PART I
Identity, Family, and Memory

What makes you who you are? What does it mean to be an "American"? The first four essays in this book introduce you to the variety of ways that your identity is constructed, and to the forces *within* and *outside* of yourself that define your multiple and sometimes conflicting identities. These identities are individual, sexual, familial, racial, communal, national, and international, to name a few. They are determined by personal choice as well as by the historical "moment" or generation in which you have grown up. We hope you will find the challenge of figuring out your identity as an individual, and our collective identity as a nation, a fascinating puzzle, one that each of you will solve in your own way.

From the earliest days of American history, immigrants and travelers to the United States have been asking questions about what it means to be an American. They have come up with an array of definitions, many of them associated with the promises expressed in *The Declaration of Independence*, which asserts the American dream that all of us are "created equal" and have a basic right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." While that promise originally excluded the majority of those living in the US in 1776, it has become a rallying cry for every group that has fought for equality since then, including Native Americans, slaves, women, and workers.

The first essay in this section, "Identities and Social Locations," will help you begin to figure out how to make sense of the social and cultural factors that influence your personal development and identity. The three essays that follow explore the ways in which different generations understood, experienced, and acted on the promises of American life as they grew up at different historic moments during the second half of the twentieth century. Whether your family has lived in the US for generations or are recent arrivals, we think you will find these essays useful for thinking about how your family's past has shaped its present, and for discovering how your family has contributed to shaping the nation (or nations) in which they have lived and worked.

CHAPTER 1

Identities and Social Locations:
Who Am I? Who Are My People?

Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey

Born and educated in Great Britain, Gwyn Kirk (1945–) is a political sociologist, peace activist, and multimedia producer. Margo Okazawa-Rey (1949–) is a Japanese-born educator and social worker active in numerous public policy organizations and grassroots educational efforts. Both women work in the United States as writers, lecturers, lobbyists, and teachers. The following essay, excerpted from a chapter of their textbook, Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives *(2004), provides a perceptive analysis of the complex factors that shape our identities.*

Our identity is a specific marker of how we define ourselves at any particular moment in life. Discovering and claiming our unique identity is a process of growth, change, and renewal throughout our lifetime. As a specific marker, identity may seem tangible and fixed at any given point. Over the life span, however, identity is more fluid. For example, an able-bodied woman who suddenly finds herself confined to a wheelchair after an automobile accident, an assimilated Jewish woman who begins the journey of recovering her Jewish heritage, an immigrant woman from a traditional Guatemalan family ''coming out'' as a lesbian in the United States, or a young, middle-class college student, away from her sheltered home environment for the first time and becoming politicized by an environmental justice organization on campus, will probably find herself redefining who she is, what she values, and what ''home'' and ''community'' are. [. . .]

Identity formation is the result of a complex interplay among a range of factors: individual decisions and choices, particular life events, community recognition and expectations, societal categorization, classification and socialization, and key national or international events. It is an ongoing process that involves several key questions:

Who am I? Who do I want to be?
Who do others think I am and want me to be?
Who and what do societal and community institutions, such as schools, religious
    institutions, the media, and the law, say I am?
Where/what/who are my ''home'' and ''community''?
Which social group(s) do I want to affiliate with?
Who decides the answers to these questions, and on what basis?

Answers to these questions form the core of our existence. In this chapter, we examine the complex issue of identity and its importance in women's lives.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1993) defines *identity* as

the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitely known or
recognizable;
a set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a
member of a group;
the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity; individuality.

The same dictionary defines *to identify* as ''to associate or affiliate (oneself) closely with a person or group; to establish an identification with another or others.''

These definitions point to the connections between us as individuals and how we are perceived by other people and classified by societal institutions. They also involve a sense of individual agency and choice regarding affiliations with others. Gender, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, and language are all significant social categories by which people are recognized by others. Indeed, on the basis of these categories alone, others often think they know who we are and how we should behave. Personal decisions about our affiliations and loyalties to specific groups are also shaped by these categories. For example, in many communities of color, women struggle over the question of race versus gender. Is race a more important factor than gender in shaping their lives? If a Latina speaks out publicly about sexism within the Latino community, is she betraying her people? This separation of categories, mirrored by our segregated social lives, tends to set up false dichotomies in which people often feel that they have to choose one aspect of their identity over another. It also presents difficulties for mixed-race or bisexual people, who do not fit neatly into such narrow categories.

In order to understand the complexity and richness of women's experiences, we must examine them from the micro, meso, macro, and global levels of social relations. [. . .]

Critically analyzing the issue of identity at all of these levels of analysis will allow us to see that identity is much more than an individual decision or choice about who we are in the world. Rather, it is a set of complex and often contradictory and conflicting psychological, physical, geographical, political, cultural, historical, and spiritual factors, as shown in the readings that follow.

Being Myself: The Micro Level

At the micro level, individuals usually feel the most comfortable as themselves. Here one can say, for example, "I am a woman, heterosexual, middle class, with a movement disability; but I am also much more than those categories." At this level we define ourselves and structure our daily activities according to our own preferences. At the micro level we can best feel and experience the process of identity formation, which includes naming specific forces and events that shape our identities. At this level we also seem to have more control of the process, although there are always interconnections between events and experiences at this level and the other levels.

Critical life events, such as entering kindergarten, losing a parent through death, separation, or divorce, or the onset of puberty, may all serve as catalysts for a shift in how we think about ourselves. A five-year-old Vietnamese American child from a traditional home and community may experience the first challenge to her sense of identity when her kindergarten teacher admonishes her to speak only in English. A White, middle-class professional woman who thinks of herself as "a person" and a "competent attorney" may begin to see the significance of gender and "the glass ceiling" for women when she witnesses younger, less experienced male colleagues in her law office passing her by for promotions. A woman who has been raped who attends her first meeting of a campus group organizing against date rape feels the power of connection with other rape survivors and their allies. An eighty-year-old woman, whose partner of fifty years has just died, must face the reality of having lost her life-time companion, friend, and lover. Such experiences shape each person's ongoing formulation of self, whether or not the process is conscious, deliberate, reflective, or even voluntary.

Identity formation is a lifelong endeavor that includes discovery of the new; recovery of the old, forgotten, or appropriated; and synthesis of the new and old [. . .]. At especially important junctures during the process, individuals mark an identity change in tangible ways. An African American woman may change her name from the anglicized Susan to Aisha, with roots in African culture. A Chinese Vietnamese immigrant woman, on the other hand, may adopt an anglicized name, exchanging Nu Lu for Yvonne Lu as part of becoming a US citizen. Another way of marking and effecting a shift in identity is by altering your physical appearance: changing your wardrobe or makeup; cutting your hair very short, wearing it natural rather than permed or pressed, dyeing it purple, or letting the gray show after years of using hair coloring. More permanent changes might include having a tattoo, having your body pierced, having a face lift or tummy tuck, or, for Asian American women, having eye surgery to "Europeanize" their eyes. Transsexuals – female to male and male to female – have surgery to make their physical appearance congruent with their internal sense of self. Other markers of a change in identity include redecorating your home, setting up home for the first time, or physically relocating

to another neighborhood, another city, or another part of the country in search of a new home.

For many people, home is where we grow up until we become independent, by going to college, for example, or getting married; where our parents, siblings, and maybe grandparents are; where our needs for safety, security, and material comfort are met. In reality, what we think of as home is often a complicated and contradictory place where some things we need are present and others are not. Some people's homes are comfortable and secure in a material sense but are also places of emotional or physical violence and cruelty. Some children grow up in homes that provide emotional comfort and a sense of belonging, but as they grow older and their values diverge from those of their parents, home becomes a source of discomfort and alienation.

Regardless of such experiences – perhaps because of them – most people continue to seek places of comfort and solace and others with whom they feel they belong and with whom they share common values and interests. Home may be a geographic, social, emotional, and spiritual space where we hope to find safety, security, familiarity, continuity, acceptance, and understanding, and where we can feel and be our best, whole selves. Home may be in several places at once or in different places at different times of our lives. Some women may have a difficult time finding a home, a place that feels comfortable and familiar, even if they know what it is. Finally, this search may involve not only searching outside ourselves but also piecing together in some coherent way the scattered parts of our identities – an inward as well as an outward journey.

Community Recognition, Expectations, and Interactions: The Meso Level

It is at the meso level – at school, in the workplace, or on the street – that people most frequently ask "Who are you?" or "Where are you from?" in an attempt to categorize us and determine their relationship to us. Moreover, it is here that people experience the complexities, conflicts, and contradictions of multiple identities, which we consider later.

The single most visible signifier of identity is physical appearance. How we look to others affects their perceptions, judgments, and treatment of us. Questions such as "Where do you come from?" and questioning behaviors, such as feeling the texture of your hair or asking if you speak a particular language, are commonly used to interrogate people whose physical appearances especially, but also behaviors, do not match the characteristics designated as belonging to established categories. At root, we are being asked, "Are you one of us or not?" These questioners usually expect singular and simplistic answers, assuming that everyone will fit existing social categories, which are conceived of as undifferentiated and unambiguous. Among people with disabilities, for example, people wanting to identify each other may

expect to hear details of another's disability rather than the fact that the person being questioned also identifies equally strongly as, say, a woman who is White, working class, and bisexual.

Community, like home, may be geographic and emotional, or both, and provides a way for people to express group affiliations. "Where are you from?" is a commonplace question in the United States among strangers, a way to break the ice and start a conversation, expecting answers like "I'm from Tallahassee, Florida," or "I'm from the Bronx." Community might also be an organized group like Alcoholics Anonymous, a religious group, or a political organization like the African American civil rights organization, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Community may be something much more abstract, as in "the women's community" or "the queer community," where there is presumed to be an identifiable group. In these examples there is an assumption of shared values, interests, culture, or language sometimes thought of as essential qualities that define group membership and belonging. This can lead to essentialism, where complex identities get reduced to specific qualities deemed to be essential for membership of a particular group: being Jewish or gay, for example.

At the community level, individual identities and needs meet group standards, expectations, obligations, responsibilities, and demands. You compare yourself with others and are subtly compared. Others size up your clothing, accent, personal style, and knowledge of the group's history and culture. You may be challenged directly, "You say you're Latina. How come you don't speak Spanish?" "You say you're working class. What are you doing in a professional job?" These experiences may both affirm our identities and create or highlight inconsistencies, incongruities, and contradictions in who we believe we are, how we are viewed by others, our role and status in the community, and our sense of belonging.

