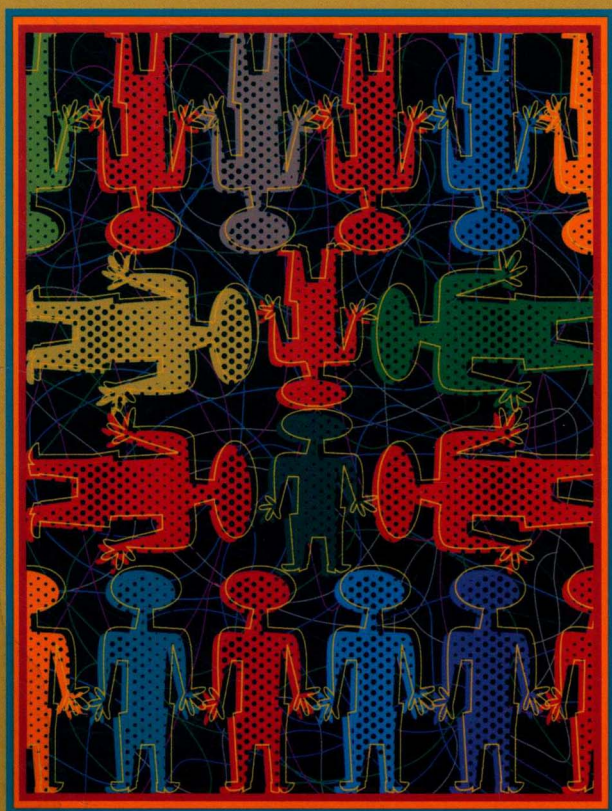


AMERICAN CONTEXTS

Multicultural Readings for Composition



AUDREY B. JOYCE

American Contexts

Multicultural Readings for Composition

Audrey B. Joyce

Pasco-Hernando Community College



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Preface

American Contexts contains forty nonfiction readings that shed light on the meaning of terms such as identity, family, heritage, assimilation, justice, and equality, which are the core of the study of multiculturalism in the United States. Following the categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau, these readings are divided into four ethnic/racial groups of writers: African American, Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American.

What makes *American Contexts* unique is that all authors and selections (including expository and argumentative essays, memoirs, and autobiography) meet three criteria. First, all forty authors are highly regarded American writers from one of the four ethnic/racial groups recognized by the Census. Every writer selected is an award-winning, respected writer, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Gary Soto, Bharati Mukherjee, and N. Scott Momaday. Second, these authors are recognized as spokespersons for their groups. They have written books and essays on current, often controversial, socioeconomic issues. Some of the writers, such as Nikki Giovanni, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Vine Deloria, and Jesus Colon, also have engaged in political activism. Thus, knowledgeable, affected members of a group address the issues of importance to members of that group. It is the voice of the “insider” that the reader will hear. Finally, the authors write about a wide variety of topics (such as bilingual education, dropouts, gang warfare, and single mothers) that are debated in today’s media. The readings should help readers better understand how writers from different ethnic groups address these current issues. These topics should appeal both to students from a minority racial/ethnic group and to those from the dominant culture.

The ethnic/racial classification is that designation used by the writer or listed in biographical references. For example, Frederick Douglass, whose father was white, considered himself African American. Many of the Native American writers, such as Joseph Bruchac and Inez Petersen, are of mixed heritage; their essays often focus on their efforts to understand and honor their heritage. The broad term “Asian American” includes immigrants from countries such as China and Japan that were former enemies. The essay “Beyond Our Shadows” by Helen Zia shows how being viewed as “Asian American” has affected her. As seen in the battle over the last census, the division of human populations into racial/ethnic groups is itself an interesting and controversial topic, suitable for a class discussion.

The introduction to each of the four parts consists of a brief overview of that group's history in the United States and a list of important milestones (dates, laws, and events). Even for those students familiar with U.S. history, this introduction will call attention to events that may not have been fully discussed in a conventional textbook. Reviewing this history will help students better understand the context of essays that follow. For example, the essays by Pablo Medina and Gustavo Perez Firmat both refer to events following the Cuban immigration of 1960. Students can better understand the reading by Maya Angelou once they are aware of the "separate but equal" laws of the time.

Following the historical introduction, the ten essays in each part are arranged by the author's date of birth. Before each selection, students will find biographical and critical notes that will be of assistance in understanding the essay. The biographical notes present basic information on the writer, including education and current work. For instance, the biographical notes on Luis Rodriguez discuss his former involvement with gangs; this information will help the reader understand why Rodriguez is so active in fighting gang membership.

