to point out how and why.

The Music in Daily Life Project emphasizes the verbs you can use to describe people’s relationship to music:

- Is this person finding music to explore and express an identity or being invaded by music to the point of identity diffusion, using music to solve personal problems, consuming music to fill a void and relieve alienation and boredom, participating in musical mysteries to feel fully human, addicted to music and evading reality, orienting via music to reality?

As you can see, each verb carries a different interpretation.
A Note on Interviewing

- **Choosing subjects.** Choose carefully. The three subjects you choose don’t have to be big music buffs, but you will get your best interviews from people who are willing to talk about their likes, dislikes, memories, and associations.

- **Preparing your subject.** Make an appointment for the interview, and be on time. Tell your subject how long you will be spending and why you want this information.

- **Preparing yourself.** Before the interview, make a list of questions you want to ask. Most questions should be open-ended—they should not lead to a yes or no response. Just keep in mind that your goal is to listen, so you’ll want to give your subject plenty of time to talk.

- **Conducting the interview.** Remember that in many respects, you control the agenda because you scheduled the interview and have determined the questions. The person you interview will be looking for guidance and direction. You are likely to have choices to make during the interview. The guidelines used by the Music in Daily Life Project note the following situation:

  Somebody says, “I really love Bruce Springsteen and his music, can’t help it, I get weepy over ‘Born in the USA,’ you know? But sometimes I wonder if I haven’t just swallowed the hype about his being a working-class hero from New Jersey with the symbolic black guy by his side, you know what I mean?” and then pauses, looking at you for some direction or an answer. A choice to make.

  The choice concerns which thread in the conversation to follow—the person’s love for Springsteen or his feeling of being hyped by the working-class hero image. You could do several things at this point in the interview. You could just wait for the person to explain, or you could say, “Tell me a little more about that,” and hope the person will decide on which thread to elaborate. Or you could ask a direct question—“Why do you love Springsteen’s music so much?” “What makes you weepy about ‘Born in the USA’?” “Why do you think you’re being hyped?” (Notice that each of these questions involves a choice that may take the interview in a different direction.)

  The point here is that a good interviewer must listen carefully during the interview. The goal is not to dominate but to give the subject some help in developing his or her ideas. Your task as an interviewer is to keep the conversation going.

- **Get Permission.** If you plan to use the subject’s name in class discussion or a paper, get permission and make arrangements to show your subject what you have written.
During the 1940s and 1950s, *Life* was the most popular general magazine in the United States, with an estimated readership of twenty million. Founded as a weekly in 1936, *Life* was the first American magazine to give a prominent place to the photoessay—visual narratives of the week's news as well as special features about American life and culture. If anything, *Life* taught generations of Americans what events in the world looked like, bringing them the work of such noted photographers as Robert Capa, Margaret Bourke-White, and W. Eugene Smith in photojournalistic accounts of the farm crisis and labor conflicts during the Great Depression and of battle-front situations during World War II.

In another sense, *Life* also taught Americans what the world should look like. After World War II, *Life* regularly featured families in postwar America, ordinary people in their new suburban homes, driving new cars on America’s newly built freeway systems to work, school, and church. Perhaps no other source offers such a rich archive of what domestic life was supposed to be in the 1940s and 1950s in these pictorial representations of white, middle-class nuclear families.

To get a sense of how *Life* pictured America in the early postwar period, check out the December 3, 1945 issue and the news story “U.S. Normalcy: Against the Backdrop of a Troubled World *Life* Inspects an American City at Peace.” Published just four months after World War II ended, the article juxtaposed images of international instability (the beginnings of the Cold War, the Nuremburg Trials, and child refugees in war-torn Europe and China) and of domestic turmoil (industrial strikes and unemployment) with the concerns of people in Indianapolis returning “their minds and energies to work, football games, automobile trips, family reunions and all the pleasant trivia of the American way of life.”

Most college and public libraries have *Life* in their collection. Take a look through several issues. You will find many family portraits. You could develop various projects from this photojournalistic archive about family values in the postwar period, the role of women as homemakers, representations of teenagers, and the relation of domestic life to the Cold War. Keep in mind that the photoessays on the American family not only provide slices of life from the 1940s and 1950s but they also codify Americans’ understanding of the ideal family and the American dream. Remember too that audiences did not read these photoessays on the family in isolation from advertisements and other photoessays. You might want to consider the overall flow of *Life* and how its messages about the family are connected to other messages.

Finally, you might think about why there is no longer a general magazine such as *Life* that claims to picture the “American way of life.” The magazine industry today is thriving by attracting specialized readerships based on such interests as computers, skateboarding, mountain biking, and indie rock. The era of such general national magazines as *Life*, *Look*, *Colliers*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* has clearly been replaced by niche marketing and subcultural ’zines. What does this proliferation of specialized magazines suggest to you about the current state of American culture?