

# 1. Science Fictions and Social Realities

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**To be a difference, a difference has to make a difference.**

Gertrude Stein

Who are you? It is a question that we have all been asked. In answering, we define ourselves by placing greater emphasis on some characteristics than on others. Most of us view our identity as a combination of many factors, including physical characteristics and social ties—connections to a family, an ethnic group, a community, a religion, or a nation. Although this way of defining a person seems ordinary, it has consequences. “When we identify one thing as unlike the others,” writes Martha Minow, a law professor, “we are dividing the world; we use our language to exclude, to distinguish, to discriminate.” She continues:

Of course, there are “real differences” in the world; each person differs in countless ways from each other person. But when we simplify and sort, we focus on some traits rather than others, and we assign consequences to the presence and absence of the traits we make significant. We ask, ‘What’s the new baby?’—and we expect as an answer, boy or girl. That answer, for most of history, has spelled consequences for the roles and opportunities available to that individual.<sup>1</sup>

At what point do physical differences become powerful social divisions that affect what we believe is possible for others and ourselves? How are such differences used to justify social inequalities? What role do scientists, educators, religious leaders, and the media play in the process? How does history shape the value we place on *us* and *them*? This book explores how such questions were answered at specific times in American history. Chapter 1 introduces these questions by examining the idea of difference through various lenses.

In every society some differences matter more than they do in others. The way a society responds to differences affects the way individuals see themselves and others. Those responses are especially important at a time when scientists are completing “the first survey of the entire human genome”—a scientific milestone that promises to enhance our understanding of the ways inherited traits influence who we are and what we become. The readings in this chapter raise important questions about the relationship between our genetic inheritance and our identity. In doing so, they increase our awareness of the factors that shape not only how we see ourselves and others but also the value we place on our observations.

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1. *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law* by Martha Minow. Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 3.

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## What Do We Do with a Variation?

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### Reading 1

James Berry raises important questions about the ways we respond to differences in a poem entitled “What Do We Do with a Variation?”

What do we do with a difference?  
Do we stand and discuss its oddity  
or do we ignore it?

Do we shut our eyes to it  
or poke it with a stick?  
Do we clobber it to death?

Do we move around it in rage  
and enlist the rage of others?  
Do we will it to go away?

Do we look at it in awe  
or purely in wonderment?  
Do we work for it to disappear?

Do we pass it stealthily  
Or change route away from it?  
Do we will it to become like ourselves?

What do we do with a difference?  
Do we communicate to it,  
let application acknowledge it  
for barriers to fall down?!

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## CONNECTIONS

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What is the message of Berry’s poem? Imagine a poem that described how we are alike. What might the message of such a poem be?

Noy Chou, a high school student who was born in Cambodia and reared in the United States wrote the following stanza as part of a poem entitled “You Have to Live in Somebody Else’s Country to Understand.” It explains how she feels

about being perceived as different.

What is it like to be an outsider?

What is it like to sit in the class where everyone has blond hair  
and you have black hair?

What is it like when the teacher says, "Whoever wasn't born  
here raise your hand."

And you are the only one.

Then, when you raise your hand, everybody looks at you and  
makes fun of you.

You have to live in somebody else's country to understand.<sup>2</sup>

What does the student add to your understanding of James Berry's question?  
How would you answer his question?

How did you learn which differences matter and which do not? Record your response in a journal. A journal can be a way of documenting the process of thinking. For author Joan Didion and others, it is also a way of examining ideas. She explains, "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means." You may find it helpful to use a journal to explore not only the ideas raised in this chapter but also those in the chapters that follow.

In the *Guide to Choosing to Participate*, available from Facing History and Ourselves, Jesus Colón describes how real and perceived differences shaped a decision he made on a late-night subway ride in New York City in the 1950s. A young white woman on the train was struggling with two small children, a baby, and a suitcase. Colón wanted to help her but feared her response. Would she accept his help? Or would she see him as a threat because he was black and Puerto Rican? Colón called his essay "Little Things Are Big." What do you think the title of Colón's essay means? How does the title relate to the question Barry asks in his poem?

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1. "What Do We Do with a Variation?" from *When I Dance* by James Berry, Harcourt Brace. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Inc.

2. "You Have to Live in Somebody Else's Country to Understand" by Noy Chou. In *A World of Difference Teacher/Student Guide*, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and Facing History and Ourselves, 1986, Group and Individual Identity, pp. 8-9.

## Eye of the Beholder

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### Reading 2

*The Twilight Zone*, a popular TV show from 1959 through 1965, blended science fiction with fantasy and horror. The action often took place in familiar settings and featured characters that seemed quite ordinary. Their stories, however, were far from ordinary because they lived in an imaginary world just beyond our own—"the twilight zone." In creating the series, producer and writer Rod Serling hoped it would prompt thoughtful discussions of social issues. "Eye of the Beholder," one of Serling's most provocative episodes, offers an answer to James Berry's question: What do you do with a difference? (Page 2).

A video of the episode (22 minutes) is available at video stores or may be borrowed from the Facing History Resource Center. If possible, watch the episode as a class. If you are unable to see it, the following paragraphs provide a synopsis of the story.

Meet the patient in room 307, Janet Tyler. A rigid mask of gauze bandages covers her face. Only her voice and her hands seem alive as she pleads with a nurse to describe the weather, the sky, the daylight, clouds—none of which she can see. The nurse, visible only by her hands, answers kindly but briefly.

"When will they take the bandages off?" Janet asks urgently. "How much longer?"

"When they decide they can fix your face," the nurse replies.

"It's pretty bad, isn't it? Ever since I was little, people have turned away when they looked at me. . . . The very first thing I can remember is another little child screaming when she saw me. I never wanted to be beautiful, to look like a painting. I just wanted people not to turn away."

With a consoling pat, the nurse moves away.

A doctor enters Janet Tyler's room. We see only his hands, his shadow, his back as he looks out a window. Janet questions him with a mixture of fear and hope. When will he remove the bandages? Will her face be normal?

The doctor tries to comfort her. His voice is gentle. Perhaps this time the treatment will be successful. But he also issues a warning. He reminds her that she has had treatment after treatment—eleven in all. That is the limit. If this effort fails, she can have no more.

"Each of us is afforded as much opportunity as possible to fit in with society," he says. "In your case, think of the time and effort the

state has expended, to make you look—”

“To look like what, doctor?”

“Well, to look normal, the way you’d like to look. . . . You know, there are many others who share your misfortune, who look much as you do. One of the alternatives, just in case the treatment is not successful, is to allow you to move into a special area in which people of your kind have congregated.”

Janet twists away from the doctor. “People of my kind? Congregated? You mean segregated! You mean imprisoned! You are talking about a ghetto—a ghetto for freaks!” Her voice rises in a crescendo of anger.

“Miss Tyler!” the doctor remonstrates sharply. “You’re not being rational. You know you couldn’t live any kind of life among normal people.” His words are harsh, but his voice is sad and patient.

Janet refuses to be mollified. “Who are these normal people?” she asks accusingly. “Who decides what is normal? Who is this state that makes these rules? The state is not God! The state does not have the right to make ugliness a crime. . . . Please,” she begs. “Please take off the bandages. Please take them off! Please help me.”

