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# Images of the White American Male in Decline

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This paper deals with multiculturalism in the United States. I have opted for an odd pairing of two arenas of this broad cultural movement: images from ESL (English as a Second Language) textbooks that I have used in my classes, and images from recent Hollywood films. Specifically, I analyze how images of “race and gender,” the two remaining categories of the once regnant “race, class, and gender” trio, are presented, and I explore ethnic images as well. Though I am not a professional ESL instructor (my graduate degrees are in Asian Studies and American Studies), I have made my living in this area for twelve years. In any case, my only focus is on cultural issues, so those are what I will examine here.

While I have used many textbooks over the years, the three I have chosen for this inquiry came to my attention unintentionally; after many months of using them in various classes, I began to notice patterns and cultural value judgments that kept appearing again and again. Wedded to my own scholarly research on Hollywood film, I found that these three textbooks were very much in synch with the spirit of multiculturalism in America. It is my intention now to illuminate various aspects of that multicultural enterprise.

## The Multicultural Workshop

I start with a text (a series, really) that is explicitly multicultural. This series, *The Multicultural Workshop: A Reading and Writing Program*,<sup>1</sup> is composed of three books and a box of reading cards containing one hundred stories. As an ESL text, it appears to be quite useful, but the cultural assumptions underlying it are never discussed, beginning with the term “multicultural.” I could find nowhere in the books or cards a definition of the term or even reference to why this series is considered so. In addition, the authors fail to state the intended setting for the book, so I have had to deduce it myself. Given the fact that there is a detailed map of the United States in the opening pages as well as the fact that immigrants featured are connected to America, I must conclude that the series deals with multiculturalism in the United States.

This lack of explanation seems to be a grave weakness because many of those outside America simply have no idea about the “multicultural” project going on in modern America. For example, my students in Japan neither understand what multicultural means, nor can they spot instances of it; they merely use the book and cards as reading instruction material. Thus, I have made the effort to explain what I think the series intends, beginning with some basic categories that we in North America might take for granted.

Primarily, I believe, multiculturalism focuses on issues of race and gender, with ethnic issues subsumed under race. (*The Multicultural Workshop* most certainly reinforces this assumption. My content analysis reveals that approximately 60 percent of the cards fall under that umbrella.) Overall, as a cultural and political project, multiculturalism in America appears to be a power play, an effort to grasp power

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

from the dominant group in America for hundreds of years — white males. Historian David Hollinger offers the motive and timing for this challenge to white male dominance: “Multiculturalism grew rapidly in the 1980s and early 1990s by directing itself in simple terms against an evil widely resented, the narrowness of the prevailing culture of the United States.”<sup>2</sup> In no way, do I believe, is multiculturalism an attempt to include white males and to share power. Power is a zero sum game; the only question is the degree to which white male power is challenged and how explicit that challenge is.

Unlike more polemical multicultural texts,<sup>3</sup> this series lacks any overt animus toward white males and their culture. Rather, this series represents an underappreciated aspect of multiculturalism: an attempt to write white males out of the “inclusive” story by simply ignoring them. Toward that end, *The Multicultural Workshop* is surprisingly successful. Thus, while non-whites and women were featured in about 60 percent of the cards, white men managed only 10 percent, just about equal to environmentalism/animal rights issues.

The most common category in this series has to do with immigrants and their children who may speak a language other than English and come from a non-Anglo background. Insofar as this is an ESL textbook, this emphasis can be appreciated. For instance, Unit One, Chapter Two is “Cambodia,” and it features a poem by Ponly Ho about the sights and sounds of Cambodia. Ho was a high school student in Boston when she wrote it. Another example is Tencha Avila’s story “Remembering Mom and Dad,” a reflection on growing up Mexican-American, which appears in Unit Two, Chapter One.

A much smaller category has to do with changes in modern American families in general. Unit Two, Chapter Three fits that bill. It uses the lyrics of Harry Chapin’s *Cat’s in the Cradle* to show how the

previously hardworking but distant father was no longer an acceptable role model after the social revolution of the 1960s. This clearly portrayed a mainstream white family. I thought I had found another exception in Unit One, Chapter Four, "The Neighborhood Deli." In the foreground of the first picture are two young whites, seated with three African Americans. In addition, the source was *The Christian Science Monitor*, so I expected this to deal with "majority" Americans. Instead, it turned out to be a reading selection about The Bagel Nosh, a Jewish deli.