Some individuals experience marginality if they can move in two or more worlds and, in part, be accepted as insiders (Stonequist 1961). Examples include bisexuals, mixed-race people, and immigrants, who all live in at least two cultures. Margaret, a White, working-class woman, for instance, leaves her friends behind after high school graduation as she goes off to an elite university. Though excited and eager to be in a new setting, she often feels alienated at college because her culture, upbringing, and level of economic security differ from those of the many upper-middle-class and upper-class students. During the winter break she returns to her hometown, where she discovers a gulf between herself and her old friends who remained at home and took full-time jobs. She notices that she is now speaking a slightly different language from them and that her interests and preoccupations are different from theirs. Margaret has a foot in both worlds. She has become sufficiently acculturated at college to begin to know that community as an insider, and she has retained her old community of friends, but she is not entirely at ease or wholly accepted by either community. Her identity is complex, composed of several parts. [. . .]

Social Categories, Classifications, and Structural Inequality: Macro and Global Levels

Classifying and labeling human beings, often according to real or assumed physical, biological, or genetic differences, is a way to distinguish who is included and who is excluded from a group, to ascribe particular characteristics, to prescribe social roles, and to assign status, power, and privilege. People are to know their places. Thus social categories such as gender, race, and class are used to establish and maintain a particular kind of social order. The classifications and their specific features, meanings, and significance are socially constructed through history, politics, and culture. The specific meanings and significance were often imputed to justify the conquest, colonization, domination, and exploitation of entire groups of people, and although the specifics may have changed over time, this system of categorizing and classifying remains intact. For example, Native American people were described as brutal, uncivilized, and ungovernable savages in the writings of early colonizers on this continent. This justified the near-genocide of Native Americans by White settlers and the US military and public officials, as well as the breaking of treaties between the US government and Native American tribes (Zinn 1995). Today, Native Americans are no longer called savages but are often thought of as a vanishing species, or a nonexistent people, already wiped out, thereby rationalizing their neglect by the dominant culture and erasing their long-standing and continuing resistance. [. . .]

Colonization, Immigration, and the US Landscape of Race and Class

Global-level factors affecting people's identities include colonization and immigration. Popular folklore would have us believe that the United States has welcomed "the tired, huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (Young et al. 1997). This ideology that the United States is "a land of immigrants" obscures several important issues excluded from much mainstream debate about immigration. Not all Americans came to this country voluntarily. Native American peoples and Mexicans were already here on this continent, but the former experienced near-genocide and the latter were made foreigners in their own land. African peoples were captured, enslaved, and forcibly imported to this country to be laborers. All were brutally exploited and violated – physically, psychologically, culturally, and spiritually – to serve the interests of those in power. The relationships between these groups and this nation and their experiences in the United States are fundamentally different from the experiences of those who chose to immigrate here, though this is not to negate the hardships the latter may have faced. These differences profoundly shaped the social, cultural, political, and economic realities faced by these groups throughout history and continue to do so today.

Robert Blauner (1972) makes a useful analytical distinction between colonized minorities, whose original presence in this nation was involuntary, and all of whom are people of color, and immigrant minorities, whose presence was voluntary.

According to Blauner, colonized minorities faced insurmountable structural inequalities, based primarily on race, that have prevented their full participation in social, economic, political, and cultural arenas of US life. Early in the history of this country, for example, the Naturalization Law of 1790 (which was repealed as recently as 1952) prohibited peoples of color from becoming US citizens, and the Slave Codes restricted every aspect of life for enslaved African peoples. These laws made race into an indelible line that separated ''insiders'' from ''outsiders.'' White people were designated insiders and granted many privileges while all others were confined to systematic disadvantage. [. . .]

Studies of US immigration ''reveal discrimination and unequal positioning of different ethnic groups'' (Yans-McLaughlin 1990, p. 6), challenging the myth of equal opportunity for all. According to political scientist Lawrence Fuchs (1990), ''Freedom and opportunity for poor immigrant Whites in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were connected fundamentally with the spread of slavery'' (p. 294). It was then that European immigrants, such as Irish, Polish, and Italian people began to learn to be White (Roediger 1991). Thus the common belief among descendants of European immigrants that the successful assimilation of their foremothers and forefathers against great odds is evidence that everyone can pull themselves up by the bootstraps if they work hard enough does not take into account the racialization of immigration that favored White people.

On coming to the United States, immigrants are drawn into the racial landscape of this country. In media debates and official statistics, this is still dominated by a Black/White polarization in which everyone is assumed to fit into one of these two groups. Demographically, the situation is much more complex and diverse, but people of color, who comprise the more inclusive group, are still set off against White people, the dominant group. Immigrants identify themselves according to nationality – for example, as Cambodian or Guatemalan. Once in the United States they learn the significance of racial divisions in this country and may adopt the term *people of color* as an aspect of their identity here. [. . .]

This emphasis on race tends to mask differences based on class, another important distinction among immigrant groups. For example, the Chinese and Japanese people who came in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century to work on plantations in Hawai'i, as loggers in Oregon, or building roads and railroads in several western states were poor and from rural areas of China and Japan. The 1965 immigration law made way for ''the second wave'' of Asian immigration (Takaki 1987). It set preferences for professionals, highly skilled workers, and members of the middle and upper-middle classes, making this group ''the most highly skilled of any immigrant group our country has ever had'' (quoted in Takaki 1987, p. 420). The first wave of Vietnamese refugees who immigrated between the mid-1970s and 1980 were from the middle and upper classes, and many were professionals; by contrast, the second wave of immigrants from Vietnam was composed of poor and rural people. The class backgrounds of immigrants affect not only their sense of themselves and their expectations but also how they can succeed as strangers in a foreign land. For example, a poor woman who arrives with no literacy skills in her own language will have a more

difficult time learning to become literate in English than one who has formal schooling in her country of origin that may have included basic English.

Multiple Identities, Social Location, and Contradictions

The social features of one's identity incorporate individual, community, societal, and global factors [...]. Social location is a way of expressing the core of a person's existence in the social and political world. It places us in particular relationships to others, to the dominant culture of the United States, and to the rest of the world. It determines the kinds of power and privilege we have access to and can exercise, as well as situations in which we have less power and privilege.

Because social location is where all the aspects of one's identity meet, our experience of our own complex identities is sometimes contradictory, conflictual, and paradoxical. We live with multiple identities that can be both enriching and contradictory and that push us to confront questions of loyalty to individuals and groups. [...]

It is also through the complexity of social location that we are forced to differentiate our inclinations, behaviors, self-definition, and politics from how we are classified by larger societal institutions. An inclination toward bisexuality, for example, does not mean that one will necessarily act on that inclination. Defining oneself as working class does not necessarily lead to activity in progressive politics based on a class consciousness.

Social location is also where we meet others socially and politically. Who are we in relation to people who are both like us and different from us? How do we negotiate the inequalities in power and privilege? How do we both accept and appreciate who we and others are, and grow and change to meet the challenges of a multicultural world? [...]

Study Questions

1 What do Kirk and Okazawa-Rey claim are the most important factors that shape our identities?
2 Explain the macro, meso, and micro levels of social relations. Which of Kirk's and Okazawa-Rey's examples are most helpful to you in understanding these concepts? Which of these levels have had the most impact on the formation of your identity? Why?
3 Do you agree with Kirk and Okazawa-Rey that we all live with multiple identities? Using yourself as an example, explain your agreement/disagreement.
4 Explain "social location" in your own words. Is "social location" a useful concept for analysis in thinking about your own identity formation? Why or why not?

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CHAPTER 2

What We Really Miss About the 1950s

Stephanie Coontz

Stephanie Coontz (1944–) is a professor of history and family studies, and a social commentator. Her books include The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap *(1992), and* The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families *(1988). She has also published articles in numerous media outlets, such as* The New York Times, Newsweek, *and* Vogue, *and appeared as a guest on television talk shows. In this essay, excerpted from her 1997 book,* The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms With America's Changing Families, *Coontz identifies and examines an enduring myth of the American family.*

In a 1996 poll by the Knight-Ridder news agency, more Americans chose the 1950s than any other single decade as the best time for children to grow up.[1] And despite the research I've done on the underside of 1950s families, I don't think it's crazy for people to feel nostalgic about the period. For one thing, it's easy to see why people might look back fondly to a decade when real wages grew more in any single year than in the entire ten years of the 1980s combined, a time when the average 30-year-old man could buy a median-priced home on only 15–18 percent of his salary.[2]

But it's more than just a financial issue. When I talk with modern parents, even ones who grew up in unhappy families, they associate the 1950s with a yearning they feel for a time when there were fewer complicated choices for kids or parents to grapple with, when there was more predictability in how people formed and maintained families, and when there was a coherent "moral order" in their community to serve as a reference point for family norms. Even people who found that moral order grossly unfair or repressive often say that its presence provided them with something concrete to push against. [. . .]

Nostalgia for the 1950s is real and deserves to be taken seriously, but it usually shouldn't be taken literally. Even people who *do* pick the 1950s as the best decade generally end up saying, once they start discussing their feelings in depth, that it's not the family arrangements in and of themselves that they want to revive. They don't miss the way women used to be treated, they sure wouldn't want to live with most of the fathers they knew in their neighborhoods, and "come to think of it" – I don't know how many times I've recorded these exact words – "I communicate with my kids *much* better than my parents or grandparents did." When Judith Wallerstein recently interviewed 100 spouses in "happy" marriages, she found that only five "wanted a marriage like their parents'." The husbands "consciously rejected the role models provided by their fathers. The women said they could never be happy living as their mothers did."[3]

People today understandably feel that their lives are out of balance, but they yearn for something totally *new* – a more equal distribution of work, family, and community time for both men and women, children and adults. If the 1990s are lopsided in one direction, the 1950s were equally lopsided in the opposite direction.

What most people really feel nostalgic about has little to do with the internal structure of 1950s families. It is the belief that the 1950s provided a more family-friendly economic and social environment, an easier climate in which to keep kids on the straight and narrow, and above all, a greater feeling of hope for a family's long-term future, especially for its young. The contrast between the perceived hopefulness of the fifties and our own misgivings about the future is key to contemporary nostalgia for the period. Greater optimism *did* exist then, even among many individuals and groups who were in terrible circumstances. But if we are to take people's sense of loss seriously, rather than merely to capitalize on it for a hidden political agenda, we need to develop a historical perspective on where that hope came from.