Reluctantly the doctor agrees, and the staff prepares for the removal. Bit by bit, he peels the gauze away. She sees at first only the light, then the shadowy forms of the doctor and nurses. As the last strip of gauze comes off, the doctor and nurses draw back in dismay. “No change!” the doctor exclaims. “No change at all!”

Janet Tyler gasps and raises her face. She has wide-set eyes, delicate brows, fine skin, and regular features, framed by wavy blonde hair. She begins to sob and struggle away from the nurses.

“Turn on the lights,” the doctor orders. “Needle, please!”

As the lights come on, the doctor and nurses are clearly visible for the first time. Piglike snouts dominate their lopsided, misshapen features. Their mouths are twisted, their jowls sag.

Janet runs through the hospital in a panic, pursued by nurses and orderlies. She passes other staff and patients. Each face is a little different but all share the same basic pattern—snouts, jowls, and all. She flings open a door and freezes in sudden shock. The doctor and another man are in this room. She sinks down by a chair and hides her face in fear.

“Miss Tyler, Miss Tyler, don’t be afraid,” the doctor urges.

“He’s only a representative of the group you are going to live with. He won’t hurt you. . . . Miss Tyler, this is Walter Smith.”

Walter Smith steps forward, and Janet Tyler cringes away. He

too has regular features, lit by a friendly smile. A stray lock of dark hair curls over his forehead. “We have a lovely village and wonderful people,” he tells Janet. “In a little while, a very little while, you’ll feel a sense of great belonging.”

She looks at his face. “Why do we have to look like this?” she murmurs.

“I don’t know, I really don’t,” he replies with sadness. “But there is a very old saying—beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Try to think of that, Miss Tyler. Say it over and over to yourself. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

He holds out his hand to her. Slowly, hesitantly, she takes it, and they walk away together, through a corridor lined with pig-faced spectators.<sup>1</sup>

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## CONNECTIONS

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List the words and phrases in the episode that you found significant. Be sure to identify the person who utters those words. (For example: Tyler: “Who decides what is normal?”) What does your list suggest about the way difference is understood in this society?

Who in Janet Tyler’s society determines what is “normal”? Who is “beautiful”? What is “rational”? What is the source of that power? Why is “ugliness” a crime? While this show is fiction, it raises important questions about images in our own society. Where do we get our ideas about beauty? How do we learn what is “normal”? What part does our family play? Our peers? What is the role of the media? To what extent do media images shape our standards of beauty? To what extent do those images reflect the views of society as a whole?

Our standards of beauty, ideas about difference, even notions of what is normal are shaped to a large extent by culture—the attitudes, values, and beliefs of a society. To find out how standards of beauty have changed over the years, you may wish to check movies made in the 20th century. Works of art can also offer clues to standards. So can toys—particularly dolls. For example, what do “Barbie” dolls suggest about our standards of beauty? What does your research suggest about the idea that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”? About the way standards change? What events or ideas may have prompted those changes?

Describe the relationship between Janet Tyler and the doctor. Why does the doctor seem to have so much power and Tyler so little? Who do you think has power over the doctor?

How do the people in Tyler's society answer the question: What do you do with a difference? Where do you think people in that society got their ideas about difference? How do they learn which differences matter and which do not? Where do you get your ideas about difference? How do you learn which differences matter and which do not?

What part do the labels people place on differences—"disabled," "dysfunctional," "abnormal"—play in the way we view ourselves and others? According to an old saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me." Is it true? Are labels harmless? Do words hurt?

Medicine is generally viewed as a healing profession and science as a body of knowledge that advances society. What is being "healed" in this society? How is society being "advanced"? What does the episode suggest about the relationship between physicians and other scientists and the society in which they live? For example, what does the episode suggest about the way physicians and scientists promote the values of their society? What does it suggest about the way the values of the larger society influence their work?

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the television networks tried to avoid controversial issues. In a 1959 interview, Serling stated, "I think it's criminal that we are not permitted to make dramatic note of social evils that exist, of controversial themes, as they are inherent in our society. I think it's ridiculous that drama, which by its very nature should make a comment on those things which affect our daily lives, is in a position, at least in terms of television, of not being able to take a stand."<sup>2</sup> To what extent does Serling's criticism of television in the 1950s and 1960s hold true today? What "social evils" do TV dramas confront today? What "evils" are seldom discussed? For more information about the producer and the series that he created, see *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man* by Gordon Sander.

Because Serling's programs were science fiction, he had more freedom to deal with the issues of social injustice. To what social inequalities might this episode refer? How would you adapt the "Eye of the Beholder" for today's world? What changes would you make in the story?

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1. Adapted from "Eye of the Beholder," (Nov. 11, 1960) *The Twilight Zone* and *The Twilight Zone Companion* by Marc Scott Zicree, 2nd Edition. Bantam Books, 1982, 1989, pp.144–145.

2. *The Mike Wallace Show*, Rod Serling, October 1, 1959, CBS.

## Beyond Classification

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### Reading 3

Rod Serling used fiction to explore the negative consequences of the labels we attach to ourselves and others. For many Americans, that kind of discrimination is a part of their daily life. Stereotyping obscures the reality of who they are and what they may become.

According to many psychologists, although it is natural to view others as representatives of groups, stereotypes are offensive. They are more than a label or judgment about an individual based on the characteristics of a group. Stereotyping reduces individuals to categories. Therefore stereotyping can lead to prejudice and discrimination. The word *prejudice* means pre-judge. We pre-judge when we have an opinion about a person based on his or her membership in a particular group. A prejudice attaches value to differences to the benefit of one's own group and at the expense of other groups. Discrimination occurs when prejudices are translated into actions. Not every stereotype results in discrimination. But all stereotypes tend to divide a society into *us* and *them*.

Dalton Conley understands the power of stereotypes. He writes:

I am not your typical middle-class white male. I am middle class, despite the fact that my parents had no money; I am white, but I grew up in an inner-city housing project where most everyone was black or Hispanic. I enjoyed a range of privileges that were denied my neighbors but that most Americans take for granted. In fact, my childhood was like a social science experiment: Find out what being middle class really means by raising a kid from a so-called good family in a so-called bad neighborhood. Define whiteness by putting a light-skinned kid in the midst of a community of color. If the exception proves the rule, I'm that exception.

Ask any African American to list the adjectives that describe them and they will likely put black or African American at the top of the list. Ask someone of European descent the same question and white will be far down the list, if it's there at all. Not so for me. I've studied whiteness the way I would a foreign language. I know its grammar, its parts of speech; I know the subtleties of its idioms, its vernacular words and phrases to which the native speaker has never given a second thought. There's an old saying that you never really know your own language until you study another. It's the same with race and class.



In fact, race and class are nothing more than a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world, to organize our reality. . . . One of [my mother's favorite stories] was how I had wanted a baby sister so badly that I kidnapped a black child in the playground of the housing complex. She told this story each time my real sister, Alexandra, and I were standing, arms crossed, facing away from each other after some squabble or fistfight. The moral of the story for my mother was that I should love my sister, since I had wanted to have her so desperately. The message I took away, however, was one of race. I was fascinated that I could have been oblivious to something that years later feels so natural, so innate as race does.<sup>1</sup>

Diana Chang was born in New York City and reared in China. After returning to the United States, she wrote a poem called "Saying Yes."