Finally, there is a questionable multicultural category that is widely employed in the series: Environmentalism. I have never seen this described as "multiculturalism," but if we pair it with animal rights, there is, I suppose, some association with civil rights. I will simply note when a chapter or card focuses on this topic.

### **White Males**

As mentioned, white males are present as subjects in only about 10 percent of these multicultural cards, often in conjunction with another issue. For example, Card 60 discusses the challenges faced by a white male whose genetic disease has left him blind. This strain of retinitis pigmentosa in his family "primarily affects men and boys. . ." I found this to be a rare case of sympathy toward white males. When dealing with white males, more typically the authors were mildly negative, such as in Card 69, where "Europeans" killed most bison, or Card 39, which describes the paradise that was Hawaii before the arrival of the white man; after the first contact, disease decimated the native population and Hawaiian culture was supplanted by that of the Europeans.<sup>4</sup> Only

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

grudgingly do the authors admit that reading and writing skills brought by whites were a good thing.

To be fair, however, I must note three cards that are generally positive about white males. Card 46 praises the accomplishments of humanitarian Alfred Nobel, creator of the Nobel Prizes. (Admittedly, this introduction allows the authors to privilege multicultural winners of Nobel Prizes: "Prizes were first awarded in 1901, and the list of Nobel laureates contains many distinguished names: Albert Einstein in physics [Jewish], Marie Curie in chemistry [female], Toni Morrison and William Faulkner in literature [Morrison is a black female; Faulkner is the only one listed who is not considered multicultural], Martin Luther King, Jr., [black] for peace."

Card 98 describes the positive attributes of a leader. Only males are featured, and the only non-white male is Mao Tse-tung. This card is immediately followed by a wrenching account of killing during the Vietnam War. Well-known writer Tim O'Brien shares the pain and sorrow of the time he used a grenade to kill a young enemy soldier. I could detect no animus toward O'Brien here, nor toward white soldiers in general. These cards demonstrate that the authors are not attempting to vilify white males in a doctrinaire way.

Still, those three cards are the exceptions, exceptions which are overshadowed by the subtle criticisms of white males as seen above. Often, however, there is a curious tendency to avoid mention of white males in connection with accomplishments which are largely due to them, particularly in technology. For example, Card 25 celebrates the 1986 non-stop around-the-world of the airplane *Voyager* but does not mention the work or background of the white male designer of the plane. Cards 45 and 49 discuss the advances in space technology but

again there is no mention of the overwhelmingly white male scientists who have made this possible.

### **Empowered Females**

In stark contrast to this slighting of white males is the treatment afforded women. That the two female authors conspicuously privilege the place of women in this series comes as no surprise. Even when the topic is immigration or cultures outside the United States, the emphasis is clearly on “women’s narratives,” as is established in the first two cards in the series. The first pictures three generations of Native American women, and the interviewer first speaks with three teenage women. The second card shows a picture of an elderly black woman who has written a poem called “Computer.”

In addition, there is an unmistakable sense that the authors deliberately intend to “empower” woman. For example, a story about scientists at a laboratory in Antarctica (Card 65) takes testimony from two women, one of whom mentions that women had previously been excluded in such fields. Card 80 is an interview with two scientists who study volcanoes—both women. Perhaps these two cards are meant to bolster the claims about a bias against girls in science that comes in Card 41.

In two cards that should be gender neutral about the challenges of old age, both feature only women. Card 16 shows that senior women can still do useful work such as hanging wallpaper, while Card 28 lauds the scholarly achievements of a woman past eighty. There are no stories about senior males to balance these accounts. In cards dealing with women in other cultures, this sense of empowerment is also evident. Card 83 features an old Korean woman relating to her granddaughter the folly of following men. She regrets the time she spent

mourning the loss of her husband and insists that her granddaughter be strong and independent. Similarly, Card 95 urges the same for Nigerian women.

All told, the attention given to women, as well as the emphasis on only the positive, make these cards unequivocally multicultural. Next, I would like to examine the position the authors take with respect to African Americans.

