

FIFTH EDITION

Editors' Notes to Accompany

SIGNS OF LIFE IN THE U.S.A.
Readings on Popular Culture for Writers

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PREFACE

We realize that few instructors sit down and read an entire text cover-to-cover before designing their syllabi. You simply don't have the time, and doing so would likely interfere with your ability to adjust your course to your students' interests and needs. We also realize that most instructors range around in the texts they use, jumping from chapter to chapter and selecting some readings while skipping others. Accordingly, we've designed this instructor's manual to make it easier for you to plan your course. We suggest possible ways to combine chapters to form a coherent unit and ways to abbreviate chapters should you not have time to cover all the readings in each. We suggest thematic links that run throughout *Signs of Life*, links that may not always be apparent in the selections' titles. We also suggest ways to sequence your discussion of the readings so that your students can build on their experiences and address other topics.

However, the manual doesn't just organize the material in the text; we've also designed it to suggest how you can use *Signs of Life* in the classroom. Perhaps most important, we explain why we've chosen to make a theoretical approach explicit in a reader for composition students and why we've adopted semiotics as that approach. We also anticipate students' responses to the issues raised in *Signs of Life*. This text is based on widespread classroom experience, as we've received ample feedback from instructors across the nation who've used the previous four editions of *Signs of Life*. In addition, we've assigned many of the readings ourselves, and we've both adopted a semiotic approach in teaching students at different levels. Thus, by identifying which essays are likely to anger or excite students, which selections are relatively difficult or easy to read, which topics are perfect for personal reflection, and so forth, we can help you to devise a class plan that will work for your students.

In addition, we suggest activities beyond essay writing that will enhance students' understanding of the issues the text raises. These activities range from journal writing and prewriting exercises to classroom activities, such as debates and small group work, that encourage lively student involvement. We firmly believe that one of the best things a teacher can do is organize a class so that the students take charge of their own learning. Particularly in a writing class (but also in discipline-specific courses), students need to be active participants in their education. We've designed *Signs of Life* to allow students to do that. It is based on the premise that students come to college with a high level of expertise in popular culture that you can rely on to generate lively class discussion, inspire a commitment to learning, and create a community of writers within your class.

So what doesn't the manual do? It doesn't "give the answers" to the comprehension and writing/activity questions that follow each selection. We realize that some manuals take the instructor through answers step by step, but we haven't done that, for both practical and philosophical reasons. As is appropriate for a composition textbook, there are no readings here that you would have difficulty understanding, so we don't need to outline answers for the comprehension questions, although we do address cases where authors raise unusually thorny or problematic points. And even with comprehension questions, you may feel it appropriate for your students to emphasize one angle or another. The writing and activity questions don't have "right" or "wrong" responses and they don't invite single correct answers. That's not to say that the questions are hard or that some responses might not be stronger than others.

And we do provide suggestions for how you can use these questions with your students. It's just that we believe that critical thinking is nurtured if students explore an issue, sort out the evidence from several alternative sources that would best support a thesis, and consider what contrary positions might exist. In other words, the questions are intended to encourage students to *think* about an issue — to think thoroughly, specifically, and carefully. With that preparation, we believe, students are well on their way to becoming strong academic writers.

A word on the manual's organization is in order. We first provide an overview to using *Signs of Life* in your class, suggesting how to create thematic units, abbreviate chapters, or combine chapters, and giving hints on how to encourage student involvement. We also explain why we've used a semiotic approach and give you a little background history of semiotics. Next are two essays from instructors who have used *Signs of Life*, offering their advice to teachers new to the book. The bulk of the manual takes you through the readings, suggesting ways to use them in class and anticipating likely student reactions, creating links between selections and chapters, and providing hints on how you can have a lively discussion and assign successful writing topics based on the selections.

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USING POPULAR CULTURE AND SEMIOTICS IN THE COMPOSITION COURSE

Why Popular Culture?

We decided to focus this text on popular culture because we are convinced that students think and write at their best when they are in command of their subject matter. This is crucial when students are learning university-level writing strategies, for the newness of a subject can make students lack confidence as writers or lead them to adopt ineffective writing habits. Sometimes, for instance, students may oversummarize an issue because they are just learning about it and, essentially, are explaining it to themselves. *Signs of Life* is designed to take advantage of students' literacy in popular culture to generate sharp analysis and insightful interpretations. This is not to say that we assume all students are voracious consumers of popular culture in the same way. On the contrary: we assume that our readers will come to the book from a variety of backgrounds, interests, and experiences. The book, and particularly the apparatus, should allow students to share that variety through class and group activities.

In keeping with the increasing academic interest in cultural studies, we also assume an inclusive definition of popular culture. We address topics like advertising, which traditionally have been considered part of popular culture, but we also include issues such as race that form part of America's social and cultural fabric. This notion of popular culture differs from the one that reigned when we began teaching almost thirty years ago. We recall a textbook that, as its nod to "popular culture," asked students to compare and contrast a Volkswagen and a Porsche, with no attention to the cars' social or cultural significance. This text used popular culture as an occasion for teaching rhetorical modes; in contrast, *Signs of Life* addresses the way broader issues, such as gender and ethnicity, affect cultural values and ideologies. As a result, we hope that your students will find the materials in *Signs of Life* to be both personally engaging and intellectually stimulating — among the two most important ingredients for a successful writing class.

In our experience, students respond to the materials in *Signs of Life* with delight, a little surprise, and great enthusiasm. Indeed, instructors who used the first four editions report that their students complete reading assignments and come to class eager to discuss and debate the topics. You'll find that your students often will be the experts on a subject, knowing more about, say, the latest hit single than you do. For some instructors that may be a discomfiting role reversal. But we encourage you to let your students enjoy the role of expert, for that may well be their first step on the road to enjoying the role of writer.

Your students' expertise in what could be called the *data* of popular culture may lead them to believe that they are already masters of its significance. Most commonly, this appears in the form of an objection to performing interpretations of popular culture — an objection that you're "reading too much" into something, or that the topic is "merely entertainment" and so doesn't signify anything. It is useful at such times to concede that, of course, a given television show, movie, or CD *is* entertainment, but the question is, "What makes it entertaining?" When masses of Americans, for example, are entertained by reality television programs that feature the humiliation and discomfiture of contestants, or laugh out loud at the latest Tarantino casual violence, that

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signifies something about American consciousness. You can connect the enormous amount of *schadenfreude*, hostility, and ironic detachment in contemporary entertainment to a larger cultural system in which social atomization and downright rudeness are increasingly the norm. This is significant, and if students still don't get the point, ask them how they feel when someone talks on a cell phone during a movie, in a restaurant, driving a car, or in class, carelessly ignoring or even endangering the well-being of others. Isn't this a sign of a society whose social cohesion is being unravelled, and isn't this unravelling evident in what is found to be entertaining?

Why Semiotics?

By making our choice of a semiotic approach explicit, we've departed from some textbook conventions. Traditionally, textbook authors assume a neutral stance toward their material, playing the role of objective compiler. Students then read the text, their task being to argue about or analyze it. But we see problems in this formulation of the roles of both author and student. As a comparison of textbooks can easily show, no textbook author is a mere compiler: the choices of what to include or exclude can reveal the author's values, philosophies, and ideologies. This point is hardly new, but our semiotic approach is designed to put it into practice.

Discussed less often is the role of the student. It has long struck us that textbooks invite students to analyze, but textbook authors don't fully explain what that means. There's the old "break up into constituent parts" definition, but that often remains a mystery to students: we're not even sure what it means when applied to real issues that don't have distinct parts. Essentially, analysis remains a pure category, with theoretical assumptions and ideological positions unexplored and undefined. But we don't believe there's such a thing as pure analysis, even for students. Indeed, it's likely that, in their discipline-specific courses, students will be asked to use various approaches or theories in their essays. In a sociology class, for instance, students may be asked to perform a Marxist analysis of a social problem; in an economics class, they may be assigned to assess tax-cutting proposals from a supply-side perspective. Being self-conscious about one's point of view is essential to academic writing; we can think of no better place for students to learn that lesson than in a writing class, and the semiotic approach is especially suited to this purpose.

Our own experience has borne this out. As an analytic method, semiotics teaches students to formulate cogent, well-supported interpretations. It emphasizes the examination of assumptions and beliefs and the way language shapes our apprehension of the world. Most students feel comfortable with semiotics: Since one of its precepts is that its job is to *reveal* interests and ideologies, not to *judge* them, students are less likely to feel that you are peddling a single point of view on a topic if you adopt a semiotic approach. Semiotics also makes it easier for a class to discuss sensitive or politically charged issues: the goal is not to judge individuals' beliefs but to locate those beliefs within a social and cultural context.

Using semiotics in a writing class makes sense, too, because of things our students have told us. Much to our delight, students sometimes report that they're covering semiotics in another class. That shouldn't be too surprising, for semiotics also has the benefit of being a cross-disciplinary approach. A wing of critical theory in literature departments, semiotics also has been influential in film and media studies, anthropology, law, psychology, sociology, political science, and even management studies. While we can't guarantee that all students will revisit semiotics in their academic lives, we feel its cross-disciplinary nature makes it suitable for a writing class made up of stu-

dents who are studying a variety of majors and disciplines. Finally, our students have told us that they enjoy semiotics. In fact, we've had students say that they appreciate learning something entirely *new* in our classes, and what's new extends beyond the topics covered to a way of looking at the world.

With all that said, we recognize that a semiotics approach may be new to some instructors. Accordingly, we've designed the book to allow you to be as "semiotic" with your class as you choose. We'll be delighted if you discuss semiotics with your students, try out semiotic readings in class, and assign them semiotic essay topics. But if you prefer to use the approach with a lighter touch, that's fine, too. Indeed, colleagues have told us that they appreciate the fact that the text does not obligate them to spend a lot of time with semiotics or to involve the class in technical definitions (we've avoided the technical jargon that makes much semiotics research seem turgid). Your class may be content knowing that semiotics means the interpretation of popular culture — and that can be your focus.

Some Background in Semiotics

Students often become intrigued by semiotics, asking about its history and wondering how they can learn about it. We'll anticipate their most common questions here, but don't worry, you don't have to be an expert to answer their questions. Their first question may well be: "Semi what? How do you pronounce it?" Well, it's simple: /semiótiks/. The word might seem unfamiliar because it was coined a little more than a century ago by Charles Sanders Peirce, who derived it from the Greek word for *sign*, or meaning: *semeiotikos*. The fact that Peirce, who founded the modern study of semiotics in the last third of the nineteenth century, could adopt an ancient Greek term so readily testifies to the long heritage of reading signs. From Plato and Aristotle to the Stoics, ancient philosophers speculated on the nature of signs; indeed, the Stoic philosophers anticipated contemporary semiotic theory by arguing that the meaning of a sign lies in a concept, not in a thing or referent.

Despite its antiquity, semiotics may be unfamiliar because unlike linguistics, which is a regular part of the university curriculum, relatively few colleges have programs or departments in semiotics. Most semiotic study takes place within disciplines such as literary and film studies and anthropology; here, the emphasis tends to be on semiotic theory — which, like any theoretical study, can be technical and forbidding. But just as you don't need to master transformational generative linguistics to decode a sentence, you don't need to master theoretical semiotics to perform semiotic analyses. In fact, we do just that every day, especially in regard to popular culture — and that's why students are perfectly capable of using a semiotic approach.

Students really need only a few basic principles to conduct a semiotic analysis. The first is that the meaning of a sign — whether it is a linguistic symbol, an artifact, a belief, or a form of behavior — is to be found within the system to which it belongs, not in some absolute realm of nature or reality. In semiotic terms, the meaning of a linguistic sign, for example, lies in its place within a system of culturally constituted concepts, not in a "real" object to which it refers. Similarly, in popular culture, a BMW gets its significance from its place in the system of automotive status symbols, not from its reference to any sort of concrete referent. It can at once be *associated* with other status symbols (like Land Rovers) and *differentiated* from nonstatus cars like Hyundais. Through such differential and associational relations, the meaning of a popular sign is constructed. Your students may want to insist that BMWs are popular because they're built well, that they refer to some objective measure of quality, but that

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functional answer fails to account for the many well-built cars that do not carry the status value of a “beamer.” Just ask them to compare a BMW to other luxury cars such as a Cadillac or to a Lexus. The difference between the cars as they appear within the system is where the meaning lies, in the images that they project, not in the materials with which they are constructed.

In technical terms, the systematic interpretation of a popular sign represents an adaptation of Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiological principle that the meaning of a linguistic sign lies in its differences with respect to all the other signs in a linguistic system. Because structural semiology is a formalistic method that tends to ignore history and politics, we have expanded upon Saussure to add both Peircean and Marxist semiotic insights. From Peirce we take the principle that signs are situated in history and that their meanings shift as our knowledge or experience shifts. From Marxism, we take the principle that cultural signs bear ideological weight. Thus, when we speak of the system to which a sign belongs, we refer to historical and ideological (or mythological) systems as well as formal ones. One could say that, in a broad sense, the semiotic method we propose resembles that found in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*.

Your students are likely to notice that the systematic, or mythological, interpretation of popular cultural signs involves a certain amount of generalization. They may even complain that this constitutes stereotyping. Stereotyping and generalization differ, of course, but it’s still best to respond by conceding the point and noting that there are always individual exceptions to the general semiotic rule. Then you can refer to such phenomena as the Values and Lifestyles System paradigm that James Twitchell describes in his selection “What We Are to Advertisers,” which advertisers use to categorize types of consumer. The VALS paradigm blatantly stereotypes consumers, but if it didn’t work, marketers wouldn’t use it. Indeed, you can ask your students if they recognize their consumer profile in the VALS chart — you may even want to identify to your class where you yourself fit in. Indeed, in spite of our own self-consciousness about consumer profiling, we find that we fit rather tidily into the VALS paradigm ourselves!

The ability to interpret something by locating it within an overall system is fundamental to any analytic writing, not just the interpretation of popular signs. As a result, teaching your students to see things like cars within their cultural contexts is a step towards helping them to see how, say, understanding Shakespeare in their literature classes requires a knowledge of the cultural system within which his plays appeared. The difference is that, with Shakespeare, the cultural systems are historically alien to our times and must be learned. In our own time, the systems are well known; they simply need to be made explicit.

This should help you when, after interpreting the status value of something like a BMW, a student says, “Well, isn’t all that obvious?” And, yes, semiotic analyses of popular culture sometimes may appear obvious, precisely because the systems within which popular signs appear are familiar. But ask your students if the meanings, say, of their clothing styles are obvious to their parents or to someone from a different culture, who may have no knowledge of the fashion system to which American youth styles belong.

The key to teaching your students how to conduct semiotic analyses of popular culture is to cue them in to the social environments within which signs appear. In one sense, this involves the teaching of present history, which is rather different from the teaching of “current events.” Current events tend to be the larger-than-life events—usually crises—that make headlines. Present history includes everything that we think and do on a day-to-day basis. Current events are macrofocused and have relatively little bearing on the conduct of our lives (unless we are in the center of them). Present history is microfocused, and part of semiotics is simply bringing to light the small things with which we live.

Thus, one need not be an expert in semiotic theory to be adept at semiotic interpretation. You may have studied semiotics in graduate school or as part of your postgraduate training, and though you may have found stimulating the writings of such semiotic masters as Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, and Jean Baudrillard, you may still wonder how your composition students will fare in the realm of semiotics. You needn't worry. Just as one can write a syntactically flawless essay without knowing linguistic theory, one can go right to the heart of a cultural sign without bothering with whether Saussure or Peirce should be your guide. The secret is in the system, and that can be your focus.

Responding to Questions about Semiotics

The corollary to our fundamental semiotic precept, that the meaning of a sign is to be found in the system to which it belongs, is that meaning is a social construct, not a simple reflection of truth or reality. The systems within which our values and beliefs function are mythologies, not absolute revelations. This semiotic principle — that meaning is mythological (or ideological) in origin — may well raise the most challenging of your students' questions, questions that are likely to be of two sorts: scientific and moral. Here are some ways to cope with such questions.

Let's start with the scientific objections. We live in an empirical culture that believes in the truth of observation: If you want to get to the heart of something, all you need to do is look at it. European culture was not always like this, of course. In the Middle Ages, for example, the truths of faith were held to be higher than the truths of observation — so Galileo was ordered to retract what he said about what his telescope showed him. But since our society now believes in empirical observation, some students may be shaken by the semiotic suggestion that when we speak of "reality," and of the names we give to our experience of reality, we are speaking of the system of concepts within which we operate, a system that determines what it is possible for us to know.

For the semiotician, our knowledge reflects not ultimate realities but systems of values that can be called *worldviews* or *cultural myths*. Myths are not legends and stories in the semiotic view; they are value and belief systems that frame the very way we perceive and define reality. From a semiotic perspective, reality is not something waiting passively out there for us to discover: It is the product of our own interpretive decisions. There is always a semiotic frame, a mythology, that mediates between our consciousness and the reality we interpret, and therefore construct, because of that frame. This is one of the most profound, and disturbing, principles of semiotic understanding — disturbing because it flies in the face of our cultural belief in the sanctity of "objective" knowledge. For that reason, it is probably the most difficult obstacle to overcome in learning to think semiotically.

But a little history, read in the light of semiotic understanding, shows that our very belief in scientific objectivity is itself a form of interpretation, not an absolute fact. Fundamentally, your students will probably take a more or less positivistic approach if they object to semiotic principles. Positivism, a nineteenth-century philosophical movement that held that "truth" is revealed through the clear gaze of objective observation, is the ideology of most laypersons today when it comes to scientific interpretation. However, positivism is no longer in force among contemporary scientists. Modern scientists themselves take the position that the "truths" of science are fundamentally interpretations that are themselves made possible by what Thomas Kuhn, a scientific historian and philosopher, called the "paradigms" of "normal science."

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(Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, revolutionized the philosophy of science.) At any given time, according to Kuhn, a scientist pursues the research programs that the state of understanding at the moment permits. In an era of relativity, for example, physicists work within a relativistic paradigm of understanding. If relativity theory is ever overthrown, a new paradigm of understanding will emerge to govern future research. The object of study is reality, but it is the paradigm that determines what the researcher will look for and how it will be interpreted.

The profound effect our cultural mythologies have on the way we view reality can be seen by looking at the different ways that different cultures regard language itself. In European-American culture, for example, the myth holds that the purpose of language is to communicate one's intentions, emotions, or meanings. Language, in short, is regarded as a transparent medium whose primary purpose is to convey information. The natural ground for language is considered to be logic and truth, the projection of objective facts, not persuasion and purpose. Thus, language is considered essentially apolitical, something that cannot ethically be manipulated. We even invent stories to support this mythology, taking America's most successful politician, George Washington, and glorifying him as an apolitical man who never told a lie. (Note how the myth stresses his reluctance when drafted as the first president.)

Things were not always thus in Western culture, however. In ancient Athens, wealthy men sent their sons to school primarily to learn the art of rhetoric, which was understood as the art of making political speeches. The Sophists, who ran the schools, specialized in rhetoric — teaching how to manipulate linguistic tropes to achieve one's ends. But it is not the Sophists whom we remember today (except negatively—the word *sophistical* now refers to an argument that can't be trusted). Rather, we remember Socrates, Plato's teacher, who hated the Sophists — among other things, he didn't like their habit of accepting tuition fees — and who believed that the purpose of language was to lead one objectively to absolute philosophical truth. Socrates' philosophical predilection to regard language logically and objectively eventually triumphed as the dominant language-mythology of European culture. The Sophists' rhetorically based, political attitude toward language was defeated, and the philosophical view of language as an objective bearer of the truth became the now-invisible (because it is so widely embraced) linguistic myth of Western civilization.

Modern rhetoricians and semioticians, however, can point out just how many rhetorical tricks Plato used in his own writings to attack the rhetoricians of ancient Athens. (There is another irony here: Plato, the first great writer of secular prose in European history, despised and condemned writing as being too prone to trickiness and misinterpretation.) In other words, Western culture's embrace of an antirhetorical mythology of language is based, at least in part, upon some pretty fancy rhetoric. Plato, after all, got his way, which is what persuasive argumentation is meant to do.

Students may also raise a moral objection to semiotics — the approach can raise the specter of relativism. We think it is fair for students to ask, "If semiotics argues that values are culturally relative, then what's the point in having values?" Since such questions are difficult to answer, they may be either ignored or dismissed in a manner that suggests that some semioticians are eager enough to expose the ideological underpinnings of their opponents' values but that they consider their own values unassailable. We don't believe that this is a good way to teach semiotic thinking, so we'll address the issue of ethical relativism that semiotics raises in a more tentative way. We intend to open up the question for further debate — perhaps the first debate you may engage in with your class.

Our first response to the "What's the point, then?" question is that every attempt to come up with an absolute standard of values is going to run into trouble anyway. Most commonly, people rely on religious teachings to provide moral guidance, but it

doesn't take long to see how ambiguous things can get even when we can agree on the same guide. American moral culture, for example, is founded on the injunctions of the Bible, whose commandment on killing seems clear enough. "Thou shalt not kill," the commandment says, but then the interpretation begins. Killing nonhumans is rarely included in the injunction (though in Buddhist culture, the ideal is to kill no animal at all), but what about war, capital punishment, euthanasia, and that most intractable of controversies, abortion? If your students begin to pronounce judgment on such matters, let the class discussion reveal the sources of their judgments. Likely as not there will be disagreement, and when students probe the ground for their opinions, they will discover that many such grounds are possible. Ask your class, then, who gets to decide which ground is paramount, and the ensuing discussion should reveal just how political our values are.

The point, then, is not whether value systems are possible; it is how convincing we can be when presenting our values. Often, the mere challenge to justify one's opinions can illuminate their ideological foundations. Semiotic thinking teaches us to probe our values, not to give them up, and such probing can help us — especially as writers — find better ways of persuading others to adopt our point of view. Simply denouncing the opposition gets one nowhere: A writer has to find the terms that make most sense to a reader who may not share his or her perspective. Indeed, as semioticians, we have written this text with the understanding that the semiotic point of view is hardly universal but that if it is thoughtfully, even considerately, presented, it can contribute to anyone's intellectual growth.

Further Readings in Semiotics

If you want to pursue semiotics further, we suggest the following books and Web sites as a place to start. Some are introductions to the field (and would also be suitable for student readers), while others are technical and theoretical.

- Barthes, Roland. *The Fashion System*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990. A classic semiotic reading of clothing styles.
- . *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. One of the first applications of semiotic theory to the interpretation of popular culture. Barthes's wide-ranging analyses take in everything from the cultural significance of plastic and strip tease to professional wrestling and Einstein's brain.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. London: Verso, 1988. A classic reading of American culture, focusing on New York and Los Angeles, by the world's preeminent postmodern semiologist.
- Berger, Asa. *Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics*. New York: Longman, 1984. A popular introduction to semiotics, applying semiotic insights to the interpretation of Shakespeare, Sherlock Holmes, pop art, the comics, digital watches, baseball, and much more.
- . *Cultural Criticism: A Primer of Key Concepts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995.
- Blonsky, Marshall. *American Mythologies*. New York: Oxford, 1992. A reading of American popular culture.
- . *On Signs*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985. An anthology of essays written by leading semioticians from Umberto Eco to Jacques Derrida. Essays range from technical expositions on semiotic theory to cultural and literary criticism.
- Bondanella, Peter. *Umberto Eco and the Open Text: Semiotics, Fiction, Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997. An overview of Eco's career.

- Chandler, Daniel. *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge, 2004. An accessible introduction to semiotics.
- . “Semiotics for Beginners.” www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html. An online introduction.
- Clarke, D. S., Jr. *Sources of Semiotic: Readings with Commentary from Antiquity to the Present*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1990. An anthology of semiotic writings from Aristotle to the present, with each selection annotated by Clarke.
- Danesi, Marcel. *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999. A consideration of the importance of semiotic thinking in our everyday lives.
- Deely, John. *Basics of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1990. A primer in semiotic theory from one of the major figures in the Semiotic Society of America.
- Eco, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1979. A magisterial summation of semiotic theory from the world’s leading semiotician, establishing a theoretical grounding for the connection between signs and culture.
- . *Travels in Hyperreality*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1990. A collection of essays that interpret American and Italian popular culture.
- Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977. A primer in structural semiology and deconstruction written for students of literary criticism and theory.
- Holbrook, Morris B., and Elizabeth C. Hirshman. *The Semiotics of Consumption*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993.
- Marti, M. “Tools for Cultural Studies.” University of Basel. <http://pages.unibas.ch/shine/culturalstudies.html>. A full bibliography of semiotic studies.
- Nöth, Winfried. *Handbook of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989. An encyclopedic dictionary of major semiotic terms and concepts.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers*. 8 vols. Eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1931–66. Eight volumes of the original essays, papers, and random jottings that inaugurated the modern study of semiotics in America.
- Ryder, Martin. “Semiotics.” University of Denver at Colorado. http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/semiotics.html. An impressively comprehensive list of semiotics resources, including links to corollary sites.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trans. Roy Harris. London: Duckworth, 1983. A transcription of the pioneering lectures that led to the development of semiology and structuralism.
- Scholes, Robert. *Semiotics and Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1982. An introduction to semiotics for students of literary theory and criticism.
- Sebeok, Thomas, ed. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1986. A guide to semiotic terms and concepts, edited by the dean of American semiotics and the founder of the Semiotic Society of America.
- Solomon, Jack. *The Signs of Our Time: The Secret Meanings of Everyday Life*. New York: Harper/Collins Perennial Library, 1990. A nonacademic introduction to semiotics, focusing on its application to popular culture. Essays range from interpretations of TV shows and advertisements to toys, food, clothing, architecture and postmodernism. This book has been used as a class text for college writing classes across the nation.
- Umiker-Sebeok, Jean, ed. *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987. A collection of papers devoted to the semiotics of marketing goods and services.
- Wollen, Peter. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972. A semiotic approach to the interpretation of films.

Using *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*

ALTERNATIVE THEMATIC ARRANGEMENTS

You're not likely to march through *Signs of Life* chapter by chapter, assigning your students every selection; even if you wanted to do that, you probably wouldn't have time. You'll probably need to use the text selectively to accommodate the length of your school term and the skill level of your students. There are better and worse ways to do that. One way, of course, is by covering the entire text but eliminating readings from each chapter. We advise against that simply because your students may feel frustrated by what can seem a whirlwind tour of topics (the "if it's Tuesday, it must be gender" feeling). Some instructors might choose to cover just one chunk of the book, say, the chapters on advertising, TV, and film. While that's a workable approach that would score points for focus, we'd be sorry to have students lose the deliberate cross-pollination of issues that occurs throughout the text. Here's a brief example. The images perpetuated by the media are shaped by our culture's assumptions about race; similarly, prevailing beliefs about gender are reinforced and given legitimacy through advertising, television, and film. If you emphasize just one chunk of the book, we urge you to include in your syllabus at least some selections from other parts.

So what do we recommend? We strongly suggest beginning with the general introduction so that students can gain an overview of the book, understand the semiotic approach, and learn why they're covering popular culture in their writing class. At this point, you might ask them for their ideas on which selections they'd like to cover. Although it may seem scary to begin the course without everything mapped out in detail, you may win greater class involvement if you allow your students some say in what they have to read. Together you could pick and choose among all the selections, creating your own themes as you go along. As an alternative, you could plan out the first half of the course, then solicit student suggestions for what to cover during the second half. If you prefer more structure, we see two possible approaches: (1) organizing your course around one broad theme or (2) creating several small units, each with its own theme.

1. *Organizing your course around one broad theme.* Three of the chapters "Consuming Passions: The Culture of American Consumption" (Chapter One), "We've Come a Long Way, Maybe: Gender Codes in American Culture" (Chapter Six), and "Constructing Race: Readings in Multicultural Semiotics" (Chapter Seven) — address themes far-ranging enough that you could select one and focus your entire course on the single theme it introduces. After beginning with one of these chapters and covering it entirely, you could pick among other chapters that contain readings related to the theme and select those that would best enhance your approach to the overall topic. The following possibilities would work if you plan to cover five additional chapters, although you certainly can adapt these schemes or invent your own.

Theme: Consuming Behavior in America

Begin with: "Consuming Passions" (Chapter One)

Do: "Brought to You B(u)y" (Chapter Two)

Pick three: "Video Dreams" (Chapter Three), "The Hollywood Sign" (Chapter Four), "Popular Spaces" (Chapter Eight), "We've Come a Long Way, Maybe" (Chapter Six), "American Icons" (Chapter Nine)

Theme: Multiculturalism/Ethnicity

Begin with: "Constructing Race" (Chapter Seven)

Pick four: "Brought to You B(u)y" (Chapter Two), "Video Dreams" (Chapter Three), "The Hollywood Sign" (Chapter Four), "We've Come a Long Way, Maybe" (Chapter Six), "American Icons" (Chapter Nine)

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Theme: Gender

Begin with: “We’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe” (Chapter Six)

Pick four: “Brought to You B(u)y” (Chapter Two), “Video Dreams” (Chapter Three), “The Hollywood Sign” (Chapter Four), “Popular Spaces” (Chapter Eight), “American Icons” (Chapter Nine)

2. *Creating several small units, each with its own theme.* Because the selections cover many interrelated themes, you could organize your course around several smaller issues. You’ll probably spot such units as you skim through the book; we suggest some here that we find especially appealing. We also suggest possible readings from throughout the book, but by no means should this be read as a definitive list, nor should you feel obligated to cover all the readings suggested for each theme.

Ethnicity

Do: “Constructing Race” (Chapter Seven)

Pick from: Stark, Pough (Chapter Three); Boyd, Hagedorn (Chapter Four); Quindlen, Kennedy (Chapter Five); Morgan (Chapter Six); Swentzell (Chapter Eight); Dyson (Chapter Nine)

Consumerism/Commodification

Do: “Consuming Passions” (Chapter One)

Pick from: Marchand, Schlosser, Steinem, Twitchell (Chapter Two); Brooks, Easterbrook, Solomon, Corliss (Chapter Five); Omi, Wynter (Chapter Seven); Gladwell, Willis (Chapter Eight); Dyson, Prager, Cross, Caldwell (Chapter Nine)

Gender

Do: “We’ve Come a Long Way, Maybe” (Chapter Six)

Pick from: Norton (Chapter One); Craig, St. John, Steinem (Chapter Two); Creamer, Stark, Douglas, Pough, Mayer, Connolly (Chapter Three); Denby, Eaklor, Hagedorn, Sobchack (Chapter Four); Lippard, Nelson (Chapter Five); hooks (Chapter Seven); Karbo, Spain (Chapter Eight); Medhurst, Prager, Cross (Chapter Nine)

The Formation of Personal Identity

Begin with Kron (Chapter One)

Pick from: Hine, Davis, Goewey (Chapter One); St. John, Twitchell (Chapter Two); Mayer (Chapter Three); Brooks, Lubrano, Nelson (Chapter Five); Devor, Jennings, Blum, Fried, Wolf, Gibson, Messner (Chapter Six); Lopez, Bernstein, Algranati, Shen (Chapter Seven); Karbo (Chapter Eight); Bader (Chapter Nine)

Interpreting Signs and Images

Do: “American Icons” (Chapter Nine); cover, frontispieces, images and photos throughout the text

Pick from: Norton, Hine, Davis, Kron, Goewey, Frank (Chapter One); Craig, St. John, Portfolio of Ads (Chapter Two); Stark, Douglas, Pough, Mayer, Connolly (Chapter Three); Boyd, Denby, Eaklor, Hagedorn, Parenti (Chapter Four); Brooks, Solomon, Corliss, Kennedy (Chapter Five); Devor, Wolf, Tannen, Gibson (Chapter Six); Omi, Price, Bernstein, hooks (Chapter Seven); Gladwell, Willis, Karbo, Greenbie, Vergara (Chapter Eight)

Social Class

Pick from: Shames (Chapter One), Twitchell (Chapter Two); Parenti (Chapter Four); Brooks, Quindlen, Easterbrook, Lubrano (Chapter Five); Price

(Chapter Seven); Greenbie, Vergara (Chapter Eight); Brennan, Caldwell (Chapter Nine)

ENCOURAGING STUDENT RESPONSE AND INVOLVEMENT

Signs of Life presumes a class with active students. It calls upon their knowledge of popular culture and encourages them to participate in their writing class. We've built into the apparatus suggestions for a variety of ways students can respond to readings, reflect on them alone, and discuss them with others. We've tried to suggest responses that are appropriate to each reading. For instance, we include at least one reflective journal topic for selections that might disturb readers. But our suggestions are meant to be flexible: Just because we frame a topic as an essay question, for instance, doesn't mean that you can't rewrite it as a journal prompt. We'll summarize for you the major strategies we've relied on to trigger students' response, and we'll offer whatever hints we can for ensuring their success.

