



# CRITICAL ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

CHRISTOPHER GOULD ■ ELE BYINGTON

# *Critical Issues in Contemporary Culture*



CHRISTOPHER GOULD

*University of North Carolina at Wilmington*

ELE BYINGTON

*University of North Carolina at Wilmington*

Allyn and Bacon

*Boston ♦ London ♦ Toronto ♦ Sydney ♦ Tokyo ♦ Singapore*

*Vice President:* Eben W. Ludlow  
*Editorial Assistant:* Elizabeth Egan  
*Marketing Manager:* Lisa Kimball  
*Production Administrator:* Susan Brown  
*Editorial-Production Service:* Matrix Productions Inc.  
*Cover Administrator:* Linda Knowles  
*Cover Designer:* Susan Paradise  
*Composition Buyer:* Linda Cox  
*Manufacturing Buyer:* Suzanne Lareau



Copyright © 1997 by Allyn & Bacon  
A Viacom Company  
160 Gould St.  
Needham Heights, Mass. 02194  
[www.abacon.com](http://www.abacon.com)

All rights reserved. No part of the material protected by this copyright notice may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner.

Acknowledgments appear on pages 541–546, which constitute a continuation of the copyright page.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Critical issues in contemporary culture / [edited by] Christopher Gould, Ele Byington.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-02-345402-4

1. Readers—Civilization, Modern. 2. Civilization, Modern—Problems, exercises, etc. 3. English language—Rhetoric.

4. College readers. I. Gould, Christopher

II. Byington, Ele.

PE1127.H4C75 1996

306—dc20

96-16416

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 01 00 99 98 97

*Critical Issues  
in Contemporary  
Culture*

# Preface

---

*Critical Issues in Contemporary Culture* is a collection of readings aimed at stimulating critical inquiry by inviting students to examine contemporary issues relating to gender, social class, and ethnicity. Designed to complicate students' understanding of "mainstream culture" as well as to highlight the diversity of contemporary America, this book contains selections by authors who critically examine convention and tradition.

With so many multicultural reading anthologies currently on the market, we have designed *Critical Issues* to provide several distinctive features:

1. The emphasis is on issues. As one reviewer remarked of the text: "It makes the multicultural and multidisciplinary viewpoints implicit in a thorough examination of issues."
2. Topics should appeal to a broad range of students, nontraditional as well as traditional, and are addressed in a wide variety of texts—autobiographical, literary, academic, journalistic, and argumentative.
3. At the end of most reading selections are activities that lead students from informal holistic response to more detailed analysis. Writing suggestions at the end of each chapter encourage students to synthesize sources and make other kinds of connections among the readings.
4. The instructional apparatus allows teachers to adapt the book to their individual aims.

Though chapters need not be assigned sequentially, we recommend beginning with Chapter 1, which examines some of the problems and confusion that surround *culture* and *literacy* as terms of discussion. Since *Critical Issues* is intended to suit the needs of first-year students, each of the chapters following Chapter 1 introduces approaches to reading and writing analytically—reading strategies and reading journals (Chapter 2), group inquiry (Chapter 3), creating a synthesis of ideas (Chapter 4), rhetorical analysis (Chapters 5 and 6), Peter Elbow's "Believing Game" (Chapter 7), and reading texts complicated by abstractions (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 completes the text with a focus on the power of stories to reveal our cultures to each other—stories that are a blend of fiction, nonfiction, newspaper account, and even one created by a research project.

We wish to thank the following individuals for their helpful, constructive responses to earlier drafts of our book: James C. McDonald, University of Southwestern Louisiana; Marjorie Roemer, University of Cincinnati; Susan Simons, Community College of Denver; Dana Thomsen, Johnson and Wales University; K. J. Walters, Lehman College of CUNY; and Linda Woodson, The University of Texas at San Antonio.

C. G.

E. B.

# Contents

---

*Preface* ix

## 1 *Culture and Literacy: Entering the Conversation* 1

Herbert Gans, *High Culture/Low Culture* 4

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Literacy and Cultural Literacy* 8

Alan C. Purves, *General Education and the Search for a Common Culture* 24

John U. Ogbu, *Minority Status and Literacy in Comparative Perspective* 29

F. Nyi Akinnaso, *Literacy and Individual Consciousness* 38

Rosa M. Torruellas, Rina Benmayor, Anneris Goris, and Ana Juarbe, *Affirming Cultural Citizenship in the Puerto Rican Community* 50