### **The Struggle Against White Racism**

In *The Multicultural Workshop*, cards dealing with African Americans stress the burdens of white racism. For example, in Card 38 a passage from Marian Wright Edelman explains that “caring Black adults were buffers against the segregated and hostile outside world that told us we weren’t important . . . . We couldn’t play in public playgrounds or sit at drugstore lunch counters or order Coke. . .” Card 43 honors the blacks whose patience and courage at “sit-ins” at the counters of segregated Southern stores advanced civil rights. In Card 84 Roger Wilkins also discusses the white racism his family encountered when they moved to an all-white neighborhood:

The problem for our new neighbors was that their neighborhood had previously been pristine (in their terms) and they were ignorant about black people. The prevailing wisdom in the neighborhood was that we were spoiling it and that we ought to go back where we belonged (or, alternatively, ought not to intrude where we were not wanted). There was a lot of angry talk among the adults, but nothing much came of it.

A similarly troubling story is told in Card 61, “Staring Eyes See Stereotypes, Not a Person,” an excerpt from a *San Francisco Examiner*



newspaper article by Ri'Chard Magee. In this story, the author laments the suspicions cast on him by strangers simply because he is "6-foot-4, young, black, and male — a potential danger to them." Magee tells of the pain caused to blacks and Hispanics in this otherwise tolerant city. He then makes a case that comes unnervingly close to a rationale for violently attacking whites:

How can you feel at home when people are constantly telling you to get back to Africa or Mexico — or just back to "where you belong"?

My way of dealing with this kind of thing has changed over the years. In the past, when my friends and I would walk the streets and a hundred pairs of white eyes would look at us as if we were the lowest form of dirt, it would make us angry enough to hurt or rob them.

Now I'm more likely to use words to defend myself against those eyes.

Is Magee admitting that he physically assaulted whites? The above strongly implies it, though if we stretch the grammar, it could mean he only *felt* like attacking whites. The problem comes in the use of the word "would": "it *would* make us angry." To my mind, he is in fact admitting such attacks took place because in the first part of the sentence he uses "would" to denote an action completed in the past: "In the past, when my friends and I would walk the streets. . ." Thus, it is only logical to conclude that the second part of the sentence also describes a genuinely completed act: "it would make us angry enough to hurt or rob them."

This seems to be dangerous ground for a reading textbook to tread, if only because of the reality of such attacks by young black males (including those against other black males — see John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* [1991]). This kind of black-on-white violence has been

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

recorded in American literature. Eldridge Cleaver, for one, wrote in his autobiography *Soul on Ice* that the racial connection in the rape of white women by black men was both real and deliberate:

I became a rapist. To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto . . . and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey. I did this consciously, deliberately, willfully, methodically. . .

Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women — and this point, I believe, was the most satisfying to me because I was very resentful over the historical fact of how the white man has used the black woman. I felt I was getting revenge.

Cleaver goes on to add that had he not been apprehended by the police, he undoubtedly would have “slit some white throats.”<sup>5</sup>

Regretfully, this kind of interracial violence continues in America, as this December 2000 newspaper account of a heinous quadruple murder attests:

Four people were shot to death early Friday and a fifth was critically wounded during a crime spree that began as a home robbery in far east Wichita. The victims were all shot in the back or head . . . . The surviving woman said the five were taken to ATMs near 21st Street and Webb Road, then to a soccer field just west of 29th Street North, where the women were raped. The victims were ordered to kneel and were then shot . . . .<sup>6</sup>

The suspects arrested by the police are black. An MSNBC affiliate, KSN News, had pictures of the suspects.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusions

I believe the emphasis on women and minorities makes this series eminently multicultural. The de-emphasis on white males only adds to that impression. Therefore, I have chosen two cards that best sum up the position and spirit of *The Multicultural Workshop*. The first is Card 42, "Immigrants Forgoing Citizenship Pursuing American Dream." While the entire series is very careful never to openly criticize or denigrate Anglo-American culture, this particular card is close to celebrating non-Anglo differences. It focuses on Hispanic immigrants who see America as only an economic opportunity. Armando Espinosa, "an immigrant from Ecuador, has no intention of becoming a United States citizen." Despite living in New York for 12 years, "He certainly did not consider himself an American." "I am Ecuadorian in my blood and guts," he says. Then, in a phrase that perfectly captures what this kind of multiculturalism embraces, he opines, "I do not even like apple pie."