Part of it came from families comparing their prospects in the 1950s to their unstable, often grindingly uncomfortable pasts, especially the two horrible decades just before. In the 1920s, after two centuries of child labor and income insecurity, and for the first time in American history, a bare majority of children had come to live in a family with a male breadwinner, a female homemaker, and a chance at a high school education. Yet no sooner did the ideals associated with such a family begin to blossom than they were buried by the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s. During the 1930s domestic violence soared; divorce rates fell, but informal separations jumped; fertility plummeted. Murder rates were higher in 1933 than they were in the 1980s. Families were uprooted or torn apart. Thousands of young people left home to seek work, often riding the rails across the country.[4]

World War II brought the beginning of economic recovery, and people's renewed interest in forming families resulted in a marriage and child-bearing boom, but stability was still beyond most people's grasp. Postwar communities were rocked by racial tensions, labor strife; and a right-wing backlash against the radical union movement of the 1930s. Many women resented being fired from wartime jobs they had grown to enjoy. Veterans often came home to find that they had to elbow their way back into their families, with wives and children resisting their attempts to reassert domestic authority. In one recent study of fathers who returned from the

war, four times as many reported painful, even traumatic, reunions as remembered happy ones.[5]

By 1946 one in every three marriages was ending in divorce. Even couples who stayed together went through rough times, as an acute housing shortage forced families to double up with relatives or friends. Tempers frayed and generational relations grew strained. "No home is big enough to house two families, particularly two of different generations, with opposite theories on child training," warned a 1948 film on the problems of modern marriage.[6]

So after the widespread domestic strife, family disruptions, and violence of the 1930s and the instability of the World War II period, people were ready to try something new. The postwar economic boom gave them the chance. The 1950s was the first time that a majority of Americans could even *dream* of creating a secure oasis in their immediate nuclear families.

There they could focus their emotional and financial investments, reduce obligations to others that might keep them from seizing their own chance at a new start, and escape the interference of an older generation of neighbors or relatives who tried to tell them how to run their lives and raise their kids. Oral histories of the postwar period resound with the theme of escaping from in-laws, maiden aunts, older parents, even needy siblings.

The private family also provided a refuge from the anxieties of the new nuclear age and the cold war, as well as a place to get away from the political witch-hunts led by Senator Joe McCarthy and his allies. When having the wrong friends at the wrong time or belonging to any "suspicious" organization could ruin your career and reputation, it was safer to pull out of groups you might have joined earlier and to focus on your family. On a more positive note, the nuclear family was where people could try to satisfy their long-pent-up desires for a more stable marriage, a decent home, and the chance to really enjoy their children.

The 1950s Family Experiment

The key to understanding the successes, failures, and comparatively short life of 1950s family forms and values is to understand the period as one of *experimentation* with the possibilities of a new kind of family, not as the expression of some longstanding tradition. At the end of the 1940s, the divorce rate, which had been rising steadily since the 1890s, dropped sharply; the age of marriage fell to a 100-year low; and the birth rate soared. Women who had worked during the depression or World War II quit their jobs as soon as they became pregnant, which meant quite a few women were specializing in child raising; fewer women remained childless during the 1950s than in any decade since the late nineteenth century. The timing and spacing of childbearing became far more compressed, so that young mothers were likely to have two or more children in diapers at once, with no older sibling to help in their care. At the same time, again for the first time in 100 years, the educational gap between young middle-class women and men increased, while job segregation for working

men and women seems to have peaked. These demographic changes increased the dependence of women on marriage, in contrast to gradual trends in the opposite direction since the early twentieth century.[7]

The result was that family life and gender roles became much more predictable, orderly, and settled in the 1950s than they were either twenty years earlier or would be twenty years later. Only slightly more than one in four marriages ended in divorce during the 1950s. Very few young people spent any extended period of time in a nonfamily setting: They moved from their parents' family into their own family, after just a brief experience with independent living, and they started having children soon after marriage. Whereas two-thirds of women aged 20 to 24 were not yet married in 1990, only 28 percent of women this age were still single in 1960.[8]

Ninety percent of all the households in the country were families in the 1950s, in comparison with only 71 percent by 1990. Eighty-six percent of all children lived in two-parent homes in 1950, as opposed to just 72 percent in 1990. And the percentage living with both biological parents – rather than, say, a parent and stepparent – was dramatically higher than it had been at the turn of the century or is today: 70 percent in 1950, compared with only 50 percent in 1990. Nearly 60 percent of kids – an all-time high – were born into male breadwinner–female homemaker families; only a minority of the rest had mothers who worked in the paid labor force.[9]

If the organization and uniformity of family life in the 1950s were new, so were the values, especially the emphasis on putting all one's emotional and financial eggs in the small basket of the immediate nuclear family. Right up through the 1940s, ties of work, friendship, neighborhood, ethnicity, extended kin, and voluntary organizations were as important a source of identity for most Americans, and sometimes a *more* important source of obligation, than marriage and the nuclear family. All this changed in the postwar era. The spread of suburbs and automobiles, combined with the destruction of older ethnic neighborhoods in many cities, led to the decline of the neighborhood social club. Young couples moved away from parents and kin, cutting ties with traditional extrafamilial networks that might compete for their attention. A critical factor in this trend was the emergence of a group of family sociologists and marriage counselors who followed Talcott Parsons in claiming that the nuclear family, built on a sharp division of labor between husband and wife, was the cornerstone of modern society. [. . .]

The call for young couples to break from their parents and youthful friends was a consistent theme in 1950s popular culture. In *Marty*, one of the most highly praised TV plays and movies of the 1950s, the hero almost loses his chance at love by listening to the carping of his mother and aunt and letting himself be influenced by old friends who resent the time he spends with his new girlfriend. In the end, he turns his back on mother, aunt, and friends to get his new marriage and a little business of his own off to a good start. Other movies, novels, and popular psychology tracts portrayed the dreadful things that happened when women became more interested in careers than marriage or men resisted domestic conformity.

Yet many people felt guilty about moving away from older parents and relatives; ''modern mothers'' worried that fostering independence in their kids could lead to

defiance or even juvenile delinquency (the recurring nightmare of the age); there was considerable confusion about how men and women could maintain clear breadwinner–homemaker distinctions in a period of expanding education, job openings, and consumer aspirations. People clamored for advice. They got it from the new family education specialists and marriage counselors, from columns in women's magazines, from government pamphlets, and above all from television. While 1950s TV melodramas warned against letting anything dilute the commitment to getting married and having kids, the new family sitcoms gave people nightly lessons on how to make their marriage or rapidly expanding family work – or, in the case of *I Love Lucy*, probably the most popular show of the era, how *not* to make their marriage and family work. Lucy and Ricky gave weekly comic reminders of how much trouble a woman could get into by wanting a career or hatching some hare-brained scheme behind her husband's back.

At the time, everyone knew that shows such as *Donna Reed*, *Ozzie and Harriet, Leave It to Beaver,* and *Father Knows Best* were not the way families really were. People didn't watch those shows to see their own lives reflected back at them. They watched them to see how families were *supposed* to live – and also to get a little reassurance that they were headed in the right direction. The sitcoms were simultaneously advertisements, etiquette manuals, and how-to lessons for a new way of organizing marriage and child raising. I have studied the scripts of these shows for years, since I often use them in my classes on family history, but it wasn't until I became a parent that I felt their extraordinary pull. The secret of their appeal, I suddenly realized, was that they offered 1950s viewers, wracked with the same feelings of parental inadequacy as was I, the promise that there were easy answers and surefire techniques for raising kids. [. . .]

Similarly, the 1950s sitcoms were aimed at young couples who had married in haste, women who had tasted new freedoms during World War II and given up their jobs with regret, veterans whose children resented their attempts to reassert paternal authority, and individuals disturbed by the changing racial and ethnic mix of postwar America. The message was clear: Buy these ranch houses, Hotpoint appliances, and child-raising ideals; relate to your spouse like this; get a new car to wash with your kids on Sunday afternoons; organize your dinners like that – and you too can escape from the conflicts of race, class, and political witch-hunts into harmonious families where father knows best, mothers are never bored or irritated, and teenagers rush to the dinner table each night, eager to get their latest dose of parental wisdom.

Many families found it possible to put together a good imitation of this way of living during the 1950s and 1960s. Couples were often able to construct marriages that were much more harmonious than those in which they had grown up, and to devote far more time to their children. Even when marriages were deeply unhappy, as many were, the new stability, economic security, and educational advantages parents were able to offer their kids counted for a lot in people's assessment of their life satisfaction. And in some matters, ignorance could be bliss: The lack of media coverage of problems such as abuse or incest was terribly hard on the casualties, but it protected more fortunate families from knowledge and fear of many social ills.[10]

There was tremendous hostility to people who could be defined as ''others'': Jews, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, the poor, gays or lesbians, and ''the red menace.'' Yet on a day-to-day basis, the civility that prevailed in homogeneous neighborhoods allowed people to ignore larger patterns of racial and political repression. Racial clashes were ever-present in the 1950s, sometimes escalating into full-scale antiblack riots, but individual homicide rates fell to almost half the levels of the 1930s. As nuclear families moved into the suburbs, they retreated from social activism but entered voluntary relationships with people who had children the same age; they became involved in PTAs together, joined bridge clubs, went bowling. There does seem to have been a stronger sense of neighborly commonalities than many of us feel today. Even though this local community was often the product of exclusion or repression, it sometimes looks attractive to modern Americans whose commutes are getting longer and whose family or work patterns give them little in common with their neighbors.[11]

The optimism that allowed many families to rise above their internal difficulties and to put limits on their individualistic values during the 1950s came from the sense that America was on a dramatically different trajectory than it had been in the past, an upward and expansionary path that had already taken people to better places than they had ever seen before and would certainly take their children even further. This confidence that almost everyone could look forward to a better future stands in sharp contrast to how most contemporary Americans feel, and it explains why a period in which many people were much worse off than today sometimes still looks like a better period for families than our own.

Throughout the 1950s, poverty was higher than it is today, but it was less concentrated in pockets of blight existing side-by-side with extremes of wealth, and, unlike today, it was falling rather than rising. At the end of the 1930s, almost two-thirds of the population had incomes below the poverty standards of the day, while only one in eight had a middle-class income (defined as two to five times the poverty line). By 1960, a majority of the population had climbed into the middle-income range.[12]

Unmarried people were hardly sexually abstinent in the 1950s, but the age of first intercourse was somewhat higher than it is now, and despite a tripling of nonmarital birth rates between 1940 and 1958, more then 70 percent of nonmarital pregnancies led to weddings before the child was born. Teenage birth rates were almost twice as high in 1957 as in the 1990s, but most teen births were to married couples, and the effect of teen pregnancy in reducing further schooling for young people did not hurt their life prospects the way it does today. High school graduation rates were lower in the 1950s than they are today, and minority students had far worse test scores, but there were jobs for people who dropped out of high school or graduated without good reading skills – jobs that actually had a future. People entering the job market in the 1950s had no way of knowing that they would be the last generation to have a good shot at reaching middle-class status without the benefit of postsecondary schooling.