The critical notes provide information on some of the major concerns of that writer, in particular those themes that appear in the selection that follows. For example, students learn of Cornel West's interest in both economic and moral issues, two concerns that recur in his essay "Beyond Affirmative Action." In some cases, the notes discuss briefly a major book by the writer, such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. These critical notes should aid students in analyzing the essay that follows.

Along with each selection, readers will find questions for discussion, research, and writing. All these questions should elicit critical thinking; repeatedly the questions ask "why." They require students to extend an answer, to explain the reasons "why" for their response. Although each question/suggestion can be used as a "writing prompt," instructors should select those most suitable for their students' abilities and probable interests. Some instructors will want to focus solely on questions dealing with identity formation and/or multicultural issues; others may prefer to use one of the "springboards for writing" assignments that broaden out from other topics discussed in the reading. In all cases, the writing topics, sometimes controversial, should lend themselves readily to student discussion and writing. For instance, Louis Owens in "Water Witch" discusses the importance of guns and hunting in his life, affording students an opportunity to write on the much debated issue of gun control laws.

Placed before the selection, the "Preparing to Read" questions can be used for group work, class discussion, or journal writing. These introductory questions, which help to give students a "set" before reading, make this a usable book for those students who still need assistance

in improving reading skills. These are open-ended, sometimes provocative questions, which allow students to consider an issue and express their opinions. The questions lead students into the reading.

The first set of questions following the selection, "Writing About the Reading," asks the students to respond to specific questions about the text. Questions require students to interpret, analyze, compare, predict, infer, and argue. Students sometimes are required to explain the meaning of one of the author's statements. They are asked why an author begins or ends an essay in a certain way, why the writer has included certain types of support, what are the causes and consequences of certain events, and whether or not a writer is justified in making an assertion. These questions are suitable for a close reading, a class discussion, or an interpretative paper.

The second set of questions after the selection, "Writing from Your Own Experience," asks the students to recall, consider, and write an essay about events in their own lives similar to those discussed in, or suggested by, the reading. These questions, best viewed as writing prompts, are well suited to personal essays that require students to reflect thoughtfully on their own experiences. For example, if the writer has discussed how he has turned his life around, the students may be asked to write about some way in which they have made a positive change in their lives and the reasons for this change. Or, if a writer has discussed someone who has served as a mentor, students may be asked to recall someone who assumed the role of mentor in their lives and the reason that they chose this person. Those students who hesitate to write about themselves are encouraged to write about the experiences of other people, either real or fictional.

The last group of questions, "Writing from Research," lists a variety of research projects that require the students to go beyond the text to expand their knowledge of this ethnic/racial group. For instance, after reading the selection "Un Poquito de Tu Amor" by Sandra Cisneros, students are asked to research a traditional holiday, such as Cinco de Mayo, celebrated by an ethnic/racial group. David Mura's "Where the Body Meets Memory" discusses his parents' experience in a relocation camp during World War II. One of the following questions asks students to write a paper about the reasons for these camps. Many of the research questions ask students to investigate the contribution of members of this ethnic/racial group to a field, such as politics, business, sports, or the arts. The instructor also may wish to use the historical introduction or Milestones list for research projects. To assist the students with research, a selected bibliography and a list of selected Internet resources appear at the end of each of the four parts.

Questions asking for comparisons are found both at the end of each part and at the end of this book. Following each of the four parts, students will find suggestions for comparing essays by writers from within the same ethnic/racial group. To compare writers from different

ethnic/racial categories, students can use the suggested topics in "Connecting Writers Across Ethnic/Racial Groups" at the end of the book. Additionally, the Thematic Table of Contents allows comparison of topics (such as assimilation, early memories, families, violence, and justice) discussed by writers from separate groups.

Finally, students will find the Glossary at the end of the book to be of assistance in understanding many of the terms, often from sociology, used in this text. These terms also may lend themselves to class discussion and/or research projects.

In a typical semester course, an instructor would not expect students to read and write on all the selections. One instructor could decide to use a few selected shorter readings from each of the four parts. Another instructor, with a different student population or instructional goal, might choose to use a few of the longer, more complex readings from just one or two parts of *American Contexts*.