Cover On the first day of class, you might start by asking students to interpret the cover. What's the significance of the icons? How do they function as signs of American popular culture? What do they signal to readers about the content of this book? And don't ignore the polka dots: what does this graphic element suggest about the book's spirit? Encourage your students to go into some detail in thinking about the pop cultural associations that the icons can trigger. The cow, for instance, suggests not simply the "Got Milk?" campaign, but also McDonald's, even "Supersize Me" and *Fast Food Nation*. What associations can they make with the other icons?

Introduction We consider the general Introduction essential if you plan to use the semiotic approach, for that's where we not only explain the method and our rationale for using it but also walk students through sample interpretations that can serve as models for their own analyses. Notice that often we stop short of completing an analysis. We've deliberately not provided definitive readings of the topics raised; instead, we try to give just enough so that students will be excited and encouraged to pursue their own interpretations. Thus, often we stop in the middle of an analysis and turn to the students. Use such moments as a way to stimulate class discussion. Ask your students to finish the job, to amplify and extend, or even to contradict, the analyses that we've started. Even if you don't use semiotics, the introduction explains why their textbook focuses on popular culture as its topic.

In addition, we've included in the Introduction a portfolio of pop culture images through seven decades. You'll notice that the portfolio doesn't simply illustrate pop culture icons, although it does do that. It also illustrates a trajectory from the rather child-like innocence and sweetness of the thirties, as we see in *The Wizard of Oz*, to the outright raunchiness, in-your-face and bare-it-all eroticism of a Britney Spears. Ask your students if they see a pattern in the images. What does that pattern suggest about the values implicit — and explicit — in American popular culture?

Writing about Popular Culture We recognize that many students, even early in their writing process, may want to see what a "real" essay looks like as a model to guide their own revision and thinking. We've thus included in our introduction suggestions for writing on popular culture, and, because many instructors ask their students to analyze visual texts, we've added a section offering advice on how to do that. We also include student-written essays on topics prompted by this text. Of course, you may wish to supplement this material with sample essays written by your own students. But these sample essays are particularly useful if you want to review student work early in the term before your own students have produced any final drafts, or you may prefer the diplomatically easier choice of critiquing an essay not written by someone sitting in class.

This section has two parts: an introduction to writing about popular culture and three sample students essays. You can assign the introductory comments with or without the subsequent essays — the two can exist independently if you like. The introductory material would be best assigned early in the term, perhaps even before students start their first writing assignment. Here we emphasize prewriting strategies, especially critical reading strategies and invention techniques, and offer suggestions on writing arguments about popular culture. Specifically, we emphasize constructing a strong argument with specific evidence — one of the most common need of students, even at varying levels and abilities, is to learn how to translate their personal reactions and private opinions into a defensible argument that can stand up in the court of public discussion. Then we walk students through the beginnings of a interpretation of an ad to demonstrate some of the strategies they can use when they need to analyze a visual text. Our comments are not intended to be exhaustive but rather to suggest to your students how academic discourse demands that writers be responsible to their readership, in addition supporting to their own ideas.

The second part presents three student essays, chosen because they represent a range of styles and topics, with brief marginal annotations. While we believe each writer is effective in achieving his or her goals, be aware that, as with any student writing, there's always room for improvement. So we suggest you describe these essays not as "ideal" models — that might intimidate some students, anyway — but as interesting and effective responses to some of the issues *Signs of Life* raises. If your students can suggest revisions to strengthen the essays, great!

The first essay, by William Martin-Doyle of Harvard University, is a strong semiotic reading of *Cool Hand Luke*. This essay is particularly useful if you're emphasizing text-based arguments, as Martin-Doyle draws upon Robert B. Ray's "The Thematic Paradigm" in Chapter Four for his critical framework. Interestingly, Martin-Doyle departs from Ray in his argument, showing a spirit of intellectual independence that we think is worth promoting. In addition, the argument is supported with a good, close reading of the film. We recognize that some students may not have seen *Cool Hand Luke*. That shouldn't be a problem, because students can focus on how Martin-Doyle draws upon both Ray's essay and the film to construct his own interpretation. If curious, students can rent the film (or you may wish to do that yourself).

The second essay, by Dana Mariano of Lehigh University, is based on her experience with a recent popular trend: tattooing and body piercing. This is a fully accessible essay that we selected because Mariano goes beyond simply narrating her visit to the tattoo parlor to interpret the appeal of the fad itself—a nice blend of the personal and the broader social context. We include the third essay, by Joshua Keim of California State University, Northridge, because students often receive open-ended assignments but don't quite know where to go with them. Joshua's assignment asked him to write a semiotic analysis of the social and cultural values implicit in a retail store of his own choosing. In this essay, Joshua lets his interpretation unfold as he narrates the process of walking around City Walk, and his essay provides a good model of how to focus a topic and how to ground it in lots of specific, relevant details.

Citing Sources We include a brief guide to citing sources, including online and media sources, for your students' quick reference.

Frontispieces and Images We feel that it's essential for a semiotics-based reader to include both images and text, so each chapter begins with a frontispiece that presents an image related to the chapter's topic, and throughout the book appear photos and images ripe for analysis. Do discuss these images with your students, perhaps as a way to begin class discussion of a new topic. Some, such as the "Mind if I Smoke? Care if I Die?" frontispiece (Chapter Two), offer critical commentary of their own. Some illustrate points mentioned in the chapter introductions or articles (the frontispiece

showing Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake, for instance, reflects the discussion in Chapter Five's introduction). Others coordinate with adjacent articles (the photograph of Salt 'N' Pepa meshes with the Pough selection in Chapter Three, for instance, just as the "Which Man Looks Guilty?" photo accompanies the Randall Kennedy selection in Chapter Five). Some extend the issues raised in adjacent articles (such as the photo "You're Fired" that advertises *The Apprentice* in Chapter Three). Discuss with your students both the immediate impact the images have on them — their gut responses — and the images' cultural and social significance. To get your students thinking about an issue, ask them to brainstorm alternative images and then to debate which ones they would or would not want to see in a text. Not only would such a discussion reveal much about their own worldviews, it would enable students to see that they've already been semioticians all along.

Chapter Introductions and Boxed Questions A crucial part of the book, the chapter introductions suggest ways to analyze the chapter's subject and provide a critical framework for reading and understanding the essays that follow. Such a framework is vital for a popular-culture textbook, for the students' strengths can become their weaknesses. Because students know so much about the culture around them, it's sometimes hard for them to adopt a critical stance toward it; guiding students toward that critical stance is one of the introductions' main tasks. The introductions suggest ways to read a subject, model interpretations of examples, link the various issues raised by the selections, and (as with the general Introduction) create opportunities for students to explore an issue further. You can also trigger discussion by assigning the boxed questions included with each introduction. The "Exploring the Signs" questions are all journal or prewriting topics, intended to stimulate a student's thinking on a topic even before you discuss it in class. Most relate the chapter's subject to the student's personal experience, and they're meant to lead students to see how a broad or abstract topic can apply to their own lives. The "Discussing the Signs" boxes suggest in-class activities such as debates, discussions, or small-group work. You could try these tasks either on the day you discuss the chapter introduction or anytime when you're covering the chapter readings. The "Reading on the Net" exercises suggest ways to investigate a topic on the Internet. Some Net exercises send students online to research a topic, while others ask them to interpret what they find at a given Web site. In some cases, we've given specific Internet addresses, but be aware that the Net is always changing — your students may find alternative sites that are as interesting as the ones we've suggested.

"Reading the Text" Questions All selections are accompanied first by questions we've dubbed "Reading the Text," essentially comprehension questions designed to ensure careful, accurate reading. They ask students to identify the selections' key concepts, to explain difficult terms, and to articulate how the selections' main ideas relate to each other and to the evidence the authors present. These questions are ideal for readings logs or journals. You could routinely assign them whenever you give a reading assignment, or you could assign them just for selections you anticipate may be difficult for your students. We suggest that you create some mechanism whereby your students can share their responses with others. You might begin discussion of a reading by asking some students to read their responses to the class; that will enable you to see quickly whether your students had any trouble understanding the selection. Alternatively, your students could share their responses in small groups, or they might write brief responses on the board at the beginning of class.

"Reading the Signs" Questions Each selection is also accompanied by various writing and activity questions designed to produce clear analytic thinking and strong student writing. You'll see that most Reading the Signs questions call for a written response to the text. Some we've framed as journal topics; we find it valuable peda-

gogically for students to be able to link the sometimes abstract or theoretical concepts to their own lives. Seeing that their school work doesn't have to exist independently of their home culture can prove a tremendous motivation for students. Journal entries can also be particularly useful for selections that might disturb your students; writing in their journals allows them a chance to explore their responses before they get to class. Occasionally, you might ask students to read their entries aloud in small groups or before the entire class (for sensitive topics, you might read the entries to the class yourself, without revealing the students' names). But be sure to let your class know at the beginning of term whether the journal is to be public (shared with other students) or private (shared with just you), or both.

The essay questions range from fairly simple and straightforward to challenging and controversial, calling for different modes of response (argumentation, comparison, and so forth). Some topics focus on a single selection, while others ask students to consider two or more selections in relation to each other. You'll find that some questions ask students to conduct nontraditional research, such as interviews. We've found that students become excited when doing such work and that they often produce their best writing when they can generate their own primary evidence. To ensure successful interviews, you should provide them with some guidelines ahead of time. You might discuss with your class the difference between questions that are open-ended and those that prompt yes-no responses. You could ask students to prepare interview questions for your review. Particularly if students will be asking about sensitive topics, they can benefit from role-playing an interview in small groups. Role-playing can also help students with timing; they usually underestimate how long it will take to cover a set of issues.

A number of questions invite other in-class activities, such as group work, debates, and hypothetical conversations. We encourage you to try these to stimulate all your students to participate. We've found small groups can work for almost any sort of class activity, from discussing a selection to writing a collaborative research paper. Small groups often allow students to be more honest, and being in a group can make it easier for quiet students to participate in the class. We particularly like to use groups to create a different class dynamic than exists during a whole-class discussion. In addressing gender issues, for instance, you can create same-sex groups to discuss an issue and then have the groups report to the whole class. That way not only will students benefit from their group discussion, but they can stand back and examine the groups themselves for evidence of gender-based patterns. One kind of group work that can yield surprising results is a hypothetical conversation between two authors or characters from the readings. We like these conversations because students must first discuss among themselves the likely positions each author would take on an issue (what the author would say); then they must consider the manner of presentation appropriate for each author (*how* the author would say it). If you ask your students to stage such a conversation, be sure to give them plenty of time for planning it — that's when half the learning takes place!

Debates are particularly valuable for teaching argumentative strategies: Students must generate logical arguments, amass compelling evidence, and anticipate opposing viewpoints. When creating debating teams, we've found it works best to mix students of various viewpoints — in other words, it's not necessary for everyone on a team to hold the same opinion about an issue. If the group members have different opinions, they will be exposed to alternative positions when planning their presentations.

Some questions call for nonanalytic assignments, such as designing an advertisement. Do give these a try; they provide students a chance to put the analytical and theoretical material to practical use. Students may see such assignments as just fun, so we suggest that you create some mechanism whereby they reflect on or analyze their cre-

ations. They might present their work to the class, explaining the rationale behind it; or, in an essay, they could describe their goals and discuss the extent to which their creation fulfilled those goals.

“Reading the Net” Questions The Internet can offer you and your students a wealth of material to study and analyze. You can use the Internet as a source of textual evidence for students to examine — just how does a movie studio package and market its latest release, for instance, and what messages is it sending to prospective viewers? You can also have your students research the background behind pop cultural phenomena, an especially useful strategy if you want them to have some historical range in their analyses. Your students are likely to be quite savvy about using the Internet, but they might not have much experience conducting formal research. You may wish to discuss the need to evaluate Web sites: how can they tell if a site is legitimate? What clues should they look for?

Glossary of Key Terms We include a glossary of key words and concepts drawn from the chapter introductions to provide a ready-reference for you and your students.

Companion Web Site For supplementary material, consult the Web site that accompanies this text at www.bedfordstmartins.com/signsoflife. This Web site offers a rich array of links, from manufacturers’ sites that are ripe for analysis and interpretation, to critical sites and archives such as the American Advertising Museum. You can search our companion Web site either by chapter or by subject.

Advice from Experienced Instructors

Since we began working on the first edition of *Signs of Life* several years ago, we have benefited from the fresh ideas and innovative teaching techniques of our friends and colleagues — and we’d like to share some of this helpful advice with you. Meredith Kurz of Valley College provides suggestions for an array of pedagogical issues, ranging from sequencing assignments throughout the term to preventing plagiarism. Next, Deborah Banner describes an imaginative class project that she assigned at UCLA involving group work, student presentations, the collaborative creation of an ad, and individual student essays. We find their ideas striking and believe you will as well, whether you’re new to *Signs of Life* or a veteran.

MEREDITH KURZ

Signs of Life in the Composition Class

My title’s obviously pilfered wordplay echoes what I believe to be the spirit of this textbook and its perhaps secondary or tertiary message — that a somewhat less than deadly serious approach to the subject of composition and composition pedagogy is not undesirable. When all is said and done, to write is to play, and to teach writing also is to play — to play with ideas, writing techniques, grammar, and words. The problem I faced in teaching my early semesters was that I had not yet found my own way to that realization; consequently, there was no way that I could help my students find their own way there. But since lately I have made some modest progress in that respect, I submit my roadmap for perusal by both novice and seasoned instructors. It is marked with concepts, directions, tips, and other miscellanea that I have picked up

along the way from professorial mentors, collegial colleagues, and anyone else who had something to offer and did.

During the first of my university's two teaching assistant training semesters, my composition director gave our class some very useful advice: "Get a good textbook, and let it support you," she said. With this idea in mind, we TAs set about finding the most supportive book available and chose for our first-teaching-semester textbook a reader-rhetoric-handbook combination. We were motivated to select such a text for three reasons:

- For our students' sakes (having everything included in one book would lower course costs for them);
- By our own insecurities (this textbook was so complete that it could teach the course all by itself; then we would be able to relax and cruise right through our first semester because "we had a good textbook, and we were going to let it support us"); and
- Because our instructor advised us to choose that particular textbook.

That first semester, I cleaved to that book with religious fervor, presenting the text to my students, chapter and verse, rigidly following the order of the textbook from Chapter One and forward. Then, somewhere around midsemester, I realized that I was losing my class's interest and my own energy. My undeviating progress through the textbook was boring me to death, and I seemed to be taking my students with me. Certainly, none of us was turning out any deathless prose. This complete textbook dependence on my part fostered a rigidity that worked to stifle almost all the original ideas anyone might have had, to abort any innovative writing styles that may have been gestating in my students' minds, and to suffocate whatever creative teaching I might have attempted.

Fortunately, at about that time, my composition director gave our TA class (many of whom found themselves in a similar situation) a second very useful bit of advice: "Don't allow your textbook to control you," she said. At first, this new useful advice seemed to contradict the old useful advice, until I realized that support and control are two entirely different concepts. At that point, I decided to change to a less prescriptive textbook format so that I wouldn't be tempted to lean so heavily on it. Accordingly, I set about finding a book that would afford my students and me a greater degree of flexibility, offer some not unwanted guidance, and yet not encourage dependence. Please forgive me if I sound like a textbook commercial here, but it was just about then that *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.* (hereinafter affectionately referred to as *SOL*) came into my life — just in time to breathe some life into my teaching. A reader with something extra, *SOL* provided both the readings and the "way" for my class and for me. *SOL* is a textbook that offers instructive but not pedantic readings and that provides a flexible and dynamic analytical methodology for reading and for writing. Additionally, the sheer number and diversity of essays make the textbook adaptable to many different types of semester formats, allowing room for instructor creativity and providing enough material for a multitude of assignment focuses.

I also welcomed the move from division by modes — to my mind, a rather out-moded and useless structure — to this text's focus on popular culture, semiotic methodology, and subject-oriented organization. The textbook's content, approach, and arrangement are such that anyone from anywhere can find material of interest and a way to write about it. Equally important, however, I also found in *SOL* room to play and flexible rules to play by. Although it may have been too late to resurrect my first semester, I had found a way to infuse life into my second.

Here ends the testimonial for *SOL* and begin some (I hope) useful suggestions for its application.

My Choice: The Assignment-Driven Semester

Some colleges and universities supply to their composition faculty a departmentally mandated textbook and require that the composition course follow its, usually, prescriptive text. I have been fortunate enough never to have worked in such circumstances except in my first TA semester. The English departments for which I have taught generally have given me a wide choice of textbooks as well as the discretion to formulate my semester as I see fit. Each has supplied me with only a very general course outline that allows for a great deal of creativity on my part. These course outlines vary little from school to school and seem to adhere to the following broad assignment pattern: (1) the narrative essay, (2) the analysis essay, (3) the argument essay, and (4) the research essay. Making semester planning a bit more complex, at California State University, Northridge, where I did my TA training and teaching, the department required, in addition to the class textbook, a full-text nonfiction work as well.

My first semester's semidisaster served me well in helping me to devise my second. I learned a lot from that experience, and one important lesson involved that first essay assignment — the narrative. In that first semester, most students turned in narratives that were exclusive rather than inclusive. These essays could not have been of interest to anyone but the writer herself and maybe, just maybe, her best friend. The writing was far too personal and, unfortunately, set a tone for the semester that I found difficult to dislodge. Subsequent essays, no matter what their purpose, always seemed to emerge from a too-personal point of view and consequently spoke only to an exclusive audience, no matter what purpose and audience directives I had supplied. I realized that the problem had a great deal to do with the students' rhetorical maturity and that it was my job to move them from their writing adolescence into a writing adulthood. Clearly, I needed to set up a model that would move them from "I" to "we" and finally to "they" — from subjective to intersubjective to objective, the academic objective being the writing style that they needed to acquire. My goal would be to achieve a synthesis between the four types of essays required and the three rhetorical stances I wished to move them through.

My Unit I: Narrative (The Inclusive "I")

My whole text, Mike Rose's excellent autobiographical narrative *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: Penguin, 1990), provided a perfect jumping off point for the semester. Rose writes an autobiographical narrative that is "I" oriented but also discusses many other issues, literacy among them, and literacy, after all, is what we are after in our classes. After two weeks spent reading, discussing, and writing about the Rose narrative, it was an easy segue into *SOL*, where I began by assigning a personal literacy narrative. Fan Shen's "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition" (Chapter Seven) chronicles the author's rhetorical journey from his own culture's composition form to our Western academic approach. In so doing, he explores the differences in form and style and the cultural and ideological reasons behind those differences. Most freshman composition students have no idea that writing form and style varies from culture to culture, so interacting with Shen's essay is a real eye-opener for them. From studying Shen's "I" (more than just personal) narratives, the students glean new and interesting information and perspectives from content and at the same time gain a more sophisticated understanding of personal narrative form. They learn that each of them can universalize the "I" and that their "I" can signify something beyond themselves. With this preparation,

the students attempted their first essay, the “I” narrative. The assignment asked them to write either a cultural autobiography, a cultural biography, or a literacy narrative and, like the authors of their textbook models, to write inclusively rather than exclusively.

My Unit II: Analysis (The Cultural “We”)

In the second unit, students moved from a subjective to an intersubjective point of view, focusing on how we construct and know ourselves as individuals within our own cultures and how we relate as members of or visitors to American culture, in particular. We all need to understand the worldview within which we must operate. To begin, I assigned the general Introduction to *SOL* so that students could apprehend the central focus and critical methodology that would support their reading and writing in Units II, III, and IV of the course. At this point, I began really to “let my textbook support me.” I made good use of the boxed questions embedded in the text of the introduction for freewriting and journal writing. I also encouraged students to question the text itself and then attempt to answer their own questions either in group discussions or in individual journal entries. Since the Introduction informs the reader of the constructed mythological underpinnings of all they know and believe, I consider it fitting that students question any possible mythological bases for the textbook authors’ stance, as well. I want them to question everything!

Next, we read the introductions to Chapter One, “Consuming Passions: The Culture of American Consumption,” and Chapter Two, “Brought to You B(u)y: The Signs of Advertising,” along with selected essays from each of these chapters, to learn how “we” come to be products of our shared cultures. I found Laurence Shames’s “The More Factor” (Chapter One) to be a real eye-opener to the basic American myth and its all-pervasive influence on our national psyche. I then moved from the general principles of the myth to some of the manifestations. Finally, selections such as Roland Marchand’s “The Parable of the Democracy of Goods” (Chapter Two) and Jack Solomon’s “Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising” (Chapter Five) helped all of us to understand some of the ways in which we disseminate and perpetuate that myth.

Working through these first two chapters prepared the students to write their second essay of the semester, an analysis for which I gave them a rather broad directive: they could analyze a trend, a style, a fad, or an advertisement. Then, with Units I and II under our belts, we were ready to go on to my Units III and IV.

My Unit III: Argument (The Position Paper)

About halfway through the semester we made the giant leap from subjective to objective writing, understanding that writing, either from “I” or “we,” never allows us to be wholly objective. We now focused our discussions and writing exercises outside of ourselves as we examined some of the issues featured in the textbook as well as some too new to have made it to the latest edition. Once we had worked through one issue chapter, reading the introduction and then at least three or four essays, the students acquired a basic understanding of how to address an issue. The textbook essays modeled for them how to examine an issue by presenting and interpreting data and then taking a position and supporting it. Chapter Six, “We’ve Come A Long Way, Maybe: Gender Codes in American Culture,” and Chapter Seven, “Constructing Race: Readings

in Multicultural Semiotics,” generally are of interest to students because the readings deal with concerns that touch or have touched their lives. The readings in these chapters stimulated very active classroom discussion and some intense freewriting and journaling. Since students had by now liberated their writing from self, it seemed appropriate that their third essay assignment allow them a greater degree of latitude. Accordingly, for this assignment, they had the freedom to interact with any essay or essays from either one of the issue chapters we’d covered or to select an essay from one of the other issue chapters.

In addition, while we were working in this unit, students had the opportunity to begin integrating information from source texts into their writing (a skill that they would need to develop for their fourth major essay assignment). Furthermore, by interacting with one or more of the textbook essays, they learned not only to interact with other writers (by including a voice or voices other than their own in their writing) but also to work with the conventions of integrating and citing sources according to MLA guidelines. After that, it was onward to the final assignment of the semester.

My Unit IV: Research (The Academic Objective)

Now that my students had experienced taking a supported position using textual evidence in the argument essay, they were ready for the final challenge of the semester, the research paper. I never have been in favor of pointless research essays that are nothing more than information dumps; therefore, I required that the research essay make some kind of point and express a thesis, whether stated or implied. At this point, I made good use of *SOL*’s model student essays located in “Writing about Popular Culture.” The students had already read this section before writing their first essay, but I encouraged them to reread it each time they began to a new assignment.

For this assignment, even more than the previous one, I also relied on the textbook to supply the subject bases for the students’ papers and to act as the primary research resource, as well. I did this with good reason.

Reason 1: To Plagiarism-Proof the Paper (well, almost)

Unfortunately, the plagiarism problem continues to exist, exacerbated by one of our best new research tools, the Internet. Not only do students turn in papers borrowed from friends or culled from sorority or fraternity files, but they also download papers from cyberfiles full of essays for sale. One way of circumventing the problem is to construct a research essay assignment that, like the argument paper, bounces off a textbook essay, thereby helping to ensure that students will not be able to submit a borrowed or purchased paper. I find that requiring my students to integrate two *SOL* essays in with their other sources to create the finished product allows little opportunity for plagiarism. This is another example of how allowing my textbook to support me helps me to maintain control in a critical area.

Reason 2: Creating Interesting Concept Connections and Facilitating Research

One thought-provoking way to construct the research assignment is to have the students not only address the issue itself but also examine the ways that media present

it. Taking this approach, students can make use of both the textbook issue section they've chosen and one or more of the media-focused chapters. With the textbook as their primary research resource, they have access to a number of essays from which to draw, and of course they can and must move outside of it to find additional material in the university's library and on the Internet. (I do limit the number of allowable Internet sources to two.) My students have turned out some extremely successful research papers using the textbook in this way.

I have continued to use *SOL* in subsequent semesters, always finding new ways to use its content and method. It's just like the mythical magic purse: each time I spend some of it, the expenditure increases rather than decreases its content for me.

Still More Support

Throughout the semester, the students can enhance their active, critical reading skills using the questions headed "Reading the Text" for reading journal entries. These questions encourage students not simply to read but to interact critically with the text to formulate their answers. I save the questions listed under the "Reading the Signs" heading for in-class work: freewriting, group discussions, group exercises, and other productive activities I otherwise would have to invent. These questions engage students in evaluating and analyzing the material content of the essay and their own points of view in relation to the material.

Here, again, I allow the textbook to support me. It is awfully hard work to come up with interesting writing prompts, whether for journal entries, freewrites, group activities, or formal essay assignments. Instructors spend many hours devising these kinds of questions, as did I during my first TA semester. It's a wonderful relief to let the textbook do more of that work so that I have the time, energy, and freedom to enjoy my job and to teach my students that writing need not be drudgery but an interesting, involving, and immensely enjoyable and rewarding pastime.

Finally, I want to reemphasize the point that accepting this kind of support does not amount to allowing the textbook to control my semester or me. I still make all the major decisions. I construct my semester, select the essays I want my students to read, make the assignments, and decide exactly how semiotic I want us to be. The choices are all mine. *SOL* allows me that degree of latitude. And what of the rhetorical art: invention, form, and style? In my experience so far, students learn more from reading good, interesting writing and then writing, writing, writing, themselves than they ever will learn from reading the dry passages found in many rhetorics and handbooks. What extra information I think they need concerning invention, form, and style I can supply from my own education and experience as a college reader and writer. We all can. We've made it this far: we must know something!

DEBORAH BANNER

Undergraduates in Grey Flannel Suits: Advertising in the Composition Classroom

On one unusually crisp Monday afternoon in November, a corporate behemoth took over my English composition classroom. Five creative teams vied for financial and administrative support as they presented advertising strategies for new consumer

products to their supervisors. Each team unveiled a new product, discussed marketing plans, and debuted original print and video ads. Unlike most marketing meetings, however, this one ended in an awards ceremony, at which each group received certificates of achievement and rousing ovations. Also unlike most meetings, every participant submitted a five-page paper to the “Executive Vice President” — actually, me — at the end of the session.

It sounds elaborate, but to my students, that Monday was just another deadline for their fall class in composition, rhetoric, and language. They were used to odd pedagogical shenanigans — I had already impersonated a talk-show host, a fitness instructor, and an appellate judge — and my assumption of executive power over a fictitious conglomerate was, to them, the least quirky aspect of their assignment. For this project, I had required them to participate in the charade: each student took on a distinct role within his or her group, so that their presentations and papers were “reports” to the company’s management from the “creative executive” or the “art director” of each campaign. Following the presentations, each student team submitted its ads along with individually written and revised papers; each student ultimately received a grade that combined the collaborative and the individual elements of the project. Without a doubt, this was a labor-intensive assignment for all of us. It was also one of the most successful class projects in which I’ve participated.

The assignment was inspired by Chapter Two, “Brought to You B(uy): The Signs of Advertising” of *Signs of Life*, particularly several articles that I had taught before. Ads are great material for composition classes for many reasons, not least of which are their familiarity to students and the ways in which ads themselves can be examined for a visual “thesis” and “examples.” I had assigned earlier classes Roland Marchand’s “The Parable of the Democracy of Goods” (Chapter Two) and Jack Solomon’s “Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising” (Chapter Five). These two articles are excellent models for the mechanics of semiotic analysis, as well as for their presentation of arguments supported by reference to multiple specific examples. In particular, Solomon’s article is helpful to students writing papers on advertising. Thomas Hine’s “What’s in a Package” (from Chapter One, “Consuming Passions: The Culture of American Consumption”) is another article that supports this assignment well.

My earlier classes had discussed these essays in small groups and as a class; we had analyzed ads in small groups and as a class; and eventually, students wrote a paper on ad analysis. This approach was successful, but I had grown tired of my old plan. This time, once my students were familiar with the semiotic approach, I asked them to become ad executives. In groups of five, they were responsible for inventing a consumer product or service and designing a marketing strategy, complete with print and video ads. Along with the ads, each student was to write a five-page paper that referenced the articles in *Signs of Life* to examine his or her particular role in the group project. While I designed the individual job titles and separated the class into groups of five, students were responsible for assigning each role according to their own interests. This was more than a concession to my love of role-playing assignments; individual paper assignments were determined according to a student’s position in the group. Each group had a Creative Executive, who coordinated the presentation and the advertisements with one other; organized students self-selected for this job within minutes of receiving the assignment. The Marketing Manager — usually a budding business major — was responsible for analyzing the target markets of the product and the target audiences of the ads. Public Relations Gurus examined the correspondence among the images of the company as a whole and those projected through the product and the ad campaign. Finally, the Art Director and Video Director took primary responsibility for analyzing the print ad and the video ad, respectively. Most students assumed their roles with great panache: one Marketing Manager promised in his paper that his team’s product would “become the flagship brand for the corporation in the

twenty-first century,” while one Video Director requested my help in lobbying the campus media lab for permission to use their digital editing equipment, above and beyond the assignment’s requirements. (The lab approved her request, and the resulting ad for a state-of-the-art health club was stunningly professional.)

I realize that the above constitutes a lot of work for two weeks. Then again, I work at an institution with remarkable technological resources for instructors and undergraduates. My students had free access to video cameras, viewing monitors, analog and digital editing booths, networked computers, color printers, and several different desktop publishing and photo editing applications, as well as university employees whose job it is to train and assist undergraduates in using these resources. With hindsight, however, a modified version of this assignment would work, with few adjustments, for students whose multimedia resources extend to a box of magic markers and a piece of paper. The assignment stipulated that no points would be added or subtracted for technological prowess or the lack thereof, and team grades were determined by the creativity and coherence of the ideas behind the advertising campaign rather than by any advanced graphics in the ads themselves. I received an assortment of print ads, including a construction paper and crayon collage, a computer-generated blend of text and scanned images, and one hand-lettered, hand-colored posterboard.

I had two goals for this project. Primarily, I hoped to help strengthen students’ critical thinking, reading, and writing skills. By putting them in the role of producers, rather than consumers, of popular culture, I hoped that my students would take a more active critical stance toward their subject matter. By requiring a significant amount of teamwork, I multiplied the occasions on which students would examine, critique, or simply discuss their own writing and how to improve it. Beyond merely drilling students in criticism, however, I tried to engage those critical skills on a terrain where the class felt more at ease and more invested than they do with traditional academic analysis. Using *Signs of Life* gave me a head start here: students are already impressed and excited to be analyzing popular culture — a field that they often feel more authorized to critique than they do others. I deliberately structured the assignment as a “professional” project that employed several different media, in the hope that students might think of composition as more than a dull, academic rite of passage and see that clear writing skills have valuable applications in the rest of the world.

In previous composition classes, my students had examined popular culture as critical consumers but consumers nonetheless. Often, students felt so close to the objects under scrutiny that they had difficulty suspending personal judgments: for example, students who attend class bedecked in Calvin Klein logo attire rarely want to consider the semiotic subtexts of CK advertisements. They want reassurance that they look cool. Alternatively, out of a naive belief that “criticism” as such is inherently negative, some students resist imputing any motive to advertising other than genuine desire to communicate a product’s virtues. By imagining themselves as advertisers, my students gained a crucial detachment from their material. Indeed, this is one of the reasons that the editors of *Signs of Life* suggest putting students in the role of advertisers for a day. Not only did my students take advantage of multiple possibilities for building signs into advertisements, but the depth of their subsequent analyses improved once they had recognized how far those signs and sign systems could extend. Because they were responsible for every editorial decision in creating the ads, students quickly dispensed with the obvious images — a smiling trio of women, for example — to focus on countless subtle signals working alongside the obvious. During one class period given over to team strategy, I overheard students arguing about the semiotic importance of the size and color of different typefaces, longer or shorter words in a slogan, the ethnic backgrounds of the people depicted in each ad, and the placement of each element in relation to the others.

Thus the smiling trio of women in one group's print advertisement was meant to signal feminist independence, appropriately enough for the product, which was marketed to women. Yet in the final analysis, the trio was also deliberately multicultural, dressed in casual clothes that bore insignias from prestigious universities, depicted in black and white, seated on comfortable couches, smiling at each other rather than at the camera, in a home and not outdoors or in a bar, surrounded by signs of professional success such as briefcases, cellular phones, and computers, and, finally, accompanied by a minimum of discreet advertising copy. Another group, selling sports sunglasses to the college market, designed their ad so that the sunglasses appeared in the center of the page, lit with a spotlight. Through the lighting, which they intended to connote museum exhibits or stage performance, they suggested the elitism, prestige, and attention-getting qualities of their product without including any text to that effect. Once students understood from experience that such signals are at least as important to a successful ad's composition as the depiction of the commodity itself, they ceased making the single most common undergraduate objection to pop culture analysis. In other words, they stopped saying, "It's just an ad. Aren't we reading too much into this?" and directed their energies at designing advertisements and writing their papers.