Millions of men from impoverished, rural, unemployed, or poorly educated family backgrounds found steady jobs in the steel, auto, appliance, construction, and

shipping industries. Lower middle-class men went further on in college during the 1950s than they would have been able to expect in earlier decades, enabling them to make the transition to secure white-collar work. The experience of shared sacrifices in the depression and war, reinforced by a New-Deal inspired belief in the ability of government to make life better, gave people a sense of hope for the future. Confidence in government, business, education, and other institutions was on the rise. This general optimism affected people's experience and assessment of family life. It is no wonder modern Americans yearn for a similar sense of hope.

But before we sign on to any attempts to turn the family clock back to the 1950s we should note that the family successes and community solidarities of the 1950s rested on a totally different set of political and economic conditions than we have today. Contrary to widespread belief, the 1950s was not an age of laissez-faire government and free market competition. A major cause of the social mobility of young families in the 1950s was that federal assistance programs were much more generous and widespread than they are today.

In the most ambitious and successful affirmative action program ever adopted in America, 40 percent of young men were eligible for veterans' benefits, and these benefits were far more extensive than those available to Vietnam-era vets. Financed in part by a federal income tax on the rich that went up to 87 percent and a corporate tax rate of 52 percent, such benefits provided quite a jump start for a generation of young families. The GI bill paid most tuition costs for vets who attended college, doubling the percentage of college students from prewar levels. At the other end of the life span, Social Security began to build up a significant safety net for the elderly, formerly the poorest segment of the population. Starting in 1950, the federal government regularly mandated raises in the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation. The minimum wage may have been only $1.40 as late as 1968, but a person who worked for that amount full-time, year-round, earned 118 percent of the poverty figure for a family of three. By 1995, a full-time minimum-wage worker could earn only 72 percent of the poverty level.[13]

An important source of the economic expansion of the 1950s was that public works spending at all levels of government comprised nearly 20 percent of total expenditures in 1950, as compared to less than 7 percent in 1984. Between 1950 and 1960, nonmilitary, nonresidential public construction rose by 58 percent. Construction expenditures for new schools (in dollar amounts adjusted for inflation) rose by 72 percent; funding on sewers and waterworks rose by 46 percent. Government paid 90 percent of the costs of building the new Interstate Highway System. These programs opened up suburbia to growing numbers of middle-class Americans and created secure, well-paying jobs for blue-collar workers.[14]

Government also reorganized home financing, underwriting low down payments and long-term mortgages that had been rejected as bad business by private industry. To do this, government put public assets behind housing lending programs, created two new national financial institutions to facilitate home loans, allowed veterans to put down payments as low as a dollar on a house, and offered tax breaks to people who bought homes. The National Defense Education Act funded the socioeconomic

mobility of thousands of young men who trained themselves for well-paying jobs in such fields as engineering.[15]

Unlike contemporary welfare programs, government investment in 1950s families was not just for immediate subsistence but encouraged long-term asset development, rewarding people for increasing their investment in homes and education. Thus it was far less likely that such families or individuals would ever fall back to where they started, even after a string of bad luck. Subsidies for higher education were greater the longer people stayed in school and the more expensive the school they selected. Mortgage deductions got bigger as people traded up to better houses.[16]

These social and political support systems magnified the impact of the postwar economic boom. "In the years between 1947 and 1973," reports economist Robert Kuttner, "the median paycheck more than doubled, and the bottom 20 percent enjoyed the greatest gains." High rates of unionization meant that blue-collar workers were making much more financial progress than most of their counterparts today. In 1952, when eager home buyers flocked to the opening of Levittown, Pennsylvania, the largest planned community yet constructed, "it took a factory worker one day to earn enough money to pay the closing costs on a new Levittown house, then selling for $10,000." By 1991, such a home was selling for $100,000 or more, and it took a factory worker *eighteen weeks* to earn enough money for just the closing costs.[17]

The legacy of the union struggle of the 1930s and 1940s, combined with government support for raising people's living standards, set limits on corporations that have disappeared in recent decades. Corporations paid 23 percent of federal income taxes in the 1950s, as compared to just 9.2 percent in 1991. Big companies earned higher profit margins than smaller firms, partly due to their dominance of the market, partly to America's postwar economic advantage. They chose (or were forced) to share these extra earnings, which economists call "rents," with employees. Economists at the Brookings Institution and Harvard University estimate that 70 percent of such corporate rents were passed on to workers at all levels of the firm, benefiting secretaries and janitors as well as CEOs. Corporations routinely retained workers even in slack periods, as a way of ensuring workplace stability. Although they often received more generous tax breaks from communities than they gave back in investment, at least they kept their plants and employment offices in the same place. AT&T, for example, received much of the technology it used to finance its postwar expansion from publicly funded communications research conducted as part of the war effort, and, as current AT&T Chairman Robert Allen puts it, there "used to be a lifelong commitment on the employee's part and on our part." Today, however, he admits, "the contract doesn't exist anymore."[18]

Television trivia experts still argue over exactly what the fathers in many 1950s sitcoms did for a living. Whatever it was, though, they obviously didn't have to worry about downsizing. If most married people stayed in long-term relationships during the 1950s, so did most corporations, sticking with the communities they grew up in and the employees they originally hired. Corporations were not constantly relocating in search of cheap labor during the 1950s; unlike today, increases in worker productivity usually led to increases in wages. The number of workers covered by corporate pension

plans and health benefits increased steadily. So did limits on the work week. There is good reason that people look back to the 1950s as a less hurried age: The average American was working a shorter workday in the 1950s than his or her counterpart today, when a quarter of the work-force puts in 49 or more hours a week.[19]

So politicians are practicing quite a double standard when they tell us to return to the family forms of the 1950s while they do nothing to restore the job programs and family subsidies of that era, the limits on corporate relocation and financial wheeling-dealing, the much higher share of taxes paid by corporations then, the availability of union jobs for noncollege youth, and the subsidies for higher education such as the National Defense Education Act loans. Furthermore, they're not telling the whole story when they claim that the 1950s was the most prosperous time for families and the most secure decade for children. Instead, playing to our understandable nostalgia for a time when things seemed to be getting better, not worse, they engage in a tricky chronological shell game with their figures, diverting our attention from two important points. First, many individuals, families, and groups were excluded from the economic prosperity, family optimism, and social civility of the 1950s. Second, the all-time high point of child well-being and family economic security came not during the 1950s but *at the end of the 1960s*.

We now know that 1950s family culture was not only nontraditional; it was also not idyllic. In important ways, the stability of family and community life during the 1950s rested on pervasive discrimination against women, gays, political dissidents, non-Christians, and racial or ethnic minorities, as well as on a systematic cover-up of the underside of many families. Families that were harmonious and fair of their own free will may have been able to function more easily in the fifties, but few alternatives existed for members of discordant or oppressive families. Victims of child abuse, incest, alcoholism, spousal rape, and wife battering had no recourse, no place to go, until well into the 1960s.[20]

At the end of the 1950s, despite ten years of economic growth, 27.3 percent of the nation's children were poor, including those in white ''underclass'' communities such as Appalachia. Almost 50 percent of married-couple African-American families were impoverished – a figure far higher than today. It's no wonder African Americans are not likely to pick the 1950s as a golden age, even in comparison with the setbacks they experienced in the 1980s. When blacks moved north to find jobs in the postwar urban manufacturing boom they met vicious harassment and violence, first to prevent them from moving out of the central cities, then to exclude them from public space such as parks or beaches. [. . .]

The Fifties Experiment Comes to an End

The social stability of the 1950s, then, was a response to the stick of racism, sexism, and repression as well as to the carrot of economic opportunity and government aid. Because social protest mounted in the 1960s and unsettling challenges were posed to

the gender roles and sexual mores of the previous decade, many people forget that families continued to make gains throughout the 1960s and into the first few years of the 1970s. By 1969, child poverty was down to 14 percent, its lowest level ever; it hovered just above that marker until 1975, when it began its steady climb up to contemporary figures (22 percent in 1993; 21.2 percent in 1994). The high point of health and nutrition for poor children was reached in the early 1970s.[21]

So commentators are being misleading when they claim that the 1950s was the golden age of American families. They are disregarding the number of people who were excluded during that decade and ignoring the socio-economic gains that continued to be made through the 1960s. But they are quite right to note that the improvements of the 1950s and 1960s came to an end at some point in the 1970s (though not for the elderly, who continued to make progress). [. . .]

Study Questions

1 What is the ''myth'' of the American family, according to Coontz? Where does this myth come from? What purposes does it serve? Who is left out of the myth?

2 Why did the white, middle-class family become the American ideal during the 1950s? What political, social, and economic factors supported the formation of the ideal family in that period? What historic realities contradicted the myth?

3 How did/does the American media and popular culture support the myth of the ideal family?

4 How do you define what constitutes a family?

Notes

1. Steven Thomma, ''Nostalgia for '50s Surfaces,'' *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 4, 1996.

2. Frank Levy, *Dollars and Dreams: The Changing American Income Distribution* (New York: Russell Sage, 1987), p. 6; Frank Levy, ''Incomes and Income Inequality,'' in Reynolds Farley, ed., *State of the Union: America in the 1990s*, vol. 1 (New York: Russell Sage, 1995), pp. 1–57; Richard May and Kathryn Porter, ''Poverty and Income Trends, 1994,'' Washington, D.C.: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 1996; Rob Nelson and Jon Cowan, ''Buster Power,'' *USA Weekend*, October 14–16, 1994, p. 10.

3. Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 15.

4. Donald Hernandez, *America's Children: Resources from Family, Government and the Economy* (New York: Russell Sage, 1993), pp. 99, 102; James Morone, ''The Corrosive Politics of Virtue,'' *American Prospect* 26 (May–June 1996), p. 37; ''Study Finds U.S. No. 1 in Violence,'' *Olympian*, November 13, 1992. See also Stephen Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1988).

5. William Tuttle, Jr., *"Daddy's Gone to War": The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

6. "Marriage and Divorce," *March of Time*, film series 14 (1948).

7. Arlene Skolnick and Stacey Rosencrantz, "The New Crusade for the Old Family," *American Prospect*, Summer 1994, p. 65; Hernandez, *America's Children*, pp. 128–132; Andrew Cherlin, "Changing Family and Household: Contemporary Lessons from Historical Research," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983), pp. 54–58; Sam Roberts, *Who We Are: A Portrait of America Based on the Latest Census* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 45.

