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GRAPHIES

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ESSAYS

DIANA YOUNG

Cartographies

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ESSAYS

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About this book

A note to Instructors and a Guide to Examination

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works by fresh new writers like Judy Ruiz, Norma Field, Gerald Early, and Michael Dorris as well as little-known essays by established writers such as Calvin Trillin, N. Scott Momaday, Joan Didion, and Alice Walker.

- The essays are organized by 5 interesting, fresh chapter topics that reflect common concerns of contemporary essayists and the experiences of most first-year college students. They are not the same old topics found in other composition readers.
- The apparatus gets students thinking and writing.
 - An introduction in each chapter discusses the chapter's theme and connects the essays in the chapter to that theme.
 - Questions and writing topics follow each essay.

Preface

Essays and maps might be said to share the same enterprise. Paul Theroux believes that in “a sense, the world was once blank . . . and . . . cartography made it visible and glowing with detail.” Eudora Welty circles around the same idea when she tells of seeing Mammoth Caves as a child: without interpretation, she writes, life is just the darkness of those vast caverns. Like maps, essays plot pathways through uncharted tracts, trying to bring something into being where there used to be nothing. Essays attempt to transform experience into knowledge.

The essays in *Cartographies* certainly do. Today’s understanding of the essay has been molded by reportage, by the newspaper article, which has familiarized students with a narrowly descriptive mode. This collection offers a rich expository mode, in which the essays exhibit the *how* of a narrative, the way a mind focuses on and revolves around its subject. All the writers here are interested in analysis, which demands room to work. This collection offers students models of subtle, sophisticated, and powerful thought — of the sort that provokes the most articulate inquiry, and the most vivid and compelling writing.

These essays are great examples of the genre, but are not intended to stand like dead monuments to the essay. These voices are seldom interested in alluding to lyrical moments in literature, are not most centrally concerned with ideas embedded in the world of classical learning. That world — with its texts and experiences shared by a small population — is gone forever. But although the world is different, the genre itself is elastic enough to encompass the enormous changes.

Today’s essay seems full of juice. First, universal education has allowed many more people to share in it. Second, a range of voices — women’s, minorities’, gays’ — that was once all but silenced is now heard as having legitimate claims on our common life. Third, perhaps, the shrinking resources and the burgeoning violence in the world make

life more perilous, make it more urgent to provoke a response. *Cartographies* collects essays that take on the big hard subjects the world offers now: they show us the connection between the destruction of the rain forest and AIDS; they consider immigration in this politically rewritten global map; they talk about alcoholism, transsexuality, apocalyptic sects, pit bulls, supercomputers, and Miss America. The maps we need today are different from those the ancients needed; instead of filling in the blanks, we need maps to guide us through the congestion of political, social, and moral life. We need to hear from people who have thought deeply about difficult issues, and who can show us the possible pathways through the maze.

The essays have been arranged thematically in chapters whose titles encourage students to rethink ideas they might take for granted, and to reconsider the cultural construction of the ideas one might deploy to impose order on the world, including the world of words.

The anthology begins with a topic that concerns all students, that requires them to know nothing but their own autobiographies. The opening chapter, "Becoming," contains essays that are propelled by the dynamics of self-exploration and self-identity. In the next, "Embodying Identities," the writers establish a relationship with the body as a means of asserting or denying that identity, so that the body itself becomes a newly understood site of meaning. The essays in "Constructing Nature" encourage students to see nature as it is perceived and shaped by our expectations of it and of ourselves, rather than as it exists in itself. Nature is a cultural construction, and these essays, unlike classic nature essays, expose the logic of that construction. "Traveling" gathers together pieces that use the mode of traveling to explore the relationship between seeing and determining the truth of what is seen. Concomitantly, "Reading Cultures" contains essays that imply that it is the interplay between writing and watching that is responsible for producing the idea of a culture. From the first to the final chapter, the student has moved from the self out into the wider world, from the individual story to stories of whole groups of people.

So that each student is prepared to begin discussing the essay at the beginning of every class, I have included after each selection two questions designed to be "big" enough to start a general conversation on what the essay is about, but "small" enough so that students must marshal evidence to support their positions.