My students had fun designing their products and advertisements, and they zeroed in on some great marketing opportunities: one group dreamed up "the Air Executive," a comfortable shoe for businessmen, while another spotted an opening in the beverage market and created Belmont Beer for Women, named for Portia's hometown in *The Merchant of Venice*. Their general enthusiasm for the project carried over to their papers, which helped to motivate some extremely productive individual and peer writing conferences. While I have used several forms of peer review in previous courses, I sometimes fear that it can be a one-sided process. Peer editors have little invested in the outcome of their reviews, other than their desire that a conscientious reading will elicit an equally careful review from their partners. Yet my students tended to grow complacent with or tired of the peer review process over the term, giving cursory attention to the papers of their peers. With this assignment, though, each student's paper was linked to the group's final project. Every student thus had a vested interest in improving his or her teammates' papers, inasmuch as each member's understanding of the team's goals directly affected the group's success. Each student's paper was reviewed by two other teammates, doubling the amount of constructive criticism for each paper and ensuring that the group was in accord regarding the strategy behind the ad campaign.

Without exception, the quality of my students' writing shot up on these papers. Of course, not everyone received an A, but I was able to give the first A that term. Also, for the first time that term, every student received a passing grade on the paper. This was in part due to a significant amount of class time spent discussing the papers and the group project as a whole. During four different class meetings, at least thirty minutes were devoted to team meetings, so that students could plan projects and talk about papers, and we spent one entire class peer reviewing drafts. I discovered that students conceived of the project as a whole: during meetings that were technically scheduled for planning presentations, I overheard students brainstorming paper ideas; similarly, students used some of the time intended for essay review to work on video scripts or to discuss the layout of print ads. Because I required every team to meet me at least once during the planning stages, I could keep track of their progress and offer help wherever needed. Unexpectedly, these mandatory group meetings increased the number of individual student appointments: while reviewing their team project with me, many students signed up for additional one-on-one conferences to discuss their papers. Several students commented to me or on final evaluations that they had never

before considered English classes to be that interesting. Such positive feedback was a real thrill on its own but also a gratifying indication that I was successful in achieving my less measurable goals for the project: generating interest in a field that students considered dull or irrelevant and applying student strengths in other fields to composition.

Most of my students were neither English nor humanities majors, and many felt alienated by writing and reading critical essays. Their levels of intimidation ranged from some students' vehement dislike of composition as a practice to the mental block that writing was a born gift and not a teachable skill that improves with practice. By requiring students to work with graphics and video as well as writing, I hoped to tap their creative sides and to uncover dormant talents for alternative forms of composition. One of the great strengths of *Signs of Life* is in its modeling of sophisticated written analysis with everyday objects and media, a feature that tends to make students feel more authorized to critique the material under consideration. I hoped to complement this strategy by combining writing, a skill with which my students did not feel comfortable, with related creative fields where they might feel more at home. Among other things, I discovered that my students excelled at creative multimedia composition, something I wouldn't have known had I assigned only written papers.

Discovering creativity in one area proved helpful in coaching students through other areas. Several students proved to be superb video directors, with a natural visual sense of narrative that they were not able to match in their writing. So we started discussing writing on their terms, comparing thesis statements to visual exposition, specific examples to shot composition, and revision to dubbing and editing. I stressed to students that writing, too, is a creative act, even when it is done for academic purposes. Composition skills are not only translatable across different media — from graphic design to written text, say — but are of equal importance in different media for the professional futures of many students. For example, a strong writer will design a Web site better than someone who cannot support a general argument with specific examples. One student, whose level of academic motivation seemed exemplified by his confession (intended, no doubt, as a compliment) that mine was the only class in his schedule that he attended on a regular basis, turned out to be an absolute whiz at video and Web design. His paper, a semiotic analysis of the video ad by the sunglasses group, showcased a previously hidden ability to organize a convincing argument. Like many students, once he wrote about a subject of genuine interest, his writing improved. His argument was an analysis of the episodic nature of the group's ad, which was designed to mimic MTV videos, capitalizing on the short attention spans of the young target market as well as the aura of coolness and sex appeal that MTV projects. His discussion of and evidence for these claims were among the most entertaining, intelligent written work submitted that term.

Along with all of my lofty goals, though, I hoped that this project would help me do what every teacher wants: I wanted to have fun with my class. In this regard, the assignment was an unqualified success. Student presentations and ads were consistently entertaining and intelligent, regardless of the teams' technical prowess. Even the students who borrowed an existing commercial strategy were remarkably canny about the way they chose to do so. By reconfiguring a popular sales pitch to their own product, the student teams were able to reason out the mechanics of how and why particular pitches work. For example, one memorable ad campaign borrowed the "Got Milk?" ad format to sell a college-age dating service. The team was able both to defend the copycat style as a means of investing their service with an aura of wholesomeness, as well as to examine the applicability of the original ad series' signs to their own service, such as the implied urgency in the brief question, the tactic of coming right to the point, and the association of dating with an essential life function. Much more gratify-

ing than the entertainment afforded by such presentations, however, was this project's unexpected effect of forging solidarity among my students, via productive, mutually supportive team relationships that lasted throughout the term. Of course, there was a dysfunctional moment or two — such as a group in which a student defaulted on his or her work or one in which an individual tried to impose his or her personal agenda on the rest of the team. Yet these kinds of glitches, inevitable with any classroom situation involving more than one student, were by far the exception. In each case, difficulty with one individual had the effect of bonding the other members of the team more solidly. With five members to each student team, this still left four people to execute a project, more than enough for successful group work.

I solicited student feedback at all stages of the assignment, reminding them that they were free to offer critiques and make suggestions for improvement, just as I would eventually critique their work. I'd use some of their suggestions if I taught this class again. For one thing, this project was more time-consuming than I had anticipated, for me and for the class. One student suggested simply allowing more than two weeks from start to finish, while another suggested that the video assignment could be modified into a skit forming part of the class presentation, thus saving the time otherwise spent filming and editing. Instead of submitting a video, student groups would turn in their scripts and stage directions. Students also observed that organizing meetings outside of class was difficult for anyone living far from campus. I had randomly assigned students to teams without considering the logistics of their meeting schedules; next time, I'd allow students to organize themselves by geography if that would enable meetings after hours. Finally, it's hard to grade individual students on a group project. Each student justifiably wanted a grade that reflected the work of the individual student, but it can be difficult to separate individual contributions to a group effort. Also justifiably, no student wanted anybody to take credit for work that others had done. My solution was to give each student an average of the group's grade for the project and the individual's grade for the paper. Of course, this had the effect of raising some students' final project grades and lowering others, but there was no case where a student who received a failing grade on the paper received a passing grade for the project. This was the result of luck, not careful planning: nobody failed the paper. Next time, I'd stipulate that a failing grade on the paper meant a failing grade for that individual on the assignment.

Overall, the advertising project was productive as well as entertaining. I learned along with my students and enjoyed the opportunity to work more closely with them than I usually do: I attended video training sessions with them and held many, many extra office hours to strategize ad campaigns with the different teams or to discuss papers with different students. My one caveat to instructors considering some form of this assignment would be to outdo yourself in offering positive reinforcement. At every stage of the project, I praised the work and the effort that my students were exerting, and our final presentations were followed by a small "Class Clio" ceremony, at which every group and every student received silly awards and certificates for achievements in "coolest name for a new product," "most likely to turn a huge profit," "ads so hip they're worth taping," and so on. Approximately half of my class were first-year students, and the rest were split fairly evenly among the upperclassmen, but all of them responded equally well to steady cheerleading.

Ultimately, the true test of a classroom project is the question of whether it is worth repeating. I don't need to think about that one. I'd do it again in a heartbeat — but I'd have to change at least one thing. Next time, I will dispense with the fiction of being Executive Vice President. Next time, I will be CEO.

Chapter One

CONSUMING PASSIONS

The Culture of American Consumption

We've made consuming behavior the subject of our first chapter because of the essential role that consumption plays in shaping American popular culture. The culture of consumption is linked most obviously to the topics covered in the first few chapters of *Signs of Life* — that is, cultural products such as advertising, television, and film — but it also affects issues such as gender and race that are raised later in the book. Thus, Chapter One serves as a useful starting point for a course, no matter which other chapters you include in your syllabus. You'll also find that consuming behavior is an ideal topic for beginning your course because it's a part of every student's life. This is true whether your students hail from wealthy suburbs and have lots of disposable income or are working single mothers struggling to make a life for themselves and their families. And it's true for traditional students and nontraditional students alike, those entering college straight from high school and those returning after a hiatus. The constant pressure to buy is an unavoidable part of their lives, even if not all are able or willing to respond to that pressure. If you like to start your course by concentrating on personal experience writing, begin with this chapter.

This chapter is also a fine place to start if you plan to adopt explicitly the semiotic approach that underlies this text. We've found that semiotics makes immediate sense to students when it's presented in the context of their own behavior. They know, for instance, that they are sending messages to others by their choice of clothing — and they're likely to admit it. Just ask them about the different messages they send when they dress for work, for school, or for a party. Or ask them how their friends would “read” them differently if they showed up driving an Acura Integra, a Mini Cooper, or an H2. The chapter's introduction emphasizes the link between consumer behavior and one's sense of personal identity to enable students to see that, in a sense, they've been semioticians all along.

The Discussing the Signs of Consumer Culture exercise, which asks the class to list and interpret their own clothing styles, is a great ice-breaker for the first few days of the term, when students may not know each other and may be a bit shy about talking in class. Note that the exercise encourages students to distinguish between their own interpretations of their clothing and those of others. This distinction between personal and public meanings is important as students learn that academic writing is not simply an assertion of opinion but an expression of opinion through socially constituted conventions of discourse. This exercise additionally can raise the distinction between a functional and a cultural meaning of an object. Students often are willing to challenge another student's claim that, for instance, she wears her ripped blue jeans “just because they're comfortable.” Someone in the class inevitably will point out that jeans can be purchased ripped for eighty dollars, or that they project a cool image, and so on.

Students may be somewhat more resistant to the issue raised in the Exploring the Signs of Consumer Culture question, which asks them to reflect on the importance of consumer products in their lives. Because Americans still cling to the belief that one's identity is a highly individualized matter of soul and spirit, it's understandable that students may feel uncomfortable with the claim, made explicitly in the introduction and implicitly in many of the readings, that “you are what you consume.” Ask students to volunteer to share their responses in class, and use them to trigger a discussion of the

relative importance of consumer objects and other matters in their lives. You might want to return to this issue later in the term, especially after covering some of the chapters from the second part of the book, which show how serious issues can be commodified in American culture. It would be particularly interesting to do so after discussing Chapter Seven, “Constructing Race: Readings in Multicultural Semiotics.” Race is deeply connected to one’s sense of personal identity and selfhood, and it is increasingly being appropriated to peddle everything from clothing to universities (check your college catalogue for calculated images of multiculturalism).

The Reading Consumer Culture on the Net exercise should allow your students to have some fun in interpreting the mythology of American consumerism. You can ask your students to explore home shopping networks and auction Web sites either individually or in small groups; they can visit the addresses suggested in the exercise, but by all means invite them to explore other sites as well. Students may not be instinctively analytical when visiting these sites because shopping is such a common behavior; you might prepare them by asking them to look at the products advertised (are they necessities? luxuries?), the images used to make those products seem desirable, and, particularly, the target market (typically women). If you ask your whole class to complete this exercise, try assigning small groups a different site and then ask your students to compare their findings in class. One final note: This exercise works perfectly with the Anne Norton selection.

The chapter covers a range of consumer objects and behaviors, and if pressed for time you could focus on the ones you feel your students could easily relate to. The selection by Laurence Shames provides a general framework for analyzing consumerism — it relates American frontier history to our desire for more goods and services — and thus can be useful no matter which other readings you assign. For a selection that focuses on consumers’ behavior, assign Anne Norton, who argues that shopping malls and catalogues operate as sign systems designed to stimulate consumption. A suite of four selections addresses different categories of consumer objects — objects that are all semiotically rich in significance. Thomas Hine studies a part of everyday life that’s often overlooked in academic study — the semiotics of packages — while Fred Davis turns his attention to the packaging used to adorn our bodies, clothing; his focus on blue jeans should appeal to students of any demographic group. Joan Kron analyzes how home decor works as a sign of personal and group identity, and David Goewey next examines the popularity of SUVs as an indicator of a cultural ethos. Next Thomas L. Friedman introduces a broader, more international perspective on American consumer culture as he reflects on the concerns, often expressed on college campuses, about globalization and the supposed Americanization of international culture. It’s important for students to realize that consumerism is not just about shopping and buying; it has serious implications for economic and political stability throughout the world, as the September 11, 2001, attacks so dramatically revealed. The chapter concludes with Thomas Frank’s analysis of a current style of marketing consumer products: the use of cultural rebels and individualists to sell, ironically enough, mass-market products that are in fact anything but countercultural.

LAURENCE SHAMES

The More Factor (p. 76)

Shames attacks a cherished American myth — that the U.S.A. is a land of endless opportunity — so be prepared for some real opposition to his thesis. Because many students are attending college precisely so that they can expand their opportunities,

they hardly want to hear that their hunger for more may not be nourished. Their response may also be complicated if they are recent immigrants whose lives have been directly shaped by this myth. In class, you might focus initially on the first part of Shames's essay, his discussion of the frontier myth of limitless opportunity. Your students are likely to be familiar with this myth from popular media; they could brainstorm examples of TV shows and films that perpetuate this myth. You can ask them to analyze as well the "Credit Card Barbie" photo on p. 90. In what ways does Barbie—a consumer product herself, of course — both symbolize and encourage consumption among her fans of mostly young girls? Then move to the more troubling of Shames's assertions, his claim that America is "running out of more." This selection was published in 1989, so you could ask your class whether the current flat economy, following the dot.com collapse, have altered the "hunger for more." If you have adults in your class, try sparking a debate between them and their younger counterparts, who may have had less experience in the working world. Politically conservative students might object that Shames questions the efficacy of a free-market economy, and they'd be right: It's just that Shames would see the free-market ideology as problematic. The essay could also be complicated by introducing issues of race and gender: the opportunities Shames describes have not always been equally available to everyone in our society.

The selection is particularly good for teaching critical reading and summarizing skills. The Reading the Text questions ask students to identify some of the key concepts in Shames's essay; you could use these exercises to gauge quickly how well your students have grasped Shames's ideas. The first Reading the Signs question asks students to extend Shames's thesis into the twenty-first century; you might invite students to generate evidence both from personal experience and observation and from current political events. Because question 2 points to what is perhaps Shames's most controversial claim — that ethical standards have been destroyed by the hunger for more — it's ideal for staging an in-class debate. In preparing for a debate, students will need to anticipate counterarguments and develop specific evidence; be sure to allot sufficient class time for them to do this in groups. You may also want to combine a debate with a discussion of library research techniques (students could investigate, for instance, some of the scandals surrounding Enron and Arthur Andersen, among other corporate giants). Question 2, of course, could be adapted to an at-home essay as well. The remaining questions ask students to relate Shames's selection to other issues raised in the text. Question 3 is straightforward, asking students to apply Shames's argument to the Kron essay found in this chapter. Question 4 is more challenging and open-ended, for it asks students whether the hunger for more is quintessentially American or, alternatively, a more universal human trait. For this assignment, the Joan Kron and Thomas L. Friedman essays in this chapter can provide some perspective on material objects' role in other cultures and nations.

ANNE NORTON

The Signs of Shopping (p. 83)

You can have a lot of fun with Norton's essay: It's a rich analysis of something most people take for granted — shopping malls and catalogues. The article begins in a somewhat dense academic style, but that style diminishes as the article progresses. No matter what your students' economic background, you can assume they're familiar with some sort of mall and occasionally peruse catalogues. Norton's selection works well early in a term, for it provides a wonderful opportunity for combining discussion

of personal experience with an analytic interpretation of an accessible topic. Some students may resist Norton's claim that one's behavior can be so thoroughly manipulated by marketers, but ask them to consider specific examples that are close to their own experiences. Why do Victoria's Secret shops feature gilded and lacy touches? What's the image projected by that slick Gap storefront? Your students may balk at Norton's suggestion that malls appeal to women's desire for independence and escape from home; ask them to test her assertion empirically by performing a rough demographic survey at a local mall. What do their results suggest about the gender patterns in malls?

The Reading the Text questions will enable you to see if students grasp Norton's central concepts or if they have difficulty with her occasionally academic style; they will also reveal if your students hesitate to accept her premise that an everyday activity such as shopping can be constrained by political ideologies and cultural mythologies. If they do resist this premise, ask them whether they respond differently when visiting, say, a Banana Republic outlet and a Walmart — and why. In varying ways, the Reading the Signs questions ask students to apply or extend Norton's argument about shopping. Question 1 asks them to apply Norton's claims to window displays in a local mall; this question works especially well if they study the displays of at least two shops, preferably shops intended for the same market. Question 2 should trigger a great in-class discussion, with students comparing catalogues in small groups. (For variety, you might bring in some catalogues you receive; expect many students to bring in Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie and Fitch.) Question 5 is an at-home companion question that invites students to analyze closely one catalogue. For questions 2 and 5, encourage your students to focus on details. Why does the L. L. Bean catalogue include a golden retriever, not a rottweiler? Question 3 is ambitious, for it invites students to test Norton's gender-based argument by interviewing women of different ages. For this question, you might first want the class to discuss interviewing strategies — and the importance of interpreting an interviewee's comments. Questions 4 and 6 turn to the Internet, with 4 asking students to study the Home Shopping Network or a similar program and 6 focusing their attention on a commercial Web site.

THOMAS HINE

What's in a Package (p. 91)

At first students may view packages as purely functional: We need them to hold toothpaste, or deodorant, or whatever. But Hine should open their eyes to the images packages create for their products. His selection is easy to read, and students are likely to be persuaded by his discussion both of the marketing decision making behind package design (why are billions spent on packaging, anyway?) and of the cultural differences in packaging. Ask your students about trends in packaging design. Why, for instance, is Oral-B dental floss available in a translucent aqua package reminiscent of an I-Mac? Why does Pepsi seem to change its cans every few months? Whether your students accept Hine's notions, you can plan a great session by assigning Reading the Signs question 1, which asks students to bring a product to class. We've suggested that students all bring items from the same product category to allow for comparison of design choices. As an alternative, you might identify four or five categories and have small groups of students sign up for each. If you ask students to give brief presentations of their object, be sure to give them a strict time limit (probably just a few minutes), or else some students may not have a chance to present. Questions 2 and 4 are

similar in that they invite students to analyze the packaging of one retail outlet (with the latter question specifying an outlet with an explicit political theme). You can stage in-class activities similar to those called for in question 1 by asking your students to bring to class samples of the packaging from their store. Questions 3 and 5 relate the issue to students' own consuming behaviors. Number 3 calls for a journal entry on the appeal of packaging, while 5 asks students to interpret, through a stranger's eyes, the packages visible in their own home. Joan Kron's essay in this chapter is a natural complement to Hine's selection and can help students respond to this question.

FRED DAVIS

Blue Jeans (p. 101)

You'll probably find students accept the notion that clothing is a sign system: Just ask them about the different meanings clothing can have in the context of the office or school — or a date to a club. Were any styles banned from their high school, and if so, why? What did the forbidden styles mean to students and to parents and administrators? Fred Davis focuses on one of the most ubiquitous articles of clothing in American culture: blue jeans. Davis's selection is accessible, but be sure students don't overlook his central argument that jeans have occupied two contradictory sets of symbolic significance in American society: values that he terms "democratic" and "left" wing compared to values he dubs "dedemocratizing" and "right" wing. Note that this distinction is roughly parallel to that articulated in Jack Solomon's selection in Chapter Five, a nice companion piece to the Davis essay.

Students will enjoy Reading the Signs question 1, which asks them to bring a current fashion magazine to class, but be forewarned that they may have some difficulty applying the democratizing/dedemocratizing concepts. To help them, you might start with an issue of *Vogue*, which is likely to contain many examples of high fashion, and then move to the other magazines that your students bring to class. Question 2 calls for an update of Davis's essay through an analysis of current trends in the blue jean industry; students should take into account the current taste for ultra-faded, bizarrely cut jeans that seem to outdo each other in looking ripped and dirty (and in being expensive). Question 3 is ideal if you are emphasizing the semiotic method, for it asks students to weigh the relative value of function and cultural significance in clothing choices. The last two questions invite students to study real people's fashion tastes, with question 4 calling for a journal entry in which students reflect on their own preferences and question 5 asking them to interpret the styles predominant on your campus (this last question could work nicely as a group project).

JOAN KRON

The Semiotics of Home Decor (p. 109)

We consider Kron's essay one of the best in the chapter, both for its clear, lively writing and for its insightful exploration of how home decor works as a sign of one's identity. And students respond positively to her argument. Like most people, they probably

have never considered the issues she raises but are quick to recognize the validity of her claims. Students may quarrel with Kron's implied criticism of materialism in our lives — especially if they stop reading after the Martin J. Davidson anecdote — but be sure they notice that she does not limit her discussion to American culture and that she is not entirely critical of people's use of objects and decor as a symbol system. Indeed, Kron believes that the use of material symbols and signs is intrinsically human. If your class includes students from a variety of ethnicities or nationalities, you might ask them to do a sort of cross-cultural survey of domestic decor and furnishings to see how different cultures make, in Kron's terms, "distinctions between ourselves and others."

This essay lends itself to questions and exercises that invite students to use personal experience; Reading the Signs questions 1, 2, and 4 all do this in various ways. When students are discussing their own possessions, make sure that they distinguish between personal, private meanings and larger, public significance. Question 3 invites students to argue with or modify one of Kron's more extreme claims, that "To put no personal stamp on a home is almost pathological in our culture" (para. 32). The last question may be the most challenging. It directs students to Karen Karbo's "The Dining Room" in Chapter Eight; the connecting link between Kron's and Karbo's selections involves the way possessions can serve as signs of relationships, and you'll want to be sure your class discusses that topic.

DAVID GOEWY

"Careful, You May Run Out of Planet": SUVs and the Exploitation of the American Myth (p. 119)

If you're emphasizing a semiotic approach, this selection is a sure bet for your syllabus, for Goewey provides a model semiotic reading of the most popular current trend in the automotive world. Not only does Goewey discuss the broad cultural significance of SUVs, but he clearly and effectively outlines the larger system in which they appear. A profitable class exercise would be to dissect Goewey's methodology — and to study the ways in which his inclusion of abundant specific details works to make his argument both vivid and logical. Even if you're not using semiotics explicitly, this selection is likely to trigger a lively response from students. While some may balk at Goewey's historical analysis, few would claim that image and cultural association have nothing to do with one's automotive preferences. Ask your students: What sorts of vehicle would they like to be seen driving, and why? Why is it that some people identify totally with their cars? Note that, in its discussion of American frontier myth, this selection pairs well with the Laurence Shames selection in this chapter.

This selection is ideal for both personal and analytic assignments. A journal entry topic, Reading the Signs question 1 invites students to interpret the significance of their own car (or that of an acquaintance); this topic could be suitable for a personal essay as well. For straightforward analytic topics, consider question 2, which calls for a Goewey-style analysis of a different category of vehicles (sporty two-seaters, pick-up trucks, retro cars like the PT Cruiser, or luxury sedans all would be good choices as they have clearly recognizable cultural associations), or question 3, which sends students to automobile advertising for signs of the values and ideologies associated with particular car models. In working with students on such assignments, you'll want to make sure they see beyond the functional appeal of a particular vehicle (for example, an ad's

performance claims) to the values the ad connotes. For an argumentative assignment, assign question 4, which suggests that students use interview evidence as support in a response to Goewey's thesis about the motivations behind SUV ownership. Question 5 has students use Gregg Easterbook's "The Progress Paradox" in Chapter Five as an analytic frame for explaining the popularity of SUVs.

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Revolution Is U.S. (p. 130)

With its focus on globalization, Friedman's selection broadens the issues related to consumer culture by drawing a distinction between globalization, which once had a nationally complex dynamic, and Americanization, which is unidirectional. (You might study the photo of the Lahore, Pakistan, street on p. 132, for it illustrates simultaneously old globalization, in the Imperial Book Depot, and the new Americanization, in the Coca-Cola advertisement.) Because of various political changes, such as the end of the Cold War, that distinction is rapidly fading, with Americanization supplanting globalization. Indeed, for Friedman, what's significant is not simply the influence of American corporations across the world, but the inevitable exportation of American cultural values and ideologies that are carried by those corporations. That's why he opens with his "five gas stations theory of the world," an amusing analogy that rather wickedly caricatures the cultural values and social practices inherent in five different economic systems. You might start your discussion here, asking students first to outline, perhaps on the board, those economies and the values and practices common to each. (We enjoy Friedman's sardonic humor here, but some students may object that he is stereotyping cultural patterns. If they do, that's a good opportunity to address the relationship between stereotypes and generalizations and to discuss Friedman's rhetorical strategy in beginning with this rather flamboyant "theory." And such students might enjoy responding to Reading the Signs question 4, which invites them to assess the validity of Friedman's theory.) Then move to his larger concerns about how the tendency to adopt American practices essentially violates "social contracts" (para. 4) that are very different from our own. What are the consequences of this tendency? What does Friedman's anecdote about an Israeli youth's desire for a McDonalds' autograph from former U.S. Ambassador Martin Indyk say about the love-hate response to American culture?

The Friedman essay is ripe for thought-provoking assignments. Reading the Signs question 1 has the class debate the extent America is responsible for globalization. We suggest that students interview international students about American corporate impact in their home countries. Question 2 shifts the perspective and asks students to evaluate the benefits of globalization to America. Encourage them to consider both apparent advantages (more markets in which to peddle goods) and disadvantages (job loss for American workers). The last two questions allow students to take issue with or support Friedman, with question number 3 focusing on a claim he makes about American values and question 4 addressing his five gas stations theory of the world.

THOMAS FRANK

Countercultural Consumerism (p. 136)

In this brief selection, Frank takes aim at one of today's dominant marketing techniques — the use of countercultural or rebellious imagery — that is aimed largely at the college-age market. Students should have little trouble understanding Frank's language, but they may not all be cued into some of his 1960s-era cultural references. Before discussing this essay, you could ask students (individually or in pairs) to do some Internet research on details such as Kent State, Abbie Hoffman, and Charles Reich, and then give a brief presentation in class. Given that retro styles are all the rage right now, it's unlikely that students will balk at his basic premise, although they may just provide the circular explanation that these styles, and the larger image they project, is just "cool." Try to get them to probe further: *Why* is it cool to look defiant and rebellious? Is one really being rebellious when the products that create that image are mass-produced and mass-marketed? What would constitute "genuine" rebelliousness?

Frank's selection lends itself to assignments and activities that ask students to interpret popular media products. Reading the Text question 1 asks them to study a current men's fashion magazine to determine if the cultural rebel remains a marketing motif; at least in summer 2005, we find this figure not only remains but dominates much advertising addressed to both men and women. Number 2 broadens the issue by having the class brainstorm current media figures who sport the rebel attitude in preparation for individual essays on what the popularity of these figures says about modern American culture. Expect students to draw upon the music industry (especially hip-hop, but not exclusively that segment) and the film industry (for its abundance of bad-boy and bad-girl stars). A more challenging question is number 3, which has students take on Alice Embree's assertion about the passive role consumer culture imposes on women (Anne Norton's selection in this chapter can jump-start their thinking). For a broad-scale analytic assignment, try number 4, which has students visit a youth-oriented store and analyze whether it uses the anti-shopping motifs Frank discusses. We suggest you have students visit shops such as Urban Outfitters or Diesel, as they fit well the pattern Frank describes. To heighten their critical response to a store that they might be (too) familiar with, you might first discuss Thomas Hine's "What's in a Package" in this chapter and Malcolm Gladwell's "The Science of Shopping" in Chapter Eight. This assignment is ideal for a group project, as individuals can focus on one aspect of the store (advertising, packaging, mannequins, and so forth) and the group can present its collective observations and interpretations to the class.

Chapter Two

BROUGHT TO YOU B(U)Y

The Signs of Advertising

Advertising has long been a favorite topic in composition classes, and with good reason. Students can write critically about visual texts that affect their everyday lives and that therefore may seem more accessible than written texts. In this chapter, we hope to enable students to go beyond the usual evaluative criticism of advertising to an assessment of how ads not only reflect but also shape American society. We've chosen readings that do not simply interpret ads but that address the ways advertising uses the fundamental myths of American culture to shape a consumerist ideology. It's unlikely that students have encountered such a perspective in high school (where they may also have discussed advertising), so you can look forward to introducing them to a fresh angle on the subject. If you're emphasizing a semiotic approach, we strongly recommend including this chapter in your syllabus, for ads are a natural for semiotic analysis. If you're skirting the semiotics, you can still use these selections, for they can trigger careful, close readings of advertising texts no matter what the methodology. We've seen that students take to analyzing advertising quite readily, so you should encounter little or no resistance to this topic. Indeed, you and your class should have some fun with it!

Your students will need little preparation for discussing advertising, but because it's such a familiar part of their lives, they may need some guidance in talking critically and precisely about it. Providing such guidance is the aim of the Discussing the Signs of Advertising exercise, which asks that students each bring an ad to class and discuss their interpretations of it in small groups. You may want to review first the follow-up questions in the exercise, for they are intended to help students move beyond evaluative judgments to a critical analysis of how ads work. We suggest that, as students discuss their ads, you move from group to group, pushing them to be ever more precise and analytic. If you have time, ask each group to select one ad and present their interpretation to the whole class. The Exploring the Signs of Advertising exercise stimulates students' critical thinking in a different way: It asks them to create their own alternative ad and then assess their creation. Putting students in the advertisers' seat, we hope, will enable them to see how the complex rhetoric of advertising is constituted. It would work best if you suggest that students redesign an ad they don't like because of its ideology. We don't see it as a problem if students have trouble coming up with a new design, for they could then reflect on the tenacious power advertising images have on our imaginations and worldviews. We've made this a journal topic, but it certainly could be a more formal assignment. The Reading Advertising on the Net asks students to visit *Advertising Age's* Web site for its compendium of Super Bowl ads. This question is meant to inspire consideration of how advertising has become a source of entertainment in its own right; after all, many a viewer turns on the Super Bowl to check out the ads, not the football game, and many ads, such as 2002's Britney Spears Pepsi ad, come with their own prebroadcast media hype. If your students do not all have access to the Internet, try downloading the text and images for class discussion.

Here are a few tips on constructing assignments involving advertising. Be sure to require students to attach to their essays copies of print ads they may be interpreting (or to submit a video of TV ads); otherwise, you might have trouble evaluating their work. Students can benefit if, early in the drafting stage, you review basic advertising terminology. Words such as *copy* and *layout* would enable students to avoid such

clunky phrasing as “the words that appear in the advertisement” or “the way the images are arranged in the ad.”

This chapter approaches advertising from a wide range of perspectives. Several selections take a broad view, and we recommend that you include at least one of the them in your syllabus. Roland Marchand is essential for a historical sense of how the mythologies exploited by American advertising have evolved. For a broad-based consideration of gender roles in advertising, assign the Steve Craig selection; for a narrower gender focus, see Warren St. John’s “Metrosexuals Come Out,” which links the trend toward more sensitive men to the advertising industry. We include inside looks at how the advertising business operates: Gloria Steinem exposes the surprisingly cozy relationship between advertising and journalism in the magazine industry, and James B. Twitchell reveals how marketers categorize and stereotype consumers. For a focus on particular consumer groups, Eric Schlosser’s “Kid Kustomers” is an eye-opening exposé of the tricks used to get kids to want more goodies. Closing the chapter, the Portfolio of Ads presents sample ads that you could use for class discussion or essay assignments. If you plan to use just a few selections, many of them pair up well with other chapters and themes. If your course focuses on gender, the Steve Craig, Warren St. John, and Gloria Steinem articles are essential readings. The Marchand complements Chapter One, “Consuming Passions.” If you’re interested in critiquing the behind-the-scenes techniques used to stimulate consumer desire, Schlosser, Steinem, and Twitchell complement Malcolm Gladwell’s reading in Chapter Eight.