By using readings in *American Contexts* as the basis for discussion, research, and writing, students will come to a better understanding of themselves and others. As students review the cultural adaptations made by others, they will have an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in establishing identity. Observing the broad range of issues of concern to a group, students will come to understand that although writers view the world from the perspective of their cultural heritage, all writers from the same group do not necessarily think alike, that group labels and stereotypes are often misleading. Through their reading and writing, students will become better acquainted with the diversity and interrelationship of groups that comprise America today.

I appreciate the support of Marion D. Bullock and Stanley M. Giannet, Pasco-Hernando Community College, and Maura Snyder, Professor Emerita, Saint Leo University, in developing this book. Thanks also to Joseph Opiela at Longman Publishers for his encouragement and valuable suggestions.

To the many reviewers who provided detailed and full critiques, I give a special acknowledgment: Cathryn Amdahl, Harrisburg Area Community College; Anne Bliss, University of Colorado at Boulder; Lenore Dowling, Rio Hondo Community College; Jeff Henderson, Kalamazoo Valley Community College; Dolores Johnson, Marshall University; Elizabeth Leyson, Fullerton College; Richard Marback, Wayne State University; Ollie Oviedo, Eastern New Mexico University; Merry G. Perry, University of South Florida; Mary Trachsel, University of Iowa; Randy Woodland, University of Michigan.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to my husband for his understanding and assistance.

Audrey B. Joyce

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“No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death. . . .”

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Selection 6: NIKKI GIOVANNI (1943–) <i>Black Is the Noun</i>	60
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“Easy Job, Good Wages”

“I Heard a Man Crying”

“Kipling and I”

“A Hero in the Junk Truck”

“Little Things Are Big”

“Now when I see ads reading, ‘Easy job. Good wages,’ I just smile an ancient, tired, knowing smile.”

Selection 2: JOSEPH TORRES (1933–) *The Language Crusade* 136

“... people respond to the Official English message because it is ‘simplistic’ and ‘it seems like the right thing to do. It is a message that sounds non-racist and nice, which is why it’s hard to fight.’”

Selection 3: RICHARD RODRIGUEZ (1944–) *Illegal Immigrants: Prophets of a Borderless World* 144

“Let’s face it: America has never really liked immigrants, at least not when the immigration is actually taking place.”

Selection 4: PABLO MEDINA (1948–) *Arrival: 1960* 149

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Selection 5: GUSTAVO PEREZ FIRMAT (1949–) *Earth to Papi, Earth to Papi* 155

“For Cubans in this country, exile has been as much a spiritual legacy as a political status. Exile is our inheritance, like wealth or good looks.”

Selection 6: JUDITH ORTIZ COFER (1952–) <i>The Myth of the Latin Woman</i>	167
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- Selection 2: BHARATI MUKHERJEE (1940–) *American Dreamer* 223
 “That act cut me off forever from the rules and ways of upper-middle-class life in Bengal, and hurled me into a New World life of scary improvisations and heady explorations.”
- Selection 3: SHAWN WONG (1949–) *The Chinese Man Has My Ticket* 232
 “In Europe I don’t know if I need to stand up for my race or my country or my self-respect as a cash-spending tourist.”
- Selection 4: DAVID MURA (1952–) *Where the Body Meets Memory* 241
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- Selection 5: AMY TAN (1952–) *Mother Tongue* 251
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- Selection 6: HELEN ZIA (1952–) *Beyond Our Shadows: From Nothing a Consciousness* 259
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- Selection 7: FAE MYENNE NG (1957–) *False Gold* 270
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- Selection 8: CHANG-RAE LEE (1965–) *Coming Home Again* 276
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never blamed me, for this was the way she knew it would be with my wonderful new education."

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Selection 10: LE THI DIEM THUY (1972–) *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* 302

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Selection 2: VINE DELORIA, JR. (1933–) *The Reservation Conditions* 337

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- Selection 3: N. SCOTT MOMADAY (1934–) *The Names: A Memoir* 345
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- Selection 4: GERALD VIZENOR (1934–) *Measuring My Blood* 352
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- Selection 5: SIMON J. ORTIZ (1941–) *The Language We Know* 361
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- Selection 6: JOSEPH BRUCHAC (1942–) *Notes of a Translator’s Son* 371
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- Selection 7: LINDA HOGAN (1947–) *All My Relations* 382
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- Selection 8: LOUIS OWENS (1948–) *Water Witch* 388
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- Selection 9: LESLIE MARMON SILKO (1948–) *Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective* 395
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