Amy Ling, *Creating One's Self: The Eaton Sisters* 64

## 2 *The Macho Myth* 76

Frank Pittman, *Beyond the BS and Drumbeating: Staggering Through Life as a Man* 79

Lorenzo Carcaterra, *Loving Your Enemy*

William Raspberry, *What You See . . .* 94

Joyce Carol Oates, *Rape and the Boxing Ring* 90

Fredric Dannen, *Revenge of the Green Dragons* 103

Margaret Edwards, *But Does the New Woman Really Want the New Man?* 109

Warren Farrell, *Why Men Are the Way They Are* 116

Joseph Campbell, *Marriage and Feminism* 120

## 3 *Sexual Relationships: Romantic Love, Courtship, Marriage* 126

Lawrence Stone, *A Short History of Love* 129

Richard Stengel, *No More MoonJune: Love's Out* 137

Paul Gray, *What Is Love?* 141

Anastasia Toufexis, *The Right Chemistry* 145

- Michael Lerner, *The Frustration in Family Life* 151  
 Venny Villapando, *The Business of Selling Mail-Order Brides* 158  
 Maulana Karenga, *Black Male/Female Relations* 167

#### 4 *The Beauty Myth* 178

- Doll of Easy Inches Is More Realistic Model* 182  
 Marge Piercy, *Barbie Doll* 184  
 Lavonne Adams, *The Holly Pageant* 186  
 Alice Walker, *Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self* 193  
 David Futrelle and Leora Tanenbaum, *Bootstrap Feminism* 201  
 Richard Selzer, *Fetishes* 208  
 Ynestra King, *The Other Body: Reflections on Difference, Disability and Identity Politics* 217  
 Margo Kaufman, *Sitting Pretty* 224

#### 5 *Family Images* 230

- Louise Erdrich, *Scales* 233  
 Rosario Morales, *The Day It Happened* 245  
 Scott Russell Sanders, *The Men We Carry in Our Minds . . . and How They Differ from the Real Lives of Most Men* 250  
 Stephen Birmingham, *Telling Them Apart* 255  
 Willard B. Gatewood, *Prologue to "Color, Culture, and Behavior"* 262  
 Joyce Carol Oates, *Is Laughter Contagious?* 271  
 Joel Dreyfuss, *The Invisible Immigrants: Haitians in America Are Industrious, Upwardly Mobile and Vastly Misunderstood* 282  
 Deborah Dash Moore, *New York Jews* 293  
 Eugene Richards, *Long Island Shelter, Boston, Massachusetts* 299

#### 6 *Work, Social Class, and Ethnicity: Sharing the American Dream* 306

- Nicholas Lemann, *Curse of the Merit Class: America's New Ruling Caste Is Bad News for the Country* 310  
 Barbara Kantrowitz, *Young, Gifted and Jobless: For a Rising Number of Professionals, the Dream of Financial Security Is Gone* 317  
 Richard Manning and John McCormick, *The Blue-Collar Blues: Hundreds of Thousands of Former Factory Workers Suddenly Constitute a Downwardly Mobile Class* 324



Lars Eighner, <i>On Dumpster Diving</i>	330
bell hooks, <i>Homeplace: A Site of Resistance</i>	340
Yoichi Shimatsu and Patricia Lee, <i>Dust and Dishes: Organizing Asian American Workers</i>	349
Felicia Lowe, <i>Asian American Women in Broadcasting</i>	358

## 7 *Education, Social Class, and Ethnicity: Achieving Excellence and Equity* 369

Allan C. Ornstein and Daniel U. Levine, <i>Social Class, Race, and School Achievement</i>	373
Benjamin P. Bowser and Herbert Perkins, <i>Success Against the Odds: Young Black Men Tell What It Takes</i>	389
Ann H. Beuf, <i>The World of the Native American Child: Education</i>	404
Mitsuye Yamada, <i>Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman</i>	412
Marcus Mabry, <i>The Ghetto Preppies: Giving Kids "A Better Chance" Is Not So Easy</i>	419
Christopher Jencks and colleagues, <i>Conclusions about Inequality in the Schools</i>	425

## 8 *Identity and Polarization* 432

Nikki Giovanni, <i>Pioneers: A View of Home</i>	434
Howard Blum, <i>Bias Incident at Staten Island's Miller Field: A Tale of Two Neighborhoods</i>	439
Deborah Tannen, <i>Asymmetries: Men and Women Talking at Cross Purposes</i>	445
Mary Mebane, <i>Shades of Black</i>	464
David Updike, <i>The Colorings of Childhood: On the Burdens, and Privileges, Facing My Multi-Racial Son</i>	470
Toni Cade Bambara, <i>My Man Bovanne</i>	479
Emile Ollivier, <i>The Shipwreck of "La Caminante"</i>	486