8. Levy, "Incomes and Income Inequality," p. 20; Arthur Norton and Louisa Miller, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the 1990s*, Current Population Reports Series P23–180 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, October 1992); Roberts, *Who We Are* (1995 ed.), pp. 50–53.

9. Dennis Hogan and Daniel Lichter, "Children and Youth: Living Arrangements and Welfare," in Farley, ed., *State of the Union*, vol. 2, p. 99; Richard Gelles, *Contemporary Families: A Sociological View* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1995), p. 115; Hernandez, *America's Children*, p. 102. The fact that only a small percentage of children had mothers in the paid labor force, though a full 40 percent did not live in male breadwinner–female homemaker families, was because some children had mothers who worked, unpaid, in farms or family businesses, or fathers who were unemployed, or the children were not living with both parents.

10. For discussion of the discontents, and often searing misery, that were considered normal in a "good-enough" marriage in the 1950s and 1960s, see Lillian Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue Collar Marriage* (New Haven, Conn.: Vintage, 1962); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

11. See Robert Putnam, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," *American Prospect*, Winter 1996. For a glowing if somewhat lopsided picture of 1950s community solidarities, see Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: Discovering the Forgotten Virtues of Community in the Chicago of the 1950s* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). For a chilling account of communities uniting against perceived outsiders, in the same city, see Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983). On homicide rates, see "Study Finds United States No. 1 in Violence," *Olympian*, November 13, 1992; *New York Times*, November 13, 1992, p. A9; and Douglas Lee Eckberg, "Estimates of Early Twentieth-Century U.S. Homicide Rates: An Econometric Forecasting Approach," *Demography* 32 (1995), p. 14. On lengthening commutes, see "It's Taking Longer to Get to Work," *Olympian*, December 6, 1995.

12. The figures in this and the following paragraph come from Levy, "Incomes and Income Inequality," pp. 1–57; May and Porter, "Poverty and Income Trends, 1994"; Reynolds Farley, *The New American Reality: Who We Are, How We Got Here, Where We Are Going* (New York: Russell Sage, 1996), pp. 83–85; Gelles, *Contemporary Families*, p. 115; David Grissmer, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Mark Bender, and Stephanie Williamson, *Student Achievement and the Changing American Family*, Rand Institute on Education and Training (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 1994), p. 106.

13. William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 113, 143; Marc Linder, "Eisenhower-Era Marxist-Confiscatory Taxation: Requiem for the Rhetoric of Rate Reduction for the Rich," *Tulane Law Review* 70 (1996), p. 917; Barry Bluestone and Teresa Ghilarducci, "Rewarding Work: Feasible Antipoverty Policy," *American Prospect* 28 (1996), p. 42; Theda Skocpol, "Delivering for Young Families," *American Prospect* 28 (1996), p. 67.

14. Joel Tarr, "The Evolution of the Urban Infrastructure in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Royce Hanson, ed., *Perspectives on Urban Infrastructure* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1984); Mark Aldrich, *A History of Public Works Investment in the*

United States, report prepared by the CPNSAD Research Corporation for the U.S. Department of Commerce, April 1980.

15. For more information on this government financing, see Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and S. Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), chapter 4.

16. John Cook and Laura Sherman, "Economic Security Among America's Poor: The Impact of State Welfare Waivers on Asset Accumulation," Center on Hunger, Poverty, and Nutrition Policy, Tufts University, May 1996.

17. Robert Kuttner, "The Incredible Shrinking American Paycheck," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, November 6–12, 1995, p. 23; Donald Bartlett and James Steele, *America: What Went Wrong?* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 1992), p. 20.

18. Richard Barnet, "Lords of the Global Economy," *Nation*, December 19, 1994, p. 756; Clay Chandler, "U.S. Corporations: Good Citizens or Bad?" *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, May 20–26, 1996, p. 16; Steven Pearlstein, "No More Mr. Nice Guy: Corporate America Has Done an About-Face in How It Pays and Treats Employees," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, December 18–24, 1995, p. 10; Robert Kuttner, "Ducking Class Warfare," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, March 11–17, 1996, p. 5; Henry Allen, "Ha! So Much for Loyalty," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, March 4–10, 1996, p. 11.

19. Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City*, pp. 11–12; Jeremy Rifken, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), pp. 169, 170, 231; Juliet Schorr, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

20. For documentation that these problems existed, see chapter 2 of *The Way We Never Were*.

21. *The State of America's Children Yearbook, 1996*, (Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, 1996) p. 77; May and Porter, "Poverty and Income Trends: 1994," p. 23; Sara McLanahan et al., *Losing Ground: A Critique*, University of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty, Special Report No. 38, 1985.

CHAPTER 3

Generational Memory in an American Town

John Bodnar

John Bodnar (1944–) is a professor of history who writes on labor, immigration, public and community memory, and the treatment of history in popular culture. He is the author of The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America *(1985)*, Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century *(1992)*, *and* Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film *(2003)*. The following essay is based upon a series of interviews that Bodnar and his students conducted with individuals who grew up in the same Midwestern town, and whose sense of identity, values, and community were deeply influenced by the generational history of their times.*

T he idea of generational memory is widely invoked by scholars of modern American history. Drawing on the insights of Mannheim, who argued that social and political events encountered in early adulthood can permanently shape outlook, numerous historians have explained conflict and debate in modern America in terms of the disparate memories of respective generations. In the most familiar case, scholars have noted the divergent recollections of people who lived through the cataclysmic decades of the 1930s and 1960s, suggesting that the imprint of those times determined subsequent moral and political viewpoints.[1]

In the scholarly formulation, the ''depression generation'' apparently concluded that the central institutions and authorities that patterned their lives were responsible for pulling them through hard times and the war experience that followed, and that they would never need to be changed. Thus, they resolutely defended the traditional family, communal ties, religion, corporate capitalism, and the American nation. Terkel's renowned study of remembering the Great Depression argued that the event left ''an invisible scar'' on those who lived it; and his oral history of World War II revealed how much those who experienced hard times appreciated the jobs that the war produced. Conflict with institutions and authorities existed in the

various accounts, but ultimately, people recalled solidarity in families, communities, workplaces, and the nation as a whole. Rieder argued that residents in a section of Brooklyn, New York, in the 1970s resisted racial integration of their neighborhood, modern ideas of sexual liberation, and the critics of their country because, "as children of the Great Depression" and as participants in World War II, they exalted such values as homeownership, traditional families and mores, and patriotism.[2]

The members of the "sixties generation" are generally regarded as mirror images of their parents. They tend to recall traditional authorities as repressive and untrustworthy. A survey of the "baby boomers," born between 1946 and 1964, conducted by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1988, claimed that they "challenged virtually all the social mores and political values that had come before." The study stressed their commitment to new sexual norms, their flight from marriage, and their experimentation with drugs and new musical forms. "Boomers," themselves, although often idealizing the model of a traditional family, told the magazine's investigators that they placed less emphasis on a "close-knit family" and "respect for authority" than did the generation that preceded them. Indeed, nearly all scholars who have looked at this group have stressed its tendency to rebel against traditional institutions as a hallmark of its collective identity. In one of the most complete investigations of the age group, Roof found that, despite their differences, those in the "sixties generation" were unified by their shared rebellion against traditional institutions, which further explained their involvement in numerous kinds of searches for meaning at midlife; they had already rejected many of the traditional prescriptions for living. A Gallup Poll from 1985 made a similar point: This generation was even less likely to trust social and political institutions and their leaders than people who were born after them.[3]

The manner by which people recall the past and use it to fashion outlooks in the present can be determined from life histories. This study of generational memory is based on a collection of accounts from individuals in Whiting, Indiana, an industrial town near Chicago, in 1991. The limitations are obvious. One town, one class, and one scholar's predispositions do not make for a representative national sample. Whiting is not America. Nonetheless, what was remembered in Whiting was clearly linked to many of the issues that pervaded the nation's political discourse in the past and in the present.

The town manifests a pattern representative of the midwest industrial belt: economic and population expansion early in this century, an interlude of economic contraction in the 1930s, economic stability in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, and a rapid decline of 30 percent in population from 1970 to 1990 and of 70 percent in employment at the town's major source of jobs – the refinery of Standard Oil of Indiana – from 1960 to 1990. Economic turmoil was accompanied by broad transformations in the politics and culture of postwar America. Traditional religious, corporate, and governmental institutions lost some of their authority and ability to command loyalty, and individual goals came to supersede collective ones. The institutional pillars of Whiting – the Catholic Church, Standard Oil, and the Democratic Party – all suffered losses during this period. Fathers could no longer assure their sons of jobs at the refinery, as their own fathers had been able to do. Young

people were more likely to divorce and avoid church attendance than their parents were. Republicans won the majority of the votes for president in 1972 and 1980 in a town that had otherwise voted Democratic since the 1920s. In American culture as a whole, authority became more decentralized, and the idea of personal fulfillment contested the constraints on individualism that flourished under the regime of church, party, family, and corporation.[4]

Psychologists have demonstrated that narratives, along with abstract propositions, are the two fundamental forms of human cognition. Narratives in the form of life histories render complex experience understandable. Like all narratives they are subjective, despite their objective components, "reconstructing" rather than simply "resurrecting" the past in order to justify life choices. They are not only selective and subjective but also defensive and didactic. Their engagement with both the past and the present mitigates explanations of generational memories grounded solely in history but not those that are based in culture.[5]

The attempts of the people from Whiting to display their personal identities in life histories did not produce great variety. In their construction, these life histories resembled autobiographies, verifying Eakin's contention that self-portrayals usually involve "culturally sanctioned models of identity." Three such "models" were found in Whiting. Individuals of an older generation presented themselves as morally upright, selfless, thrifty, hard working, and devoted to the welfare of others in the community and in the nation. They were not imprinted so much by past decades or events as by their long relationship with institutions and ideologies that venerated their preferred ideals: Standard Oil embodied a paternalism that promised jobs for hard toil; the Catholic Church guaranteed salvation for sacrifice and adherence to marital roles; and the nation offered fair treatment in return for patriotism.[6]

A second model of identity was exhibited by residents born in the town after 1940. This group evinced a relationship with authorities and ideologies that sanctioned a greater variety of lifestyles. Their narratives celebrated, rather than censured, self-fulfillment and mounted a stronger attack upon the power of parents and, especially, the corporations that influenced their lives. In a remarkable turn of events, the third model emerged from members of the older generation who had left Whiting and retired to Arizona. That these citizens, who had lived through the Great Depression and World War II, told of making lifestyle changes in the southwest desert implied that the imprint of the years prior to 1950 was not beyond reformulation. [...]