ROLAND MARCHAND

The Parable of the Democracy of Goods (p. 151)

Students can’t help but be experts in advertising, for they’re surrounded by it in their daily lives, but they may know little about advertising’s early history. The Marchand selection provides some of this history, but it’s not just background: Marchand reveals the surprising continuity of ploys used from advertising’s infancy to today. While early advertising looks dated and old-fashioned — often amusingly so — the images it projects and the myths it exploits are still around. One way to make sure that your students understand what Marchand means by the “democracy of goods” and the “democracy of afflictions” (the point of the first two Reading the Text questions) is to compare the 1920s ads he discusses with their present-day descendants. Today ads peddling everything from Internet access to wine suggest that you, too, can live the good life, and ads promoting personal care products still invoke the democracy of afflictions (even the wealthiest eligible bachelor can have dandruff).

Reading the Signs question 1 is challenging, as it asks students to explore some of the political and social implications of the advertising strategies Marchand outlines. The next two questions ask students to apply Marchand’s ideas to particular examples: number 2 asks students to focus on a current popular magazine (this topic is ideal for small group work), while number 3 has them compare an older publication with a current one. In both cases, you’ll want to be sure to discuss how the ads’ use of these myths may have changed since the 1920s and what those changes reveal about American values and culture. Your students should have little trouble with either of these questions. Question 4 is somewhat more challenging because it asks students to grapple with more abstract concepts. To prepare students, you might first brainstorm in class (either in whole class or in small group discussion) possible responses focusing on specific evidence students can bring to bear on the topic.

STEVE CRAIG

Men's Men and Women's Women (p. 161)

Gender too often is construed as a “women’s issue,” and to combat that misconception we include Craig’s essay, which addresses advertising directed at both women and men. If your class is focusing on gender, Craig’s selection is a must-read that students should find accessible. Craig begins by outlining advertisers’ technique of demographic targeting (you might want to read this selection in conjunction with James Twitchell’s piece in this chapter) and the assumptions they make about both genders. He then turns to focus on four commercials that serve as examples of how men and women are portrayed to their own gender and to the other. You can have some fun with this selection, asking students first to debate Craig’s reading of the ads (Reading the Signs question 1 invites students to do just that). You might divide the class into four groups and assign each group one of Craig’s categories; have students analyze magazines for their category. What kind of publication tends to have “men’s men” ads? “men’s women” ads? What do their results suggest about the publications’ assumptions about their readership?

This selection lends itself to a variety of analytic and argumentative assignments. Reading the Signs question 2 asks students whether Craig’s categories (which he devised in 1990) still apply to advertising today, while question 3 has them consider Craig’s ethical take on the techniques he describes. For a narrower focus, try question 4, which has students consider whether metrosexuals fit any of the categories (Warren St. John’s selection is a natural companion read). To complicate matters, question 5 has students study commercials that accompany relatively gender-neutral TV programs for evidence of stereotyped gender portrayal. The most challenging, and wide-reaching, question is 6, which has students enter the debate over the origins of gender identity. For this question, you’ll want to read a number of selection that address the social construction of gender roles, along with Deborah Blum’s essay in Chapter Six, which argues for biological origins.

If you like to include audiovisual material in your course, a dated but still relevant film entitled *Killing Us Softly* (1979) adds another dimension to Craig’s discussion of gender portrayal in advertising. Addressing the ways women function as signs (of sexuality, passivity, even stupidity) in advertising, this film shows lots of sample ads and delivers a lively, accurate interpretation of them. It’s never failed to trigger a strong response from our students, and you can compensate for its age by asking students to test its claims on current advertising. A sequel, *Killing Us Softly Again* (1987), is also available, though it’s similar to the first; it’s worth checking to see if your school’s film library has either film.

WARREN ST. JOHN

Metrosexuals Come Out (p. 174)

Even though, as St. John points out, the term *metrosexual* was coined in the 1990s, the trend has hardly faded. Not only is *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* going strong, but it has been joined by the similar *What Not to Wear*, whose male host is pure metrosexual. Like *Details*, *GQ* has long been a metrosexual bible, but it seems to be even more so these days, with articles headlined, for instance, “Yes, Real Men Wear Pink

(Complete Instructions Inside)” (that’s from the May, 2005 issue). Indeed, in July 2005 the Bakersfield *Californian* — in California’s very conservative, and impoverished, Central Valley — led a business section with the headline “Men Put on New Face in Traditional Women’s Market.” Your students should find St. John’s essay quite engaging, as it outlines clearly the metrosexual trend, its origins and predecessors, its encouragement by the advertising industry, and an array of attitudes toward it, from the sensitive guys themselves to women to gay men. You can have fun in class studying an array of magazines for men (include some that have metrosexual advertising and models, like *GQ*, and some that portray traditional gender roles, such as *Maxim*). How do the magazine’s articles and advertising construct different male identities? Beyond discussing the gender and advertising angles, you can also use St. John’s selection to discuss evidence and detail: our students have been impressed by the precise economy of his writing, his ability to cover a lot of territory using pithy detail.

This selection is ripe for assignments that focus on both gender and advertising. St. John dubs *Details* “the metrosexual bible”; Reading the Signs question 1 has students test the accuracy of this label on a current issue (alternatively, they can study a different men’s magazine). A more ambitious assignment is posed by question 2, which asks students to assess St. John’s claim that “America is on the verge of a metrosexual moment”; to prepare them for this topic, you might brainstorm in class a list of male-themed magazines, ads, and other other media that could serve as specific evidence for their arguments. Question 3 sends students to Nell Bernstein’s selection in Chapter Seven to address the phenomenon of “trying on” a different identity, while question 4 asks students to situate metrosexuals in the advertising schema James B. Twitchell outlines in his essay in this chapter.

ERIC SCHLOSSER

Kid Kustomers (p. 178)

Students often assume that they are impervious to advertising, as they cherish a self-perception of being logical, independent-minded consumers. And thus they sometimes dismiss as much-ado-about-nothing critiques of advertising that skewer the industry. But Schlosser’s exposé of the techniques marketers use to attract children may give them pause, especially his discussion of “pester power” and the use of focus groups as young as two or three that are intended to provide insight into children’s tastes. Ask your students about the ethical implications of such strategies. What are the implications of encouraging kids to manipulate their parents so that mom and dad buy the latest toy or video game? What values are advertisers implicitly inspiring in children? Should two-year-olds be considered the same as adult participants in a focus group? An interesting class project could have small groups visit Web sites for children’s clubs or product lines designed for children; students should study both the pitches and claims for the products and the extent to which the sites ask users for personal information (indeed, it would be revealing if students discover Web sites that violate the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act). Be sure to extend your discussion to some of the larger ramifications of hard-sell advertising to kids. What are advertisers teaching children about the value of material goods? Do students see any connection between such advertising practices and the unquenchable desire for consumer products (see Gregg Easterbrook’s “The Progress Paradox” in Chapter Five)? As you discuss

these matters, keep in mind that, as Schlosser points out, children's advertising exploded during the 1980s — precisely the decade when eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds were themselves kids. Ask your students to recall their own experiences: Did they use “pester power”? Did their parents impose restrictions on their consuming behavior? What was their attitude toward consumption at the time, and how does it compare with their current attitudes and behavior as consumers? Do they have younger siblings who exhibit the behavior Schlosser describes?

It's a natural to ask students to analyze children's advertising based on this selection. Reading the Signs question 1 asks students to analyze the advertising that accompanies Saturday cartoon shows, encouraging them to see the relationship between the advertising and the shows (you'll find that often the two are indistinguishable). For a more focused analysis, question number 2 limits students to interpreting a single ad. As is likely to emerge in class discussion, children's advertising, especially in its more manipulative forms, often triggers calls for more regulation to protect these youngest (and most vulnerable) of consumers. Question 3 has the class debate whether such regulation is warranted; we suggest that teams work energetically to amass examples from print and broadcast media and from the Internet and to use them as evidence for their position. Implicit in Schlosser's discussion is an approach to market research that parallels the techniques described by James B. Twitchell in “What We Are to Advertisers.” Perhaps the most challenging question is number 4, which asks students whether Twitchell's claim that marketing relies on mass stereotypes applies to children. We say this question may be challenging because we've seen that kids' advertising often appeals to a sense of individualism — “You're special!” — and students need to be skeptical when such claims go out to millions of kids.

GLORIA STEINEM

Sex, Lies, and Advertising (p. 183)

No, we didn't include this selection just for its great title! This is a long essay, but a must-read for any class that addresses either advertising or gender issues. Steinem exposes the compromises magazines — particularly women's magazines — must make when soliciting advertising. Forget about freedom of the press: The advertising industry makes tremendous demands related not only to its ads, as one might expect, but to editorial content as well. And Steinem documents these demands thoroughly. Many of our students have been shocked by this essay, claiming their eyes have been opened to a practice they never realized existed. Some, insulted at being conned by advertising disguised as “journalism,” have vowed that they'll now think twice about buying popular magazines. If you want your students to cover something fresh in your class, this essay is for you.

Note that this is an updated version of Steinem's now-classic essay. The major change is a preface, in which Steinem describes the many reactions to the original publication of “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” reactions that ranged from bitter sneering to outright celebration. You'll find this preface extremely useful for its creation of a historical context and for its documentation of actual readers' responses to a text. Be sure to notice that Steinem dubs as the “most rewarding response” the inclusion of her essay on college reading lists!

We've never had trouble generating lively discussion about the Steinem essay. Her writing is clear, concrete, and accessible, so your students should be able to handle the

selection's length. A few students may be puzzled by the term *complementary copy*, but you can ask their peers to help explain it. When assigning the essay, you might ask students to look through magazines they have at home to see whether Steinem's argument about complementary copy applies to them (Reading the Signs questions 1, 2, and 3 encourage and structure such explorations). Have them also look for instances of favorable product placement and advertorials (another technique some students have trouble identifying). We urge you to ask your students to bring in one of their magazines and present their findings to the class. Be forewarned that some students have trouble distinguishing between copy and advertising. That difficulty actually proves Steinem's point, but it also means that you may need to spend some time covering the difference between the two. We've found that Steinem's claims hold for most magazines — certainly for all women's magazines, but for men's and special interest magazines as well (*Car and Driver*, *Shape*, *Cat Fancy* — the list is virtually endless). It holds true the least for general-interest magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, but even there you'll see some complementary copy and often many advertorials, and students could develop Steinem's discussion of why these magazines' content seems less influenced by the ad industry. Finally, question 4 asks students to explore the First Amendment implications of Steinem's revelations. We've made it a journal topic, but it could be adapted to a formal essay assignment as well.

JAMES B. TWITCHELL

What We Are to Advertisers (p. 203)

Twitchell's selection should raise more than a few eyebrows, for he exposes the schemes that advertisers use to categorize the interests and needs of different market segments. You can initially have some fun with Twitchell, as many readers will instinctively be prompted to see where they would be slotted in the Values and Lifestyle System (VALS), a scheme marketers use to correlate consumer taste, personality profile, and financial resources so that they tailor their campaigns just for their target groups. In which slots do most of your students (or their families, if they don't see themselves as having enough disposable income to find their profile) fit? Are there any patterns in the class's responses? Note that because students may have to reveal financial background, you'd do well to keep your survey informal and anonymous. (Reading the Signs question 1 has students write a journal entry in which they place themselves on the VALS chart and respond to their doing so.) But you'll want to move quickly from your testing of the VALS paradigm to the larger issues it raises. What are its limitations: are there consumer groups that are not accounted for? VALS does not make explicit ethnicity or gender as criteria, but are ethnic and gender identities presumed? If so, what difference does that make? VALS essentially relies on stereotypes of consumer behavior. Do students see larger consequences in a multibillion-dollar industry relying heavily on narrowly drawn social stereotypes? And you should raise one counterquestion as well: As Twitchell himself acknowledges, such categorization of consumers seems to be an effective marketing tool. What does that suggest about the power of marketing campaigns not simply to get us to buy but also to adjust our behaviors, even values, to social norms?

Because Twitchell makes unambiguous claims here, students should have no problem responding to his essay. Reading the Signs question 2 allows students to address the question of whether the VALS paradigm accurately predicts consumer

behavior; to generate evidence for this topic, they might conduct surveys of acquaintances' habits as consumers. Questions 2 and 4 solicit argumentative essays: number 3 invites students to analyze the values implicit in VALS itself, while the more philosophical number 4 sends them to the Eric Schlosser selection in this chapter and the Malcolm Gladwell in Chapter Eight to argue whether the research techniques described in these selections are ethical.

Portfolio of Advertisements (color insert)

We felt that it was essential to include some ads that your entire class could share. You'll find that the ads are ideal for semiotic readings, as well as for discussion of audience, purpose, and style. And they relate to some of the broader themes, such as gender, that emerge throughout *Signs of Life*. You can use the portfolio in a number of ways. It's perfect for class discussion, because every student will have the ads in his or her text and can refer easily to details. You might break the class into small groups, and have each interpret an ad of their own choosing; you might have the class vote on the ads they consider most and least effective, and then discuss the significance of the results. Several of the ads (the ones for OnStar and Phoenix Wealth Management in particular) are useful for a discussion of gender portrayal in advertising. If students find any of the ads problematic or offensive, ask them what alternative appeals they'd suggest. How would they redesign the ads?

Chapter Three

VIDEO DREAMS

Television, Music, and Cultural Forms

Your students will be the experts when you cover this chapter. In the past, we've had students claim that their arrival at full "adult" consciousness dates from August 1, 1981 (the day MTV began broadcasting). More recently, we've had students proudly assert that they've watched every episode of *The O.C.* or *Desperate Housewives*. And we've had students narrate with precision the labyrinthine plot of the most confusing *X-Files* episodes. While not all your students will be TV junkies, many will be (or were, in their early teen years), and they may be far more familiar with current music and TV programs than you are. Take advantage of their expertise by asking them to shape your class discussion. Your students are likely to know which current shows are the best ones to consider in light of Susan Douglas's essay about women's roles on television, for instance, or they'll be able to tell you whether today's female rappers follow the trends that Gwendolyn Pough outlines. Your job will be to steer them toward writing careful critical analyses of the shows and videos they watch and the music that they enjoy. That may not always be easy. We've found some students identify closely with their favorite TV programs or bands, and they can resist critical discussion of them because they may feel their own tastes are under attack. (The Exploring the Signs of Music Videos box question, accordingly, allows students to explore the impact that music videos have had on them.) Be sure your students understand that asking *why* this image or this story appears in a video or TV program is not the same as evaluating their worth as individuals. Indeed, you should expect the argument against analysis that claims, "But it's just entertainment." You might respond with the central semiotic insight that nothing is innocent. In fact, media products are designed precisely to appeal to a culture's dreams and desires — that's what makes them entertaining — and what you're doing is studying the nature and social significance of such appeals. You could study some of the images included in the chapter — a scene from the first *Survivor* (p. 224), for example — and ask them how, in different ways, they are constructed to appeal to their audience. Are any of them "just entertainment"? If any students think so, they are more likely to feel that way about *The Simpsons*; you may need to remind them that the cartoon's originator, Matt Groening, began it as a self-conscious skewering of mainstream American culture.

The Discussing the Signs of Television question is further intended to nurture such a critical approach by asking students to go beyond a show's surface appeal to ask, "What is the program really saying?" The Reading Music on the Net question has a similar goal. By asking students to explore how their favorite artists are "packaged" on the Net, the question not only prompts them to engage in some semiotic interpretation but also encourages them to see the ubiquity of promotion and image creation in American culture. In addition, you could ask your students to visit MTV's site (www.mtv.com) and interpret what they find there.

To facilitate class discussion, you'll want to ensure that students all have seen the same videos or programs. While over 99 percent of American families own at least one TV set, some students might not be able to watch assigned programs, either because of work schedules or because some dorm residents don't have their own television. We recommend that, if your school can provide the necessary technology, you tape videos or TV programs and view them in class before analyzing them. That way, you can stop and study details or go back and watch significant scenes a second time.

You'll find that useful because students won't always remember details, or the details they recall won't necessarily be the most significant ones. Don't worry about using all your class time. Videos are usually short (four or five minutes), you could focus on particular scenes in long shows, and single segments of TV programs usually provide plenty to analyze (a half-hour show typically translates into about 22 minutes, sans commercials). You should feel free to zap those commercials — unless, of course, you want to study the significance of what products are pitched to which audiences and how they relate to the programs they sponsor.

The chapter addresses both television and music, and if you need to make cuts to the chapter, you might focus on one or the other. The chapter begins with a trio of selections on reality TV that form a unit; you'll find the tone and style of each differ, with Francine Prose engaging in a serious contemplation of the political implications of RTV, Anita Creamer more lightheartedly skewering make-over shows, and Rick Pioto and Kelly Otter zeroing in on *The Osbournes*. If you use this unit, keep in mind that reality TV has been around for a decade, and it may seem like "normal" programming to students who have been exposed to little else. The next three selections, by James Harold, Carl Matheson, and Steven D. Stark, offer cultural interpretations of very popular shows (*The Sopranos*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, respectively) and are ideal if you are emphasizing a semiotic approach. In the next selection, Susan Douglas offers a feminist reading of women's roles in three supposedly "enlightened" programs. If you want to form a gender-theme quartet, you could pair the Douglas with the next selections: Gwendolyn Pough's analysis of female rappers, Andre Mayer's lament over the chauvinism that pervades popular media, and Marisa Connolly's reflection on the way homosexuality is, in effect, erased in *Will and Grace*.

FRANCINE PROSE

Voting Democracy off the Island: Reality TV and the Republican Ethos (p. 222)

We lead the chapter with Francine Prose's essay because it's a fine piece of cultural analysis — and an essay that could lead to some lively class debate. Prose essentially makes a two-part argument. First, she analyzes the appeal of shows like *Average Joe* and *Survivor*, suggesting that viewers' attraction to them is based largely on voyeurism and a delight in watching contestants lose and suffer. You might want to connect this discussion with that in the introduction to this chapter, where we talk about how *schadenfreude* is at the heart of so many reality TV programs. It's likely that your students will accept this part of Prose's argument, although you should be prepared for some to dismiss it by saying "Oh, RTV is just fun to watch" or "It's only a TV program." If you get that response, push them harder: *Why* is it amusing to watch people get humiliated? What are the values explicitly expressed in *Survivor*'s motto, "Outwit. Outplay. Outlast."? If you can stand doing so, you might watch in class a clip of one of these programs, showing a contestant humiliated, beaten, and defeated. How do students respond to such a scene?

We think it's important that, even if students disagree with Prose's explanation, they understand the values inherent in reality TV, or else they will have trouble grasping the second part of her argument. Here she makes a parallel between the individualist, dog-eat-dog values underlying RTV and the ethos espoused by the current Republican administration. We happen to think she's right, but expect a lot of students

to balk at this political angle. Encourage them to look beyond their own political persuasions and to consider some current political issues, such as the debate over Social Security. Traditionally, of course, Social Security was instituted as a retirement plan to which everyone contributed and from which all could benefit. With the Republican attempts to privatize the program, that sense of “social” security changes, with the program becoming competitive, dependent on a market economy in which some individuals may be rewarded and others may lose. That sounds very much like what Prose is talking about.

This selection can prompt a range of meaty assignments, especially argumentative topics. The most straightforward are Reading the Signs question 1, which has students support or refute Prose’s political argument, and question 5, which invites them to do the same with one of Prose’s claims about reality TV. For a topic that requires students to do some outside work, try question 2, which has them use interviews with RTV fans as the basis for an argument about the popularity of this genre. If you prefer to assign an analytic essay, consider question 3, which asks students to interpret *Average Joe* as an instance of *schadenfreude*. Finally, question 5 triggers a challenging speculative essay about what the abundance of reality TV programs reveals about our culture.

ANITA CREAMER

Reality TV Meets Plastic Surgery: An Ugly Shame (p. 229)

Creamer’s selection, with its conversational tone, makes a nice stylistic counterpoint to Francine Prose’s serious, slightly dense discussion. It’s not that Creamer doesn’t make a serious point: her goal is to castigate the trend of make-over TV programs as unethical and unhealthy. Your students will have no trouble with this short, accessible piece, and it’s likely that they’ll buy her argument more readily than they will Prose’s. That’s because the make-over shows are in some ways more extreme in their implications than some other kinds, and because they very obviously play on narrow cultural definitions of physical attractiveness. Indeed, if students resist Prose’s position, you might move to Creamer’s piece, then move back to Prose. One word of caution: it’s possible that you have students in your class who themselves had a nose fixed or breasts enhanced. (Sadly, we’ve heard of young women who requested, and received, breast enlargement surgery as their high school graduation gift.) So you’d do well to keep discussion away from the merits or demerits of plastic surgery and keep the focus on the TV programming and what it says about our culture.

Your students can write both analytic and argumentative essays in response to Creamer’s piece. Reading the Signs question 1 has them use Francine Prose as a framework for analyzing one of the shows Creamer describes, while question 2 sends them to Naomi Wolf’s “The Beauty Myth” in Chapter Six to analyze the cultural values implicit in these programs. For a textual analysis, see question 3, which has students compare and contrast Creamer’s and Prose’s styles. Question 4 has students explore Creamer’s striking statement that “surgery has become entertainment”; encourage your students to consider other forms of “fix-it” programming, such as shows that feature home makeovers, garden makeovers, career makeovers, wardrobe makeovers. . . . you get the idea.

RICK PIETO AND KELLY OTTER

The Osbournes: Genre, Reality TV, and the Domestication of Rock 'n' Roll (p. 232)

When your students consider the cultural significance of a program like *The Osbournes*, it is likely that they will focus on the family's celebrity status, the way even the most mundane daily activities of the rich and famous count as entertainment largely because the people are, well, rich and famous. And this observation is certainly valid. You can apply the pattern to other media celebrities — just consider the hoopla over the Hilton sisters — and to the rich and famous in other walks of life — should people really care what Martha Stewart fed her dogs this morning? But that sort of caring is nurtured by the media, from *People* magazine to publications like *Time* and *Newsweek*, which once were news magazines but now look indistinguishable from their entertainment-based cousins. And, while defenders of *People* like to point out that it always includes a couple of stories about “ordinary” folks, is that why readers buy the publication? Yet this selection makes additional points about this program that you'll want to push your students to understand. Broadly put, Pietro and Otter are demonstrating how TV has essentially domesticated a former rock 'n' roll bad boy, someone with a tough and gruff image who was never really *that* big a deal anyway, and has turned him into a sit-com dad. Despite the much-lauded presentation of his “dysfunctional” family, in many ways it's perfectly functional, at least within the terms of the program. And thus you may want to see *The Osbournes* as part of a larger media pattern that tends to domesticate, or make safe, what might be considered progressive or otherwise simply daring. Indeed, we see yet another example in the 2005 *Hogan Knows Best* on VH1, an *Osbournes* clone starring wrestler Terry “Hulk” Hogan and his self-consciously more conventional family. You can find parallel points in the Susan Douglas, Andre Mayer, and Marisa Connolly selections in this chapter (Reading the Signs question 5 has students address precisely this pattern).

The authors' writing is accessible enough, though you might want to make sure students understand what they mean by coercion, manipulation, and control, and how those concepts apply variously to the subgenres of programming that they discuss. If they grasp these concepts, they should be prepared to write well-considered essays on the selection. Reading the Signs question 1 is the simplest, asking students to evaluate Pietro and Otter's contention that the show is enacting a “new myth of rock 'n' roll.” For more challenging questions that have students tackle the coercion/control ideas, see question 2, which has them analyze the episode of *Average Joe* that Francine Prose begins her selection with; question 3, which invites them to study the slightly different *Real World*; or, even more complex, question 4, which asks students to consider the manipulation wrought by reality TV and its social and ethical implications.

JAMES HAROLD

A Moral Never-Never Land: Identifying with Tony Soprano (p. 241)

Your first reaction to this selection's title might be “What? How can anyone identify with such a ruthless gang lord?” Your response would certainly be valid. As anyone who's watched even a few episodes knows, *The Sopranos* is notorious for its explicit,

often cruel violence and gratuitous savagery. And some people (not us) like to watch it just for that reason. So is Harold writing a defense of unbridled violence? Does he see the program's success as a sign of our morally degenerate times? Not at all. His essay is a careful consideration not simply of the moral implications of such a program but, more subtly, the complex ways in which it can shape a public's response. He starts off by outlining the potential dangers of art, drawing upon Plato and Tolstoy's classic discussions of the topic. While this section will seem "philosophical" to your students, it's clearly written, and you'll want to work through Harold's complication of the Platonic/Tolstoyan criticism of art. Harold suggests that, along with some modern criticism of media with ugly characters, it presumes a one-dimensional identification between viewer and character. He then moves to a discussion of the ways in which the show confuses and disrupts that kind of identification, through plot twists, character development, and the inclusion of a moral center, whom Harold identifies as Jennifer Melfi. The result? A program that, in its continual redefinition of the moral/immoral, the sympathetic and the repugnant, might actually make viewers more conscious of ethical problems, not numbed to their seriousness. For Harold, then, *The Sopranos* is anything but a sign of our corrupt times.

Some of your students, especially those tired of academic bashing of "their" media, will find Harold's defense of Tony Soprano refreshing, while others just won't buy it. Invite them to debate the point. Reading the Signs questions 1 and 2 have them do this with slightly different focuses; we've framed them as essay questions but you can use them for in-class discussion or debate as well. For topics that broaden the scope beyond this one program, see question 3, which sends students to Vivian Sobchack's selection on cinematic violence in Chapter Four; question 4, which invites a comparison and contrast between *The Sopranos* and one of the gangster films that Harold mentions; or question 5, which has them apply Robert B. Ray's paradigm for cinematic heroes to Tony Soprano — a question with no easy answer!

CARL MATHESON

The Simpsons, Hyper-Irony, and the Meaning of Life (p. 250)

For more than a decade and a half, *The Simpsons* has been a popular cultural institution in America and may well be your students' (and perhaps your own) favorite TV program. This alone may make *The Simpsons* a challenge to analyze, because it is often difficult to be objective about things that you especially like. But *The Simpsons* is challenging for a second, more particular reason; given its self-appointed role as America's most popular satirizer of American pop culture, the show (like its grittier counterpart, *South Park*) may seem to be above critique. But don't let that fool you: *The Simpsons* is as much a reflection of contemporary American society as it is a parody of it, and it shares many traits with the culture that it lampoons.

First of all, while *The Simpsons* delights in skewering American hypercapitalism and consumerism, it is itself a gigantic commercial enterprise, with high-rent advertising rates and every kind of commodity spinoff, from dolls to watch faces. Its success means that it draws in millions of viewers, exposing them to the ads its sponsors run, at top dollar per spot, even as it massages their egos by assuring them of their immunity to commercialism. Keep that in mind when a student insists that the show is a devastating critique of consumerism.

Note too how the “star” of *The Simpsons* has changed over the years. In the beginning, witty and wicked Bart Simpson, whose sharp tongue added phrases to the language even as he ridiculed much that is ridiculous in American society, held center stage. But for a number of years, Bart has played second fiddle to Homer, a dopey buffoon who specializes in low comedy. Don’t be fooled here by any particular plot line that Homer may be involved in, because the real significance isn’t in the plot, it’s in the antics. *The Simpsons* plots tend to be thrown together loosely to create a stage for the gags. The show may act as if it is sending a social message of some sort, but the real significance lies in the rapid pace of punch lines and dopey situations, situations that Homer specializes in creating.

This shift from Bart to Homer parallels a related shift in American entertainment from sophisticated to adolescent humor. Consider *Malcolm in the Middle*, which at first featured its title character’s high IQ, but now has relegated that detail to a sideshow as Malcolm’s antics become just as stupid as his cretinous brothers’ and parents’. Or consider *Family Guy* and its flatulent humor, or *Jackass* and its legacy. Increasingly, American entertainment, especially humor, is conforming to the crude but edgy sensibility of male adolescents, reflecting the culture industry’s decision to abandon past standards of taste and restraint in the name of profits. This relaxation of standards itself reflects a general trend within American social codes of behavior in which adolescent conduct is rapidly becoming a norm. If your students question this, ask them if they have been “flipped off” recently (or have flipped someone else off), for the least social offense? What sort of language — that is, vulgar expletives — are they accustomed to hearing, and using? To point this out is not necessarily to criticize anyone but simply to draw attention to the essentially immature behavior of Americans these days, a code that is reflected in what entertains us.

As with James Harold’s selection on Tony Soprano, you’ll probably have some students defending *The Simpsons* against Carl Matheson’s analysis and others defending Matheson. Reading the Signs questions 1 and 3 thus invite students to support or refute two of Matheson’s points about the program, while question 2 has them extend his concept of hyper-irony to other media examples. We’ve included two comparison questions: number 4 prompts students to compare the show with its Web site (which we find even more fully commercialized), and number 5 has them compare it with another comic program, like *SpongeBob SquarePants*, that might seem the same but has a somewhat different tone.

STEVEN D. STARK

The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Talk-Show Furor (p. 263)

Expect this selection to test your students’ ability to separate personal tastes from analytic judgment. While some of your students are likely to have never thought twice about Oprah Winfrey, many may be avid fans — the sort who eat the foods she says she likes or who read the books she recommends because, well, she recommends them. It will be important for both groups to see that Stark isn’t making an aesthetic or even personal judgment about the Oprah Winfrey empire. Rather, he situates her program in the context of the system of talk shows and teases out the differences in an attempt to explain why her program achieved a stature the others didn’t quite manage. If your students are tempted to respond in only a personal way to the show (and

not to Stark's argument), assign Reading the Signs question 1, a journal topic, to get that out of their systems.

This selection is ideal for argumentative topics, particularly those that address the value and appropriate content of television. Reading the Signs question 2 focuses on Stark's central assertion that talk shows have had a democratizing influence on television. A more narrow-gauge question, number 3 has students watch an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and write their own explanation for its appeal (you can prevent simple restatements of Stark's position by asking students to also consider whether the show and its appeal have evolved since Stark published this essay). For a topic that engages current debate, try question number 4, which asks students to respond to media critics who wish to "purify" TV. Be sure that students recognize an interesting political twist here: While Stark cites conservative critic William Bennett as exemplary of this position, liberals have it on their agenda as well. Question 5 broadens the issues by prompting students to compare talk shows with reality TV programs, both genres that have been criticized for sensationalized programming. Here, you'll want students to refer to specific programs and episodes; the Francine Prose, Anita Creamer, and Rick Pietsch and Kelly Otter readings can help their thinking about RTV.

SUSAN DOUGLAS

Signs of Intelligent Life on TV (p. 270)

We include this selection not just because Douglas's title echoes our own! We like Douglas because she offers an insightful interpretation of some of today's most popular TV programs — and she explores the mythologies that underlie them as well. If you're emphasizing gender issues in your class, be sure to include Douglas in your syllabus. Your students should have little trouble with Douglas's clear, accessible style, though expect a few students to complain that she's making a mountain out of a very little molehill. If some students do so complain, discuss with your class the personal spin Douglas adds to her essay: She's critiquing programs she *likes*, not those she hates. (Such students may appreciate answering Reading the Signs question 3, which invites them to explore their response to their favorite TV show.) To ensure a specific discussion of the programs, try supplementing the class's reading of her essay by taping a segment of one of the programs that she discusses; to save class time, you could watch only those parts in which male and female characters interact or display what Douglas considers stereotypical behavior. Such an in-class viewing of an episode would prepare students for the first Reading the Signs question, which asks them to support or oppose Douglas's thesis using evidence from the shows she discusses. You'll find that her thesis can easily be applied to other shows and even other media — her essay allows for great flexibility in assignment creation. Reading the Signs question 2 invites students to extend Douglas's concerns to other shows that portray women as professionals (*Sex and the City* is a natural for this question, but others would work as well), and question 4 asks them to extend it to a young adult show. Advertising also invites analysis à la Douglas; question 5 thus sends students to Steve Craig's essay in Chapter Two.

GWENDOLYN POUGH

Women, Rap, Wreck (p. 275)

Your students are likely to be quite familiar with the controversies surrounding male rappers, and many may have full defenses ready for their favorite rap stars. But often overlooked in the debates about rap are the female rappers — which is precisely why we’ve included this selection. You’ll find Gwendolyn Pough’s selection useful for a number of reasons. She first provides an overview of the history of women hip-hop artists and the scholarship written about them; this history can provide a context for discussing current artists, both female and male. She then moves to a close examination of two songs, Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.” and Eve’s “Love is Blind.” Here you’ll want to discuss Pough’s interpretation of gender roles in these songs. Do students agree, for instance, that Queen Latifah’s stance is essentially feminist, even though the artist disdains that label? Discuss as well some of Pough’s broader argument: can a hip-hop song really be an agent for social change, as Pough rather optimistically suggests? Especially since it is a commercial product (recall our discussion of *The Simpsons* above)? As you discuss gender roles, you should turn your students’ attention to the photo of Salt ‘N’ Pepa on page 277. How do clothing, expression, and body language combine to create an image for the group? Be aware that some sensitive issues may be raised in class discussion: Pough sees most (but not all) female hip-hop artists as challenging the depictions of women perpetuated in male raps, and this position points to both gender and ethnic tensions. If discussion gets heated, try to defuse things by narrowing the discussion, perhaps to one of the raps Pough describes. You might also ask students to share with the class their responses to Reading the Signs question 1, which invites students to write a “screenplay” for a video that depicts their gender in a way that they like. We’ve made this question a journal topic, but it’s workable as an essay or even as a group assignment. Pough’s essay lends itself to straight-forward analysis and argument topics as well. For an argumentative essay, try question 2, which asks students to support or refute Pough’s interpretation of “U.N.I.T.Y.,” while question 3 asks students to analyze the work of a female hip-hopper of their own choice using Pough’s argument. For a comparison essay, assign question 4, which has students compare and contrast videos by male and female rappers.