"Are you Chinese?"  
"Yes."

"American?"  
"Yes."

"Really Chinese?"  
"No . . . not quite."

"Really American?"  
"Well, actually, you see . . ."

But I would rather say  
yes

Not neither-nor,  
not maybe,  
but both, and not only

The homes I've had,  
the ways I am

I'd rather say  
twice,  
yes.<sup>2</sup>

Ifemola J. Nwokoye has lived in the United States and Nigeria. Her mother is a white American and her father a Nigerian. In both nations, people regard her as "different." She writes:

In our society, being both black and white is a difficult thing to deal with; you learn from the beginning that you are supposed to be a member of some specific group and so will never be accepted for who you really are. You are born into a complex world that aims to simplify things by making divisions between races. In America, people are often unwilling to accept the idea of a biracial person. In our everyday lives we are constantly confronted with situations in which we must define who we are. We check the boxes marked “white,” “black,” on our college forms, but there is no space marked “multiracial” yet. There is no place for me.

It is also twice as hard coming from two very distinct cultures—Nigerian and American. In each society I am treated in extremely different ways; yet, in both, I am identified by color. In America, I’m seen as black. I remember the time a schoolmate asked a friend of mine why she was sharing her snack with a black girl. I recall the icy stares of the ladies behind the perfume and make-up counters of every department store, their plastic smiles melting to frowns as they watched my every move. Most vividly, however, I remember how my math teacher would repeatedly confuse me with the only other black girl in the class, even until the end of the year—his belief apparently being that all black people look alike. Through all my experiences living in this culture, it has been a struggle to maintain my self worth.

Ironically, in Nigeria the situation is absolutely reversed. Because I am so much lighter than most people there, I am given a higher status and considered a model for others. I am treated with the utmost respect and admiration because in their eyes, I resemble a white person. What does remain consistent in both cultures is that I am not considered a biracial person; I’m still being labeled as one or the other.

I lived in Nigeria for the first seven years of my life and have visited on and off since my parents’ divorce. As a child in Nigeria, I wasn’t fully aware of people’s perceptions of me, but I had a sense that I was somehow “better” than most of the children I knew, and that I had something special that they lacked. I remember being the teacher’s favorite; the other students would get beaten, while I never experienced a lash of my teacher’s cane. And I recall sitting in the front seat of my dad’s car during a traffic jam. The little hands and noses of the village children would press hard against the window of the car, as if to penetrate the barrier of glass to steal a precious part of me. The society conditioned me to view myself as superior.

Drawing on my experience in America and in Nigeria, I have

reluctantly come to the conclusion that there is no place in either of my cultures where I can be accepted for who I am. I think of the irony in both experiences, and I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

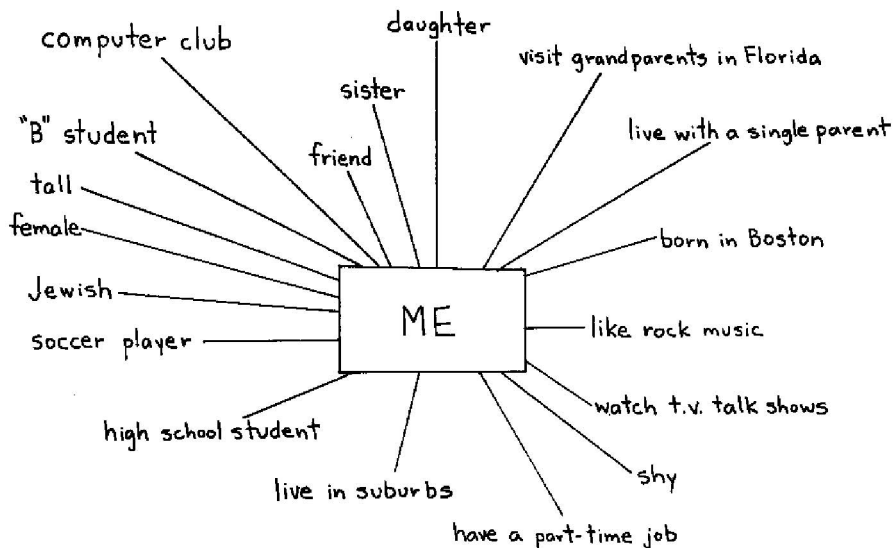
I know that I must ignore the limitations and labels society places on me, and instead, realize that I am an individual with unique insight, able to encompass the best of both worlds. I refuse to see my biracial identity as confining, and I am determined not to be defeated by other people's narrow vision. Increasingly I am able to get strength from my inner voice and accept my own perspective on who I am. I now take pride in my two cultures.<sup>3</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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Create an identity chart for Dalton Conley. The diagram below is an example of such a chart. It contains the words or phrases people attach to themselves as well as the ones that society gives them. Begin with the words or phrases that he uses to describe himself. Then add the labels others might attach to him. Create a similar chart for Ifemola J. Nwokoye. What words or phrases does she use to describe herself? What words or phrases might others use to describe her? How are the two charts alike? What differences seem most striking? What part have labels played in shaping each identity?

Construct an identity chart for yourself, much like the ones you made for Conley and Nwokoye. After you have completed your chart, compare it to those



of your classmates. What do you have in common? To what extent is each chart unique? What part have labels played in shaping your identity? What other factors have affected who you are and what you may become?

Our identity—our sense of who we are and what we might become—is more than a set of labels. It is also shaped by our philosophy—our ideas, values, and beliefs about the world and our place in it. What ideas about self and others have shaped the philosophy of each of the individuals quoted in this reading?

How does society shape our identity? To what extent does your answer explain why Ifemola Nwokoye believes that the identity crisis everyone faces is “doubly hard” for biracial children? Who else in American society may confront similar challenges in forging an identity?

Compare and contrast Diana Chang’s experiences with those of Ifemola Nwokoye. How do their histories shape their attitudes and beliefs?

A Facing History and Ourselves student who dislikes being labeled was surprised to discover that her classmates had similar feelings. She writes:

I had always known that I didn’t fit into boxes and labels neatly, but it was not until all of us in class looked carefully at our identities that I realized that there were times when we all couldn’t fit into a box: racially, economically, religiously, or politically. That day we put away facades, superficial stereotypes, and imposed labels and came to the understanding that we are all crossbreeds in some way. . . . Once we were able to understand our own identities, we were better able to understand those of others.

How do the student’s comments explain why Dalton Conley believes that “race and class are nothing more than a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world, to organize our reality”? How do the comments explain why Ifemola Nwokoye has come to believe that she must “ignore the limitations and labels society places on me, and instead, realize that I am an individual with unique insight, able to encompass the best of both worlds”? How do the student’s comments explain the way Nwokoye views her heritage?

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1. *Honky* by Dalton Conley. University of California Press, 2000, pp. xi–xii.

2. Copyright © 1985 by Diana Chang.

3. *Of Many Colors: Portraits of Multiracial Families* was copyrighted ©1997 by Peggy Gillespie and was published in 1998 by the University of Massachusetts Press. pp. 137–138.