As poignant as Card 42 may be, Card 35 is perhaps the most apt story for this entire series because it symbolizes the goal of this kind of multiculturalism: to replace the white male in America. The picture here shows Akhil Sastogi and his father, Ajay. Akhil was born in India but moved to Virginia when he was two. When he was seven, he invented and later patented a screw-on device to keep gallon jugs of milk from spilling. For this invention, Akhil won the Invent America 3rd Grade Award for the state of Virginia. It is the title of this card, however, that captures the dreams of multiculturalism: "Thomas Edison, Move Over!" This series has clearly worked for that goal, as do the next two texts I examine.

## **Marathon Mouth<sup>8</sup>**

This book is described as “a student-centered, multi-skills conversation text.” There is no explicit political or social agenda, but, of course, there will always be an implicit one. Very broadly, this textbook falls under a “casual” multicultural heading, one that includes all races and seeks to empower those previously oppressed, including women. For example, page 50 has an exercise meant to get students to ask questions about ability. The students are to choose a question, such as “Can you ride a horse?” Next, they must mill about the room asking classmates until they get an affirmative response, at which point they write that student’s name in the textbook. The sample question is, “Can you play rugby very well?” In case a student does not know what rugby is, there is a small picture at the bottom showing three husky males engaged in a pitched battle. The name supplied by the textbook as an example, however, is “Jennifer.”

This attempt at social engineering is no fluke. While the book is full of active females — on page 83 Erika jogs, Sasha cycles, Eun Hi practices karate, and Beatrice aggressively downhill skis; on p. 85 Anne is an avid fisher(wo)man, while Beatrice now plays soccer — it again embraces the exception on page 95: “What is Jane going to do this evening?” She is going to play hockey with her sister. Clearly, the authors of *Marathon Mouth* hope to show women in traditional male roles.

## **Stupid White Men**

It is difficult to criticize positive portrayals of minorities or women unless it becomes overtly propagandistic. For example, if a book

presents commercial airline pilots as admirable figures, then consistently portrays them as, say, black females, there would be room for objection. When using negative portrayals, however, it becomes trickier since no group wants to see itself so portrayed, no matter how much truth there might be to it. This is why, I believe, these teaching aids try to avoid negative portrayals as much as possible; generally, they stress the positive.

Still, there are a few exceptions. Chapter Ten presents a short list of adjectives, and students are to find their opposite meaning, as in “heavy — light,” “fast — slow.” What, then, will the textbook do with the pairs “agile — clumsy” and “smart — stupid”? The answers can be found on page 61. Simon, a **clumsy** white male waiter, is shown dropping his platter of food, while Pam, who is **agile**, deftly gets out of the way.

Just above that illustration, however, comes a much more problematic image. Two students are at the blackboard. Wei, a non-white, is **smart**, while Charles, a white male who is foolishly scratching his head, is **stupid**. To be sure, this is only an illustration in a textbook, but as feminists and others have shown us over the past forty years, such images can actually be more insidious than overt portrayals.<sup>9</sup> Since the advent of civil and women’s rights, there has been an emphasis on “role models” and “self-esteem.” The question I ask here, then, is: What kind of role models are clumsy white Simon and stupid white Charles? As it turns out, the issue of white male self-esteem is more serious than some imagine. For example, on the cover of their May 2000 issue, *The Atlantic Monthly* features Christina Hoff Sommers’s “The War Against Boys,” which argues that the belief that American schools favor boys and harm girls is both false and harmful to boys. She has since developed this article into a book.<sup>10</sup>

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

These privileged images of minorities and women most certainly have their counterparts in the movies. In the last few decades — particularly the last decade — Hollywood has offered a steady stream of the empowered woman — *Gloria* (1999), *Thelma and Louise* (1995), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), and *G. I. Jane* (1997) to name but a few. Black images too have improved dramatically. While previously there had been few positive roles for blacks and only a handful of black stars (Sidney Poitier comes to mind), by the 1990s there was a whole list of black film stars, albeit mostly male. Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, Will Smith, Eddie Murphy, and Samuel L. Jackson are but a few of these stars, and with rare exception they play strong and positive characters.