ANDRE MAYER

The New Sexual Stone Age (p. 284)

We really think Mayer’s argument is right on target — and we think you can expect it to trigger a lively class discussion. That’s because many students may take issue with Mayer’s biting indictment of today’s pop culture stars, especially musicians and singers, who have embraced sexist and chauvinistic gender roles. So often students see these stars, like Mariah Carey or Fred Durst, as cool and cutting-edge, not retrograde, and thus are likely to bristle at Mayer’s attack. You might ask your class to list on the board a dozen or so current pop music stars, then consider the images they project. Do they follow the patterns Mayer describes? Alternatively, you could form small groups, each charged with the task of preparing two lists: five current stars who fit Mayer’s argument, and five who in fact assume more progressive notions about gender. Have the groups write their lists on the board, and then analyze the results. If the

lists demonstrate a consensus, discuss the particular details about the artists' images and behavior that led them to be so categorized; if the lists contradict each other, get students to discuss their assumptions about what constitutes outmoded or progressive attitudes toward gender. In either case, you may want to move from observing the phenomenon Mayer decries to addressing its larger significance. Why is a slutty appearance so prized for female stars, even for teen and preteen girls? While a group like Destiny's Child would like its audience to see them as champions of female empowerment, is their choice of clothing, makeup, and hairstyle really empowering or does it just make them sex objects? How can they account for this trend in pop music?

Students are likely to have plenty to say in response to Mayer's selection. For straightforward argument assignments, try Reading the Signs question 1, which invites students to support or oppose Mayer's central thesis, or number 5, which suggests students debate the degree of chauvinism or liberation that exists in pop music (an in-class debate, in which teams generate lots of specific evidence for their argument, could be the basis of an at-home essay assignment). Two questions narrow the assignment focus, with number 3 asking students to analyze *Maxim* in light of Mayer's charges and number 4 having them analyze the style of female rappers. The most speculative question is number 2, which challenges students to develop their own argument about why the trends that Mayer laments are so prevalent in popular music.

MARISA CONNOLLY

Homosexuality on Television: The Heterosexualization of Will and Grace (p. 287)

Don't let the density of this essay's title scare you off. Marisa Connolly has written a very clear, well-argued analysis of the gender relations in *Will and Grace*, asserting that, rather than being progressive in featuring a protagonist who is gay, the show makes Will and Grace seem like a straight couple. Thereby his homosexuality is, in effect, erased, and the program is made "safer" for a mass audience. Connolly presents this argument well, locating *Will and Grace* within the context of other TV shows that include gay characters and analyzing specific episodes and interactions between the program's leads. In addition, she broadens her evidence by studying news articles about the program; she finds that frequently language is used that would be more appropriate for a heterosexual couple than for a gay pair.

Because this is an academic article, you might want to have your students analyze her evidence and methodology, because it's a very accessible example of its genre and could be a useful model for students. In addition, you might want to discuss this piece along with several other articles (by Rick Pioto and Kelly Otter, Susan Douglas, and Andre Mayer) which argue that popular media often have a facade of being daring or trailblazing but in fact preserve traditional or conservative values.

Connolly's selection is flexible enough so that assignments can focus on *Will and Grace* or study other media examples. For the former, see Reading the Signs question 1, which invites students to test Connolly's thesis, and question 4, which addresses a broader question of whether having a gay lead character still represents an advance. Question 2 complicates matters a bit by having students study *Will and Grace* through the eyes of Susan Douglas. And question 3 has students analyze another TV show that features gay characters; alternatively, you could allow them to focus on a film like *Alexander*, asking them to study the controversy over its depiction of the main character.

Chapter Four

THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN

The Culture of American Film

It's not surprising that writing instructors have long used films as texts for student analysis, for the best films can offer the complexity, narrative structures, characters, and symbol systems of a novel or story. Film has also been a favorite subject of semiotic analysis, and with good reason. Movies are rich sign systems, deliberately designed to appeal to an audience's values and desires, both reflecting and shaping a society's dreams. We find that using a semiotic approach can help students make the leap from writing simply their judgments of movies—why they like a particular film — to writing critical analyses of them. Because movies are so much a part of their lives, it's sometimes difficult for students to interpret them critically. By providing an analytic framework, this chapter is designed to help them do just that. The Exploring the Signs of Film question asks students to examine their favorite films, reflecting on what their personal preferences reveal about their own tastes, values, and beliefs. In essence, students will explore how their cinematic tastes serve as signs of their individual identity. The Discussing the Signs of Film question looks at film as a broader social phenomenon, this time asking them to consider why blockbuster hits achieve such a status. For this question, have your class identify the most recent megahits, locate the films in the context of other popular fads, and consider the social values and ideologies that the films manipulate. It's worth asking students to consider how Hollywood's image-making machine works its magic on its own products; accordingly, the Reading Film on the Net exercise invites students to study the Web site of a recent film or the posters that advertise films. Students should consider this question: How does the packaging of a film affect a viewer's understanding of its meaning?

As with Chapter Three on television and music, it's useful to structure class discussion around a common visual text; but given time constraints, you might find it trickier to watch an entire feature film in class. Some movies are ninety minutes long, so if your class runs in a two-hour block you probably can watch one movie in class. If that's not an option, consider assigning a current film for homework, or check to see if your campus has a film series that would enable the class to see the same film (usually at a discounted rate). Your students are likely to possess a tremendously high level of cinematic literacy — so high that it may pose a problem. When discussing a movie, you may find it necessary to steer students away from celebrity worship. Among themselves, they're used to talking about what film a particular actor has appeared in recently or what a certain director earned for a film; at times, we've just had to say that celebrity gossip isn't the same as a critical discussion. You may also have to remind students that a public relations spin on a movie isn't the same as an objective analysis of it. Just because Madonna says she is "telling all" in *Truth or Dare* (1991), for example, doesn't mean that it's the case. You'll be able to keep students on track if you remind them of that semiotic question "Why?" Keep at them to ask: Why this plot twist? Or why a male rather than a female character? Or why a black actor for this role? When you do this, they will be on their way to writing sharp analytic papers.

Because the readings in the chapter address various myths that influence films, you'll find the chapter easy to adapt to your course's focus and students' interests. Robert B. Ray provides a broad framework for examining Hollywood archetypes, so we strongly recommend that you include his essay in your syllabus. Alternately, Linda Seger's selection outlines the "universal" story lines that give shape to the mythologies

underlying many popular films. If you need to cut back on some of the material in the chapter, you can do so according to the themes you're emphasizing. For a focus on classic movies, assign Charles Ealy's selection on *Star Wars* or Vicki L. Eaklor's essay on *Gone with the Wind*. Eaklor can be paired with the Jessica Hagedorn selection, for both address gender issues, while the Hagedorn can also be paired with Todd Boyd's selection for a class addressing multicultural issues. David Denby focuses on a cinematic subgenre, teen movies, and Michael Parenti examines social class. Vivian Sobchack concludes the chapter with a cultural analysis of violence in film (her selection is valuable for a semiotically centered course).

ROBERT B. RAY

The Thematic Paradigm (p. 308)

Ray's selection has been one of the most frequently assigned in the earlier editions of this text — and that's no surprise. It's useful no matter what films your class analyzes, and whether or not you emphasize semiotics, because it focuses on an essential pattern of protagonists in American films: the outlaw and the official heroes. This pattern is by no means limited to Westerns. These protagonists are found in action-adventure, mystery, political, and even romance movies. Ray thus provides your students with a clear, accessible paradigm for interpreting characters from almost any film. Students should have little trouble identifying the paradigm, but be sure, in class, to review the ideological significance of the two character types — a more abstract point that students may overlook. Ask, for instance, why Americans tend to prefer the outlaw hero. What does that reveal about the American character? To encourage students to consider the significance of Ray's categories, we strongly suggest that you do Reading the Signs question 3, which asks the class to brainstorm examples of outlaw and official heroes, then to categorize them according to shared traits (such as race or gender). Consider as well assigning William Martin-Doyle's "*Cool Hand Luke: The Exclusion of the Official Hero in American Cinema*" (p. 46), one of the student essays in the Writing about Popular Culture section. While not all students will be familiar with *Cool Hand Luke*, Martin-Doyle provides a sufficient summary and uses Ray effectively to interpret the film.

Ray's selection provides an ideal framework for analyzing not only films but other media. Not all heroes need be real, of course; question 1 has students consult Gary Engle's and Andy Medhurst's selections and consider which type of hero Superman and Batman are to their audiences (for a simpler question, ask students to analyze just one hero). Questions 2 and 4 are similar, asking students to apply Ray's paradigm to the central characters in the *Terminator* and *Alien* films, respectively; in discussing the *Alien* films, students should consider gender issues as well, for the protagonist is female, and American heroes traditionally have been male. And certainly you could allow students to analyze a current film. Finally, question 5 is speculative, asking students to create a third category of hero to accommodate the characters in such cartoons as *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. To prepare students for writing this topic, you might assign the introduction to Chapter Nine, "American Icons: The Mythic Characters of Popular Culture."

LINDA SEGER

Creating the Myth (p. 317)

You'll find that you can use Seger's clear, accessible discussion in a number of ways. This essay can introduce your students to cultural myths; it provides a critical framework for analyzing a broad range of films; its central argument, that successful films employ archetypes which tap into universal human desires, is open to debate and modification. This essay complements Robert B. Ray's in that Seger focuses on heroic myths, but unlike Ray she traces classic hero patterns through a single film, *Star Wars*, that should be familiar to most students (be sure to draw their attention to the *Star Wars* photo on p. 319). She also complicates the heroic myth by examining what she calls "broken" characters and combination myths; this examination will give you great flexibility in class discussion, as most films fit her scheme somehow. Seger also raises some interesting open-ended questions (for instance, why the *Rambo* films were so successful). Herself a screenwriter, Seger wrote this selection for a readership of aspiring screenwriters, and that shapes her tone and attitudes. Her status as an industry insider helps to explain her apparent endorsement of using existing myths in film — she doesn't recommend originality in screenplays. You may want to discuss that essentially conservative viewpoint with your class. Reading the Signs question 1 addresses this issue; question 5 calls for an evaluation of Seger's suggestion that screenwriters use Grimm's fairy tales for inspiration.

If you're covering both the Ray and Seger selections, consider assigning question 2, which calls for a gender-based comparison of the two approaches to heroes. Question 3 sends students to Michael Parenti's essay for help in analyzing *Pretty Woman* and *Indecent Proposal*, while question 4 asks them to examine the archetype-filled *Titanic*. Perhaps the most challenging question (and our favorite) is the last, which asks students to explore the myths about American history, race, and gender underlying *Gone with the Wind*. Vicki E. Eaklor's essay in this chapter could add additional dimensions to this assignment. Remember, though, that the film runs more than three hours and thus is difficult to show in class. After doing this assignment, some of our students have lamented that they will never view the movie the same way again — proof to us that the assignment works.

CHARLES EALY

Understanding Star Wars (p. 326)

We like Charles Ealy's discussion of the many academic explanations for why the *Star Wars* saga has so captured viewers' imaginations because, as a newspaper article, it remains open-ended in its conclusions. Thus you can structure your discussion of this selection by asking students to evaluate the various scholarly positions it presents. Which are more persuasive, and why? Which seem to identify the social and cultural values implicit in *Star Wars* more accurately? Would students want to combine any of the explanations? Because most students will probably be familiar with this classic, you can watch brief clips in class to test the different arguments (you may not need to watch the entire film). In addition, this article pairs well with the Robert B. Ray and Linda Seger selections, as Ealy discusses both heroes and archetypes and thus you can deepen the class's understanding of those terms.

You'll find that this selection creates opportunities for a creative variety of analytic and argumentative essays. Reading the Signs question 1 poses a natural argumentative topic: it asks students to propose their own reading of the film's cultural significance. Note that we consider it important for students not simply to propose their own reading but to situate it within the broader context of scholarly debate that Ealy summarizes. For a more focused question, try number 2, which has students respond to one of the claims about *Star Wars* that Ealy describes, or number 3, which invites them to adopt Linda Seger's perspective and evaluate the scholarly arguments. Ealy's discussion of monomyths and archetypes can, of course, be applied to other films as well. *The Lord of the Rings* is richly mythic, and so we suggest in question 4 that students analyze the cultural myths implicit in that film. Students need not tackle the entire trilogy; because the first installment, "The Fellowship of the Ring," is the most critically acclaimed and sets up the trilogy, we suggest they focus on that segment.

TODD BOYD

So You Wanna Be a Gangsta? (p. 331)

This selection is essential if your course emphasizes ethnic issues; it's also ideal if you like to emphasize the historical context in which pop culture products should be interpreted. Boyd outlines a full and rich history of the gangster genre of film, starting with the good-old-fashioned American Western, moving to ethnic white gangster films such as the *Godfather* series and then the Blaxploitation flicks, and concluding with analyses of *American Me* and *Boyz N the Hood*. You'll find that this historical approach can head off simple evaluative judgments of recent black gangsta films and help prevent unproductive digressions into social issues that are only tangentially related (whether gangsters face a bum rap by society, for instance). Even though both *American Me* and *Boyz N the Hood* are now quite a few years old, we find most first-year students have seen at least one (usually *Boyz*) and many have viewed both. Students sometimes see *Boyz* as an "alternative" film; expect some to bristle at Boyd's suggestion that the film reflects a "bourgeois sense of politics." Boyd's writing should be accessible to most students; the one section that may be more difficult is his discussion of black nationalist politics. Determine early in class discussion whether students grasp Boyd's point, since missing it can mean missing his overall argument about *Boyz*.

If you assign this selection, try to arrange an in-class viewing of *Boyz* or place it and *American Me* on reserve in your college's media library: That will allow for a richer discussion of Boyd's readings of these films. A natural assignment based on Boyd's essay is to ask students to view one of the films that he mentions and then either to respond to his argument about it or to write their own interpretations of it. For a somewhat more complicated topic, try Reading the Signs question 2, which invites students to compare the representation of ethnic "others" in a film such as *Scarface* with that of black gang members in a movie like *Boyz N the Hood*. Two questions allow students to explore the implications raised in Boyd's essay: Number 1 asks whether Hollywood glorifies criminal behavior (Vivian C. Sobchack's "The Postmorbidity Condition" in this chapter makes a perfect companion piece) and question number 4 asks whether gangsta films exploit the black community. Both questions would make good research paper topics. Question 3 asks students to consider why gangsta culture is so popular among middle-class teens; you could organize your class in teams and have them interview adolescents as a means of gathering primary evidence for their papers.

Finally, question 5 extends the issues to gender by asking students to interpret a film that Boyd does not address, *Waiting to Exhale*. Boyd focuses largely on films that feature the black male underclass; you may find it useful to have your students interpret a film with African American characters who are both female and middle-class — a departure from usual cinematic conventions.

DAVID DENBY

High-School Confidential: Notes on Teen Movies (p. 343)

You should find it easy to get students to talk enthusiastically about David Denby's article, as they tend to love talking about their high school experiences. Ask them if the stereotypical characters Denby describes existed in their high school — you'll probably find that your class vividly remember such types. Then you can move to a thornier question: to what extent does film reflect reality or shape it (this is the question posed by Reading the Signs question 4)? You'll want to also discuss the cultural implications of the patterns Denby discusses, perhaps focusing on gender. What's the significance of the tendency of nerdy male characters to "get" the gorgeous female in the end, while the nerdy girls have to be revealed as secretly beautiful (e.g., they fix their hair properly, start wearing makeup) if they are to get the guy? You might find it fun to ask students in groups to plan their own teen movies. Would they rely on the stereotypes Denby describes? If so, why? If not, how would they change the usual depiction of teens?

Denby's article provides a clear framework for analyzing particular films and even TV shows. Reading the Signs question 1 has students analyze *The O.C.*, though you could have the class brainstorm other current TV programs with teen characters and select an alternative. A more complex topic is posed by question 2, which asks students to assess one of Denby's claims using several current teen films. Question 3 is also challenging, as it asks students whether *American Beauty* can be considered a teen movie in Denby's terms. Here, students need to think about whether just having teen characters locates a film in this subgenre.

VICKI L. EAKLOR

Myth and Gender in Gone with the Wind (p. 349)

Given that *Gone with the Wind* is considered an American classic, we're glad to include this selection in this edition. Vicki L. Eaklor offers a fresh take on this film, arguing that, while Scarlett O'Hara in many ways embodies traditional female characteristics, she also subverts them by assuming traditionally male traits. We are persuaded by Eaklor's argument, but don't be surprised if some of your students resist it. And they are really likely to resist Eaklor's suggestions about homosexual overtones in the film. That's understandable, given that they probably viewed the film when younger and responded primarily to the gushy romanticism. They may say "I never noticed that!" If you get that response, you might show selected clips in class, concentrating on some of the key scenes that Eaklor analyzes (clocking in at over three hours, the film would

be difficult to show in its entirety in class). What different interpretations of the clips would they suggest if they disagree with Eaklor? You could also discuss the film's reception by viewers; it is especially popular among women. Why might that be the case? We think it's precisely because Scarlett O'Hara is something of a proto-post-feminist character who can seem empowering to women while also embodying traditional gender roles.

Students who object to Eaklor's argument will be challenged by Reading the Signs question 1, which asks them to assess her thesis. Encourage students to provide their own counteranalysis of the scenes Eaklor discusses; you'll want to make sure those who concur with her argument advance additional evidence of their own (as opposed to simply repeating Eaklor's demonstration). A more focused version of this question is posed in number 2, which limits the scope to two characters, Rhett and Ashley. For some field work, try question 3, which has students interview fans of the film to assess Eaklor's interesting claim that viewers have a "love/hate" relationship with it. Question 4 shifts the focus away from gender and sends students to Robert B. Ray's selection in this chapter for help in analyzing Scarlett O'Hara's status as a hero.

JESSICA HAGEDORN

Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck (p. 359)

Hagedorn's selection works well in courses that focus on either gender or ethnicity. While you're not likely to be surprised by her argument — that films tend to relegate Asian women to the traditional whore/angel dichotomy — your students may not have considered this pattern at all. Ask them to interpret the photos of Michelle Yeh (p. 361) and Anna May Wong (p. 364): To what extent do these actresses illustrate Hagedorn's point? (Yeh is best known as Jackie Chan's costar in *Supercop*, and in this photo she plays a Chinese secret agent in *Tomorrow Never Dies*; Wong was an early-twentieth-century actress who appeared in *The Thief of Baghdad* [1924] and played a prostitute in *Shanghai Express* [1932].) We should warn you that students may be unhappy with Hagedorn's criticism of *The Joy Luck Club*, a film that we've discovered is a sentimental favorite among many students, both male and female and of all ethnic backgrounds. Since many students have seen this film, you might want to combine your discussion of this essay with a viewing of the film to allow your students to test Hagedorn's thesis (see Reading the Signs question 1).

A basic analysis assignment is to ask students to view one of the films that Hagedorn mentions (or any other with Asian characters) and interpret the depiction of women in the film. Question 4 is similar, but it has students focus on one of the gender-bending films, such as *M. Butterfly*, that Hagedorn mentions (note that some conservative students may feel uncomfortable watching this film). You can broaden the issues that Hagedorn raises by addressing more generally Hollywood's tendency to stereotype different ethnicities. Question 2 invites the class to stage a debate on this issue; students could prepare for the debate by reading Michael Omi's essay in Chapter Seven. These issues apply to other media as well; question 3 invites students to analyze a magazine that targets Asian American readers. As an alternative to an essay assignment, consider bringing to class some of these types of magazines for small groups to study.

MICHAEL PARENTI

Class and Virtue (p. 368)

We decided to include this selection after hearing the umpteenth student proclaim that *Pretty Woman* is her favorite movie of all time. At least in our classes, most of the film's avid fans have been female — and, to our surprise, most consider themselves feminists. Such students are likely to be irked by Parenti, who finds the film objectionable on many grounds. He concentrates on the class issues implicit in this film and in others; we've found it interesting that many students respond, "Well, of course, one has to get rid of low-class habits." And we've had students argue that the film doesn't really show prostitution because the rich guy is Prince Charming. The film's fans will relish responding to Reading the Signs question 2, which invites them to argue with Parenti's interpretation. Be sure your students ask "why are we shown *this*?" when offering a counterinterpretation. Parenti mentions briefly the gender bigotry in the film; question 3 sends students to Aaron Devor's essay in Chapter Six for help in analyzing the film's gender roles.

Parenti's comments about class can be applied to other media examples. The selection works well when applied to other films such as *Wall Street* (see question 1) or to a TV show such as *The Apprentice* (see question 2); it can also be used to illuminate films such as *On the Waterfront* (see question 4). An exploratory topic, question 5 asks students to create a category of "racial bigotry" to parallel Parenti's two categories of "class and gender bigotry." For this question, we suggest that students first read Michael Omi's "In Living Color" (Chapter Seven); Omi comments on the ways the media reinforce ethnic biases.

VIVIAN C. SOBCHACK

The Postmorbidity Condition (p. 372)

We like Sobchack's essay because she offers a cultural explanation for the current spate of violent films — a fresh angle that goes beyond the usual debate of the effect of media violence on our culture. Her writing is accessible but on the theoretical side, so you might want to walk your students through the essay. She begins by describing succinctly an article she had written twenty-five years earlier on violence in film; at that time, she saw the violence as being aestheticized. To demonstrate what she means by this, you might show a short clip from *Bonnie and Clyde* or another film from the era. Then your students will be better prepared for her indictment of more recent violent movies, ones that she feels do quite the opposite. Rather than aestheticizing violence, she claims, current films are "careless" about it. The blasted bodies are just that, bodies, not people; the technologizing and escalation of violence becomes the object of interest, not pain and suffering; and the violence becomes an illusory joke, not a moral offense. While she finds the depiction of modern culture as postmodern to be tiresome, nonetheless you might get your class to appreciate the connotations of her title, for "postmorbidity" echoes postmodern, and she essentially is critiquing a postmodern tendency to substitute image and effect for substance and the real. An effective way to get to the heart of her essay is to tease out the reasons she distinguishes overtly violent films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Beloved* from overtly violent films like

Pulp Fiction and *Reservoir Dogs*. Ask your students how they respond to the violent scenes in the first two films: Do they laugh? Or do they squirm, turn their heads, or feel disgusted? If the latter, that's because the violence is made to seem real and carries with it a moral burden. It's likely most students don't react that way watching the second pair of films, because, as Sobchack points out, the violence is hyperbolic and over the top. And that, she finds, is exactly what's wrong with it. Students might analyze the poster for *Reservoir Dogs* (p. 378) to analyze what sort of violence it depicts.

Once students grasp her point, they're likely to want to debate it. Many students have grown up watching violent films and may see nothing wrong with unreal violence; in fact, they may argue that it's superior in that everyone knows it's "just entertainment." You might ask what that says about cultural values and attitudes. Reading the Signs question 6 invites the class to discuss this issue, though you could make it an essay topic. You might also get your students to talk about the gendered patterns of responding to violent movies (in an aside, Sobchack points out that fans of cinematic violence tend to be male). In writing on this essay, students would do well to ground their arguments in specific examples of violent films. Question 4 has them do so by testing Sobchack's claim on a recent movie (of course, you could select one of those that she discusses as well), while question 2 invites them to take on her argument about why films like *Beloved* were box-office disappointments. Sobchack doesn't directly discuss gangster films, which also are typically violent; a challenging question, number 5 asks students to argue whether the violence in a film like *Boyz n the Hood* is desensitizing or real. Finally, two questions, numbers 1 and 3, ask students to address broader issues of the effects of violence on audiences and of the possible need for restrictions of violence. If you assign these questions, you might first have the class brainstorm films that would provide relevant evidence for their arguments, no matter what position they take.

Chapter Five

AMERICAN PARADOX

Culture and Contradiction in the U.S.A.

If you really want to explore the semiotic concept of cultural mythologies, this chapter is a must. Start with the chapter's introduction, for it surveys a representative sample of the contradictory ideologies that Americans so commonly, yet often unwittingly, embrace. The first point to make clear is that being contradictory is not necessarily a bad thing; America's contradictions can be viewed as the product of its cultural diversity, a diversity that began with the cultural differences between the original settlers of Jamestown, Virginia, and of Boston, Massachusetts, and that has continued since then through wave after wave of immigration to America's shores.

Another point worth clarifying is that the readings in this chapter, indeed the entire topic of the chapter itself, do not converge on a single activity or practice in the way the other chapters of the book do in focusing on such popular cultural phenomena as consumption, advertising, television, film, and so on. Rather, America's contradictions can be found everywhere throughout its popular culture — in its consuming habits, advertising, television, film, and so on. Wherever you look — even at a Super Bowl half-time show — you can see America's contradictions in play.

It is possible that your students may feel a little defensive about the chapter's topic: after all, ordinarily, to be accused of being in contradiction is a negative criticism. That's why it's a good idea to review in class the five fundamental contradictions briefly elaborated in the introduction. Probably the most effective contradiction to begin with is the contrast between American Puritanism and its capitalist tendency to exploit sex in the name of profits. Not only will your students be likely to remember the Justin Timberlake/Janet Jackson snafu — the Exploring the Signs of American Contradictions question has them contemplate the calls for fines and greater FCC monitoring of programming in the wake of this incident — but they will also be eager to discuss the often funny ways in which Americans have expressed this basic contradiction. Invite them to suggest their own examples, and you may want to supply examples from the past, for instance, the way that nineteenth-century America insisted that its women be covered from head to toe in dresses that were cinched in at the waist with whalebone corsets in order to create and accentuate their erotic curvature. For a completely different example that your students should have no trouble recognizing, discuss the American Christmas, with its paradoxical combination of religiosity and consumerism. This is a contradiction that everyone is aware of and a bit uncomfortable with. You might want to inform your students that the highly religious Puritan settlers of New England forbade the celebration of Christmas because they thought it had become too hedonistic. And invite your class to discuss why Americans celebrate Christmas the way they do and what they would do differently if they could.

It might seem natural, in a chapter devoted to contradictions, to invite your class to debate pro/con positions related to such paradoxes. We do not encourage you to do this, however, because the purpose of a semiotic analysis is to reveal cultural phenomena, not to judge them. Your students may well entertain judgments about America's contradictions (after all, one can't help but judge the contradiction between the sweeping statements of the Declaration of Independence and the fact that its chief author was a slave owner). But, rather than getting into a discussion over what a bad thing this was (which would only restate the obvious), invite your class to consider the many ways in which this contradiction has affected American society from its begin-

nings to this day. Focusing on particular cultural dichotomies, and the often complicated ways they are manifested, can help avoid a simplistic pro-con approach to the topic. The Discussing the Signs of Contradictions question encourages the class to explore the red/blue state division proposed by David Brooks; here you'll want to steer students away from advocating one or the other and toward the significance of this political and cultural divide. The Reading Contradictions on the Net question focuses their attention on the seeming disparity between the intellectual and creative freedom promised by the Internet and the increased homogenization of media occasioned by corporate empires.

If you have any students in class who were raised in other countries, invite them to describe how American culture looks to them from their birth-culture's point of view. Students from more traditional or religious cultures, for example, may wonder why Americans, who favor women's fashions à la Britney Spears, got so upset about the Timberlake/Jackson affair, while many European students who come from countries where nude beaches are commonplace may be equally puzzled about all the fuss.

The chapter moves you through a series of contradictions that inform different aspects of our culture and our daily lives. The first three selections address the broadest contradictions: David Brooks starts the chapter with his essay sketching the American political scene as blue and red, Anna Quindlen next charts the conflict between the American ideals of community and individualism, and Gregg Easterbrook considers why increased affluence and materialism — often seen as signs of personal and national progress — paradoxically can lead to unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The remaining selections focus somewhat more narrowly on one slice of American life. Jack Solomon outlines the advertising industry's use of elitist and populist appeals; Alfred Lubrano charts the class tensions that can arise when a working-class kid leaves the family nest to attend college, a step that family members can view not as advancement but as betrayal; Richard Corliss next turns to Hollywood and religion, noting how fundamentalist groups that formerly decried the movies are enlisting them in their cause; Lucy Lippard examines the city vs. country split that has long been part of American consciousness; Mariah Burton Nelson analyzes the competing demands to be aggressive and passive that female athletes face; and Randall Kennedy considers how opponents and supporters of racial profiling wind up being “strange bedfellows” for adopting positions that logically they should oppose.

DAVID BROOKS

One Nation, Slightly Divisible (p. 388)

David Brooks's seminal 2001 *Atlantic* article that outlines his vision of a blue/red America is ideal for teaching critical thinking skills. His handy paradigm for the bifurcated American political scene can be applied to both local and national arenas. You can start by asking students to chart the cultural, economic, social, and demographic characteristics of blue and red states and to compare those results to the voting patterns of the 2000 presidential election, which was the inspiration for Brooks's dichotomy. Doing so will show you whether students grasp the distinctions Brooks is making. Then you might move to the 2004 election, which pundits widely have seen as reinforcing the legitimacy of the blue/red divide. Do your students agree with that viewpoint? What evidence do they see for or against it? You needn't limit your discussion to national politics, of course. Your students will be interested in figuring out

where their state lands in this scheme. If your students are mostly from the same state (likely if you're at a public institution), have them defend or challenge Brooks's identification of your state as blue or red. This discussion could be good preparation for Reading the Signs question 2, which asks students to assess their own community in Brooks's terms. If your college or university has students from a range of states, you might ask them to investigate, perhaps on your school's Web site, which home states dominate in the student body. Do they see any patterns that suggest your school is more blue or more red? How can students account for their observations? As students apply this dichotomy to their own lives, some may object that Brooks is stereotyping regions and people (question 1 has students debate this point). Ask your students to tease out the differences between stereotyping and generalizations. When does a valid generalization shade into an inaccurate stereotype? Be sure to ask students to consider the many details Brooks uses to illustrate blue and red characteristics: they are uncannily persuasive and have contributed substantially to the popularity of his argument.

You needn't limit the application of Brooks's dichotomy to the century's first two presidential elections, of course. Reading the Signs question 3 invites students to evaluate the current political scene. And you needn't limit essay topics to the blue/red dichotomy. Question 4 has students respond to Brooks's question about whether America remains a unified nation; to prepare them for this challenging topic, you might have them first read the Anna Quindlen selection in this chapter and the Introduction to Chapter Seven on race. Another challenging question, number 5, calls for an evaluation of Brooks's analogy between America and a high-school cafeteria.

ANNA QUINDLEN

A Quilt of a Country (p. 397)

Although a relatively brief selection, Anna Quindlen's essay packs a lot of protein as she sketches a fundamental American paradox: the tension between community and inclusiveness, on the one hand, and individualism and pluralism on the other. Quindlen poses a difficult question: "What is the point of this splintered whole?" (para. 5). You should encourage your students to explore what she means by that question, as they might misinterpret it as hostility toward the United States. Quindlen's message is hardly that. While not being Pollyanna, Quindlen notes that, despite the deep, often racially based tensions that divide Americans, and despite a mythology that celebrates the individual, the country remains, basically, communitarian and united, albeit in a checkered way. Some students may take issue with this position, and that's fine: challenge your class to develop evidence to support or oppose her position. What about the general sense of national unity post-9/11: does that indicate Americans are capable of acting with "one spirit"? What about the fading of that unity since 2001: might that be an inevitable result of the passage of time? What about Americans' responses to other threats and disasters, both national and international, since September 11? What do those responses say about the national character? To relate her discussion to popular culture, you might assign as a companion piece Jack Solomon's essay in this chapter, as the dichotomy between elitism and populism that he sees in American advertising roughly parallels Quindlen's split between individualism and community.