## 9 *Telling Stories, Revealing Cultures* 493

David Broder, <i>"Gay Pride" Claims a Place in U.S. Politics</i>	496
Carolyn S. Pittman, <i>Do They Hear Our Voices?</i>	499
Valerie Matsumoto, <i>Two Deserts</i>	504
Jamaica Kincaid, <i>Alien Soil</i>	513

Sylvester Monroe, <i>Louis Farrakhan Interview: They Suck the Life from You</i>	520
Midge Decter, <i>Why Did Blacks Turn on Jews?</i>	524
Cornel West, <i>How Do We Fight Xenophobia?</i>	526
Michael Lerner, <i>The Real Crisis Is Selfishness</i>	528
Randall Kennedy, <i>Some Good May Yet Come of This</i>	530
Tillie Olsen, <i>I Stand Here Ironing</i>	532
 <i>Readings</i>	 541
 <i>Author Index</i>	 547

# 1

## *Culture and Literacy: Entering the Conversation*



One of the most gratifying and challenging opportunities you face as a college student is the invitation to participate actively, as a reader and writer, in new *discourse communities*. The educated adults who comprise these communities abide by formal, though often unwritten, rules and customs about sharing information and ideas. The challenge of participating in their conversations is not just a matter of gathering facts and understanding concepts; it is also a process of looking at familiar objects and routines through different, at times unfamiliar, lenses. Reading selections in this chapter, and throughout *Critical Issues in Contemporary Culture*, are intended to engage this process. Many of the readings in this book examine issues and artifacts from the standpoint of persons outside *mainstream culture*—the primarily white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class community whose values and opinions, until recently, defined what most people regarded as American. Other selections are by authors who, though members of that community, try to shed its biases and preconceptions.

*Culture*, a crucial term in this book, is one of the most complex words in English. Tracing its history, Professor Raymond Williams has shown that centuries ago the term was used only to describe the cultivation of plant or animal life—a meaning retained in such words as *agriculture*, *horticulture*, and *viticulture*. Gradually, however, *culture* became associated with the cultivation of intellect, taste, artistic talent, and etiquette. (Today, a “cultured” person is assumed to be educated, sophisticated, and polite.) As a result, *culture* became synonymous with *civilization*, describing both a state of learning and refinement and a process of historical development. Until the 1800s, most English-speaking people considered that process to be uniform and inevitable, culminating in the adoption of customs, tastes, and attitudes similar to

those of the more privileged classes in Europe. However, an important change took place in the nineteenth century, when people began “to speak of ‘cultures’ in the plural: the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, [as well as] the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups with a nation.”\* Thus, *culture* came to mean the way of life exemplified by one group of people during a specific period in history. Today, the ingredients of a culture are understood to include its moral values, etiquette, customs and rituals, gender roles, and a number of other factors that insiders take for granted.

This more inclusive definition of culture discourages judgments of relative worth: no one culture, so defined, can be called better or worse than any other. However, discussions of culture are complicated by still another definition of the word. When people talk about “cultural events” or the “cultural resources” of a city or region, they typically refer to museum collections and artistic performances that reflect the tastes of a privileged class, an *elite*.

Restricting the boundaries of culture to the customs, artifacts, and tastes of an elite may not seem remarkable, but as a way of thinking it has had historical consequences. For example, public revenues have been allocated under the presumption that opera and oil painting are more worthy of government support than other more popular forms of art and entertainment. Persons outside or on the fringes of the cultural elite—even such prominent figures as Andrew Jackson and Harry Truman—have been belittled as “uncultured.”

The first reading selection in this chapter, “High Culture/Low Culture” by Herbert Gans, contrasts two very different “taste cultures” in American society. Gans considers some of the practical consequences of unequal funding for endeavors that reflect the preferences of these two cultures.

*Literacy* is another complex term with a similarly fluid definition. While any colonial American able to write his or her name was deemed literate, more rigorous criteria define literacy at the end of the twentieth century. Today, it is widely assumed that literacy entails a specific set of mental proficiencies: decoding symbolic representations of spoken language (translating letters of the alphabet into sounds, words, and ideas) as well as casting ideas and information into a symbolic code (putting them into written language in such a way that readers can understand them). Although individuals or groups may use language in other complicated ways, they are often (and incorrectly) labeled illiterate unless they also possess this specific set of mental proficiencies and can exercise them with ease.