Generational Narratives

The older generation in Whiting, born between 1902 and 1924, revered the ideal of obligation in an era when Americans argued about the pervasiveness of selfishness and the need for cohesion. They recalled lives of mutualism, duty, and care and criticized contemporaries who saw life as a process of self-realization. Their memories valorized their ability to serve their families, their employers, their working-class

community, and their nation. Authority was to be accommodated rather than resisted. But their loyalty was not blind. They granted it, as they told it, because they expected and received justice in return. At home, they benefited from familiar support; at church, they participated in a mutual effort at salvation; and at the refinery, they received steady jobs and pensions. Ultimately, their narratives represented a collective belief that they once upheld a common enterprise with other citizens and powerful institutions – the very basis of their loyalty – and that this communal foundation for just treatment was now disintegrating. Their accounts of the past were not only ventures into history and longing, but also demands for the reinstatement of justice in a society dominated by the state, the marketplace, and the media. And yet there was disaffection in their ranks. Although their peers who had retired to Arizona shared many of their memories of a moral community, they had decided in the present to embark upon a more determined quest for personal happiness.

The next generation – born between 1943 and 1962 in this sample, and coming of age after World War II – revealed a different collective memory and identity. This group blended experiences that were unique to the times in which their identities were formed with some of the personal knowledge and values of their elders. They rendered accounts of mutualism in families and neighborhoods, but they affirmed, in much stronger terms, that economic security and occupational stability were best obtained through individual resourcefulness rather than through loyalty to an institution. Their sense of self-reliance was cultivated when relationships with authority throughout American society had become problematic. Conservatives had mounted a widespread attack against individual claims upon the state, and advertisers against constraints on self-fulfillment. Moreover, cultural critics have suggested that the electronic media – especially television – tended to demystify power, fostering a ''decline in prestige'' of all who held it.[7]

In Whiting, this deterioration was rooted in the more immediate issue of Standard Oil's reduction in the workforce. Sons and daughters could no longer anticipate the lifetime jobs and benefits that accrued to their parents. Released from their parents' attachment to the refinery, they were free to characterize themselves as more self-sufficient than their elders and overtly question their authority. However, their rebellion contained something of a longing for the advantages of an earlier era that were denied them.

The Older Generation

Whiting's older generation were the children of immigrants who came to the town in the first two decades of this century to work at Standard Oil and mills in the area. Their parents were East European Catholics who relied on friends and kin to find them homes and jobs. Their life stories contained extensive accounts of family life that stressed the themes of justice/injustice and concern/indifference. Their narratives resolved these oppositions with the idealization of duty over rebellion and

selflessness over egoism. Their values did not emanate simply from events like the Great Depression but from ongoing encounters with familial, religious, corporate, and national authorities whom they considered fair and deserving of allegiance. When they gave loyalty to the community, they gave it to all of the institutions that pervaded that community. However, when they perceived that the institutions that once commanded their allegiance and supported their community were in decline – and no longer able to grant justice and benevolence – they became indignant. The nation no longer appeared to consist of caring and responsible individuals and institutions. Their patriotism had gone unrewarded; their identities were no longer validated.

The life histories of the older generation in Whiting always began with descriptions of their immigrant families. They recalled learning about the need to limit independence and to respect authority, even before the Great Depression. Family members were expected to take care of each other. According to one man born in 1919,

> Every kid had their chores to do. Every fall we'd chop wood and make kindling for storage and pile it in the woodsheds. That was the fall duty. After school, [we] had to bring it on the porch. And we used to help my grandmother out. She lived downstairs. But cleaning the kitchen, doing the dishes, well, that my sister Mary did. Housecleaning was mostly a girl's job. But the guys used to scrub floors. Our home life was like a family deal. Everybody helped each other out. I tried to bring that tradition to my kids. My dad always told us, "you guys stick together, no matter through thick or thin. In the case of an emergency, you guys come out and help." That's how we were brought up.[8]

[...] Consideration and esteem were the rewards for loyalty and submission. The older generation shared the memory of a moral community in which individualism was constrained and redefined, but not obliterated. Egoism and domination were tempered by the ideals of reciprocity and benevolence. The collective memory of this generation expressed what the past was like for them, as well as the timeless value of a moral society in the present. Their story emphasized the continued importance of recognizing individual needs and rewarding people for meeting collective exigencies, and it embodied a call for solidarity – "a realization that each person must take responsibility for the other because as consociates all must have an interest in the other."[9]

Persistent anecdotes about justice and solidarity revealed the older generation's fundamental adherence to authority. Workers at the refinery described men who were so loyal to the company that they would alert a foreman when a light bulb burned out so as not to retard the pace of production. Countless reiterations confirmed how much the local population prized rewards for their devotion, such as the pension system at Standard Oil, in which employees could contribute a portion of their income to a stock purchase plan that the company would partially match. In the view of some workers, men who earned such benefits had an easier time attracting marriage partners than those who did not.[10] [...]

During World War II, this generation described its participation in the national mobilization as voluntary. The people served the nation as they had their families and employers by joining the armed services, donating blood, buying war bonds, and producing gasoline products at the refinery. One man claimed that he decided to enlist as soon as he heard the news about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. A woman born in 1916 who admitted that everyone feared the war also recalled that "people were working so hard buying bonds and everything to help our country." At St. John's Catholic Church in Whiting, a shrine was built to "Our Lady of Victory" in 1942 "for our boys in the service, for victory, and for peace." Prelates at the church maintained that "God and His Blessed Mother" deserved such reverence and that the shrine was the best possible aid that the congregation could render "to our country and our boys in the armed forces." The pursuit of common interests was reinforced at the refinery, where the company newspaper took pride in the workers' production of vital oil supplies, purchase of bonds, and exhibition of the "discipline and teamwork" that would serve many of them well in the military.[11] [. . .]

The Younger Generation

The life histories and identities of Whiting's younger residents also affirmed the value of a tightly knit community and expressed concern about modern disintegration, although the image of communal decline in their narratives was contested by examples of resourceful individuals free from the constraints of traditional authority and hopeful of economic rejuvenation. Pride of individual achievement and hope for progress stood in place of calls for justice and moral outrage. From the perspective of middle age, these people focused more on the prospects of the future rather than a veneration of the past. Their encounter with economic decline gave them no reason to lionize authorities and institutions that held no promise of fairness or benevolence.

This working-class sample was not so likely to attend college or achieve affluence as many of their peers who are normally associated with the sixties generation. Their encounter with the 1960s and 1970s was not liberating but disappointing. Traditional authorities and paths to economic security had little to offer them. Because it was difficult to find permanent jobs at Standard Oil and other plants in the area after 1970, they resigned themselves to making a living through their own ingenuity.

This generation was no stranger to families of modest means and traditional values; family relationships accounted for most of their memories of mutualism. Unlike the older group's experience with authority, theirs seldom involved benevolence or justice, and, as a result, their memory of authority – even that of their parents – was more critical. One woman recalled with disdain how her father had forced her and her sister to return the pants that a neighbor had made for them because he would not let them wear anything but dresses. A man born in 1952 remembered his Southern Baptist upbringing with bitterness: "We went to

church three times a week; that was very important. We prayed before every meal. We read the Bible daily. . . . It was either [obey] or be thrown out.'' Still another confessed that the death of his autocratic father did not have too traumatic effect on him.[12]

The younger generation stressed discontinuity more than continuity. In an era of sharp economic and cultural change, this group described their lives mainly as the result of individual decisions, not as the result of following occupational footsteps of their parents. Their emphasis on self-reliance explicitly contested their parents' commemoration of mutualism and justice. Lasch held that a preoccupation with self-sufficiency can emerge, ironically, from feelings of powerlessness in modern life. The economic decline of Whiting and northwest Indiana after 1945 forced members of the postwar cohort into a more difficult job search than that faced by those who routinely entered the refinery during an earlier era, perhaps explaining why baby boomers produced stronger narratives of personal initiative than the preceding generation.[13] [. . .]

Although both generations recalled the recent past as a time of decline – a deterioration in the formative community in their lives – the older generation saw the problem in moral terms. For those who matured after World War II, however, the demise of Whiting did not end with moral outrage but with a dream of economic revitalization. In the early 1990s, the younger people talk of the return of progress as a way of muting fears of economic decline. They are receptive to messages of individualism and self-fulfillment from contemporary culture, not only because they challenge the moral authoritarianism of their elders, but also because they sense that individualism may be the only viable resource in an economy so much more unpredictable and unjust than the one their parents knew. In their grievance with declining solidarity, they share memories and values with their elders, but in their celebration of individualism, depart from them. [. . .]

Generational memory is formed in the passage of time, not simply born in pivotal decades and events. Revising the deterministic paradigm of much scholarly thinking, this study – with its subjective, limited perspective openly acknowledged – suggests that generational memory is best understood as the result of long-term encounters with economic forces and powerful authorities. Regardless of the impact of the past, however, generational views are also under constant review and discussion in the present. Whiting's oldest generation revealed, late in life, that their basic narrative was molded from memories of their formative years – the 1920s through the 1950s – and from their reaction to the ideas that emerged later. Undoubtedly, they asserted their critique of social change in American history as elderly people who longed for the past; but they were not just looking backward. [. . .]

Finally, the concept of generation itself is not without its problems. This study implies not only that the imprint of the past is indeterminate but also that boundaries between generations are imprecise. Generations can agree as well as disagree. For instance, both generations lamented economic decline and tended to be critical of corporate layoffs; and differences in generation did not always eliminate bonds fostered by class, although further investigation is necessary to reveal whether this

connection was more pronounced for the working class or the middle class. More-over, despite the obvious influence of life stage in remembering, both the young and the old in Whiting were concerned about the future. The former were more hopeful and the latter more pessimistic, but their respective memories and attitudes were driven, in part, by speculation about what was to come. Both groups tended to manipulate the past. Assumptions to the effect that generational outlooks are defined by pivotal events like the Great Depression or the "sixties" are wrong. Both young and old in Whiting demonstrated an ongoing connection to the process of creating meaning and exchanging information within their community and the larger society. They affirmed their commitment to participate in the continuous project of restating the reality of the past, present, and future in the contested culture of contemporary America.

Study Questions

1   What does Bodnar mean by "generational memory"? How does it affect our understanding of both the past and the present? Give an example of how it affects the historical understanding of each of the generations he interviewed.
2   Why does Bodnar argue that Whiting, Indiana can serve as a model for understanding important generational differences in attitudes toward gov-ernment, authority, religion, and work between the 1930s and the 1990s? What differences did you find most interesting?
3   Give an example of differences in generational memory within your own family.