I have written a discussion on each question in the "Editor's Notes," which offer more questions and discussion topics for every essay. The notes were designed to enable most of the important aspects of each essay to be discussed within a regular classroom hour; they vary considerably in their focus. Each essay sets the course for the editor's investigations, which are as varied as is each essay itself. While the notes also suggest writing assignments and critical, theoretical, and lit-

erary sources that students might turn to in their research, they might also just be used as jumping-off points for your own class discussion.

Each essay is introduced by a biographical headnote, which presents a context for the authors' work and, often, their writing histories. Many of the essayists address the connections between their autobiographies and their writing, which can be used as another way to start the class thinking about methods of, and reasons for, shaping experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

John McPhee and Gerald Early were generous enough to write with thoughtful suggestions for writers who might be included in this anthology. For their gracious openhandedness, I thank them.

I want to thank Norma Field and Terry Castle for their belief that autobiography and rigorous intellectual analysis can coexist, and that, moreover, they strengthen fields of academic inquiry. The accessibility and power of their writing can only make the further reaches of academe available to students who might otherwise not discover an entry-way.

Other thanks are owed to Karen Ravn, without whom the headnotes would be poor things. Andrea Goldman provided meticulous assistance; Beth Chapman turned her persuasive talents to negotiating permissions. Adaya Henis copyedited with a light hand and a gimlet eye, and Ann Sweeney, best of production editors, flattered me into my deadlines.

To my editor, Jane Betz, I owe an enormous debt; her intelligence, tenacity, and equanimity make all things possible.

Chuck Christensen and Joan Feinberg put out a list characterized by their willingness to support the ideas that people are grappling with, and their respect and perspicacity inform every title.

Bill Brown turned his powerful and precise mind to my every sentence; his interest in the project never wavered. Madeleine Lucy Fraser Brown, though less interested, taught me how to make more efficient use of my time.

To the Student

We regularly revise the books we publish to make them better. To do this well we need to know what instructors and students think of the previous edition. At some point your instructor will be asked to comment on *Cartographies: Contemporary American Fiction*; now we would like to hear from you.

Please take a few minutes to rate the selections and complete this questionnaire. Send it to Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 29 Winchester Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 02116. We promise to listen to what you have to say. Thanks.

School _____

School location (city, state) _____

Course title _____

Instructor's name _____

	Liked a lot	Okay	Didn't like	Didn't read
1. Becoming				
Harrison, <i>Growing Up Apocalyptic</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Momaday, <i>The Horse</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dorris, <i>Life Stories</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Garrett, <i>Whistling in the Dark</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Field, <i>In the Realm of a Dying Emperor</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Embodying Identities				
Ephron, <i>A Few Words about Breasts</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Ruiz, <i>Oranges and Sweet Sister Boy</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Kusz, <i>Vital Signs</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Castle, <i>First Ed</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sanders, <i>Under the Influence</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Constructing Nature				
Ehrlich, <i>Architecture</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Sacks, <i>A Walking Grove</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Thomas, <i>To Err Is Human</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Hearne, <i>Consider the Pit Bull</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Dillard, <i>Total Eclipse</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Preston, <i>Crisis in the Hot Zone</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Traveling				
Walker, <i>A Thousand Words: A Writer's Pictures of China</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Hoagland, <i>From Canada, By Land</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
McPhee, <i>Riding the Boom Extension</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Didion, <i>El Exilio and the Melting Pot</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____
Trillin, <i>Resettling the Yangs</i>	_____	_____	_____	_____

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Rodriguez, *Late Victorians*

George, *Wounded Chevy at Wounded Knee*

Lopez, *The Stone Horse*

Early, *Waiting for Miss America:*

Stand Up and Cheer

FitzGerald, *Sun City—1983*

Kingston, *No Name Woman*

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"This set of mind, in which the local Cuban community was seen as a civic challenge determinedly met, was not uncommon among Anglos to whom I talked in Miami, many of whom persisted in the related illusions that the city was small, manage-

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Like maps, essays are records. They are records that people make of the journeys through their own lives. They turn the unknown into the known, chaos into cosmos. As maps, essays are infinitely various, able to chart the psychological as well as the physical. In this chapter, the essayists examine familiar terrain, searching for landmarks of the transformational moments in their lives.

Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's landmark—converting to the Jehovah's Witnesses—is monumental, towering over any other experience of her life. This "fierce, messianic sect" practices divine cartography, mapping the state of the world and seeing everywhere in it signs of the great apocalypse to come: "There is a kind of ruthless glee in the way in which Jehovah's Witnesses point to earthquakes, race riots, heroin addiction, the failure of the United Nations, divorce, famine, and liberalized abortion laws as proof of the nearest Armageddon."

In the end, unable to share their reading of the world, Harrison leaves the Witnesses and leaves us at another transformational moment, ending the essay as she walks into an uncharted future.

N. Scott Momaday explores that kind of uncharted country in "The Horse." With Pecos, he is given a new vantage point: "On the back of my horse I had a different view of the world. I could see more of it, how it reached away beyond all the horizons I had ever seen." His essay shows how "the bright legend" of his youth shapes his adult self, just as the first words of a story do its end: "You cannot begin with the second word and tell the story, for the telling of the story is a cumulative process, a chain of becoming, at last of being."

Michael Dorris also sees the moments that determined his adulthood as being connected, but for him they are less linear, more like "overlapping stairs, unfolding a particular pattern at once haphazard and inevitable." Given greater freedom than Harrison, he has been able to taste more and varied experiences; given more time than his nineteenth-century Native American ancestors, his adult self has incorporated something from all his different experiences.

The essays in this chapter insist that the maps that are made depend upon the cartographer's point of view. In "Whistling in the Dark," George Garrett looks back to see himself as a young soldier in Europe during World War II, trying to make sense of the enormous and malevolent mystery of Hitler's "final solution," straining to understand his own place in the world. What he discovers is that, wherever he is, he is caught up in "his share of this world's woe and joy, the lament and celebration of all living things."

Norma Field shares Garrett's distance from youth; separated from her home in Tokyo by her biracialism, by time, by her life in the United States, she returns home to "become, again, daughter, granddaughter, and even niece, a process akin to regenerating amputated limbs." And what she rediscovers is that the learning lies in the telling, so that the map she draws of Japan—in which the past and the present share the same room—bears "witness against the indifference of time and the hostility of space."

All these essayists partake of this same effort to bear witness against time and space. These essays are drawn from their journeys; they have plotted their own psychic terrain, drawn the boundaries between the *is* and the *was*, tried to fix on those elusive coordinates that marked where they turned into themselves.

Barbara Grizzuti Harrison

GROWING UP APOCALYPTIC

Barbara Grizzuti Harrison was born in 1934 in Brooklyn, New York, where she still lives. A writer of both fiction and nonfiction, Harrison is perhaps best known as a practitioner of personal journalism. An article she wrote about her own child's school led to her first book, *Unlearning the Lie: Sexism in School* (1969). And, as its title suggests, her next book, *Vision of Glory: A History and a Memory of Jehovah's Witnesses* (1978), drew greatly upon experiences she had as an adolescent and a young woman. Harrison credits a "marvelous" high school English teacher and Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* as important early influences on her writing career.

"The trouble with you," Anna said, in a voice in which compassion, disgust, and reproach fought for equal time, "is that you can't remember what it was like to be young. And even if you could remember—well, when you were my age, you were in that crazy Jehovah's Witness religion, and you probably didn't even play spin the bottle."

Anna, my prepubescent eleven-year-old, feels sorry for me because I did not have "a normal childhood." It has never occurred to her to question whether her childhood is "normal" . . . which is to say, she is happy. She cannot conceive of a life in which one is not free to move around, explore, argue, flirt with ideas and dismiss them, form passionate alliances and friendships according to no imperative but one's own nature and volition; she regards love as unconditional, she expects nurturance as her birthright. It fills her with terror and pity that anyone—especially her mother—could have grown up any differently—could have grown up in a religion where love was conditional upon rigid adherence to dogma and established practice . . . where approval had to be bought from authoritarian sources . . . where people did not fight openly and love fiercely and forgive generously and make decisions of their own and mistakes of their own and have adventures of their own.

"Poor Mommy," she says. To have spent one's childhood in love with/tyrannized by a vengeful Jehovah is not Anna's idea of a good time—nor is it her idea of goodness. As, in her considered opinion, my having been a proselytizing Jehovah's Witness for thirteen years was about as good a preparation for real life as spending a commensurate