One statement that students may object to is Quindlen's assertion that "tolerance is a vanilla pudding word" (para. 9), because they may say, "What's wrong with being tolerant? Are we supposed to be intolerant?" That's not Quindlen's position, of course,

but you can prompt some good critical thinking by assigning Reading the Signs question 1, which has students support or oppose this statement. A variant of this topic is posed by question 2, which calls for a comparison between Quindlen's point and the discussion of tolerance in the introduction to Chapter Seven. For either topic, the Benjamin DeMott, Angeline Price, Jack Lopez, and Melissa Algranati selections in Chapter Seven could provide specific evidence for their arguments. Quindlen raises the larger question of what the American character is and whether it can be defined. Question 3 addresses this question via the National Opinion Research Center's positive claim that America stands "for something special" — if students share this position, be sure they articulate what "special" means — and question 4 has students respond to Quindlen's claim that it can be impossible to define a national character. Here it can be useful to hear the voices of students from other nations, for while Americans may resist a definition of our national character, those looking from a distance tend to be far readier to do so.

GREGG EASTERBROOK

The Progress Paradox (p. 400)

Who says money can't buy happiness? Gregg Easterbrook, for one. In this selection, Easterbrook examines the paradoxical result of greater affluence and the ability to indulge in material goods: dissatisfaction and depression. Understandably, students may find this argument hard to buy, for they are in school, in part, so that they improve their economic lot in life. And they are influenced by popular media to want more, to look better, to enjoy and even identify with material objects. Now they may not be aspiring to some of the examples Easterbrook supplies, such as Patek Philippe watches or \$10 million yachts, objects that only the very rich can consider. But you can expect them to respond by saying, "What's wrong with spending your money if you have it?" You might move to Easterbrook's point about the "revenge of the plastic," for some students may already be struggling with this spiral of credit card debt encouraged by credit card companies. And they may relate to "catalog-induced anxiety." Ask them about their own behavior and desires as consumers, albeit ones without lots of disposable income. We've been surprised to learn that, while not affluent, one student with a shoe fetish sat online all night to secure a pair of limited edition \$320 Nikes to add to his collection of 20+ pairs, and another spent over \$200 for a concert ticket. Were they happy? The former was happy with his shoes, but not with the revenge of the plastic; the latter thought the concert was a waste of time and regretted blowing the bucks. If you can get your students to be honest about some of their choices as consumers, you've prepped them well to think critically about the paradoxical tension between consumption and pleasure that Easterbrook describes.

To move students toward such honest self-assessment, you might assign Reading the Signs question 1, a journal topic that asks them to reflect on their own consumer habits. For topics with a media slant, consider using question 2, which has them analyze advertising in publications intended for a high-end readership, or question 3, which invites them to take on the proposition that the media's obsession with rich celebrities stimulates what Easterbrook calls "runaway materialism." A straightforward argument topic, question 4 prompts students to support or refute Easterbrook's central assertion that affluence can result in unhappiness; question 5 is a slightly more complex variant of this topic as it sends students to Laurence Shames's "The More Factor" in Chapter One for an additional analytic perspective.

JACK SOLOMON

Masters of Desire: The Culture of American Advertising (p. 409)

This selection is particularly useful for its examination of two dominant, and conflicting, mythologies underlying American advertising: populism and elitism. You should find that students easily grasp the clear paradox that Solomon outlines; for that reason, this essay is ideal for analytic essays in which students apply this paradox to advertising that they have selected (Reading the Signs question 3 has students do just that). For an in-class exercise, have your students bring a popular magazine to class and identify the patterns they detect in the advertising; a simpler exercise would have each student bring to class one advertisement that is overtly populist or elitist. You can quickly go around the room and ask students to categorize their ad and give a brief explanation. It's interesting to see which category predominates. If your students complain that some of the ads are dated (this essay was first published in 1988), challenge them to come up with their own examples (the task required by question 1). We've noticed that these appeals are most commonly used in media that target a wide audience (not surprisingly, since such an audience is more likely to hold mainstream American values); a twist to this question would ask students to compare ads in general interest magazines and those intended for more specialized readerships. For an essay that deepens students' understanding of cultural mythologies, assign question 2, which sends students to David Brooks's "One Nation, Slightly Divisible" to explore the connections between Brooks's red/blue state dichotomy and the populist/elitist split that Solomon outlines. If you're encouraging your students to take a historical view, assign question 5, which asks them to compare advertising appeals from earlier decades with those used today. As you explain this topic to your students, encourage them to go beyond describing the differences and similarities they see to analyzing the values and mythologies that underlie the ads. A broader issue is addressed in question 4, which asks the class to brainstorm a list of status symbols and then study the nature of their appeals; this topic would make a successful essay assignment as well.

ALFRED LUBRANO

The Shock of Education: How College Corrupts (p. 420)

Your students may find the title of this selection to be, well, shocking. How can education be "shocking"? How can it "corrupt" anyone? When they read Lubrano's selection, however, most will find that they can easily relate to his tale of the "status dissonance" occasioned when a blue-collar kid goes off to the bigger, faster, cooler college world. This essay, which is based partly on personal experience and partly on Lubrano's research, relates moving tales of families and relationships torn apart by the conflicting values and personal styles found at home and at school. Lubrano's term for such students is *straddlers*, people who are on the move from one class to another and find that "home" no longer fits them very well. He first outlines his own experience as a student at Columbia University, finding the need to "self-censor." You can ask your students: what are the values that are in conflict, and how does Lubrano handle the strain? Do you think he could have had any alternative strategies to cope with familial

divide? If they think that Lubrano is making “much ado about nothing,” have them consider his characterization of the way middle-class students “are groomed for another life” in the selection’s second half. How does that experience differ from the working-class upbringing he describes, and why does that difference grant middle-class kids some advantages he doesn’t have? The conflicts extend beyond family to relationships, and students may well connect with the tale of Loretta Stec, whose relationship with her construction-worker boyfriend became increasingly strained as she went to college. Even those students from wealthier backgrounds are likely to respond to the tale of two sweethearts growing increasingly apart with the distance of miles and experiences.

That is true as well of the family strains created by a student being immersed in a different world, one with more worldly and intellectual values, than that of mom and dad. Although students from working-class backgrounds are most likely to be living the conflicts Lubrano describes, students from any background may be feeling that learning, and just being at school, is separating them from their families and old friends. We find that students love to talk about their own experiences as students and their struggles to adapt to their own educational environment. Thus Reading the Signs question 1 is a journal topic that has students reflect on any changes they perceive in their connections with family and friends. This topic can allow you to gauge their own reactions to being in college — especially helpful with first-year students. But Lubrano’s essay allows for more than personal responses. An argumentative question, number 2 asks students to support or refute the claim that learning creates a gap between parents and children; you can allow your students to use personal experience as support and also their observations of others. A textually focused essay is triggered by question 3, which calls for a synthesis of the three personal accounts that Lubrano describes. The most ambitious assignment is number 4, which has students assess Lubrano’s assumption that working-class students face divisions with their families that more advantaged students tend not to experience. We suggest that students work inductively by interviewing students from a range of classes, then synthesize their results into a coherent argument.

RICHARD CORLISS

The Gospel According to Spider-Man (p. 427)

It can always be tricky to discuss religion in class, because some students may feel the need to declare their faith, others may feel defensive about it, some may feel hostile about the whole matter. But, as long as you avoid the pro-con approach that we’ve discouraged instructors from using, you should have no difficulties discussing this selection. Richard Corliss rather neutrally outlines a recent and very interesting cultural phenomenon: the increasing tendency of religious groups, particularly evangelical Christians who once denounced mainstream popular culture, to turn to Hollywood as a tool to spread their message. You’ll appreciate the way Corliss puts current film into the broader context of cinematic history and the relatively scant appearance of religious themes — until recently, that is. Before you even assign this piece, you might have students do a brief freewrite on how *Spider-Man* might have religious meanings (they might not come up with much). Or have them rank a list of some of the films Corliss mentions in terms of their religiosity. Then you can jump-start your discussion by studying their results. Undoubtedly all will pick up on the religion behind *The*

Passion of the Christ, but *Spider-Man*? That question will reveal the extent to which the pulpit has appropriated Hollywood. But don't stop there. Push students to articulate the values underlying religion (of whatever denomination) and of popular culture. How do they traditionally stand in conflict? What is the common goal that seems to make Hollywood useful for religious organizations? What is the significance of their willingness to use Hollywood as a teaching tool?

This selection can stimulate a variety of analytic and argumentative assignments. Reading the Signs question 1 lets students support or oppose Corliss's claim that films like *Spider-Man* enable religious groups to reach young people in particular; a more complex question, number 2 asks students to explain the response, by both defenders and detractors, to *The Passion of the Christ*. Note that we're asking not for students' own opinions about the film but rather for their analysis of the public's response to it; you may want to make that distinction clear to your class. Students who feel defensive about Corliss's conclusion may want to do question 3, which allows them to adopt a pastor's perspective and to respond to Corliss. If you want students to consider what a truly religious film might be, assign question 4. For a Web-based topic, try question 5, which calls for an analysis of movieministry.com, a Web site Corliss describes.

LUCY R. LIPPARD

Alternating Currents (p. 432)

Lucy Lippard outlines in this selection one of the most basic, and enduring, contradictions in American mythologies: the split between the city and the country. The "alternating current" of her title is the push-pull that most Americans feel, at one time or another, between the high energy and drama of the city and the calming ambiance of a rural area. What we like about this selection is that Lippard goes beyond simply describing this dynamic to explain the symbolic (and semiotic) significances of each context, explaining, for instance, both the positive and negative associations attached to cities. (Note that Lippard focuses more on cities and that her comments on the country are briefer and more implicit.) Before your students read this selection, ask them to brainstorm associations they have with the country and the city, then have them compare their results with the attributes Lippard describes. They may be interested in seeing how many of their prior attitudes are included in her discussion — and in recognizing that their own beliefs can fit into a full intellectual context. And encourage your students to relate their own experiences in different environments to Lippard's points. If your students are attending an urban college away from home, for instance, ask them to relate their experiences moving to school to Lippard's comments about the ways cities affect newcomers. If you're emphasizing gender issues, the Lippard article can be useful as well because she makes some debatable claims about what the city can represent to women (Reading the Signs question 5 asks students to evaluate the validity of Lippard's gender-related claims). Question 1 is a journal topic that asks students to reflect on whether they have felt the alternating current that Lippard describes. Because some students may have lived in the same place all their lives, or because some may not be independent enough to see themselves as having options for where to live, you might encourage them to view this prompt broadly: Do they long for a camping vacation in the summer? How does a week-long wilderness hike make them feel? For a topic that has students consider the relationship among two sets of contradictions, assign question 3, which sends them to David Brooks's selection to

analyze blue and red Americans' environmental preferences. Lippard's focus on the binary poles of country and city largely excludes an environment that may in fact be more typical of where Americans live — the suburbs; thus, question 3 invites students to analyze the suburb's mythological significance. For focused questions that require students to handle specific evidence, consider assigning question 4, which invites them to conduct a survey on why urbanites are “lured” by their environment.

MARIAH BURTON NELSON

I Won. I'm Sorry. (p. 439)

At first, an essay on gender may not seem to fit this chapter, for while many different attitudes toward the subject exist, they don't obviously coexist in the way that, say, the nation seems divided between red and blue states. But as Nelson makes clear in this selection, the codes governing our gender roles can exert many contradictory pressures, often in unexpected ways. In particular, she focuses on the dual roles that female athletes must play: on the one hand, they need to be tough and aggressive in order to succeed in their sport, but on the other hand they are expected to be feminine and submissive, especially around male athletes. And, as she points out, it's not easy to be simultaneously passive and aggressive, charming and ruthless. Your students will have no trouble with Nelson's accessible and clear writing, but be prepared for some defensiveness from males and females alike when it comes to her questioning of the beauty demands made on women athletes, because Nelson strikes at the very heart of the conflicting gender codes that govern the world of sport. Your students may prefer women athletes who, despite defying convention by entering what is traditionally regarded as a man's world, still abide by the old gender rules by muting their competitive drives and, so to speak, putting on high heels. So expect some comments to the effect of “What's wrong with a female athlete's desire to look pretty?” You can remind students that, in a semiotic analysis, your goal is not to judge right and wrong but, rather, to investigate the ideologies and assumptions underlying cultural practices. You should draw your students' attention to the photo of Serena Williams on p. 441; here Williams appears physically powerful but also undeniably glamorous. (And you might remind them that Williams wore a silver, pearl-studded tiara throughout the 2002 Wimbledon match.) And you can extend the discussion to men: Are there arenas in which they face parallel contradictory gender codes?

Reading the Signs questions 1, 3, and 5 are all useful assignments if your students object to Nelson's contentions about the dual gender codes that affect female athletes. By asking them to observe some women athletes in action (question 1), to analyze a women's sports magazine (question 3), or to interview women athletes on their campus about the gender pressures they face (question 4), you will be guiding them not only to a sound basis for assessing Nelson's argument but also helping them to appreciate the value of empirical evidence. Question 2 suggests a personal and reflective exercise, which may be especially valued by female athletes who themselves face the conflicting demands that Nelson describes.

RANDALL KENNEDY***Blind Spot (p. 446)***

That most vexed of controversies, racial profiling, stems from a whole slew of contradictory American beliefs, from the desire to protect the public good to the freedom of privacy and individual freedom. We particularly like Kennedy's treatment of this issue because he avoids the usual simplistic debate over whether the practice is necessary or harmful. Instead, he raises complex questions about the place of stereotyping in our culture and traces the contradictions inherent in the positions of both supporters and opponents. You'll want to make sure these contradictions are clear to your students. Supporters of racial profiling claim the need to protect the public welfare supersedes the (to them, minor) infringement of individual rights, yet, Kennedy points out, the same people often oppose affirmative action as devaluing the achievement of individuals in favor of a broader social agenda. Opponents of profiling see it as discrimination and argue that race should not be used at all by law enforcement, yet they often support the use of race as a criterion in hiring or school admissions. We suggest that you steer your discussion away from which side is "right," for that question is moot as Kennedy presents the matter. And your students should take care to note the *range* of practices to which this term applies. As Kennedy suggests, a cop who stops a black motorist is not doing the same thing as a flight attendant who confronted a Richard Reed when smoke was emerging from his sneaker. In discussing this essay, you might raise some broad issues about the tensions between individual and community rights: when does the one supersede the other (that thorny dilemma is the focus of a challenging question, see Reading the Signs question 3)? In addition, you might encourage students to consider the act of stereotyping itself. When does a valid recognition of a pattern of behavior shade into invalid generalization? Can there be a difference between "positive" profiling (as supporters of affirmative action would believe) and "negative" profiling and how can we tell the difference? Does it matter who is doing the profiling (consider in this regard the habit of claiming as described in Nell Bernstein's "Goin' Gangsta, Choosin' Cholita" in Chapter Seven). And to what extent does any form of profiling — by law enforcement, by employers, by school admissions officers — presume pure ethnic identities and ignore the multitude of bi- and multiethnic people in this country?

Don't be surprised if some of your students have their own tale about being subject to racial profiling; Reading the Signs question 2 invites students to write a journal entry on such an experience or any incident in which they felt singled out because of a physical characteristic. For an analytic assignment, try question 1, which has students take on the central contradiction that Kennedy finds in the racial profiling debate, or question 4, which prompts them to consider the implications of racial profiling given that ethnic identity in America is so often mixed.

WE'VE COME A LONG WAY, MAYBE

Gender Codes in American Culture

If you want your course to focus on one far-ranging theme, you'd do well to select gender as your topic. Not only can students easily see how it shapes their everyday lives, but it affects every area of popular culture. Each chapter in this text has at least one selection that, at least in part, treats gender, so you should have no difficulty identifying a sufficient number of readings to cover a term (see p. 10 of this manual for suggested additional readings from *Signs of Life* for a gender-themed course). We have quite deliberately constructed this chapter to show students that gender is a topic for both women and men, that gender should not be confined to women's studies courses. Occasionally male students quietly — and sometimes not so quietly — tune out when gender becomes a focus in their courses, assuming, as Deborah Tannen points out in her essay, that they are not “marked” by gender as are their female peers. We wish to counter that assumption, for we believe males and females, heterosexuals and homosexuals, are equally subject to our culture's gender norms and mythologies, though the effects can differ radically for each group and for each individual. Accordingly, we treat gender issues broadly in this chapter, addressing both men and women in the chapter's introduction and including readings that explore the signs of both genders.

Assumptions about gender can be deeply rooted, so don't be surprised if your students react strongly to the topic. We've found that students usually enjoy discussing gender issues, but, for some, just raising them seems to cast doubt on what's “normal.” The Exploring the Signs of Gender topic thus is designed to allow students to explore their own assumptions about gender and how these assumptions were shaped. We've found it's most effective to structure class discussion to stimulate lively but controlled conversation about these issues. You can alternate between arranging students in same- and mixed-sex groups, for instance, to take advantage of gender dynamics. You might want to do that with the Discussing the Signs of Gender question, which asks students in small groups to study the gender roles depicted in popular magazines. If you have an ethnically diverse group, asking students to contribute perspectives that differ from traditional American gender norms can help show how they are culturally, not biologically, constructed. No matter what your students' backgrounds, we urge you to assume that all students are gender-marked, even if our culture assumes otherwise. We've deliberately made the Reading Gender on the Net exercise broad, inviting them to explore how the Net defines gender issues. If you assign your students this topic, encourage them to read their findings as a sign of what our culture identifies as “male” and “female” concerns.

Aaron Devor's selection is essential for its theoretical argument that gender is socially constituted. It provides a framework for understanding the other selections in the chapter, as well as many selections throughout the text. While one of the text's more difficult selections, it's extremely useful pedagogically. We include Kevin Jennings's memoir about growing up gay and coming to terms with his sexual orientation next, largely to counter the equation between gender and heterosexuality. That message is complemented by the next selection, Sean Cahill's argument supporting the rights of gay partners to wed and receive the legal and financial benefits that married couples enjoy. Another counterpoint is next offered by Deborah Blum, who contrasts with Devor in outlining the ways that biology affects gender roles and behavior.

Blum's piece, which talks about childhood development, can be paired with Ilana Fried's selection, which considers the debate over women's abilities in the sciences. Next Naomi Wolf, Joan Morgan, Deborah Tannen, and James William Gibson address particular signs of gender identity: Wolf focuses on the pressure women face to be extravagantly slender; Morgan laments the way hip-hop culture reduces women to sexual objects; Tannen argues that women are always "marked" in our society; and Gibson surveys popular culture to explain why the warrior has become a model for male identity. The chapter concludes with two readings that address gender and sports: Michael Messner's selection on the effect that sports can have on a man's identity, and Henry Jenkins's exploration of that male-directed melodrama, professional wrestling.

AARON DEVOR

Gender Role Behaviors and Attitudes (p. 458)

We highly recommend that you include Aaron Devor's essay in your syllabus, because its overview of gender roles and the signs used to communicate them provides a basic critical framework for the chapter's remaining selections. But we warn you that Devor's writing style is somewhat academic and dense, and your students may find it tough going. We suggest that you use the essay as an occasion for discussing critical reading strategies and techniques for comprehending academic writing. You might ask your students to annotate the essay as they read it, and then, in small groups, to review their annotations — and their sense of what Devor's major points are. Or ask them to prepare review questions. At the beginning of class, have students write their questions on the board; you can quickly see which parts of the essay may have been confusing and warrant in-depth discussion.

Despite the difficulty, Devor's essay is well worth the effort. Not only does he chart the traditional cues of "masculinity" and "femininity," but he makes clear how they are cultural constructs, not biological necessities. You'll want to make sure students understand that, when talking about these cues, Devor is describing social norms, not his recommendations for how people should act (students might complain, for instance, that he wants women to be passive — quite the contrary). His emphasis on social construction thus makes the essay a must-read if you're using a semiotic approach. Students tend not to dispute his general claims about the socially constructed nature of gender, but they do occasionally have trouble with two of his premises. First, they may resist the notion that signs of masculinity carry with them a position of social power and dominance — in other words, that gender norms can have some inequitable consequences. You might address this issue by discussing specific, concrete examples; the Deborah Tannen selection could help in this regard. Secondly, Devor suggests the possibility of mixing gender norms (the selection is excerpted from his book *Gender Blending*), and this may make some students uncomfortable. If you're game, you could broaden the terms of discussion to include the assumption that heterosexuality is the only morally acceptable sexual preference in America — but be prepared to hear some strongly entrenched beliefs on this matter.

Because Devor provides a broad theoretical framework for viewing gender, this selection is ideal for applying to specific evidence. Consider doing the first Reading the Signs question in class before discussing the essay; that way you'll be able to refer back to students' presumptions about gender later. The question asks students to brain-

storm gender traits in small groups and then to write their lists on the board. If students form same-sex groups, we can guarantee a lively discussion! Even students challenged by Devor's essay should be able to respond to the remaining questions. Question 2 allows students to assume the role of sociologist by asking them to use their friends' behavior as evidence they can analyze in terms of gender norms. Question 3 picks up on Devor's comments about body language and sends students to popular magazines to examine the gender-related postures of models (we've found that men in particular are allowed a limited range of postures in ads, with the limitations being greatest in men's magazines such as *GQ*). Finally, question 4 asks students to address the genuinely debatable issue of whether fashion continues to restrict the female body more than the male body.

KEVIN JENNINGS

American Dreams (p. 464)

Kevin Jennings's selection is one of our favorites, and not simply for its clear writing, mild sense of humor, and engaging individual voice. In this personal narrative, Jennings describes how he came to terms with being gay while growing up, combating not only normative gender roles but also his own sense of insecurity. In the process, Jennings creates a whole cultural context for understanding why gays and lesbians are so often seen as the "other" in our society; indeed, as he describes his growing desires during adolescence to join the mainstream, to capture the traditional American dream, what emerges are multiple layers of "otherness." First Jennings became aware of geographical otherness and attempted to erase the signs that he was a southerner. What's interesting here is that he became an active participant in maintaining the distinction between mainstream and other. What's even more interesting is that Jennings repeats this pattern, for a time, with his sexual orientation. That is, at first he tried to deny his homosexuality to himself and this effort continued even when Jennings got to college. Note that when Jennings says that by accepting his identity as a gay man he has "done the most American thing of all," he is assuming a different definition of the American dream than the one he was using in the beginning of the selection. Be sure to ask your students how the dream changes for Jennings throughout his process of self-discovery. And encourage them to study the photo of the gay rights rally on page 465. We deliberately include an image of gay senior citizens to counter the more common stereotype, so often projected in media today, of gays as hip and always young.

Although some students may feel that Jennings is a tad sentimental, expect that most students will respond positively to this very open, honest piece. Given the personal nature of this selection, students may enjoy responding to Reading the Signs question 1, a journal topic that has them reflect on the pressures of normative gender roles that they may have felt during their teens. Because both Jennings and Melissa Algranati (Chapter Seven) are young people who narrate their experiences growing up and struggling with their identity, question 4 poses a straightforward comparison-and-contrast assignment based on their selections. For a challenging argumentative topic, try question 2, which addresses the tendency of some minority groups to erase their identity, or question 3, which focuses on popular media's role in perpetuating a heterosexual norm. For this latter topic, Marisa Connolly's essay on *Will and Grace* in Chapter Three is an ideal companion reading.

SEAN CAHILL

The Case for Marriage Equality (p. 469)

If you want to throw around a political hot potato in class, this reading is for you. Cahill presents (to our minds) a very reasonable, persuasive case for granting gays the right to marry and the accompanying legal benefits, including survivor's rights. His focus on the surviving partners of a deceased police officer and of a victim of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center are particularly effective, and most readers, even conservative ones, are likely to find their tales poignant, if not persuasive. But even more so than with the Kevin Jennings selection, this reading may bring to the surface some deep-seated feelings about homosexuality and what counts as "normal." Depending on their family background and religious persuasion, some students may have moral objections not simply to gay marriage but to homosexuality; by the same token, some students may be gay themselves. To prevent students from lobbing this hot potato as a weapon, then, you'll want to establish a tone of polite respect for other points of view. You might find it helpful to discuss first the introduction to this chapter or Aaron Devor's selection, so that students will have already considered how something so seemingly "natural" as gender can be socially constructed. Then you will be well prepared to discuss the gay marriage issue.

While Cahill's topic is potentially volatile, students should have no trouble understanding his selection, which invites a variety of assignment types. Perhaps our favorite question is Reading the Signs number 1, which has the class brainstorm different family structures, then asks students to write their own definition of family. Students are likely to start with the nuclear family, but encourage them to broaden their thinking. If you have students from non-Western cultures, they might be able to contribute their own observations and experiences. Other assignments call for argumentative responses to the issues Cahill raises; questions 2, 3, and 4 all invite students to support, refute, or modify various propositions related to gay marriage. For a broader topic, assign question 5, which calls for research into the current status of attempts to legalize same-sex marriage; this research should constitute support for an argument about this much-debated topic.

DEBORAH BLUM

The Gender Blur: Where Does Biology End and Society Take Over? (p. 475)

As a clear explication of biology's influence on gender behaviors, Deborah Blum's piece serves as a direct response to Aaron Devor's claim that gender is a social construct. As Blum herself points out, her argument is not exactly politically correct (readers familiar with the work of writers such as Emily Martin will bristle at her acceptance of the term *default sex* in reference to females). But don't expect her viewpoint to be reactionary: We like her essay precisely because it avoids the simplistic either-or thinking that often dominates the culture vs. nature debate on gender matters. Indeed, Blum acknowledges that many of our gender codes are cultural constructs; what she argues, however, is that evidence suggests that biology has far more influence on gender behaviors than most humanists want to admit. To academics accustomed to social

construction theories, that might seem like an untenable position, but another reason we like this piece is her careful approach to argumentation. In a nice Rogerian style, she begins with a personal anecdote that validates her readers' likely assumptions that gender is only a social construct (this piece originally appeared in the *Utne Reader*) and then explains how her thinking about gender evolved to include biological influence. Ask your students to chart the many ways in which she anticipates her readership's probable responses to her claims. Even though Blum occasionally talks about XX and XY chromosomes and Leydig cell hypoplasia, she is a Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer who knows how to make technical information accessible to the nonspecialist reader. You can use her piece as a model of clarity and specificity.

Particularly if you pair this selection with the Aaron Devor essay, your students should be well equipped to write argumentative essays. The natural question to accompany this pairing is Reading the Signs question 2, which invites students to respond to Blum's challenge to the social construction view of gender. Because Blum talks a good deal about her own observations as a mother, it's likely your students will want to discuss child-rearing strategies; an imaginative topic, question 3 prompts students to suggest appropriate ways to raise boys given the biological evidence that Blum sets forth. To extend Blum's argument, question 4 invites students to research the current findings on the genetic basis of sexual orientation (recent studies have found that homosexuality may have some genetic influence). To allow students to respond personally to Blum's often personal essay, assign question 1, a journal entry on how one's upbringing affects one's understanding of gender norms. We encourage you to study in class the photo of the doll fashion show on page 480. Notice that the show's visitors include girls and their mom and grandma. Ask your students: What does this photograph suggest about the origins of gendered behavior? What is the photographer trying to suggest about gender roles in modern American society?

ILANA FRIED

Don't Let Social Notions Curb Ability (p. 482)

Students will respond easily to Ilana Fried's op-ed piece about the controversy over women's scientific abilities that was occasioned by remarks made by Harvard University President Lawrence Summers. Fried is engagingly honest in reflecting on her (and her female friends') tendency to avoid science classes in their formative years, and students are likely to recount their own experiences with science, both positive and negative. That can make for a great conversation, but make sure your students go beyond sharing anecdotes and tackle some of very thorny implications of this controversy. What if, as Fried suggests may be the case, some biological differences between men and women that affect scientific study do exist? How should educators respond to such differences? And what about the very real socialization process girls (and boys) experience in school: Can that have as much, if not more, influence on attitudes than biological factors? In discussing such questions, you can turn to Fried's essay as an instance of diplomatic argumentation, as she takes care not to engage in name-calling (as many commentators did after Summers made his remarks) and attempts to see the shades of gray in this anything-but-black-and-white topic.

A natural journal topic, Reading the Signs question 1 invites students, both male and female, to reflect on their own experiences with scientific study — an exercise

that can motivate students to discuss Fried's essay in class. As we prepare this manual, the debate over Summers's statements continues. Question 2 has students research the ongoing responses to Summers and to assess their validity. For a topic that requires some field work, try question 3, which has students study the gender patterns among their college's science faculty and interview some female professors about their experiences studying science. (Note that it might be logistically simpler to interview female science majors.) As Fried explains, Summers's comments were both lambasted and defended; question 4 has students research his original comments and propose their own assessment of them. For an analytic topic, assign question 5, which has students adopt the viewpoint of either Deborah Blum, who weighs in on the side of biological influence, or Aaron Devor, who believes in social construction, and to write a response to Fried's selection. In both cases, students should have a complex response, thanks to Fried's avoidance of an either-or position.

NAOMI WOLF

The Beauty Myth (p. 486)

In this selection, Naomi Wolf describes a fundamental component of our culture's gender mythology: the presumption that women should be judged and valued according to their physical attractiveness. Wolf's presentation of this myth is particularly useful in that she distinguishes between biological and cultural imperatives, recognizes the historical fluctuations in this myth, and locates it in the context of power relations. That sounds like heady stuff, but her writing style is clear and direct and students should have little trouble understanding her points. As you discuss this essay, be aware that you may have some students who have struggled painfully with their own physical appearance. They may have been tormented by years of failed dieting, they may have sought a plastic surgeon's solution to a perceived facial defect, or they may be plagued by eating disorders. While you want to establish a spirit of openness in class discussion, let students know that that openness does not obligate them to engage in confession. If they wish to respond personally to Wolf's essay (and it can trigger that sort of response), Reading the Signs question 1 invites them to do so in their journal (and we recommend that you keep this a private journal entry). One way to address these issues neutrally would be to study the beauty-parlor photo on page 490. What are the images on the wall, and why are they there? Why does the photographer pose an older woman as a customer?

We especially like assignments that ask students to apply Wolf's notion of the beauty myth to specific cases. Question 2, which directs them to a local art museum to analyze the representation of women's bodies, could be either an individual or a group project. We've made question 3, which asks students to study a woman's fashion magazine in light of Wolf's argument, a class exercise, but it could make an at-home essay assignment as well. If you prefer an argumentative topic, question 4 invites students to take on one of Wolf's major assertions. And to extend Wolf's thesis, try question 5, which asks students to debate whether men are trapped by standards of physical attractiveness as women are. For this topic, several other selections in the text, including the Warren St. John (Chapter Two), Mariah Burton Nelson (Chapter Five), and James William Gibson (this chapter), could help students generate ideas and arguments.

JOAN MORGAN

Sex, Lies, and Videos (p. 496)

Morgan's selection is less about hip-hop music per se than the tendency of this musical genre — in both songs and videos — not only to show women as sexual objects but to be outright degrading and offensive, especially to black women. Expect students to respond strongly to her selection, as some will want to defend hip-hop artists' "freedom of expression" while others will decry their practices. You can turn their responses toward an interesting discussion of the power of the popular media to shape cultural assumptions and beliefs. Morgan is particularly effective, for instance, in discussing the damaging effect of misogynistic images on young girls. If your students defend these images (or the artists who create them), do they think that it's OK that the five-year-old girl whom Morgan describes already can perform sexual dances? Or that a twelve-year-old is obsessed because she doesn't look like the women in the videos? And don't skirt the racial angle here, as Morgan charges that, while women of all races are depicted sexually, the depiction of black women is the most extreme. How can students justify such a pattern? Morgan issues a challenge to her readers to protest the airing of the worst of such videos, much like the challenge Gloria Steinem makes to her readers in "Sex, Lies, and Advertising" (the similarity of the two selections' titles may or may not be accidental). In what ways could such a protest be made effective?

This selection is ideal for essays that focus either on the portrayal of women in the media or on hip-hop music itself. Reading the Signs question 1 has students interview female hip-hop fans to assess Morgan's claim that many young women are troubled by these videos, and question 2 invites students to watch some videos and analyze whether they follow the patterns Morgan describes. A similar question, number 3 broadens the scope and asks students to analyze the portrayal of women in other media; the Andre Mayer piece in Chapter Three can help pave the way to a good discussion. Not all hip-hop artists portray women negatively, of course, and one might assume that female artists tend to do so less often than males. Question 4 thus has students explore whether female rappers echo their male counterparts' representation of women; the Gwendolyn Pough reading in Chapter 3 can provide useful background. Focusing on music only, question 5 has students take on Morgan's claim that hip-hop has gone mainstream.