Notes

1   Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, 1952), 292–299, 301. Mann-heim also argued that older groups tend to cling to the views of their youth and transmit them to subsequent generations, and that younger groups were, to a greater extent than their elders, in "fresh contact" with present experience. On the strength and weaknesses of using the concept of generations, see Alan B. Spitzer, "The Historical Problem of Generations," *American Historical Review,* LXXVIII (1973), 1353–1385; Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Ithaca, 1982), 240–241; Michael X. Delli Caprini, "Age and History: Generations and Sociopolitical Change," in Roberta S. Sigel (ed.), *Political Learning in Adulthood: A Sourcebook of Theory and Research* (Chicago, 1982), 12–14; David Kertzer, "Generation as a Sociological Problem," *American Sociological Review,* IX (1983), 125–149.
2   Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1986), 3, 89, 131; *idem, "The Good War:" An Oral History of World War Two* (New York, 1984); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1985), 17–18. The title of Glenn H. Elder's, *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (Chicago, 1974) implies that the Great Depression was more decisive in its

impact than the book's actual contents do. Elder's book demonstrates that the 1930s reveal a complex relationship between hard times and personal lives. For instance, he found that the Depression did not alter many traditional conceptions of marriage and family, including the centrality of having children. However, it did influence the "timing" of childbirth. Thus, decisions to delay having children in the 1930s contributed to a "baby boom" after 1945 (282–289). The people studied by Elder were examined at later stages of their lives in John A. Clausen, *American Lives: Looking Back at the Children of the Great Depression* (New York, 1993). Clausen further minimizes the impact of the Depression, finding that viewpoints and characteristics acquired in concrete relationships during formative periods of their lives were more influential. See also Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto, 1987), 17. A 1985 telephone survey by two sociologists asked American citizens what events seemed most important to them. Those born before 1930 most frequently cited World War II, but those born between 1941 and 1965 cited the conflict in Vietnam. The authors suggested that social and political events could make a "distinctive imprint" on people at a young age. See Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, "Generations and Collective Memories," *American Sociological Review,* LIV (1989), 359–381, which tests Mannheim's assertions that generations receive distinguishing characteristics from social and political events during their youth. Mannheim, *Essays,* 276–320, makes the crucial point that generations are much more loosely bonded together than "concrete groups" like tribes or communities; he called them "cliques." Delli Caprini, "Age and History," 21.

3   David Sheff, "Portrait of a Generation," *Rolling Stone,* 524 (1988), 46–57; Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York, 1993), 40–41; Paul Light, *Baby Boomers* (New York, 1988), 32, 145–146.

4   Whiting's population of 10,880 in 1930 had dropped to 5,155 by 1990. Nearly all of that decline (80 percent) took place after 1950. The Mexican population rose to 10 percent of the town's total in 1980 and stood at 13 percent a decade later. Although the population of Lake County increased between 1950 and 1970, the western portion of the county that contained Whiting suffered a loss of close to 10 percent. Job losses in refining were also striking in this era – nearly 4,000 in Indiana between 1958 and 1966, and in Lake County, 36 percent between 1960 and 1969. Manufacturing jobs in Lake County, outside Gary and Hammond, also declined by 4.7 percent. See D. Jeanne Patterson, *Indiana Regional Economic Development and Planning* (Bloomington, 1971), II, 27, 81, 93; Indiana Dept. of Commerce, *Indiana: an Economic Perspective* (Indianapolis, 1970), 9; Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60's and 70's* (New York, 1983), 1–21; James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, 1991), 120–126. On the changing nature of authority in modern America, see Morris Janowitz, *The Last Half-Century: Societal Change and Politics in America* (Chicago, 1978), 221–263.

5   Regina Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (New York, 1991), 3–10 (thanks to John Eakin for this reference). Patrick H. Hutton, "Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities," *Historical Reflections,* XV (1980), 311–322; Peter Niedermuller, "From Stories of Life to Life History: Historic Context, Social Processes, and the Biographical Method," in Tamas Hofer and Niedermuller (eds.), *Life History as Cultural Construction* (Budapest, 1988), 451–452; Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York, 1978), 221. On the public construction of memory see Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memorie," *Representations,* XXVI (1989), 7–24; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism* (Princeton, 1992).

6   Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiographies* (Princeton, 1992), 72. On the matter of self-representation in oral histories, see Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory* (Cambridge, 1987), 22–23, 60–61. See the insightful discussion about the subjectivity of oral sources in Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories:*

Form and Meaning in Oral History (Albany, 1991), ix, 48–53. On the importance of narratives in human cognition and moral thinking, see Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

7 Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York, 1985), 309.

8 Whiting Project Interview (hereinafter WPI), 91–14. The Whiting Oral History Project consisted of 100 interviews conducted between 1990 and 1992. Most interviews were conducted in Whiting, but sessions were also held with former residents who had moved to other Indiana towns and to Arizona. The respondents were selected at random from a list of names generated by contacting such organizations as churches and labor unions, and from suggestions given by interviewees. Interviewers included the author, Chad Berry, David Dabertin, Lisa Orr, and John Wolford. Transcripts of all interviews are on deposit at the Oral History Research Center at Indiana University, Bloomington.

9 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York, 1983), 31, 64–94. Due to considerations of space, the discussion of moral outlook in this research note does not go beyond the practice of justice, or fairness, and solidarity, or caring. Some scholars might argue that the former is more characteristic of men and the latter of women. Focusing on the issue of generations inevitably submerges the issue of gender differences, but the Whiting data does not strongly affirm the gendered arguments of such scholars as Carol Gilligan that women's identities are more oriented to relationships and less centered on independence than men's are, and, thus, that their stories include a stronger plea for caring than for justice. In Whiting's older generation, both men and women presented themselves as strong individuals who were also bound to the concerns of the working-class community in which their identities and moral outlook was formed. There was a *tendency* for women to talk more about caregiving but no evidence of a significant gender division on this point. See David L. Norton, *Democracy and Moral Development* (Berkeley, 1991), 28; Gilligan, *In a Different Voice; Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, 1982), 73–75; Jürgen Habermas, ''Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion concerning State 6,'' in Thomas E. Wren (ed.), *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion Between Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 224–251.

10 WPI, 91–23; 91–24; 91–19.

11 *Stanolind Record*, 24 May 1943, 1–10; 26 May 1945, 1–4. *St. John's Parish News* (Whiting, Indiana), 16 Aug. 1942; 1 Nov. 1942.

12 WPI 91–29; 91–32; 91–173.

13 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (London, 1980), 84–87; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford, 1991), 173–175, argued that Lasch tended to deny the potential for individual agency in a modern culture free of traditional authorities.

CHAPTER 4

Growing Up Asian in America

Kesaya E. Noda

Born in Palo Alto, California to Japanese-American parents, Kesaya E. Noda (1950–) grew up on a family farm in rural New Hampshire. She studied for two years in Japan after high school, and graduated from Stanford University in 1973. In 1981 she published The Yamato Colony: 1906–1960, Livingston, California, *a history of the Japanese-American farming community where her grandparents settled after migrating from Japan. Since earning her MA from Harvard Divinity School in 1987, Noda has worked in higher education, and as a poet and activist. In the following memoir, originally published in* Making Waves *(1989) an Asian-American Studies women's movement reader, she explores her social location as a middle-class Japanese-American woman whose multiple identities are rooted at the intersection of US and family history.*

Sometimes when I was growing up, my identity seemed to hurtle toward me and paste itself right to my face. I felt that way, encountering the stereotypes of my race perpetuated by non-Japanese people (primarily white) who may or may not have had contact with other Japanese in America. "You don't like cheese, do you?" someone would ask. "I know your people don't like cheese." Sometimes questions came making allusions to history. That was another aspect of the identity. Events that had happened quite apart from the me who stood silent in that moment connected my face with an incomprehensible past. "Your parents were in California? Were they in those camps during the war?" And sometimes there were phrases or nicknames: "Lotus Blossom." I was sometimes addressed or referred to as racially Japanese, sometimes as Japanese American, and sometimes as an Asian woman. Confusions and distortions abounded.

How is one to know and define oneself? From the inside – within a context that is self defined, from a grounding in community and a connection with culture and history that are comfortably accepted? Or from the outside – in terms of messages received from the media and people who are often ignorant? Even as an adult I can still see two sides of my face and past. I can see from the inside out, in freedom. And I

can see from the outside in, driven by the old voices of childhood and lost in anger and fear.

I am Racially Japanese

A voice from my childhood says: "You are other. You are less than. You are unalterably alien." This voice has its own history. We have indeed been seen as other and alien since the early years of our arrival in the United States. The very first immigrants were welcomed and sought as laborers to replace the dwindling numbers of Chinese, whose influx had been cut off by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Japanese fell natural heir to the same anti-Asian prejudice that had arisen against the Chinese. As soon as they began striking for better wages, they were no longer welcomed.

I can see myself today as a person historically defined by law and custom as being forever alien. Being neither "free white," nor "African," our people in California were deemed "aliens, ineligible for citizenship," no matter how long they intended to stay here. Aliens ineligible for citizenship were prohibited from owning, buying, or leasing land. They did not and could not belong here. The voice in me remembers that I am always a *Japanese* American in the eyes of many. A third-generation German American is an American. A third-generation Japanese American is a Japanese American. Being Japanese means being a danger to the country during the war and knowing how to use chopsticks. I wear this history on my face.

I move to the other side. I see a different light and claim a different context. My race is a line that stretches across ocean and time to link me to the shrine where my grandmother was raised. Two high, white banners lift in the wind at the top of the stone steps leading to the shrine. It is time for the summer festival. Black characters are written against the sky as boldly as the clouds, as lightly as kites, as sharply as the big black crows I used to see above the fields in New Hampshire. At festival time there is liquor and food, ritual, discipline, and abandonment. There is music and drunkenness and invocation. There is hope. Another season has come. Another season has gone.

I am racially Japanese. I have a certain claim to this crazy place where the prayers intoned by a neighboring Shinto priest (standing in for my grandmother's nephew who is sick) are drowned out by the rehearsals for the pop singing contest in which most of the villagers will compete later that night. The village elders, the priest, and I stand respectfully upon the immaculate, shining wooden floor of the outer shrine, bowing our heads before the hidden powers. During the patchy intervals when I can hear him, I notice the priest has a stutter. His voice flutters up to my ears only occasionally because two men and a woman are singing gustily into a microphone in the compound testing the sound system. A prerecorded tape of guitars, samisens, and drums accompanies them. Rock music and Shinto prayers. That night to loud applause and cheers, a young man is given the award for the most *netsuretsu* – passionate, burning – rendition of a song. We roar our approval of the reward.

Never mind that his voice had wandered and slid, now slightly above, now slightly below the given line of the melody. Netsuretsu. Netsuretsu.