## **“What Is Your Race?”**

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### Reading 4

The difficulties many Americans have with labels are reflected in their responses to the nation’s census. Every ten years, the United States government conducts a count of people living in the nation. A census is more than a count, however. It is a statistical portrait of the nation that provides detailed information about who we are and how we live. Every census has asked about race and every census has defined race differently.

As the 2000 census approached, many Americans urged the government to abandon questions dealing with race. Others favored the idea of adding a new box to the census form labeled “Multiracial.” The government responded to the criticism by allowing individuals to check more than one “racial” box. After receiving his census questionnaire, journalist Courtland Milloy of the *Washington Post* wrote:

A question on my U.S. Census survey asked: What is your race?

The possible answers have been expanded this year to 17 and include space to write in “some other race,” such as “cablinasian,” as golfer Tiger Woods likes to call himself.

A Post colleague, who is white, said he was going to check the black box—just for the hell of it, I suppose.

“What are they going to do, put me in jail?” he asked.

I called the census help line to find out and, sure enough, there was a button to press just for people with “questions about the meaning of race.”

“The concept of race reflects self-identification,” a recorded voice said. “It does not indicate any clear-cut scientific definition which is biological or genetic in reference. The data for race represent self-classification by people according to the race or races with which they most closely identify.” If that didn’t make sense, try figuring out whether you are “Spanish/Hispanic/Latino” or just a plain old Chicano, Puerto Rican, or Cuban.

At any rate, my white colleague would not go to jail for being black. As far as the Census Bureau is concerned, if a white person feels closely identified with blacks, so be it. He can be black for a day (or a decade, as the case may be).

It did make me wonder though: How do we really know who’s who out there? And does anybody really care? In 1995, the Post,

Harvard University and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a survey in which most white people expressed the belief that blacks made up 23.8 percent of the U.S. population, nearly twice what the census says.

Maybe they were right. Maybe what they were saying is that they realize that there is no such thing as a "white" person, that we are all "colored" to one degree or another with blood from ancestors who can't be accounted for but which we all know have their origins in Africa.

The race category on the census form that really caught my eye was the one that supposedly applied to me. It came with three names attached: "Black, African Am., or Negro." I thought all of those were separate categories, with African Am. being some kind of airline.

African American, on the other hand, is the name most "people of color" prefer, according to recent opinion polls; black is no longer the in word. And speaking of the n-word, what about all of the black rappers who go by that? I can already smell an undercount.

As for "Negro," I hadn't seen one of them since 1968.

Race. What a mess.

Seeing all of the official racial distinctions based on a certain skin tone here and particular texture of hair there was to bear witness to a nation gone bonkers over a figment of its imagination.

Race, as we all know by now, is a biological fiction. It simply doesn't exist. Genetically, human beings are 99.9 percent the same. But we sure do make an awful lot of that 0.1 percent, mostly a cesspool of racism.

Last week, the U.S. Census Monitoring Board and the accounting firm of Price, Waterhouse, Coopers released a study estimating that certain metropolitan areas stand to lose \$11 billion if the bureau repeats the undercount of 1990. African Americans were undercounted by about 4.4 percent, and Latinos were undercounted by 5 percent, the study noted.

A national campaign is now underway to get African Americans and Latinos to fill out the census forms. But getting an accurate count of people is one thing; counting by race is something else.

What is the point?

A 1992 poll by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that most Americans, including blacks and whites, have virtually the same concerns, hopes, and dreams. We all want to support our families, send our children to good schools and have

adequate health care for the elderly.

Blacks are as likely as whites to invoke the virtues of individual responsibility, according to a Gallop poll, with more blacks than whites believing that black people must work harder to solve their problems and improve the lives of their families and themselves.

Earlier surveys by the Census Bureau found that blacks are the most cohesive group in the United States when it comes to reporting racial data. Only a handful of blacks report themselves as whites, compared with 18 percent of Latinos, the surveys show.

However, this race-based cohesion obscures some fundamental truths about our common humanity. And by emphasizing petty distinctions, we sometimes overlook similarities that could form the basis for powerful anti-racist coalitions.

One reason for the racial count in the census is supposedly to give the government a measuring stick to monitor civil rights violations, such as discriminatory lending practices by banks and mortgage companies. If we know how many blacks are living in an area, the theory goes, we can tell if they are being represented proportionally in politics, education and employment.

However, this leaves us with a most destructive paradox: By combating racism this way, we also give credence to the false concept of race, which is at racism's root.

And yet, not to acknowledge race is to allow the forces of racism to go unchecked.

What a mess.<sup>1</sup>

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## CONNECTIONS

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A paradox consists of two true statements that seem to contradict one another. What is the paradox that Courtland Milloy sees in the 2000 census? Why does Milloy regard that paradox as “destructive”? To what extent do paradoxes like the one he describes foster illusions? Allow some to deny the reality of not only racism but also the diversity of the American people?

On the 2000 census, three of every 10 Americans described themselves as members of one of four minority groups—African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos. Approximately seven of every 10 Americans considered themselves white. The 2000 census provides no information on whether others view a given American as white, Latino, or something else. For the first time in American history, the 2000 census recognized the way

individuals defined themselves as an important piece of information. If race is becoming a matter of “self-identification,” what word or words describe the reality of racism—the negative ways some people view themselves and others based on skin color?

To what extent does the government’s response to criticisms of its racial categories address the issues raised by critics? What are the implications of its response for individuals? For various groups within the nation? For the nation as a whole? Why do you think the government provided a button on its “census help line” just for people with “questions about the meaning of race”?

In the introduction to this chapter, Martha Minow noted that “when we simplify and sort, we focus on some traits rather than others, and we assign consequences to the presence and absence of the traits we make significant. We ask, ‘What’s the new baby?’—and we expect as an answer, boy or girl. That answer, for most of history, has spelled consequences for the roles and opportunities available to that individual.” What traits does the census make significant? What consequences does it assign to the presence or absence of those traits?

For additional readings about identity and race, see Chapter 1 of *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*.

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1. © 2000 *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2000, p. C01. Reprinted with permission.



## “Passing”

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### Reading 5

For *The Twilight Zone*, Rod Serling created an episode which suggests beauty is “in the eye of the beholder” (Reading 2). Shirlee Taylor Haizlip believes that racial designations are also “in the eye of the beholder.”

In *The Sweeter the Juice*, Haizlip describes her relatives by detailing her search for “lost” members of her mother’s family. Haizlip’s mother was separated from her closest relatives at the age of four. After the child’s mother died, distant cousins reared her. She grew up thinking of herself as an African American. She also grew up wondering what had happened to her father, grandmother, uncle, aunts, sister, brothers, and cousins. They all “vanished” after her mother’s death.

It took Shirlee Haizlip 15 years to locate her mother’s missing relatives and learn their stories. Each had chosen to “pass” as white. In a magazine article in 1995, she reflects on the response to her book and what she learned from her research.

The anthropologist Ashley Montagu was long an advocate of abolishing race as a concept. He never used the term except in quotation marks. Last year Dr. Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, a geneticist at Stanford University, confirmed that DNA is a potpourri of genes deriving from myriad ethnic sources. And Jonathan Beckwith, a microbiologist at Harvard Medical School, argues that scientists cannot measure genetic differences between the races.