\*Raymond Williams, “Culture,” *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 89.

Clearly, culture and literacy intersect. A culture is delineated, at least in part, by how it defines and uses literacy. And since some cultures have more power than others, certain definitions and uses of literacy have been privileged. Furthermore, literacy is a primary means by which culture is perpetuated or reproduced (through stories, performances, sacred texts, literature, textbooks). Consequently, scholars, politicians, religious leaders, and other citizens are concerned not only about the technical skills that define literacy, but also about which texts (oral and written) should be preserved. The ongoing debate over *cultural literacy*, addressed in reading selections by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Alan Purves, and John Ogbu, is an example of that concern.

Following Ogbu's essay are three readings that examine the practical consequences of literacy and literacy education for specific individuals and ethnic communities outside the cultural mainstream of the United States.

## Herbert Gans

### *High Culture/Low Culture*



*Born in Germany in 1927, sociologist Herbert Gans emigrated to the United States in 1940 and currently teaches at Columbia University. In the following selection from his book, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, Gans describes the tastes of a cultural elite, then contrasts them with those of a very different social group. Throughout his book, Gans demonstrates that American society encompasses a variety of "taste cultures," each of which is as worthy as any other. He goes on to advocate public support for cultural events reflecting the tastes of persons often excluded from the mass media—for example, the poor and the aged.*

#### *High Culture*

- 1 This culture differs from all other taste cultures in that it is dominated by creators and critics and that many of its users accept the standards and perspectives of creators. It is the culture of "serious" writers, artists, and the like, and its public therefore includes a significant proportion of creators. Its users are of two kinds: (1) the creator-oriented users who, although not creators themselves, look at culture from a creator perspective; and (2) the user-oriented, who participate in high culture but are, like the users of other cultures, more interested in the creator's product than in his or her methods and in the problems associated with being a creator. Even so, the creators and both kinds of users are similar in one way: they are almost all highly educated people of upper and upper-middle class status, employed mainly in academic and professional occupations.
- 2 The culture itself is in some ways more of an aggregate than the other taste cultures. For example, it contains both classic and contemporary items which are formally and substantively diverse but are part of high culture because they are used by the same public. Thus, the culture includes simple lyrical medieval songs and complex formalistic modern music; "primitive" art and abstract expressionism; *Beowulf* and *Finnegans Wake*. (Other taste cultures also use the classics, but to a much lesser extent, and they concentrate on those which are more congruent with contemporary items.) In addition, high culture changes more quickly than other cultures; in this century alone, its art has consisted of

expressionism, impressionism, abstraction, conceptual art, and many other styles. Indeed, the major unchanging features of the culture are its domination by creators and the elite social position of its users.

Even so, there are some stable elements in the culture that set it off from other cultures. Perhaps most important, high culture pays explicit attention to the construction of cultural products, such as the relationships between form, substance, method, and overt content and covert symbolism, among others, although the relative emphasis that high culture places on these varies over time. In recent decades, innovation and experimentation in form have particularly dominated high culture art and music and, to a lesser extent, its fiction and architecture, just as methodology has dominated the social sciences. The culture's standards for substance are less variable; they almost always place high value on the careful communication of mood and feeling, on introspection rather than action, and on subtlety, so that much of the culture's content can be perceived and understood on several levels. High culture fiction emphasizes character development over plot, and the exploration of basic philosophical, psychological, and social issues, with heroes and heroines of novels and plays often modeled on the creators themselves. Thus, much high culture fiction deals with individual alienation, and the conflict between individual and society, reflecting the marginal role of the creator in contemporary society.

High culture's nonfiction is basically literary; in the past it relied on novelists for its analyses of social reality, and on critics who content-analyzed novels for what they reported about society. Today, the culture relies more on essayists for its nonfiction, leading at least one critic to argue that the serious novel has lost its major function. Social scientists who live up to the culture's writing standards are also read, but as I suggested earlier, high culture is often hostile to the social sciences, partly because of their proclivity to jargon (although the equally technical language of literary criticism is rarely condemned for this reason) and partly because they refuse to accept literary observations and autobiographical impressions as evidence.

Since the culture serves a small public that prides itself on exclusiveness, its products are not intended for distribution by the mass media. Its art takes the form of originals distributed through galleries; its books are published by subsidized presses or commercial publishers willing to take a financial loss for prestige reasons; its journals are the so-called little magazines; its theater is now concentrated largely in Europe, New York's Off-Broadway, and occasional repertory companies. High culture has still not entirely accepted the electronic media, but its movies are often foreign and are shared with upper-middle culture, and what little high-culture television exists is also shared with this culture and is shown on public television. . . .