DEBORAH TANNEN

There Is No Unmarked Woman (p. 499)

This selection proved to be one of the most often used in the first four editions of *Signs of Life*, and we can understand why. In a clear, direct writing style, Tannen looks at non-linguistic ways in which women are marked in our culture — a topic well-suited to lots of lively classroom activities. You could have same-sex groups brainstorm ways in which both genders are marked among, say, students at your school; then you could ask the groups to write their lists on the board. How do the lists compare by gender? Are the lists themselves marked? Because this selection is extremely accessible, students should have no trouble recognizing the specifics of her argument. You may, however, want to spend a little time on her notion of being "marked." Some students

may want to complicate her claim that men are normative (Tannen does tend to generalize broadly about males). You could, for instance, ask students to brainstorm ways in which men, too, can be marked — and then talk about how a marked status differs for men and women (see Reading the Signs question 1). This selection is particularly good for analytic assignments that ask students to apply Tannen’s notion of marking to evidence they collect themselves (see questions 2 and 3). The final question allows students to use their imaginations in defining what an unmarked appearance for women would be like. We highly recommend that you ask your students to share their proposals with the class!

JAMES WILLIAM GIBSON

Warrior Dreams (p. 504)

At first James William Gibson’s selection may seem only tangentially related to gender, for he opens with a “war” scene filled with “Communist battalions” assaulting victorious “Americans.” But bear with Gibson. You’ll quickly see that he’s describing not a Vietnam War battle but a fantasy skirmish staged at a *Soldier of Fortune* convention, and you’ll see that zeal for this sort of event reflects an increasingly influential model for male gender roles that Gibson dubs “warrior dreams.” Gibson’s writing is clear and lively, and his method for explaining warrior dreams is perfect for a class emphasizing semiotics and cultural analysis. He takes his reader through a wide range of popular culture, from movies to paintball to warrior magazines like *Gung-Ho*, demonstrating a pattern of paramilitary culture that, he claims, became the “ideal identity for *all* men.” Expect that some students who enjoy the sort of entertainment Gibson describes may object to his not-entirely-positive depiction of paramilitary culture; be sure they understand that your use of this essay is to study a cultural system and mythology and not to pass judgment on their personal lives. Alternatively, some students may not have been exposed directly to paramilitary chic, and they might believe that Gibson’s talking about a fringe element that has little to do with mainstream society. If you find that’s the case, a discussion of 1999’s shootings at Columbine High School might help them to see the ongoing pervasiveness of what Gibson describes. Students interested in this may enjoy responding to Reading the Signs question 2, which invites them to explore the real-world implications of warrior dreams. In addition, Gibson’s selection lends itself to argumentative and analytic topics. Question 1 sends students to Michael A. Messner’s selection in this chapter to compare sports ideology with warrior dreams (students should find plenty of parallels), while question 3 prompts students to use Gibson’s argument as a framework for interpreting the attractions of professional wrestling. The broadest question, number 4, asks the class to brainstorm current media entertainment aimed at a male audience and then to discuss the prevalence of warrior dreams in pop culture today. Expect your class to compile a long list — one that both you and your students may find sobering.

MICHAEL A. MESSNER

Power at Play: Sport and Gender Relations (p. 513)

Be prepared for strong responses to this selection, especially if you have many athletes in class or if your school's sports teams have a devoted following. Messner presents a trenchant analysis of the gender roles that dominate the sports world, finding an ideology of power and dominance to control the identities of the men who participate in sports. He believes that this pattern is damaging to men and serves to perpetuate social and institutional gender inequities. Although we buy Messner's argument, many students won't and may feel that their (or their friends') values are under attack. If that's the case, point out to your students (athlete and nonathlete alike) that Messner is as much concerned about the price athletes pay as he is about describing the dominant ideologies in the sports world. Students may not have thought much about the connection between sports and gender roles; Reading the Signs question 1, which asks them to explore this connection in their journals, can be a good place to start (and may help allay a defensive response). Whether your students agree or disagree with Messner, we've found that this selection can virtually guarantee a lively discussion among your students.

If your students are troubled by Messner's thesis, encourage them to develop counterarguments (Reading the Signs question 5 asks students to stage an in-class debate on his central point). To prepare for their debate, students might interview athletes, nonathletes, and coaches. Although Messner focuses primarily on male athletes, he does mention the place of female athletes in the world of sports; students may prefer to write an argument on this issue (see question 2 and question 3, which additionally raises the issue of ethnic patterns in professional sports). For a text-based assignment, ask your students to respond to question 4, which directs them to analyze the gender roles in a magazine such as *Sports Illustrated*. A reminder: *SI's* swimsuit issue comes out each February!

HENRY JENKINS

"Never Trust a Snake": WWF Wrestling as Masculine Melodrama (p. 524)

We think your students will love Jenkins's uncondescending yet thoroughly academic analysis of the social significance of the World Wrestling Federation. A topic for semiotic analysis ever since Roland Barthes first tackled it in *Mythologies* (1957), professional wrestling appeals to a paradoxically wide range of fans, from the high-brow crowd who regard it as high-camp hilarity to the working-class men who take it more seriously. It is that latter audience that Jenkins is concerned with, and his sympathetic analysis of the compensatory spectacles that professional wrestling provides for working-class men in a postindustrial, postfeminist era can be usefully paired with James William Gibson's related analysis in "Warrior Dreams." Although it's a rather long reading assignment, you might want to assign the Gibson piece alongside Jenkins's to show just how serious the semiotics of the apparently goofy world of the WWF can be.

For a basic exercise in semiotic interpretation, you can assign Reading the Signs question 1, which asks your students to decode some actual WWF contests (make sure

your students realize that these are not real competitions but are entirely scripted theatrical productions). Question 2 presents a critical thinking and writing assignment that relates Jenkins's analysis to the larger themes concerning the role of sport in the construction of gender identities. Questions 4 and 5 offer assignments that call for an analysis of class-based tastes (question 4) and of the way that fandom constructs a sense of group solidarity (question 5). For a more reflective assignment, question 3 provides an opportunity for any serious WWF fans in your class, who may feel embarrassed about speaking up in class, to express in their journals what professional wrestling means to them.

CONSTRUCTING RACE

Readings in Multicultural Semiotics

We consider this chapter crucial to any writing course with a cultural studies bent, largely because race and ethnicity have become such influential and, sometimes, divisive forces shaping popular culture, politics, education, and even one's personal identity. Race has always been important, of course, but many recent factors — for instance, successes in the civil rights movement, a political and legal backlash against those successes, increased immigration from non-European nations, and increased opposition to such immigration — have heightened Americans' sensitivity to race and racial conflict. Discussing multicultural issues in class can be tricky, especially if your campus has experienced racial tensions or if your students come from ethnic backgrounds that historically have been odds with each other. The potential for in-class conflict is not a reason to avoid the issue; in fact, it's probably the most compelling reason to address it. Students' ability to succeed in school may depend, in part, on their ability to handle those kinds of conflicts, and their writing class may be the only structured environment in which they can explore them.

You'll find that semiotic analysis is an optimal way to handle class discussion of race because, rather than focusing on private passions about the topic, it addresses the way race serves as a sign for the culture at large. This is not to say that students will feel divorced from discussion of race — indeed, in the introduction to this chapter, we deliberately ask “Who are you?” to suggest the potency of race in shaping one's personal identity, and we make that question the focus of the Exploring the Signs of Race journal topic. But even when working on a personal level, a semiotic approach links the individual's views with that of the system, the larger society. The emphasis, in other words, is on the cultural mythologies about race that shape our values and our worldviews.

That's not to say that those mythologies may not be changing. Indeed, the United States has passed through many phases in its racial history and, in the twenty-first century, it will pass through more. Accordingly, to encourage students to look into the future, the Discussing the Signs of Race question asks them to consider the implications of an America where there is no majority race (a near-term prediction made by demographers). Since the Discussing the Signs of Race topic is future-oriented, we opted to focus on the present in the Reading Race on the Net exercise. This topic asks students to visit Web sites devoted to the culture of a particular ethnicity and to analyze the breadth of information available. You might want your students to share their findings in class, so they can assemble a composite description of Internet sources on ethnicities.

We feel reluctant to suggest cuts in this chapter, because the selections poignantly speak to the force race exerts both on our personal lives and on the American psyche. The essays do approach the issues from different perspectives, however, and you could choose selections according to those differences. Michael Omi's essay is the lead selection because he provides a broad theoretical overview of racial attitudes and explores how those attitudes are manifested in popular culture. If you've already discussed the media, Omi will provide you with a perfect transition to a unit on race. A media focus continues in the next three selections: Leon E. Wynter on African Americans' increasing role in advertising, Benjamin DeMott on the representation of blacks and whites, and Paul C. Taylor on ethnic crossovers. Angeline F. Price next addresses a group often

neglected in academic study, the often maligned white trash. Jack Lopez follows with a memoir about his youth, when he enjoyed the best of two ethnic worlds; in contrast, Nell Bernstein, bell hooks, and Melissa Algranati address conflicts experienced by individuals who don't comfortably "fit in" ethnically. Bernstein describes teens who "wear" a new racial identity, as if they were trying on a new pair of jeans; hooks writes a personal reflection that captures the affection a young black girl feels for a doll that is ethnically the same as she; and Melissa Algranati addresses the often-overlooked dilemmas faced by mixed-race individuals. Language and culture are the focus of the chapter's last selection, in which Fan Shen describes the usually unspoken, socially constituted assumptions governing conventions of writing and scholarship in American universities. Addressing the cross-cultural conflicts he experienced as a Chinese student of freshman composition, Shen's essay is perfect for a writing class.

MICHAEL OMI

In Living Color: Race and American Culture (p. 549)

We've kept Omi's essay through four editions both for its clear exposition of the prevailing racial beliefs in America and for its focus on how those beliefs are manifested in popular culture. Thus, it is one of the more important selections in *Signs of Life*: it provides a critical framework for analyzing racial issues in selections found throughout the text. Students should find Omi challenging but accessible. Omi does not use the word *semiotics*, but essentially he provides a semiotic reading of race and racial images. His underlying assumption is that cultural myths about race are socially constructed but are seen as natural categories. Race and racism are, of course, sensitive issues, but it's particularly useful to begin class discussion of them with Omi because he focuses on the *process* whereby ideas about race are created, rather than evaluating individuals who believe the ideas. In class, be sure to discuss the central concepts he advances for talking about race: overt and inferential racism, unexamined racial beliefs, the ideology of difference or otherness, situation context, and invisibility. While Omi defines and explains these concepts, the terms may be foreign to students.

The essay lends itself to assignments extending and complicating Omi's analysis of the racial images that prevail in American popular culture. We highly recommend Reading the Signs question 1, which asks the class to brainstorm common racial stereotypes and then to discuss how these stereotypes are perpetuated in popular culture. If students have difficulty doing the second task, you might organize their discussion by medium (for example, advertising, movies, and so forth) so that they can more easily focus on particular examples. You can use this discussion to speculate on the media's power to shape our understanding of the world. What difference does it make, for instance, if movies consistently depict gang members as black? What's wrong if advertising presents Asian students as hard-working and industrious? Don't be surprised if someone responds, "But isn't that true?" Such a question, of course, corroborates Omi's claims; we suggest that you invite other members of the class to respond. The remaining topics allow students to examine racial imagery and assumptions in various aspects of popular culture. Question 2 has them explore how films such as *Malcolm X* or *Mi Familia* may affect American attitudes toward racial identity. Students can have some fun responding to question 3, which asks them to analyze ethnicity in a magazine targeted to a specific ethnic readership. We suggest that you have students work in teams so they can share their insights, or ask students to present their

findings to the class. The last question, number 4, has students test one of Omi's major claims on a film or TV show of their own choosing. For this one, the class might brainstorm examples that would be good candidates for analysis and then choose a limited list that students can watch (so you can specify broadcast dates and won't need to view two dozen programs).

LEON E. WYNTER

Marketing in Color (p. 561)

We think you should be able to discuss this selection without spending an inordinate amount of time (or, we hope, any time) chatting about Michael Jackson's child molestation trial. If your students are tempted in that direction, steer them toward Wynter's goal in discussing Jackson. He sees the pop star, particularly with the release of *Thriller*, as shifting the way pop entertainment is color-coded, from being primarily white to increasingly being nonwhite (this position is echoed in this chapter's introduction). And this has happened not simply in music but, as Wynter concludes, in marketing and advertising as well. Try to encourage your students to consider the reasons for this shift. Does it signal a fundamental change in American attitudes toward race? Or does it reveal the capitalist willingness to shed long-standing prejudices if there is a buck to be made?

Your students won't have trouble understanding this point, but the selection stops short of detailing current instances of this phenomenon; that's where class projects and assignments can enter the picture. Reading the Signs question 1 has the class brainstorm current pop icons and then evaluate their influence on the consumer marketplace. A similar question is number 2, which invites students to test one of Wynter's assertions about the power of nonwhites in shaping brand identity; students should base their conclusions on an analysis of specific brands and their marketing campaigns. For broader, more challenging essay topics, try question 4, which has students propose their own definition of pop, or question number 6, which asks them to conduct some research to verify or challenge Wynter's claims about R&B, soul, and other nonwhite musical genres in the 1960s and 1970s. Also a challenging question, number 5 has students assume Wynter's perspective and respond to the Michael Omi selection in this chapter. We should note that, while clear, the essay's style is occasionally overwritten, so question 3 invites the class to discuss the style and tone of the selection.

BENJAMIN DEMOTT

Put on a Happy Face: Masking the Differences between Blacks and Whites (p. 567)

Don't be surprised if DeMott troubles some of your students, for he presents a controversial argument. DeMott deromanticizes Hollywood's tendency to depict friendly race relations, arguing that such fantasy works to perpetuate racial injustice, not to erase it. Students may wonder, "What wrong with showing cordial race relations? Isn't

that better than always depicting conflict?” It’s important for students to realize that DeMott laments racial conflict as much as he opposes false images — it’s just that he sees the false images as having serious social consequences. Such questions may well lead to a discussion of the effect of film, and the media more generally, on social consciousness. If that happens, you might refer students to Michael Omi’s selection in this chapter. Students troubled by the implications of DeMott’s position may enjoy responding to Reading the Signs question 3, which invites them to reflect in their journals on the impact of cinematic fantasy, or to question 5, which asks them to describe how they would depict race relations in film (a question that is indeed challenging).

Whether or not your students buy DeMott’s thesis, they will be able to write several different sorts of assignments in response to it. For a straightforward analysis assignment, try question 1, which asks students to analyze the race relations in one of the films DeMott mentions (or they can focus on a more recent film, such as *Hitch*). The issues this selection raises can be applied to ethnicities and media other than those addressed by DeMott. We’ve made question 2, which extends DeMott’s concerns to other ethnic groups, a discussion topic, but it would be a workable essay assignment as well. Question 4 shifts to catalogues and advertising (you might assign Anne Norton’s “The Signs of Shopping” in Chapter One to help students respond to this question).

PAUL C. TAYLOR

Funky White Boys and Honorary Soul Sisters (p. 578)

Don’t let Taylor’s hip title fool you: This selection is a challenging, at times philosophical reflection on racial identity and essentialism, ethnic “ownership” of cultural practices, and the tension between authentic and appropriated cultural products. This sounds like heady stuff, but with some help your students should be able to grasp Taylor’s ideas about ethnic crossovers in popular culture. You might ask your students to prepare a list of Taylor’s most important terms — for instance, cultural nationalism, metaphysical (or essentialist) nationalism, racial obligation, the Elvis effect — with definitions in students’ own words. In small groups, students could compare their lists and select the most accurate definitions for class discussion; alternatively, you could collect the lists to determine students’ comprehension levels. You could next focus on Taylor’s personal narrative frame, his creation as a youth of The Funky White Boys Club, which is the most accessible part of the selection. Ask your students why Taylor is so careful to describe the evolution of his thinking about this club. Then be sure students are aware of the patterns of cultural borrowing that Taylor describes. You can extend his comments about blues and rap to other musical forms that originally were targeted for black audiences but that came to be embraced by mainstream white audiences (jazz and Motown come to mind). This may help students understand Taylor’s assertion of the “historically racist trajectory of white American appetites for cultural commodities.”

Taylor’s selection creates opportunities for thoughtful analytic assignments. Reading the Signs question 1 allows students to address the central question that Taylor poses: whether whites can participate in African American cultural activities. Because your students’ success in responding to this topic will depend, in part, on their discussion of specific artists and performers, this topic offers an occasion for a lesson on unsubstantiated generalizations. A somewhat broader topic, question 2 asks students to analyze the possibly racist basis of ethnic exclusivity in popular entertainment

and sports. For a comparison topic, try question 3, which invites students to compare the history of rock 'n' roll with that of rap; they should consider the extent to which each musical genre has gone mainstream and why. Question 4 extends Taylor's concerns to the more general question of preserving one's racial heritage; the Jack Lopez, Nell Bernstein, and bell hooks selections in this chapter can help students respond to this topic.

ANGELINE F. PRICE

Working Class Whites (p. 591)

It is commonplace in academic discussions of race to equate being Caucasian in America with being privileged, and certainly that equation can be valid in many cases. But too often the privileged status is considered a necessary and automatic result of being white. We think that, just like generalizations about any racial group — black, Asian, Latino, Native American — this assumption is too sweeping and therefore logically invalid. This is where Angeline Price's selection comes in handy as you are teaching critical thinking skills: she outlines the stereotyping and media depictions of a group for whom the label "privileged" is an ill fit: the often impoverished white working class. Price teases out the distinctions the media make between "white trash" and "good country folk," and locates these images in a quick but precise history of television and film. Your students should have no trouble understanding Price's argument. But, depending on their background, they may resist her assumption (which we share) that it's just as problematic to stereotype poor whites as "trash" as it is to stereotype African American men as athletes or criminals, or Asian students as brainy nerds. Some students may simply respond with a tautology: "Well, white trash are just that, trash." Or others may think, "OK, the white trash stereotype is kind of ugly, but what's wrong with the good country folk?" To help your students refine their critical thinking, you might remind them of Michael Omi's discussion of how our assumptions about race can seem natural but are usually socially constructed. And you might flip the question around: How might a mathematically challenged Asian student respond if told "you can't be bad at math, you're Asian"?

Price's essay allows for assignments that have students analyze media examples or that address these general issues about race. For the former, assign Reading the Signs question 1, which has students study a recent film, or question 2, which sends them to your school's media library to analyze one of the TV programs Price discusses. For the latter, question 3 invites students to reflect on what Price calls American culture's "hatred" of the poor, while question 4 asks them to consider why, in an era when it's generally socially unacceptable to be openly racist, it's somehow OK to stereotype poor whites. For a more textually focused topic, try question 5, which asks students to compare Price's discussion with Michael Parenti's comments about the media's representation of class in his "Class and Virtue" (Chapter Four).

JACK LOPEZ

Of Cholos and Surfers (p. 597)

Our students have never failed to respond warmly to Jack Lopez, and it's easy to understand why. In this accessible memoir, Lopez describes growing up as a Mexican-American in East Los Angeles, moving between cholo gang culture and white surfer culture and, in the process, having “the best of both worlds.” Students respond positively not only to his message that it's possible both to assimilate and to retain one's native culture; they also enjoy his friendly tone, his mild self-deprecating humor, his resolutely nice persona. Students will want to discuss his message about assimilation, of course, but make sure they don't miss some of the subtleties of his narrative. Why, for instance, does his father ask other Mexican Americans if they are Mexican when he knows that they are — and why does that habit so irritate the young Lopez? What's the point Lopez makes about Victor VerHagen, his belligerent schoolmate? This selection is also useful if you want to discuss persona and style: How do Lopez's diction and even sentence construction contribute to a reader's response?

Because this is a memoir, a natural journal topic has students write their own account of how they developed a sense of ethnic identity (see Reading the Signs question 1). A comparison assignment, question 2 asks students to compare Lopez's development of a sense of ethnic identity with that of Melissa Algranati, a mixed-race writer whose own memoir, “Being an Other,” appears in this chapter. Lopez's reflections on his father's attitudes toward ethnicity raise the question of generational differences regarding this topic. Accordingly, question 3 has students interview friends and their parents about their sense of ethnic identity and asks the writers to assess the influence one's age can have on such attitudes. This is an ambitious topic, and you may want to prepare students by discussing interviewing strategies in advance. Finally, in describing his move from Mexican East L.A. to predominantly white Huntington Beach, Lopez raises issues about ethnic geography and race relations that students can apply to their own neighborhoods (see question 4).

NELL BERNSTEIN

Goin' Gangsta, Choosin' Cholita (p. 604)

We find the phenomenon of “claiming” a remarkable social trend, and we hope your students are as intrigued by it as we are. In this easy-to-read selection, Bernstein describes teenagers who “claim,” or adopt, a new racial identity. These teens have a variety of motives for doing so. Sometimes they want to emulate friends, other times they apparently want to irritate their parents, and often they just want to seem cool. Ask your class about these motives, and whether they had friends in high school (or even now, in college) who are “claimers.” What does ethnic identity mean to these teens? How is ethnicity a sign for them? Because a few students in your class may be (or have been) claimers themselves, you'll want to make sure the discussion doesn't descend to ridicule of the teens whom Bernstein describes. To avoid that, you might turn to the photo of four teens on p. 603. These people are not necessarily claimers, but they do strike a pose that some viewers may consider cool. Ask your students: How do these four teens relate to each other? How would students characterize their styles,

and what messages do their styles communicate? In discussing Bernstein, you may want to cover several ethnicities; her essay is valuable in that it covers kids of different backgrounds adopting a variety of new racial identities. They don't claim being white, however, and that's worth discussing too (see Reading the Signs question 4).

Bernstein's essay creates lots of opportunities for creative and argumentative assignments. Reading the Signs question 1 directs students to stage a conversation between one of the teens and her dad; through role-playing, this exercise could help students see how different generations may read ethnicity differently. The next two questions invite argumentative essays: number 2 focuses on the media's role in stimulating the claiming trend, and number 3 asks students to take a position on whether claiming is an expression of tolerance or stereotyping (for more on how the notion of racial stereotyping can be slippery, refer students to Randall Kennedy's selection on racial profiling in Chapter Five). For a more open-ended topic, assign question 5, which sends students to the Jack Lopez selection in this chapter for help in assessing the motives behind claiming.

BELL HOOKS

Baby (p. 610)

If you know bell hooks's work, this selection may surprise you. Rather than engaging in her often searing analysis of gender and ethnic politics, hooks provides a poignant personal narrative relating her childhood experience with a doll — a brown doll — that looked like her. And students should find this selection quite easy to comprehend. But this is not to say that hooks isn't making a point about ethnic identity: a child needs to feel herself reflected in not only her toys but also the culture that surrounds her. Be sure that your students don't overlook that point (you can relate it to the photo of the African American girl holding the white and black dolls on p. 611). Because this selection is short and tightly written, it's ideal for teaching some close reading strategies. You might ask your class why hooks labels herself her mother's "problem child." Why does she say Baby was "waiting" — and for what? Why does she point out that the newest Barbie at the time was "bald"?

Because this is a personal narrative, you may want your students to write their own reflections on the issues hooks raises (see Reading the Signs question 1 for a journal entry). Yet this selection can be the springboard for interesting analytic assignments as well. To update hooks's reminiscences, question 2 has students visit a toy store and examine the ethnic identities of the dolls sold today. And, to extend the scope of hooks's piece, question 3 prompts them to study the ethnic patterns in other forms of children's entertainment, such as video games. Don't be surprised if your students find examples of extreme stereotyping in videos and toys; Michael Omi's selection in this chapter can provide a useful critical framework for this topic. Question 4 focuses on the link between children's toys and the construction of gender roles; visiting a toy store can help students develop specific evidence for this question as well.

MELISSA ALGRANATI

Being an Other (p. 613)

Algranati's essay is an important reminder of a fact often overlooked in discussions of ethnicity in which supposedly clear-cut terms like *Latino*, *white*, and *African American* are bandied about. Many people in America are not "pure" anything and may find it difficult (or choose not) to identify themselves as being a member of a single racial group. How does ethnicity operate as a sign for biracial people? Algranati answers that it's not easy. In this accessible selection, Algranati describes the confusion occasioned by being a Puerto Rican, Egyptian, Jewish mix — a confusion felt both by others, who expect a unitary ethnic identity, and by Algranati, who struggled with the question "Who am I?" Expect your students to respond positively to Algranati, who neither complains about her status nor indicts the evils of American racism. Instead, she matter-of-factly describes her family and the responses she receives to her mixed identity — and, in the process, creates a sympathetic response in her readers.

Given that sympathy is a likely response, our first Reading the Signs question is a journal topic that allows students to explore their own answer to "Who am I?" This selection creates opportunities for interesting, manageable analytic topics as well. Question 2 asks students to take a stand on whether official documents, such as school applications, should ask applicants to identify their ethnicity; in preparation for this assignment, find out if your college has an ethnic check-off list included in its application form and, if so, what ethnicities are listed. For a topic with open-ended possibilities, try question 3, which asks students how they would identify themselves if they had Algranati's background. For a challenging topic, see question 4, which asks students to assume Algranati's point of view in responding to the claiming fad described in Nell Bernstein's article. Question 5 poses a potentially lively in-class activity; it has the class brainstorm biracial entertainers or other media figures, and then discuss the media's tendency to pigeonhole people. What are the implications for people who don't quite fit ethnic categories?

FAN SHEN

The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition (p. 619)

Even if you don't use any other selection this chapter, we hope you cover this essay for its analysis of the link between culture and composition. Fan Shen describes the culture shock he experienced when he faced the expectation that he promote the self, not the group, in his writing. In so doing, he describes the ideological basis of English essay writing — a topic worth discussing with your class even if you don't focus on the multicultural issues. What are the conventions of academic writing, and what sorts of knowledge does it privilege? What's gained by a Western academic approach, and what's lost? Are conventions of English composition essays the same as the writing conventions in other disciplines? But the multicultural issues are significant as well, for in describing his initial expectations about what essays should be, Shen articulates an alternative to the norm with which your students are likely to be familiar. This revelation can create opportunities for students to explore their own expectations as writers;

we heartily suggest you assign Reading the Signs question 4, which invites students to examine the aspects of writing that seem “natural” and “unnatural” to them. Indeed, you might raise the issue of how the writing class itself is a culture, one often at odds with mainstream university culture in its concern for student learning.

Shen’s description of Western and non-Western styles of learning provides a heuristic that can be useful for a variety of assignments. Reading the Signs question 1 invites students to explore in their journal the extent to which they were raised with a Western concept of self; this question could also be an essay topic. Question 3 first asks the class to discuss whether their classes assume Western learning styles (as did Shen’s classes; we’re presuming that for the most part students’ classes do). It then asks students to abandon that style by writing up the results of the discussion using the non-Western, or *yijing*, approach. We strongly recommend that, before asking students to attempt this task, you first discuss with them what Shen means by *yijing*; we also suggest that you ask students to read their work aloud so they can discuss how they attempted to achieve the *yijing* style. Question 2 is an accessible topic that asks students to compare Fan Shen’s experiences with their own experiences. Here, students could address the impact not only of cultural differences but also of gender-based patterns.

POPULAR SPACES

Interpreting the Built Environment

If you want your students to enjoy the intellectual pleasure of analyzing something they probably haven't studied in school, this chapter's for you. This chapter on the built environment is among our favorites, as we've found that our students approach writing essays on both domestic and public places with incredible enthusiasm and zeal. If you're emphasizing the semiotic method, this chapter can help overcome any resistance you face among students who bristle, say, at interpreting their favorite film because they identify too closely with it. Students tend to feel less personally attached to the built environment (particularly to public spaces) and thus may find it easier to attain critical distance from the objects of their analysis. And there's plenty to analyze. Buildings aren't just brick or stucco or glass; they are rich sign systems that define power structures and hierarchies (it was no accident that the September 11 attacks targeted edifices that symbolized American economic supremacy and military might), control visitors' behavior, and establish territorial boundaries. As the *Discussing the Signs of Public Space* boxed question suggests, you might start discussion with your own classroom. Are chairs arranged in neat rows or in a circle, and how does the arrangement affect class dynamics? Are chairs bolted to the floor, and if so, what are the implications for pedagogical style? What sort of hierarchy is implied in the traditional lecture hall? You can extend this discussion to other parts of campus: in which buildings do students feel more comfortable, and why? What messages are sent by your school's architecture? Ask your students to check your school's Web site to learn which buildings are featured: Why are *these* buildings and not others used to represent the campus? To stimulate your students' curiosity, assign the *Exploring the Signs of Public Space* boxed question, which has students reflect on their own use of public space for recreation or entertainment. Students who take to this topic might also enjoy the *Reading the Signs of Virtual Space on the Net* boxed question, which asks them to consider how "virtual" space may alter our understanding and experience of space. You might pair this question with an analysis of the home-as-work-space photo on page 634. In what ways does our increasing reliance on the Internet for business, research, and entertainment affect domestic relationships?

You'll see that many of the questions that accompany the readings in this chapter call for a kind of field research — that is, they ask students to visit a public place and analyze it. If you give such an assignment, you'll want to ascertain that your students have an equal ability to get to the place (it wouldn't be fair to expect students to drive fifty miles to an amusement park, for instance, especially when some may not have a car) and that the place is appropriate (we once counseled a novice instructor not to suggest a strip club as an assignment option). Because students may not have experience doing this sort of field research, you might spend some class time discussing note-taking techniques and observational strategies. We've found it useful to prepare observational guidelines with questions that help focus students' attention on important details. For instance, someone studying a public park might respond to questions such as: "Are visitors primarily alone, in pairs, in large groups? Do people who seem to be strangers interact with each other? Do visitors walk slowly or quickly? Do they linger and relax? What is it about the physical design of the park that encourages this behavior?" Note that such assignments are ideal for small group projects and observational

teams. Students may simply *see* more if they are with others, and they'll enjoy the camaraderie of the shared experience.

If you can't cover the entire chapter, we suggest you start with the introduction, which establishes a critical framework for analyzing public space, and then pick selections according to the type of space analyzed or the issues raised. Commercial and entertainment spaces are analyzed in the Susan Willis (Disney World) and the Malcolm Gladwell (retail stores) selections, while Barrie B. Greenbie looks at domestic and community space. The Greenbie piece can be paired with the chapter's final selection, Camilo José Vergara's reflection on the city itself as a space. Daphne Spain addresses the gendered implications of architectural design, with a focus on the modern office environment. For a first-person account of the dynamics of domestic space, assign Karen Karbo's "The Dining Room." A pair of readings address educational space, with Rina Swentzell examining the cultural values implicit in Native American and mainstream school design and C. Carney Strange and James H. Banning addressing the physical features of a college campus environment.

MALCOLM GLADWELL

The Science of Shopping (p. 642)

We lead off the chapter with Gladwell's essay because we find students respond passionately to this piece — and you can have a lot of fun with it. Gladwell gives a detailed description of the ways retailers use spatial design to manipulate consumers and to stimulate the urge to buy. Whether your students are city folk or suburbanites, well-off or struggling to make ends meet, you can assume that they're familiar with some sort of mall, and chain stores like the Gap, and that their consuming behavior has been affected by the retail design. Thus this selection provides a good opportunity for combining discussion of personal experience with an analysis of a topic accessible to all students. Some students may resist the notion that one's behavior can be shaped by architecture and physical clues, but remind them that this is the assumption that successful retailers make — it's not just Gladwell's opinion. Indeed, Gladwell focuses on Paco Underhill, a sort of retailers' anthropologist who studies consumer behavior. If students don't believe Underhill's advice to retailers would have an effect, ask them to consider retailing patterns: Why do stores almost always locate the sale section in the back? Why do college bookstores locate popular trade books, best sellers, and merchandise such as calendars up front, near the cash registers, and relegate the required textbooks to the back? Have your students ever bought an unnecessary gee-gaw because of this arrangement? For more on Underhill's strategies, consult the Web site for EnviroSell, his behavioral market research and consulting company (www.envirosell.com).

In varying ways, the Reading the Signs questions ask students to apply or respond to Gladwell's observations about the strategies for customer manipulation. Question 1 asks students to apply Gladwell's points to specific examples, such as a supermarket or local chain store (it could be one that Gladwell mentions, such as Banana Republic). For this topic, we've had students form teams and visit the store together; each team presents their findings to the class. Some stores that work very well are Victoria's Secret, Urban Outfitters, Whole Foods, and Abercrombie and Fitch (we've had A & F employees reveal that they receive explicit instructions to use many of the same techniques that Gladwell describes). A variant is question 3, which has students visit the Web site of a major retailer and study how the virtual space encourages them to buy.

This topic can be challenging, for students may see some features of the Web site as mere functional conveniences (for example, the “shopping carts” that allow you to pile up merchandise as you’re “browsing” through the store), which, while they may be helpful to the virtual shopper, also stimulate additional consumption (it’s easy to forget how much you’ve stashed in your cart). Your students may be disturbed by the invasion of personal privacy that’s implicit in some of Paco Underhill’s techniques; if that’s the case, they may enjoy the class debate suggested in question 2 on the ethics of retail anthropology (Eric Schlosser’s “Kid Kustomers” in Chapter Two could provide supplementary information for this topic). Finally, question 4 invites students to respond to Gladwell’s question, “Should we be afraid of Paco Underhill?” (para. 17). Be sure students note that, while at times Gladwell seems to suggest that his answer is yes, ultimately he decides that it is the shoppers who manipulate the retailers — a debatable point given his evidence.