Yet “race,” that socially constructed entity, was the reason for the breach in my mother’s family. Although the two sisters had the same parents and skin color, one lived all her life as a black woman, and the other lived hers as a white woman, keeping her black heritage a secret from her white husband, their only child, and their grandchildren. The sister was not alone in the choices she made. My mother’s other siblings and the rest of her family had also abandoned their race. They acted on the complexly simple infinitive “to be,” and in fact they “were,” and their descendants still “are” . . . “white.”

Some would say these relatives have “one drop” of black blood, so they are in fact black. But except in Louisiana all of the “one drop” racial laws have been rescinded since 1986. So if you look white, marry white, live in a white community, attend a white church and a white school, join white associations, have white looking children and grandchildren, you are “white,” as defined by the majority in this country.

Hundreds of thousands of blacks passed for white, starting in the days of slavery and continuing into the present. Because of the secret nature of the transaction, no records were kept of the exact numbers who created new places for themselves in American society. Population experts tell us that large numbers of black people are “missing.” I doubt that they were abducted by aliens.

According to Carla K. Bradshaw, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Washington, “Passing is the word used to describe an attempt to achieve acceptability by claiming membership in some desired groups while denying other racial elements in oneself thought to be undesirable. The concept of passing uses the imagery of camouflage, of concealing true identity or group membership and gaining false access. Concealment of ‘true’ identity is considered synonymous with compromised integrity and impostorship. . . . If an ideal world existed free from the psychology of dominance, where racial differences carried no stigma and racial purity was irrelevant, the concept of passing would have no meaning. In fact, passing of any kind loses meaning in the context of true egalitarianism. . . .”

Some geneticists claim that as many as 80 percent of black Americans have white bloodlines and that a surprising 95 percent of white Americans have some black ancestry. These statistics are based not on guesswork but on the direct clinical examination of nucleotides and microsatellites, genetic components common to all human blood. Dr. Luigi Cavalli-Sforza tells us . . . that modern Europeans (the ancestors of America’s immigrants) have long been a mixed population whose genetic ancestry is 65 percent Asian and 35 percent African. There has never been any such thing as a “Caucasoid” gene, nor is there such a creature as a “pure” white or black American. . . .

Just from looking at archival records of my family, I know that every census has measured race differently. In different periods the same people in my family were listed as mulatto, black, or white. The designation could depend on the eye of the beholder or the neighborhood where they lived. In the meantime, their neighbors, their co-workers, and their communities at large saw them as either black or white, depending on who decided what.<sup>1</sup>

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## CONNECTIONS

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How have members of Shirlee Haizlip’s family answered the question: What do you do with a difference? What are the consequences of their responses?

What is “passing”? How do myths and misinformation about “race” explain the practice? How does the fact that thousands of “blacks” have successfully “passed” as “whites” reinforce the idea that “race” is a “social invention” rather than a scientific description of human differences? Shirlee Haizlip believes that “passing” is a way of coping with the legacy of slavery. To what extent may “passing” also be a mechanism for survival during the years of “Jim Crow laws”—laws that isolated and humiliated African Americans?

Some anthropologists believe that the first step in eliminating racism is separating our need to belong from the dangerous temptation to hate others. What is the connection between the two? How would you go about separating them? The film *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* reveals some of the difficulties in resolving racial conflicts. Copies of the film and a study guide prepared by Facing History and Ourselves are available from Facing History and Ourselves resource centers.

In her novel *Paradise*, Toni Morrison meditates on questions of difference. A number of readers have noticed that she never mentions the “race” of several women in the book. When asked why, Morrison said she wanted “to have the reader believe—finally—after you know everything about these women, their interior lives, their past, their behavior—that the one piece of information you don’t know, which is, the race, may not, in fact matter. And when you do know it, what do you know?” How would you answer her question?

What does Shirlee Haizlip mean when she claims that racial designations are in “the eye of the beholder.” How have classifications changed from one census to the next? Find out what prompted those changes.

Two videotaped interviews, available from Facing History and Ourselves, provide insights into the impact of racism and antisemitism on identity in the mid-20th century. *Facing Evil* features author Maya Angelou reading her adaptation of Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask,” to reveal the hidden pain that she and many other African Americans experience daily during the years of segregation. *Childhood Memories* features sociologist Nechma Tec’s account of her childhood in Nazi-occupied Poland. Passing for her was a life-or-death matter. She had to hide her Jewish identity to avoid the death camps.

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1. “Passing” by Shirlee Taylor Haizlip. Reprinted by permission of AMERICAN HERITAGE magazine, a division of Forbes, Inc., © January/February, 1995, pp. 47-49.

## Race and Racism

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### Reading 6

If race is a “social invention,” a “biological fiction” as Shirlee Haizlip believes, what is racism? When asked to explain the term, Lisa Delpit—a scholar, a teacher, and the author of an influential book about race and education entitled *Other People’s Children*—expressed her ideas in the form of a letter to her nine-year-old daughter. It says in part:

My Dearest Maya,

You are amazing. Your golden brown skin, your deep black “ackee” eyes, your wiry, gold-flecked hair that seems persistently unwilling to stay contained in any manner of braid or twist I devise. I listen in amazement at your interpretations of the world and laugh at your corny nine-year-old’s jokes. I can’t fathom how you’ve managed to turn those little baby digits I loved to kiss into the long, graceful fingers—adorned at the tips in blue and purple designer colors—that now dance so expertly across your violin strings. Yes, you are amazing.

As much as I think of you as my gift to the world, I am constantly made aware that there are those who see you otherwise.

Although you don’t realize it yet, it is solely because of your color that the police officers in our predominantly white neighborhood stop you to “talk” when you walk our dog. You think they’re being friendly, but when you tell me that one of their first questions is always, “Do you live around here?” I know that they question your right to be here, that somehow your being here threatens their sense of security.

I didn’t tell you exactly what was going on when we took that trip to the Georgia mountains. You and your friend played outside the restaurant while his mom and I visited the ladies room. Later, the two of you told us that a white man and his wife—he with a minister’s collar—stared at you “with mean looks” and made monkey sounds and gestures. You asked why they did that, and I told you that some people were just not nice. I made you promise to come to me immediately whenever an adult was giving you trouble.

I did not have to be told much when I was your age. When I was growing up in Louisiana in the 1950s and 1960s, the color lines were very clearly drawn. I followed my mother to the back entrance of the doctor’s office, marked “colored.” I knew which

water fountain I was supposed to drink from. On the bus ride to my all-black school, I watched white children walk to schools just two or three blocks from my house.

In large part, my childhood years were wrapped in the warm cocoon of family and community who all knew each other and looked out for one another. However, I remember clearly my racing heart, my sweaty-palmed fear of the white policemen who entered my father's small restaurant one night and hit him with nightsticks, the helpless terror when there were rumors in our school yard that the Ku Klux Klan would be riding, the anxiety of knowing my college-aged foster sister had joined the civil-rights marchers in a face-off against the white policemen and their dogs. And, I remember, my Maya, the death of your grandfather when I was seven, who died of kidney failure because the "colored" ward wasn't yet allowed the use of the brand-new dialysis machine.