In the morning, my grandmother's sister kneels at the foot of the stone stairs to offer her morning prayers. She is too crippled to climb the stairs, so each morning she kneels here upon the path. She shuts her eyes for a few seconds, her motions as matter of fact as when she washes rice. I linger longer than she does, so reluctant to leave, savoring the connection I feel with my grandmother in America, the past, and the power that lives and shines in the morning sun.

Our family has served this shrine for generations. The family's need to protect this claim to identity and place outweighs any individual claim to any individual hope. I am Japanese.

I am a Japanese American

"Weak." I hear the voice from my childhood years. "Passive," I hear. Our parents and grandparents were the ones who were put into those camps. They went without resistance; they offered cooperation as proof of loyalty to America. "Victim," I hear. And, "Silent."

Our parents are painted as hard workers who were socially uncomfortable and had difficulty expressing even the smallest opinion. Clean, quiet, motivated, and determined to match the American way; that is us, and that is the story of our time here.

"Why did you go into those camps," I raged at my parents, frightened by my own inner silence and timidity. "Why didn't you do anything to resist? Why didn't you name it the injustice it was?" Couldn't our parents even think? Couldn't they? Why were we so passive?

I shift my vision and my stance. I am in California. My uncle is in the midst of the sweet potato harvest. He is pressed, trying to get the harvesting crews onto the field as quickly as possible, worried about the flow of equipment and people. His big pickup is pulled off to the side, motor running, door ajar. I see two tractors in the yard in front of an old shed; the flat bed harvesting platform on which the workers will stand has already been brought over from the other field. It's early morning. The workers stand loosely grouped and at ease, but my uncle looks as harried and tense as a police officer trying to unsnarl a New York City traffic jam. Driving toward the shed, I pull my car off the road to make way for an approaching tractor. The front wheels of the car sink luxuriously into the soft, white sand by the roadside and the car slides to a dreamy halt, tail still on the road. I try to move forward. I try to move back. The front bites contentedly into the sand, the back lifts itself at a jaunty angle. My uncle sees me and storms down the road, running. He is shouting before he is even near me.

"What's the matter with you," he screams. "What the hell are you doing?" In his frenzy, he grabs his hat off his head and slashes it through the air across his knee. He is beside himself. "Don't you know how to drive in sand? What's the matter with you? You've blocked the whole roadway. How am I supposed to get my tractors out

of here? Can't you use your head? You've cut off the whole roadway, and we've got to get out of here.''

I stand on the road before him helplessly thinking, ''No, I don't know how to drive in sand. I've never driven in sand.''

''I'm sorry, uncle,'' I say, burying a smile beneath a look of sincere apology. I notice my deep amusement and my affection for him with great curiosity. I am usually devastated by anger. Not this time.

During the several years that follow I learn about the people and the place, and much more about what has happened in this California village where my parents grew up. The issei, our grandparents, made this settlement in the desert. Their first crops were eaten by rabbits and ravaged by insects. The land was so barren that men walking from house to house sometimes got lost. Women came here too. They bore children in 114 degree heat, then carried the babies with them into the fields to nurse when they reached the end of each row of grapes or other truck farm crops.

I had had no idea what it meant to buy this kind of land and make it grow green. Or how, when the war came, there was no space at all for the subtlety of being who we were – Japanese Americans. Either/or was the way. I hadn't understood that people were literally afraid for their lives then, that their money had been frozen in banks; that there was a five-mile travel limit; that when the early evening curfew came and they were inside their houses, some of them watched helplessly as people they knew went into their barns to steal their belongings. The police were patrolling the road, interested only in violators of curfew. There was no help for them in the face of thievery. I had not been able to imagine before what it must have felt like to be an American – to know absolutely that one is an American – and yet to have almost everyone else deny it. Not only deny it, but challenge that identity with machine guns and troops of white American soldiers. In those circumstances it was difficult to say, ''I'm a Japanese American.'' ''American'' had to do.

But now I can say that I am a Japanese American. It means I have a place here in this country, too. I have a place here on the East Coast, where our neighbor is so much a part of our family that my mother never passes her house at night without glancing at the lights to see if she is home and safe; where my parents have hauled hundreds of pounds of rocks from fields and arduously planted Christmas trees and blueberries, lilacs, asparagus, and crab apples; where my father still dreams of angling a stream to a new bed so that he can dig a pond in the field and fill it with water and fish. ''The neighbors already came for their Christmas tree?'' he asks in December. ''Did they like it? Did they like it?''

I have a place on the West Coast where my relatives still farm, where I heard the stories of feuds and backbiting, and where I saw that people survived and flourished because fundamentally they trusted and relied upon one another. A death in the family is not just a death in a family; it is a death in the community. I saw people help each other with money, materials, labor, attention, and time. I saw men gather once a year, without fail, to clean the grounds of a ninety-year-old woman who had helped the community before, during, and after the war. I saw her remembering them with birthday cards sent to each of their children.

I come from a people with a long memory and a distinctive grace. We live our thanks. And we are Americans. Japanese Americans.

I am a Japanese American Woman

Woman. The last piece of my identity. It has been easier by far for me to know myself in Japan and to see my place in America than it has been to accept my line of connection with my own mother. She was my dark self, a figure in whom I thought I saw all that I feared most in myself. Growing into womanhood and looking for some model of strength, I turned away from her. Of course, I could not find what I sought. I was looking for a black feminist or a white feminist. My mother is neither white nor black.

My mother is a woman who speaks with her life as much as with her tongue. I think of her with her own mother. Grandmother had Parkinson's disease and it had frozen her gait and set her fingers, tongue, and feet jerking and trembling in a terrible dance. My aunts and uncles wanted her to be able to live in her own home. They fed her, bathed her, dressed her, awoke at midnight to take her for one last trip to the bathroom. My aunts (her daughters-in-law) did most of the care, but my mother went from New Hampshire to California each summer to spend a month living with grandmother, because she wanted to and because she wanted to give my aunts at least a small rest. During those hot summer days, mother lay on the couch watching the television or reading, cooking foods that grandmother liked, and speaking little. Grandmother thrived under her care.

The time finally came when it was too dangerous for grandmother to live alone. My relatives kept finding her on the floor beside her bed when they went to wake her in the mornings. My mother flew to California to help clean the house and make arrangements for grandmother to enter a local nursing home. On her last day at home, while grandmother was sitting in her big, overstuffed armchair, hair combed and wearing a green summer dress, my mother went to her and knelt at her feet. ''Here, Mamma,'' she said. ''I've polished your shoes.'' She lifted grandmother's legs and helped her into the shiny black shoes. My grandmother looked down and smiled slightly. She left her house walking, supported by her children, carrying her pocket book, and wearing her polished black shoes. ''Look, Mamma,'' my mom had said, kneeling. ''I've polished your shoes.''

Just the other day, my mother came to Boston to visit. She had recently lost a lot of weight and was pleased with her new shape and her feeling of good health. ''Look at me, Kes,'' she exclaimed, turning toward me, front and back, as naked as the day she was born. I saw her small breasts and the wide, brown scar, belly button to pubic hair, that marked her because my brother and I were both born by Caesarean section. Her hips were small. I was not a large baby, but there was so little room for me in her that when she was carrying me she could not even begin to bend over toward the floor. She hated it, she said.

''Don't I look good? Don't you think I look good?''

I looked at my mother, smiling and as happy as she, thinking of all the times I have seen her naked. I have seen both my parents naked throughout my life, as they have seen me. From childhood through adulthood we've had our naked moments, sharing baths, idle conversations picked up as we moved between showers and closets, hurried moments at the beginning of days, quiet moments at the end of days.

I know this to be Japanese, this ease with the physical, and it makes me think of an old, Japanese folk song. A young nursemaid, a fifteen-year-old girl, is singing a lullaby to a baby who is strapped to her back. The nursemaid has been sent as a servant to a place far from her own home. "We're the beggars," she says, "and they are the nice people. Nice people wear fine sashes. Nice clothes."

> If I should drop dead,
> bury me by the roadside!
> I'll give a flower
> to everyone who passes.
> What kind of flower?
> The cam-cam-camellia [tsun-tsun-tsubaki]
> watered by Heaven
> alms water.

The nursemaid is the intersection of heaven and earth, the intersection of the human, the natural world, the body, and the soul. In this song, with clear eyes, she looks steadily at life, which is sometimes so very terrible and sad. I think of her while looking at my mother, who is standing on the red and purple carpet before me, laughing, without any clothes.

I am my mother's daughter. And I am myself.

I am a Japanese American woman.

Epilogue

I recently heard a man from West Africa share some memories of his childhood. He was raised Muslim, but when he was a young man, he found himself deeply drawn to Christianity. He struggled against this inner impulse for years, trying to avoid the church yet feeling pushed to return to it again and again. "I would have done *anything* to avoid the change," he said. At last, he became Christian. Afterwards he was afraid to go home, fearing that he would not be accepted. The fear was groundless, he discovered, when at last he returned – he had separated himself, but his family and friends (all Muslim) had not separated themselves from him.

The man, who is now a professor of religion, said that in the Africa he knew as a child and a young man, pluralism was embraced rather than feared. There was "a kind of tolerance that did not deny your particularity," he said. He alluded to zestful, spontaneous debates that would sometimes loudly erupt between Muslims and

Christians in the village's public spaces. His memories of an atheist who harrangued the villagers when he came to visit them once a week moved me deeply. Perhaps the man was an agricultural advisor or inspector. He harrassed the women. He would say:

> "Don't go to the fields! Don't even bother to go to the fields. Let God take care of you. He'll send you the food. If you believe in God, why do you need to work? You don't need to work! Let God put the seeds in the ground. Stay home."

The professor said, "The women laughed, you know? They just laughed. Their attitude was, 'Here is a child of God. When will he come home?'"

The storyteller, the professor of religion, smiled a most fantastic, tender smile as he told this story. "In my country, there is a deep affirmation of the oneness of God," he said. "The atheist and the women were having quite different experiences in their encounter, though the atheist did not know this. He saw himself as quite separate from the women. But the women did not see themselves as being separate from him. 'Here is a child of God,' they said. 'When will he come home?'"

Study Questions

1 How does Noda figure out her identity as a Japanese-American woman? What is her "social location"?
2 Compare Noda's discussion of "outside" influences versus "inside" influences to Kirk's and Okazawa-Rey's concept of the macro, meso, and micro levels of social relationships.
3 How does Noda's sense of personal, community, and national identity change as she comes to understand what Bodner would call her family's "generational memory"?
4 What events of the 1960s and 1970s, the decades when Noda was growing up, influenced the way she wrote about her identity in 1989?