*Low Culture*

- 6 This is the culture of the older lower-middle class, but mainly of the skilled and semiskilled factory and service workers, and of the semi-skilled white collar workers, the people who obtained nonacademic high school educations and often dropped out after the tenth grade. Low culture was America's dominant taste culture until the 1950s, when it was replaced by lower-middle culture. Its public, though still large, has been shrinking steadily, partly because of longer school attendance even among blue collar workers, but also because of the exposure to television and other lower-middle mass media on the part of young working-class people who have broken out of the isolation of urban ethnic and rural enclaves.
- 7 Low culture publics are still likely to reject "culture," and even with some degree of hostility. They find culture not only dull but also effeminate, immoral, and sacrilegious—which is why Spiro Agnew's caricature of upper-middle college students as "effete snobs" attracted so much attention—and they often support church, police, and governmental efforts to censor erotic materials. At the same time, their preference for action and melodrama . . . explains their reluctance to support censorship of violence. . . .
- 8 Low culture is provided through the mass media, but despite the size of this public, it must share much of its content with lower-middle culture. Often it does so by reinterpreting lower-middle-class content to fit working-class values. For example, in a working-class population that I studied, people watching a detective serial questioned the integrity of the policeman-hero and identified instead with the working-class characters who helped him catch the criminal. They also protested or made fun of the lower-middle-class heroes and values they saw depicted in other programs and commercials.
- 9 Exclusively, low culture content exists as well, but since this public lacks the purchasing power to attract major national advertisers, its media can survive economically only by producing content of low technical quality for a very large audience. Moreover, partly because of poor schooling, low culture publics do not read much. As a result, they are served by a handful of tabloid dailies and weeklies, some with the highest newsstand sales among newspapers, which report sensational and violent activities—or invented activities—by celebrities and ordinary people.
- 10 Most Hollywood films were once made for the low culture public, until it gravitated to television. Although it shares this medium with lower-middle culture publics, initially network programming catered extensively to low culture, for example, by providing Westerns, the comic action of Lucille Ball and Red Skelton, the acrobatic vaudeville of the Ed Sullivan Show, and situation comedies like "Beverly Hillbillies"



(which described how working-class people of rural origin outwit the more sophisticated and powerful urban middle class), and the music of Lawrence Welk. Some of these programs are disappearing from the network schedule as the low culture public shrinks in size and purchasing power, but the reruns survive on independent television stations, which are now perhaps the prime transmitters for low culture. This public is also served by independent radio stations which feature rock and country music and brief newscasts that use sound effects to imitate the attention-getting headline of the tabloid newspaper.

Low culture art reflects the sexual segregation of its public. The men often choose pinup pictures (of more overtly erotic and sexually aggressive-looking women than those featured in the upper-middle culture *Playboy*), which they hang in factories and garage workshops. The women like religious art and secular representational pictures with vivid colors. Home furnishings reflect the same aesthetic: they must be solid looking and “colorful.” While high- and upper-middle culture publics value starkness and simplicity, low-culture publics prefer ornateness—either in traditional, almost rococo, forms, or in the lavish contemporary style once described as “Hollywood modern.”

11

### ♦ Discussion Questions\*

1. Herbert Gans identifies artists and academic scholars with high culture. Since Gans himself is a university professor, does this presumed affiliation with high culture affect his objectivity and authority? If so, can you point to instances of bias in Gans's writing?
2. How do you suppose a “typical” representative of each of the two cultures would respond to this portrayal of his or her tastes?
3. Gans cites *The Beverly Hillbillies* as a television comedy that exemplifies low culture in its depiction of “working-class people...[who] outwit the more sophisticated and powerful.” A more recent comedy, *Roseanne*, also depicts tension between social classes. What are some of the similarities and differences between these two programs and their treatment of class conflict? Do you think Gans would classify *Roseanne* as low culture?

\*Chapters 2–9 will feature questions that elicit an immediate personal response to each reading, progress to a closer look at the arrangement of important ideas, then lead finally to a critical view of specific details. Before presenting this sequenced process of response, however, we want to introduce freewritten journal responses (in Chapter 2) and processes of group inquiry (in Chapter 3). Consequently, the reading selections in this chapter are followed only by a few discussion questions, such as those appearing on this page.