Your world is very different, at least on its surface. In many ways now is a more confusing time to live. In *Seeing a Colorblind Future*, Patricia Williams says we are saturated with insistent emblems of brotherhood—multicolored children singing "We Are the World;" television shows with the obligatory child of color; teachers' adamant statements that "we are all the same" and "color doesn't matter." Yet, attacks on rectifying past discrimination are made unabashedly under the flag of "color-blindness," white hate crimes are on the upswing, many communities and schools are more segregated than they were 20 years ago. I receive at least a call a week from frantic African-American parents living all over the country who are terrified at the hostility shown regularly by the schools to their brown children.

As any mother would, I have a great need to protect you, but it is hard to know how. My childhood experience was different from yours. As was the case in many African-American Louisiana families, our family was a rainbow of colors from chocolate-brown brunettes to peach-colored blondes. (The history of that reality is a story we'll need to talk about later.) I was the light-skinned, freckled, red-headed child, who always got the sunburn whenever we went to the beach. Because of my coloring, I had another role, too. When traveling by car, African Americans were not allowed to use the restrooms or other facilities white travelers took for granted. Black families had to develop all sorts of strategies to make a road trip workable. When it was time for a rest stop, one of our ruses was to pull around to the side of the service station and send in the one who looked most like white to get the key. Then, outside of the attendant's view, everyone

would use the facility.

Decades later, when you were an infant, your aunt and I drove to Mississippi. I had not made that trip for many years, and although segregation was officially over, I still felt uneasy at the rest stops. Any African American would. There were Confederate flags printed on every possible souvenir in the gift shops, and restaurants and gas stations were filled with burly, white, cigarette-smoking men with gun racks mounted in their rear windows. Heart racing, cradling my beautiful brown baby, I suddenly realized I did not know how to protect you from the vicious hatred in some of the eyes that stared at us. Or, for that matter, from a society whose very structure privileges some and marginalizes you.

I have tried to protect you from the disease of internalized racism—of seeing yourself through the eyes of those who disdain you—that infects the souls of so many of our young people. When I was in my segregated, all-black elementary school, we were told by teachers and parents that we had to excel, that we had to “do better than” any white kids because the world was already on their side. When your cousin Joey was in high school, I remember berating him for getting a “D” in chemistry. His response was, “What do you expect of me, the white kids get “C’s.” Recently a colleague tried to help an African-American middle-schooler to learn multiplication. The student looked up at the teacher and said, “Why are you trying to teach me this? Black people don’t multiply. Multiplication is for white people.” You know, Maya, I think that may be the biggest challenge you and other brown children will face—not believing the limits that others place upon you.

It is not easy to know how to keep you believing in yourself, even believing in your abundant radiance and beauty. I know there was a time when you couldn’t understand why I wouldn’t allow you to wear a white character mask at Halloween, or why I told your grandmother to stop sending you white dolls.

It’s hard for a mother to know just how far to go with principles, though. And I think you helped me develop a somewhat less strident attitude in your own brilliant, unpredictable way. I remember refusing to buy a white Barbie—even though the store didn’t have the black one with equivalent turn-colors-in-the-sun hair. You were not happy with me, even though I explained at length the reasons regarding not bringing dolls into our family who looked like they would not possibly be a part of our family. “You don’t see any of your white friends begging for a black Barbie doll, do you?” I asked, adding what I

thought would be the final word. But several days later in another conversation, you asked, "Mom, do you have any white friends?" "Of course, I do, Maya, you know that," I answered. "Do you like your white friends, Mom?" "What a question, Maya, if they're my friends, then I like them." "Well, Mom," you delivered your knock-out punch, "my black Barbies want some white friends, too." Well, my dear, from that moment on your doll collection became interracial.

It is so hard to know how both to engender the possibility of color not mattering—where people will truly be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character—and to give you understanding that will create a protective armor for the real world of racial bias that exists around you. I don't want to limit you, to have you always on edge (as I sometimes feel) questioning the intentions of white playmates or teachers. Decisions based on color are so pervasive, and people of color so demonized in this country—though racist comments are often thinly camouflaged by such terms as "teen-aged mother," "the criminal element," "welfare cheaters," "drug dealers," "school drop-outs," "at-risk students"—that understanding societal realities does not come as easily as it did in my childhood.

Yes, Maya, I really do want to believe that a color-blind future is possible. I never express my doubts when one of the parents at your school calls at the last minute to invite you to a birthday party, adding that "Suzie [whom you hardly know and seldom play with, but who is the only other black girl in your class] is coming."

I am proud yet torn when I hear you come to some understanding on your own. Like when you were seven and playing with a little friend who had brought his cowboy and Indian figures, and you said, "OK, I'll be the Indians and you be the bad guys." Or when you went bike-riding with a friend and came back upset that "a white boy"—as opposed to just "a boy"—said he was going to hurt you. Or when you asked me why there weren't any black teachers in your school and added that you hoped that the school "didn't think black people weren't as smart as white people." When I told you that you needed to talk to the principal about that, you went right up to her the next day and asked your question. She, to her credit, took your question seriously and explained that they would like to find more black teachers, but that the salaries the school paid made it hard to attract them. Not one to let anyone off easy, you immediately came back with, "Well have you tried Morehouse?"

I am pleased that you have realized that brown skin is good. Yet I am saddened that you cannot be innocent to the unfortunate realities surrounding you. You have understood that the color line lives.<sup>1</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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What adjectives does Lisa Delpit use to describe the racism she experienced as a child? How did it shape her attitudes toward white Americans? What changes have taken place since her childhood? How have those changes affected the way she sees herself and others? The way she is rearing her daughter?

Create an identity chart for Lisa Delpit as a young girl. Begin with the words or phrases that Delpit uses to describe herself. Then add the labels others might attach to her. Create similar charts for Delpit as an adult and for her daughter. What words or phrases does Delpit use to describe Maya? What words or phrases might Maya use to describe herself? What words or phrases might Maya use to describe her mother?

How are the three charts alike? What differences seem most striking? What part has race played in shaping the identity of both mother and daughter? What part has racism played in shaping their identity? Compare these charts to your own identity chart. What do you have in common with the Delpits? What part has race played in shaping your identity? What part has racism played?

Write a working definition of the word *race*. A working definition is one that grows as you read, reflect, and discuss ideas. Begin your definition by explaining what the word *race* means to you. Then add the meanings implied in each of the readings you have completed in this chapter. Next create a working definition of the word *racism*. Keep in mind that the ending *ism* refers to a doctrine or principle. Can you be a racist if you do not believe in the concept of “race”? Expand your definitions as you continue reading.

How does Delpit define the term *internalized racism*? Why does she call it a “disease”? Based on your own reading and experiences and those of your friends, how would you define the term? What would you add to her definition? What would you change?

Why do you think Delpit tells her daughter that “in many ways now is a more confusing time to live”? In what sense is it more confusing today? In her view, how does that confusion shape the way the young African Americans she knows view their identity?

Although Lisa Delpit’s letter is addressed to her daughter, it was written for a wider audience. She later told an interviewer that she wanted to capture the “torment that I, her mother, face each time I am confronted with racism’s ugly face.” Why do you think she chose to voice her views in such a personal way? What feelings and emotions would have been more difficult to express in an



essay that takes a more scholarly approach to the question? Write an essay explaining your views of racism. If you choose to write your essay as a letter, think about to whom it should be addressed—your parents, a teacher, a younger brother or sister, or perhaps Lisa Delpit and her daughter Maya. Keep a copy of your essay in your journal or a portfolio so that you can revise, expand, or rewrite portions of it as you continue reading this book.