SUSAN WILLIS

Disney World: Public Use/Private State (p. 650)

Willis’s essay is one of the more difficult in this book, and you may want to spend some time discussing critical reading strategies. You could ask students to outline her essay in their journals or to jot down a list of unfamiliar terms as they read and to propose, in their own words, definitions of those terms. Ask them to identify the argument and the wealth of support Willis offers (while occasionally abstract, this article is filled with details and anecdotes that students should have little trouble understanding). The Reading the Text questions all focus on Willis’s main points, so you might also assign those questions as a reading log.

This selection is well worth the effort students may need to expend, however. Willis turns to a significant category of the built environment — the artificial world created by theme parks such as Disney World — and analyzes how the park’s design encourages consumption. Be prepared for some resistance to her thesis: Students often cling to childhood favorites, equating an analysis of them to an attack on themselves. If they do so, be sure to ask them the ever-useful question, “Why?” Why did, in a different venue, Disneyland come up with “Disney Dollars”? Why don’t we see kids playing spontaneously at Disney World? And make sure they don’t rest content with the easy answer “Disney World is just fun.” (Skeptical students may appreciate it if you assign Reading the Signs question 2, which invites students to support or refute one of Willis’s central contentions.) If your students are unfamiliar with Disney World, ask them to apply their theses to a local theme park they may have visited (see question 3). Although Willis focuses on Disney World, her argument extends to other theme parks and consumer products. Question 1 asks students to consider a related phenomenon, the plethora of Disney products, characters, and movies (here, too, expect a few students to defend Disney as if the company were equivalent to their own identity — a real sign of Disney’s impact!). A more challenging topic, number 4 calls for a comparison of the ways Disney World and a local shopping mall control spending behavior. Students will be prepared for this question if they read Anne Norton’s “The Signs of Shopping” in Chapter One and Malcolm Gladwell’s “The Science of Shopping” in this chapter. The question that demands the most creativity is 5, which asks students to design a theme park for the twenty-first century. As part of this question, ask students to articulate the rationale behind their design choices — a sure way to encourage them to see the ideological underpinnings of something so seemingly innocent as a child’s fantasyland.

KAREN KARBO

The Dining Room (p. 663)

Expect your students — both male and female, young and older — to be deeply moved by Karbo’s selection. A memoir, this piece is a coming-of-age tale that charts Karbo’s shifting relationship with her family, particularly with her mother; the changes in their relationship are paralleled by changes in the family’s dining rooms as they move from house to house. Indeed, the dining rooms not only represent the family dynamic but also work to control it. This selection is ideal for discussing the often unrecognized influence of domestic space: Ask your students to reflect on the ways their own homes’ design affects family interactions. Do they have neutral space, where family members enjoy equal status? Or are some rooms marked as territory for one person? What happens if territorial boundaries are transgressed? You can develop this discussion by studying the photo of the father and son arguing at dinner on page 671. What visual signs indicate that the characters are related, and what seems to be the dynamic among them?

Beyond raising the issue of domestic space, this selection also is well-suited for teaching close reading techniques. Be sure to discuss Karbo’s use of the second person. Why would a memoir writer elect this form of address, and what effect does it have on the reader? Ask students to pay attention to stylistic details as well. Why does Karbo capitalize some words, such as *Special Occasion* and *Fancy*, that normally are not capitalized? How does the capitalization work to create an image of Karbo’s mother? One reason students find this selection engaging, we believe, is Karbo’s subtle sense of humor. What makes some of the passages humorous, and why do students think Karbo includes humor in a tale that has a sad conclusion?

“The Dining Room” lends itself to both straightforward analytic essays and to more imaginative assignments. Reading the Signs question 1 has students analyze the ways the various dining tables and rooms symbolically represent Karbo’s relationship with her mother; for a close textual analysis, assign question 4, which focuses on Karbo’s characterization of her mother. For a more personal response, question 3 invites students to write their own memoir of a significant physical space; the question can be reformulated into an analytic essay if you prefer. Question 4 requires the most creativity, as it asks students to assume the role of Karbo’s mother and to write her remembrance of the dining rooms the selection describes. To prepare students for this topic, you might discuss in class the dynamics among all the family members: What role does Karbo’s father play? Why do we see so little of him? And what sort of relationship exists between Karbo’s parents?

BARRIE B. GREENBIE

Home Space: Fences and Neighbors (p. 672)

Barrie B. Greenbie focuses on domestic space: the ways our homes communicate to others our family’s character, and the ways they work to either encourage or frustrate a sense of community and neighborhood. This certainly is an accessible topic that students can connect with, though some may find the selection a bit of a tough read. That’s because Greenbie tends to make associative connections between points, rather

than explicit logical connections; the result is that students may find his selection meandering and diffuse. To enable your class to get the most out of this reading, you might ask them to create an outline of it; you might have small groups compare their outlines and post the most accurate one on the board. Alternately, you might pick out key terms (such as transitional space, haptic system, and the like) and have them bring to class their own definitions of the concept; you could structure your discussion by first defining these terms and then applying them to a neighboring space, such as the campus dormitories, or to photographs you bring to class (either those you take yourself or cut from home and design magazines).

Whatever its challenges, we find the Greenbie an excellent starting point for examining domestic and community space. Students can recognize readily the impact of transitional spaces, for instance, and the different effects of structures such as porches, decks, and fences. Greenbie refers primarily to suburban areas, but that's not a problem, as the terms for his analysis apply equally well to apartments and more urbanized neighborhoods. Your students might falsely assume that wealthier areas have a more comfortable sense of community; you might dispel that notion by comparing the feel of, say, a new gated community with identical stucco houses and little landscaping with that of an older community with variations in architectural style and lush, mature landscaping. One of our favorite assignments is described in Reading the Signs question 1, which asks students to use Greenbie as a critical framework for analyzing their own home. Because some students may feel reluctant to write about their family's dwelling, we suggest that you allow as an alternative a friend's or relative's home. For a less personal focus, you could assign question 2, which has them similarly analyze the residential neighborhood near your campus, or question 3, which has them interpret a campus dorm. A comparison and contrast essay emerges from question 4, which sends students to the Malcolm Gladwell selection in this chapter; they should find that Greenbie's and Gladwell's notions of transitional space are more complementary than contradictory. We encourage students to analyze the photos that accompany Greenbie's discussion; question 5 has them study the suburban tracts on pp. 679–81, although you could have them analyze other photos as well. Perhaps the most challenging question is 6, which has students consider the social and philosophical implications of the notion of "civilized life."

RINA SWENTZELL

Conflicting Landscape Values: The Santa Clara Pueblo and Day School (p. 685)

The first time we assigned this selection, we weren't sure whether our students, who are mostly urban Californians, would relate to Swentzell's topic. Our concerns proved baseless, however, as students seemed fascinated not only by Swentzell's comparison of Native American and mainstream worldviews but also by her discussion of the way a school's architectural design can embody a particular educational philosophy. Swentzell's writing is clear and accessible. You might organize your class discussion around the two worldviews that she describes. Ask students to brainstorm on the board the cultural values implicit in the Pueblo culture, and then to list the physical and architectural features common to traditional Pueblo communities. How do those features perpetuate traditional values? What approach to education and learning do they encourage? Then do the same for the Bureau of Indian Affairs school. What are the

design features of this school, and what cultural and social values do they promote? What sort of pedagogy does the design dictate? Such questions can lead to a discussion of larger political issues as students consider the relationship between the built environment, cultural dominance, and political power.

This selection can stimulate students to consider their own educational environment and the pedagogy that it encourages, especially if you pair it with the following selection, C. Carney Strange and James H. Banning’s “Educating by Design” (p. 697). We urge you to assign Reading the Signs question 1, which asks the class to analyze the design of your composition classroom (you could make this either a discussion topic or an essay assignment). Alternatively, students could compare two different sorts of classrooms — a lecture hall and a seminar room, for instance — addressing not only their physical layout but also the style of learning that each allows. We’ve created two questions that address the ideologies underlying school architectural design. Question 2 asks students to analyze the BIA Day School as a reflection of the myth of a manifest destiny, and question 3 sends them to Fan Shen’s “The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition” (Chapter Seven), prompting them to identify and evaluate the non-Western educational approaches that both authors describe. Question 4 focuses less on design than on pedagogy, inviting the class to debate the merits of hands-on learning at the university level. For this question, be sure that students consider how such learning could occur in a variety of disciplines, including the sciences, the humanities, and the arts.

C. CARNEY STRANGE AND JAMES H. BANNING

Educating by Design (p. 697)

If you are emphasizing the educational spaces, this selection is for you, either alone or paired with Rina Swentzell’s “Conflicting Spaces, Values: The Santa Clara Pueblo and Day School.” The authors begin with an entertaining hypothetical scenario that students can easily identify with: a family’s first visit to mythical Mid-Rocky University in which they check out the campus to see if it’s the sort of place son Eric would like to attend. Your students will quickly launch into tales of their own visits to your campus (especially if you assign Reading the Signs question 1, a journal entry prompt that asks students to reflect on their own first visit to your campus). You’ll want to keep discussion focused on the campus design, not matters like the personality or physical attractiveness of the campus tour guide. You can move from there to the authors’ larger concern, the ways in which the built environment sends messages to the school’s visitors, students, instructors, and strangers. Ask your class to apply Strange and Banning’s comments directly to buildings on your campus. Where is your school’s admissions office, for instance, and what does that placement communicate to prospective applicants? Is the library designed to affect the behavior of those studying there? Indeed, *do* people even study there? If not, what about the design encourages other uses of the space? In what ways are classrooms designed to facilitate learning, and what kinds of learning (active? memorization?)?

This selection is perfect for projects that require an analysis of your own campus. For a focused essay assignment, try question 2, which has students analyze your composition classroom in light of the goals and class activities that you articulate in your syllabus. You might want to let students know if you or your department have any control over classroom assignments, much less classroom design. For a more ambitious

project consider question 3, which invites teams of students to do a kind of thick-description study of your campus, with teams focusing on different aspects of the physical plant. You might prep the groups by doing a brief trial run on a single building or location adjacent to your classroom. We've done such a trial run with an eatery and a sculpture garden, and the exercise helped students understand how to observe and record details. Barrie B. Greenbie's discussion of transitional and community spaces in "Home Space: Fences and Neighbors" can help students refine their analysis, as can Malcolm Gladwell's "The Science of Shopping" if students study the student union building. We like having the groups present their findings to the class. The most challenging variant of such a project is posed in question 4. It asks students to study the problems of an unsuccessful campus building or space (we're assuming that even the most architecturally pleasing school has at least one dud) and to propose a redesign of it. Be sure that students think of the needs of the population that primarily uses the building (science students? visitors to the campus? staff?); you can ask the class to conduct interviews with users to determine their needs and responses to this building or space.

DAPHNE SPAIN

Spatial Segregation and Gender Stratification in the Workplace (p. 707)

This selection is perfect for addressing the ways in which the built environment can replicate cultural gender norms. While the style of this selection is a tad dry, your students should find it easy to grasp Spain's main ideas about the gendered patterns in contemporary office environments. Be sure they focus on her distinction between "open floor" and "closed door" offices, and encourage them to articulate the power relations that are implied by each design. Ask them about their own experiences in work environments. Whether male or female, they most likely have occupied lower-level or intern positions and thus probably have experienced the hierarchical arrangements enforced by design. Why is a view office considered a sign of importance? Why, in the aftermath of John F. Kennedy Jr.'s death in 1999, did so many commentators note how remarkable it was that his office at *George* magazine was located on the same floor as those of the staffers? Then you can move to Spain's argument about gender stratification; you might note that, while women have moved into higher corporate spheres, the general patterns of employment that Spain describes still dominate the workplace.

Students should enjoy testing Spain's ideas on work environments with which they are familiar. Reading the Signs question 2 has students analyze the office where they work; as an alternative, students could study a staff office or even faculty offices at your college. For a topic that requires students to conduct interviews, assign question 3, which focuses on Spain's contention about the nature of women's work. An imaginative prompt, question 1 invites students to work in groups to design a non-hierarchical office space. We suggest that you have each group describe their proposal to the class, with a brief presentation outlining the rationale for their design. Your students can have some fun with question 4, which has them write a hypothetical response to the "ideal" boss-secretary relationship that Spain quotes in this selection. Expect a wide range of responses, especially in this post-Enron, post-Worldcom era, to the notion that a secretarial job is to serve as custodian for the boss's "secrets."

CAMILO JOSÉ VERGARA***The Ghetto Cityscape (p. 714)***

You should find this selection easy to teach, even if your students have little knowledge of the inner city. You might begin discussion by having students brainstorm their impressions of a ghetto environment (preferably before they have read the selection); don't be surprised if their impressions echo those of scholars to whom Vergara alludes early in the piece. Then move to his main point, which is that, rather than being uniform places of ruin, inner-city environments can have quite different characters and are not necessarily places of total devastation. Vergara provides a handy paradigm for analyzing such environments; his triad of green ghettos, institutional ghettos, and new immigrant ghettos is accessible and tailor-made for applying to specific urban areas. If you live in a city, ask your students to analyze it using this framework; if Vergara's categories don't quite fit, challenge students to modify them or to devise their own (see Reading the Signs question 1). Even if you don't live in a city, this paradigm is still useful, for most suburbs and small towns have their older or relatively impoverished sections that reflect Vergara's distinctions. Indeed, this selection could be valuable in helping students observe spatial detail in any community, not just in the inner city.

This selection pairs well with Lucy R. Lippard's "Alternating Currents" in Chapter Five, for while both authors share the assumption that a sense of place has a profound effect on human consciousness, their focuses and concerns differ. Reading the Signs question 2 asks students to adopt Vergara's perspective and critique Lippard's reading of the city; alternatively, you could simply ask students to compare and contrast the two writers' views. One issue that emerges in this selection is the role that nature plays in shaping an urban environment; thus, question 3 asks students to explore this role. Note that this can be a rich, complex topic; you might assign the Lucy R. Lippard, Rina Swentzell, or Barrie B. Greenbie selections to help trigger your students' thinking on the matter. If you want your students to do a little research, have them investigate the ways in which public parks affect urban life. Perhaps the most challenging topic is number 4, which has students argue for or against Vergara's basic premise that the city's physical environment is at least as influential as economic factors in shaping people's lives. The Greenbie selection in this chapter touches on some related matters, so you might have students read that essay as well.

AMERICAN ICONS*The Mythic Characters of Popular Culture*

Pop culture personalities, media icons, folk heroes. Whatever you call them, America is populated with characters that reflect the nation's dreams, myths, and ideologies. Some may be real people, some fictional creations, and some nonhuman, but we've found they're perfect for analyzing semiotically. They serve as an accurate mirror of their times, symbolizing the values and interests of the era in which they are created. You can read pop culture characters in much the same way as you do fictional literary characters. You can ask your students to analyze the values they hold, how they develop or change over time, how they compare with other characters, how they capture the hearts of their audience. And because such characters so closely reflect the interests of their culture, they create opportunities for addressing a host of serious issues such as gender, class, and ethnicity. Some of the very best student writing we've received has focused on popular characters. Perhaps it's the novelty of looking at culture in the same way one might look at literature; perhaps it's the immediacy of the subject matter; or perhaps it's the fun of exploring and explaining "people" who inhabit our daily lives but tend to be taken for granted. Whatever the reason, studying popular characters can be a fine way to develop your students' analytic skills while having some fun in the process.

The boxed questions in the introduction are designed to inspire a spirit of fun and serious critical inquiry in your students. We encourage you to try the Discussing the Signs of American Characters question, which asks the class to brainstorm a list of their favorite pop cultural icons and then to analyze the list. Not only will this question get all your students to participate, but it asks them to consider the cultural and social basis for their personal tastes. The Exploring the Signs of American Characters question is also personally reflective, asking students about the significance that characters from children's television had for them when they were young. The Reading American Characters on the Net exercise invites your students to look outward at the larger culture's values — and at America's cult of the celebrity — by investigating the role the Internet plays in fostering a celebrity's status. In doing so, your students may see how both the celebrity's image and an audience's response to that image are careful media constructs. Alternatively, you could ask students to investigate the backgrounds of historical figures that resonate in the American imagination; check www.biography.com for some 20,000 entries.

Because the chapter's introduction does the work of setting up a critical framework for analyzing characters, you could easily allow your students to pick which essays they'd like to read if you don't have time to cover them all. Jake Brennan starts off with a sardonic take on the anticelebrity trend; we lead with this selection to prompt students to ponder seriously why some people become famous, others celebrities, still others icons — and just what those terms mean. Michael Eric Dyson follows with an analysis of a real-life superhero, Michael Jordan, with the next two selections, by Gary Engle and Andy Medhurst, focusing on fictional superheroes, Superman and Batman, respectively. A pair of selections on toys follows, with Emily Prager turning to the doll industry to critique Barbie and Gary Cross moving from Barbie to G. I. Joe. Mark Caldwell returns to real life in his review of the queen of domesticity, Martha Stewart, who despite her jail stint seems as iconic as ever. Jenny Lyn Bader concludes the chapter, exploring whether today's twentysomethings can even believe in heroes

anymore — a comprehensive essay that’s crucial to discuss even if you use the chapter selectively.

A number of selections focus on toys as objects of analysis. Some students might wonder why: after all, isn’t college where you study “serious” subjects? Our response: Toys are very serious business. It’s in childhood that we are conditioned to accept our culture’s dominant mythologies, and toys and games are one of the primary “teachers” of those beliefs. We feel it essential that students see that dominant beliefs aren’t “just in the air”; they are embodied in cultural artifacts that we usually take for granted. Toys aren’t just fun; they help shape some of our most fundamental belief systems.

We should point out that American mythmakers have not created an abundance of positive female pop culture characters who are not sex symbols. There are a few, but when asked, our students (both male and female) tend to think only of advertising characters (who are usually either a mom or an Elvira type) and romanticized historical figures such as Betsy Ross. Just as the introduction raises the issue of race, we suggest you ask your students about gender also. Why have female characters been limited to such a restricted range of roles (principally, sexual)? Are things changing? What sort of female characters, real or fictional, would your students like to see assume a greater role in American popular culture?

JAKE BRENNAN

Celebrities Who Aren’t Really Celebrities (p. 729)

Maybe Andy Warhol got it wrong, at least for the twenty-first century. Now, it seems, everyone can be famous for 15 minutes of *infamy*, or so current TV programming and celebrity “news” would have us believe. Brennan’s skewering of the current trend of the worship of noncelebrities is easy to understand, and it complements our discussion in this chapter’s Introduction of anti-icons. We lead the chapter with it because we want students to reflect on what counts as a celebrity, or icon, or hero in our culture. What do those terms really mean? How do your students define them? Reading the Signs question 2 prompts the class to brainstorm their own list of current one-hit wonders, then to analyze why these people have made it into the public eye. You can then move to considering Brennan’s argument. Do they share his assumption that people like Paris Hilton and William Hung are vastly overrated? Don’t be surprised if they disagree with his dismissal of one-hit wonders and other faux celebrities, and they may feel the need to defend a Brad Pitt or Jennifer Aniston for being “important” actors. Get them to articulate their own assumptions: why are they “important”? What does it say about our culture when Yahoo and CNN news regularly include in their top headlines a story about this singer’s latest break-up or that actor’s most recent fender-bender? Ask them Brennan’s question: “Why do we care?”

Because your students are likely to respond strongly (either positively or negatively) to this selection, it is ideal for argumentative essay topics. Three questions invite students to take issue with or defend Brennan’s claims. Reading the Signs question 1 has students evaluate Brennan’s charge that programs like *Entertainment Tonight* foster the cult of noncelebrities; to complicate students’ thinking about the topic, you might have them read Gloria Steinem’s “Sex, Lies, and Advertising” in Chapter Two and encourage them to consider whether programs like *ET* are, in effect, video versions of complementary copy promoting the entertainment industry. For a more narrowly drawn argumentative topic, try question 4, which focuses on Brennan’s

explanation for this trend, or question 5, which has students assess the validity of his distinction between celebrities and noncelebrities. While more serious in tone, Jenny Lyn Bader also explores what it means to be a hero or iconic in our culture; accordingly, question 3 asks students to adopt her perspective and to critique the non-celebrity trend. Note that we are not asking that students critique Brennan's argument but rather the cultural phenomenon that he describes.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire (p. 734)

This selection provides an opportunity to teach students the need to keep in check personal responses to a subject as they attempt to analyze it. Often in class discussion of American characters, Michael Jordan's name has come up, and with good reason. Not just a sports hero, he has an extremely attractive public persona (distinct from the bad-boy image of so many other athletes); details of his personal history, such as his father's murder, are tragic; his on-again, off-again retirement surrounded him with an aura of mystery and suspense. Expect your students to stick to a functional explanation for Jordan's popularity: "He's so much better than any other basketball player!" "He's just amazing!" If your students are Jordan fans, fine. They could benefit from this selection, though, because Dyson goes beyond the functional explanation to probe the cultural mythologies surrounding this larger-than-life hero. His unambiguous admiration for Jordan may be useful for students who resist analysis of their pop culture favorites because they equate analysis or criticism with negative commentary. And, to us at least, Dyson's argumentative base is sound: he locates Jordan within the context of black participation in sports, for instance, and he examines other parts of the system in which Jordan can be interpreted, including advertising and consumer culture. Some students may be put off by Dyson's rather academic, somewhat repetitive style, but the diction is relatively jargon-free and students should grasp most of his points.

This selection creates opportunities for a variety of analytic and argumentative topics. A straightforward assignment is Reading the Signs question 1, an argument topic that focuses on one of the complaints about Jordan that Dyson mentions (note that it's not one that Dyson shares). For a more challenging question focused on ethnicity, try question 2, which has students respond to the belief, to which Dyson alludes, that basketball is primarily a black form of cultural expression. Students might do some research on the history of basketball for this topic; they'll find that the sport was invented by a white man. If you want your students to consider sports more broadly, assign question 3, a class discussion prompt that gets students thinking about why sports personalities have become America's heroes, and question 4, an essay prompt that addresses Dyson's claims about athletics as a means for facilitating "white male bonding." For this last question, students should consult Michael A. Messner's "Power at Play" in Chapter Six.

GARY ENGLE

What Makes Superman So Darned American? (p. 744)

This is a long selection, but it's clearly written and gives your students plenty to talk about. Engle's thesis is that Superman has succeeded as a superhero because he embodies a mythology dear to a land of immigrants. Superman, Engle asserts, has not just gone from rags to riches but has moved from being an alien to a quintessential American. That such a debatable thesis is well defended and thoroughly argued makes the selection a winner for class discussion. Why does Superman seem more patriotic than Batman? Students would do well to consider whether the view of immigrants is always as romanticized as Engle suggests, either in our own era or in past decades. Engle is asking here that essential semiotic question, "Why Superman?" If your students don't buy his argument, ask them to propose alternative answers to the question "Why?" (Reading the Signs question 2 allows students to argue with Engle's thesis). If they don't see Superman as really being that important a character, again ask them why. Here, the fading of the assimilationist ideal in our multicultural era comes into play; Reading the Signs question 1 invites students to address this issue.

Engle's selection also works well when combined with other readings. Reading the Signs question 3 sends students to Robert B. Ray's definitions of heroic types (Chapter Four). While Engle says little about race and gender, those issues are certainly relevant to Superman's success, so question 4 suggests students consult the Michael Omi (Chapter Seven) and Aaron Devor (Chapter Six) selections as they consider the significance of these issues. And finally, question 6 invites students to view one of the *Superman* movies or, alternatively, an episode of *Smallville* to see if the film or program has altered the comics' depiction of this superhero. The advantage of focusing on *Smallville* is that you can show a brief excerpt in class and analyze it as a group.

ANDY MEDHURST

Batman, Deviance, and Camp (p. 753)

We find Medhurst's essay to be a lot of fun—and we hope you and your students do as well. Of course, Medhurst has a serious point to make: For him at least, the original Batman-and-Robin duo was gay, and it was the 1980s homophobic wave that eliminated Robin from the spate of *Batman* movies. Students often resist this thesis — some have real difficulty accepting the notion that such a popular character, and one intended to entertain children, could be homosexual. Medhurst uses a nice blend of evidence to support his claims, however, so challenge your students to refute that evidence if they dislike his argument (rather than simply denouncing it). Be sure they note his creation of a historical context, especially his discussion of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* — skeptical students tend to find this discussion to be the most persuasive part of Medhurst's argument (Reading the Signs question 2 asks students to critique Wertham's argument). Discuss too Medhurst's reading of individual scenes from the 1960s *Batman* TV series. It's best if you can arrange to show at least part of a *Batman* episode in class; in fact, Reading the Signs question 1 suggests students view tapes of the show in preparation for arguing for or against Medhurst's thesis. Check your college's media library to see if they have file tapes of old shows. One

term that some students don't quite understand is *camp*; that's a central concept in Medhurst's essay and you may want to spend some time discussing it. For a topic addressing camp, see question 4, which sends students to Susan Sontag (whom Medhurst discusses) for some further research. To bring Medhurst's argument up to date, question 3 asks students to buy some current *Batman* comics and to explain his current sexual orientation. As students work on this question, be sure they consider who the audience of comic books is and how that might affect decisions about Batman's sexuality.

EMILY PRAGER

Our Barbies, Ourselves (p. 769)

Toys are much like cartoons. Students may never have stopped to think about the toys they played with as a child, but when they do, the sparks start flying. In fact, this accessible and clearly written selection has never failed to generate a lively discussion, and it has been one of instructors' favorite selections in the first four editions of this book. Prager takes a tongue-in-cheek look at Barbie and the role this doll has played in shaping the gender expectations of millions of children. Be sure that students recognize Prager's tone and discuss how it contributes to their response to it. Some students may respond defensively to this essay; when they perceive part of their upbringing to be under attack, they may feel they're under attack too. These students may want to do Reading the Signs question 3, which asks students to explore in their journal the significance of their Barbie doll to them as children. It's important that students notice that Prager includes herself, as a child, among Barbie's fans and that she distinguishes between the doll and its designer — whom she heartily attacks — and the children who play with it. If you had a Barbie once, you might want to confess the fact so students won't feel as if you, too, are judging them.

The assignments that you can generate with this essay will show your students that they can write serious analysis and have some fun at the same time. Be sure to analyze the photos of Credit Card Barbie (p. 90) and of Ken and Barbie on Oscar night (p. 770). How is Barbie continually being adapted to appeal to new generations of children? How is her character a reflection of consumer and entertainment culture? We highly recommend the first Reading the Signs question, which asks students to bring a toy to class and discuss its significance, first in same-sex groups, then with the whole class. Not only does this question broaden the issue beyond Barbie, but you can ask students to interpret the gender-related patterns in the whole class's collection of toys. Question 2 allows students to be more reflective, asking them to interpret a toy they played with as children. If students are not persuaded by Prager, they may want to respond to question 4, which allows them to consider how Jack Ryan, Barbie's creator, would defend himself against Prager's charges. The most challenging question is number 5, which sends students to Laurence Shames's "The More Factor" (Chapter One) to explore Barbie's consumerist ethos. Be sure your students visit a toy store as part of their research for this question; they'll find that Barbie's possessions are no longer limited to a car and a condo.

GARY CROSS

Barbie, G.I. Joe, and Play in the 1960s (p. 772)

This is a perfect companion piece to the Emily Prager selection, for while Gary Cross discusses Barbie (and she occupies first place in his title), his main concern is G.I. Joe. What we like about this selection is that Cross charts Joe's shifting fortunes as cultural and social attitudes change — a perfect instance of the semiotic principle that a sign's meaning is historically conditioned. For an even broader cultural context, have your students also read bell hooks's short piece in Chapter Seven, "Baby," for an ethnic slant on these issues. As Cross points out, G.I. Joe eventually failed in his creators' attempts to adapt to changing times: How does he compare with action-adventure toys who populate the toy stores today?

You might also compare Cross's analysis of Barbie's appeal with Emily Prager's. The authors probably wouldn't disagree with each other's points, but the selections differ substantially in tone, style, even substance (note that Cross attributes a different origin to Barbie than does Prager; we believe Cross is accurate). Which selection do they find more persuasive, and why? How might the intended audience affect each writer's presentation? This selection also raises gender issues: what's an appropriate toy for a girl or boy? Reading the Signs question 4 is a class exercise that would generate a lively discussion of this question.

You'll see that our questions for this selection push students to consider toys as culturally significant objects. Reading the Signs question 1 seems simple — it asks students to invent a toy of their own — but the challenge is writing an essay explaining the rationale for the creation. Be sure to assign this second part, because that's where the hard thinking (and perhaps rethinking of the design) comes in. For a topic that brings Cross's issues up to date, assign question 2, which asks students to survey current action-adventure toys and to analyze them in terms of the warrior dreams framework that James William Gibson describes in his selection (Chapter Six). We encourage students to see the larger cultural role that toys play in socializing kids to mainstream beliefs; question 3 invites them to address this issue.

MARK CALDWELL

The Assault on Martha Stewart (p. 779)

When we were preparing the fifth edition of this book, we didn't know whether Martha Stewart would remain the reigning queen of domesticity, what with K-Mart in bankruptcy, her felony conviction, her five-month jail stint (albeit in a country club prison), and her current probationary status (albeit "confined" to her palatial estate). Not to worry: thanks to America's passion for celebrities and the famous — which seems to make them almost immune to public disapproval — Stewart's iconic status not only remains but seems stronger than ever, now reaching beyond the realm of domesticity. Indeed, she's expanding her media reach to include a reality TV show vaguely modeled on *The Apprentice*, a show that, if it actually does come to pass, is likely to be a hit.

Caldwell wrote this selection before Stewart's legal woes, but it's still timely for his examination of why she has so galvanized her fans' imagination (make sure that stu-

dents understand that his title does not refer to her conviction and prison sentence). What is it about Stewart's creation of a lifestyle industry that has made her so popular that she's become, as Caldwell puts it, a "national symbol"? Is it the sheer ubiquity of her products, both actual and media? What does Caldwell mean by the "democratizing of good taste"? That point is especially important, as it is the key to Caldwell's explanation for Stewart's iconic status. Most students should be familiar with the Stewart industry, but if they're not, you might bring to class her magazine, *Living*, or see if your college media library has videos of her former TV program by the same name. Alternatively, a visit to www.marthastewart.com will fill them in.

You'll find it easy to create focused, manageable assignments based on Caldwell's selection. We suggest several questions that prompt students to interpret Martha Stewart products directly: Reading the Signs question 1 asks students to analyze an issue of *Living* to see if it indeed has a democratizing effect, while question 3 sends them to a local K-Mart to examine the in-store Stewart display. For an investigative topic, try question 2, which asks students to interview Martha Stewart fans as the basis of their own arguments about her appeal. Students could also visit one of the many fan Web sites, such as www.savemartha.com, for insight into her fans' mentality. Perhaps the most challenging question is number 4, which sends students to Gregg Easterbrook's "The Progress Paradox" in Chapter Five and has them consider the connection between Stewart's popularity and the unhappiness occasioned by Americans' obsessive desire for material goods.

JENNY LYN BADER

Larger Than Life (p. 784)

We suggest that you include Bader's essay in your syllabus, no matter how many other selections from this chapter you cover. Unlike the other selections, which interpret particular characters, Bader takes a broad view and contemplates the meaning and availability of mythic heroes for her twentysomething generation. Bader should strike a chord in many of your students, as she essentially argues that heroes no longer have a powerful influence over today's younger generation and that what is needed are realistic role models. This position should inspire plenty of debate among your students, who are likely to disagree with each other on the validity of Bader's thesis (Reading the Signs question 2 invites an argumentative essay in response to Bader's central argument, and question 4 triggers an in-class discussion of traditional American heroes). If you have nontraditional students in your class, take advantage of their perspective and ask them whether they believe Bader's position applies to older generations as well.

Bader's argument is likely to touch some students personally. Consider assigning the journal topic mentioned in question 1, which allows students to explore à la Bader the heroes they admired when they were young. They may also enjoy question 3, which invites a creative response to Bader's call for "stories of spirit without apology." Bader's essay lends itself to direct analysis topics as well as more imaginative ones. Question 5 asks students to analyze Michael Jordan using Bader's perspective, but students could easily substitute another sports or a political figure if they prefer. Finally, question 6 has students consider Bader's argument in the light of the September 11 attacks on America, an event that caused many Americans to rethink what constitutes heroism.