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1. “Explaining Racism” by Lisa Delpit in *The Magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education*, Spring, 2000, pp. 15–17.

## Challenging Limits

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### Reading 7

Lisa Delpit doesn't want labels "to limit" her daughter's potential. Nancy and Stanton Wolfe have similar concerns about their daughter. They too worry about the power of labels. Their daughter Ashley has Down syndrome—that is, she was born with an extra chromosome 21. A child with Down syndrome is usually smaller and his or her physical and mental development is slower than a youngster who does not have Down syndrome.

Ashley sees herself as more than the sum of the various labels people attach to individuals with Down syndrome. She told reporter Bella English, "My goal is to change the way people think about us. I do have special needs, but I have special abilities. I just want to be seen as who I am." In an interview, English discovers who Ashley is. She writes in part:

She received a standing ovation when she spoke at her high school graduation. She's currently in her third year at Lesley College in Cambridge. She recently played a role in the NBC drama, "Third Watch." Two afternoons a week, she volunteers at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. She has a new job at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. She also has Down syndrome.

When Ashley Wolfe was born 21 years ago, her parents knew at once something was wrong, though "wrong" is not the word they would choose. Nancy and Stanton Wolfe consider their daughter pretty perfect the way she is. "She just has a little extra chromosome," her mother says.

And that is how Ashley Wolfe has tried to live her life: putting that extra chromosome in its place. "Having Down syndrome is just one little part of me," she says. On a recent day, she looks pretty much like any other young person: wearing jeans, a red shirt, gold star earrings, pouring a cup of tea for a visitor in the Union Square apartment she shares with two other students.

Yes, there are the vision problems, the speech that will slur if her vigilant attention to enunciation drifts, the gait problems that come from having one leg shorter than the other, the social problems that dog those with Down syndrome. But she wants people to know there's more to her than a medical diagnosis. "Back in the early ages," she says, "people with Downs were called mongoloids and they would institutionalize them. My parents really wanted me to be mainstreamed. I'm glad."

It was in the recovery room that the Wolfes learned for certain their newborn had Down syndrome, a genetic condition that causes multiple problems, including mental retardation, and occurs in one of every 800-1,000 live births.

The pediatrician arrived just after Ashley and said two things the Wolfes will never forget: "She's beautiful," and "Her heart's perfect." Many Down babies have serious heart defects. For Ashley's good heart, her parents were grateful.

But there were other folks whose comments cut deeply. "Are you taking her home?" was a question the parents heard often those first several hours.

There was never any doubt that Ashley would be well loved and supported. From the start, the Wolfes wanted her to be mainstreamed, which meant that she was in many regular classes, where she had her own aide. For other subjects, she went to the resource room, which offered smaller classes for slower learners. By the time she graduated from Simsbury High School outside Hartford, she had made the honor roll seven times. She had even taken Spanish.

"I had to work extremely hard to do that," says Ashley. "My parents made me study extremely hard." . . .

But her crowning achievement thus far came on graduation night in June 1997. She stood at the podium before 3,000 people and delivered a powerful message of hope called "Opening Eyes, Opening Minds." She and several other students had auditioned in front of a faculty committee; only three were chosen. "I wrote it," says Ashley, "but I had help from my parents and speech therapist."

Principal Dennis Carrithers remembers the speech well. "It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen at any school," he says. "She spoke about the things she learned here, the people who mattered to her. When she finished, people were on their feet, wiping away tears." "She's a really strong lesson that we never want to set limits on people," Carrithers says, "because we have these wonderful surprises like Ashley."

That's not to say life has been easy. "It's been a very big struggle for both me and my parents," Ashley says, sitting at her kitchen table, her appointment book in front of her. She is proud of the fact that she is organized, right down to a list of questions to ask the reporter. ("When will the story run? What section?") "I have to write everything down," she says, "or I might not remember."

The social issues have been as painful as the physical ones. "People said, 'Does she have potential? Is there a future for her?'"

she recalls. "In school, labels are put on. 'Oh, you're a special ed student.' The normal kids didn't want to be around us. I had very few friends."

It's not that other children overtly teased Ashley, her mother says, but neither did they seek her out. "We joined the Brownies and stuff like that," Nancy Wolfe says, "but I think she was always unsure of herself around kids her own age."

When Ashley was 7, she underwent several operations for dislocated hips and spent two years in a cast from her toes to her waist. "I basically had to learn to walk again," she says. Years of physical and speech therapy followed.

When complimented on her speech, she smiles. "Thank you," she says. "It took a long time. Every once in a while, I do get lazy with my speech. I'll have people tell me to please repeat things."

Obviously, Ashley Wolfe is on the high end of those with Down syndrome. Her main cognitive problems are with math and directions, and health issues remain. She is not able to drive.

To help her with time—she has trouble with clock faces—her parents bought her a digital watch. "She's always way early, just to protect herself," says Nancy Wolfe, an actress who runs a summer arts program at Wesleyan University. Money is another problem: she simply has difficulty handling it.

Ashley describes her limitations this way: "I have a very hard time with integration. That basically means putting things together, like walking into a situation and making sense of it."

One of her mother's favorite pictures is of Ashley as a 3-year-old. "She had these long blond pigtails, an eye patch, glasses and braces on her legs, and she was dancing around the living room," says Nancy Wolfe. "She has this irrepressible spirit. Sometimes, she calls me up and cries. I just say, 'No, it isn't fair, Ash.' If you had told me three years ago that she would be living on her own and balancing her checkbook I wouldn't have believed it. She has continued to raise the bar for us."

Her father describes her as "nothing short of a miracle." His expectations for her? "I never allowed myself expectations," he says, "but I also never had limitations, and I think that is key. I felt there was no limit on what she could accomplish." Her greatest achievement? "Who she is."

That Ashley has achieved so much is due in large part to her family. Stan Wolfe is a facial surgeon who recently went back to school and earned a master's degree in public health. He is now oral

health director, as well as supervisor of school and primary health, for the Connecticut Department of Public Health. Nancy Wolfe has worked with multiply-handicapped kids in the theater. The couple were determined to give Ashley the most normal life they could.

But perhaps their greatest gift was Rebecca. “Rebecca,” says Ashley with a smile, “is wonderful.”

Rebecca is the sister who arrived 3½ years before Ashley. A magna cum laude graduate of Harvard, Rebecca also lives in Somerville. One of her earliest memories is being told that her very special sister had just been born. One of her best memories is Ashley’s graduation speech. “It’s one of those things,” she says, “where you felt bad for the person who had to go after her.”

“We are very close,” Ashley says. “I take the bus to her house.”

“Shley” is what Rebecca calls her younger sister. She is unabashedly proud of her, and has always felt more a little mother than a big sister. “There’s a lot of sadness for me around not ever having a normal sister relationship,” she concedes. When she was in college, Rebecca Wolfe wrote a story for a student magazine called, “Hero Worship: How Down Syndrome Challenged the Love Between Two Sisters.” In it, she recounted the fierceness with which she protected her sister—and the embarrassment she sometimes felt.

“I’d spent my elementary years terrified that someone would make fun of me for Ashley. I hated myself for feeling even a little ashamed of her, and dared them to try it,” she wrote. “I will always have conflicting and confusing emotions of love, admiration, frustration, and sadness for her.”<sup>1</sup>

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## CONNECTIONS

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Create an identity chart for Ashley Wolfe. How is it like the ones you created for Lisa Delpit and her daughter Maya (Reading 6)? How is it like your own identity chart? What differences seem most striking?

How have Ashley Wolfe’s parents and sister answered the question: What do you do with a difference? How do you think their expectations, attitudes, and beliefs have shaped Ashley’s identity?

At Harvard, Rebecca Wolfe compiled a book of photographs from Ashley’s life and helped her sister put words to the pictures. She called the book *A Different*

*Kind of Knowledge.* What do you think the title means? How does it relate to Ashley's life? In the book, Ashley writes: "I am not too sure about the future. I just do the best I can do. Maybe have a job, get married, have kids. Because everyone has to work because we need money and we need to find love and hope." How does she seem to answer the question: What do you do with a difference?

How does Ashley Wolfe's story complicate our understanding of the meanings we attach to difference? What does her story suggest about how our choices make a real difference in the world?

What kind of education would help young people better understand the meanings we attach to differences? Would encourage them to challenge the social consequences of particular difference?

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1. "An Everyday Courage Despite Battles Physical and Emotional, 21-year-old Ashley Wolfe Remains Irrepressible" by Bella English. *The Boston Globe*, March 9, 2000. © Copyright 2000 Globe Newspaper Company.

## The Masterpiece Society

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### Reading 8

Like *The Twilight Zone* in the 1960s (Reading 2), a TV series in the 1990s entitled *Star Trek: The Next Generation* often dealt with the question: What do you do with a difference? In one episode, the crew of the starship *Enterprise* encounters a society that uses genetic engineering to eliminate differences. The episode entitled “The Masterpiece Society” is available at many video stores or may be borrowed from Facing History and Ourselves. If possible, watch the episode as a class. If you are unable to obtain the video, the following paragraphs summarize the story.

The starship *Enterprise*, representing the United Federation of Planets, enters the Moab star system on a research mission. The crew is tracking the course of a stellar core fragment—a massive remnant of a supernova—that is passing through the apparently uninhabited Moab system.

As the fragment draws closer to the desolate planet Moab IV, the *Enterprise* science officer discovers that an artificial environment on the planet shelters a human society. The entire population is in danger. The stellar fragment will trigger huge earthquakes that will destroy everyone.

Captain Picard explains to the planet’s chief administrator, Aaron Connor, why it may be necessary to evacuate the planet. In the face of the emergency, Connor reluctantly agrees to allow several members of the *Enterprise* crew to visit Moab IV and search for ways to save the planet.

Connor explains to the crew that evacuation is impossible. “You see, this is an engineered society . . . genetically engineered. Our ancestors came from Earth to create a perfect society. They believed that through controlled procreation they could create people without flaws, and those people would build a paradise.”

Connor’s adviser, Martin, elaborates, “We have extended the potential of humanity, physically, psychologically. We have evolved beyond . . . beyond—”

“Beyond us,” chief engineer Geordi La Forge of the *Enterprise* remarks acidly.

“Frankly, yes,” Martin agrees. “No one in this society would be blind, for example,” he adds, looking pointedly at the vision-visor that covers La Forge’s sightless eyes.

Tactfully, Connor seeks to smooth things over. He explains that all the living things on the planet are interconnected: "We are part of our environment, and it is part of us. . . . Each of us grows up knowing exactly what our society needs from us. . . . Let me put it this way. Are there still people in your society who have not yet discovered who they really are or what they were meant to do with their lives? They may be in the wrong job. They may be writing bad poetry. Or worse yet, they may be great poets working as laborers, never to be discovered. That does not happen here!"

When Counselor Deanna Troi reports that the people of Moab IV may risk death rather than give up their way of life, Captain Picard is appalled. "They've given away their humanity with this genetic manipulation. Many of the qualities that they breed out—the uncertainty, the self-discovery, the unknown—are many of the things that make life worth living, at least to me. I wouldn't want to live my life knowing that my future was written, that my boundaries had been already set, would you?"

Troi answers, "I don't know. I doubt it. Nevertheless, it is what they believe in."

A theoretical physicist from the planet, Hannah Bates, comes aboard the Enterprise to work with La Forge to find a way to shift the stellar fragment's course. They continue to discuss the problems of genetic engineering. "Were you always blind?" Hannah asks.

"I was born blind," Geordi says. "I guess if I had been conceived on your world, I wouldn't even be here now, would I? I'd have been terminated as a fertilized cell."

As Hannah and Geordi work on the problem, their solution is inspired by the technology used in Geordi's visor. "That's perfect!" he exclaims. "The answer for all of this is in the visor created for a blind man who would never have existed in your society."

While one crisis is averted, another has been developing. A number of the people from Moab IV now wish to leave the planet to learn more about life beyond its boundaries. But because the society is genetically integrated, such departures will create gaps. "If even a handful leave," Connor tells Picard, "the damage to this society will be devastating. . . . Thousands will suffer."

The Enterprise crew debates whether to offer asylum to those who wish to leave. Ultimately, about two dozen people from the planet leave with the starship. "In the end," Picard muses, "we may have proved just as deadly to that society as any core fragment."<sup>1</sup>



## CONNECTIONS

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How do the people of Moab IV answer the question: What do you do with a difference? What arguments do their leaders use to defend genetic engineering? How do the crew and the captain of the *Enterprise* respond to those arguments?

What does Captain Picard mean when he says the people of Moab IV have “given away their humanity”? How does he seem to define *humanity*? How do the people of Moab seem to define the word? How do you define it? How are the definitions similar? How do you account for differences?

The word *irony* describes a contrast between what is stated and what is meant or between what is expected to happen and what actually takes place. What are the ironies in the solution to the crisis that the people of Moab IV face? What do those ironies reveal about the way the creators of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* view a “masterpiece society”? How do you regard such a society?

In 2000, scientists announced the completion of the first survey of the entire human genome. The survey is helping researchers eliminate birth defects and other health problems. In time, it may also help them identify certain “beneficial” genes that detoxify the body and resist disease. According to *The Scientist*, researchers are now able to “examine the role of noncoding elements of the genome—introns—whose differing sizes across species, it turns out, may play a direct role in modulating gene expression levels, even shaping individual human differences of thought, morphology, and personality.” Find out more about the various research projects that are part of the Human Genome Project and share your findings with the class. What questions does the research raise about what it means to be human?

“Harrison Bergeron,” a short story by Kurt Vonnegut, imagines a society in which differences have been outlawed so that everyone is truly equal. No one is superior to anyone else. The story is reprinted in Chapter 2 of *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. Is the society Vonnegut describes fair? Is it just? How is it like Moab IV? How do you account for differences?

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1. Adapted from “The Masterpiece Society” (Episode 113) *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Copyright ©1992 by Paramount Pictures.