For white males, however, it has been a mixed bag. In the past, white males so dominated the silver screen that it was simply taken for granted that they would play all the roles—the good, the bad, *and* the ugly. In multicultural America, though, this has changed, and white male roles are mixed in more complex ways with those of women and people of color (not to mention gays and lesbians). At issue, however, is Who will play the bad guy? Overwhelmingly, I have observed, the bad guy tends to be white. From racism against Native Americans in *Dances With Wolves* (1990), to that against Japanese Americans in *Come See the Paradise* (1990) and *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1999), to the very common depiction of anti-Black racism in movies such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Crimson Tide* (1995), *A Time to Kill* (1996), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), *The Hurricane* (1999) *True Crime* (1999) or *The Green Mile* (2000), whites in general, and white males in particular, are featured as racists. In contrast to these negative images of white society, rarely do we now see negative images of blacks, Native

Americans, or Hispanics, and the images of Asians and Asian Americans have slowly improved as well.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the rarity of negative black, Indian, or Hispanic images, there has been an increase of positive portrayals of these groups that is ahead of the curve of real life America. While blacks and Hispanics, for example, have done extremely well in some professional sports, in other areas they are still highly underrepresented, perhaps nowhere as much as in high technology. Generally, when we think of computers, rockets, nuclear weapons, and so on, we picture white males, along with some very competent Asians and women. From Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, we have moved on to Bill Gates, Kelly Johnson, and Chuck Yeager.

Film, however, is not limited to mirroring the real world. Now it is not uncommon to find blacks in the role of computer genius or technology wizard. In *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), for example, the nuclear engineer is black (as is the admiral). In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Dr. Dyson, the genius who uses technology from the future to build a range of breakthrough devices, is also black. His character is one of the most sympathetic portrayals of an African American male that I have seen. Similarly, in *Virus* (1998), starring Donald Sutherland in his standard evil role, the technology guru is also black. Unlike *Terminator 2*, however, *Virus* does not stop at elevating the image of the black to an engineering genius. Like the textbook example of stupid Charles above, there is one crewmember who cannot do even the simplest math: a white male. (I might add that in stark contrast to this image of white males as stupid, we have a positive *and realistic* view of white males in Ron Howard's superb *Apollo 13* [1995]. The astronauts are white males, the brilliant engineers are white males, and all the ground control personnel are white males. These white

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

males sent men to the moon and back multiple times, and managed to rescue three men on Apollo 13 when an unforeseen accident occurred. Perhaps that is the kind of image we should see more of in textbooks.)

Hollywood has also been increasing the number of interracial dating and marriage films since Sidney Poitier played a doctor engaged to an attractive young blonde in one of the first black-white interracial films, the 1967 *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Of course, this partially mirrors what is happening in society in general. Thus, when Spike Lee's 1991 *Jungle Fever* explores the rewards and challenges of interracial sex, no one can say such images are independent of real life. In the same way, textbooks tacitly or explicitly approve of interracial dating. For example, in *The Multicultural Workshop*, there is a subtle allusion to a Vietnamese woman's experience with dating an African American (Card 88).

*Marathon Mouth* adopts an inconsistent position on this issue. On page 49 we find a short paragraph which begins: "In Texas, Betty lived with Native Americans. She wasn't allowed to date anyone while she lived there, but she was very happy living among them." In previous discussions of Betty, there had been absolutely nothing about her dating habits, so it comes as a bit of a surprise that she was not allowed to date Native Americans. We see from the pictures that she is white, so perhaps her family is racist and disapproves of interracial dating, a hypothesis we can easily test by returning to Lesson Two, where we first met Betty and her family. Page 8 presents her family tree. Betty, age 25, is of the third generation in this scheme. On her father's side her grandparents are white, but on her mother's side, her grandfather is Asian. Of Betty's two siblings, her sister has married a black man, while her brother has married and divorced an Asian woman.



Obviously, the authors do not object to interracial dating and marriage in principle. Why then the prohibition from the Native American side?

### **Talk Your Head Off<sup>12</sup>**

This conversation textbook has forty lessons, some of which are balanced with respect to race and gender. For example, Lesson 14 deals with gossip. While the textbook could have focused on the stereotype of women gossiping, it shows a range of people instead. The first picture shows a blonde woman gossiping with a non-white woman, the second picture shows two adult white males, and the third picture shows a non-white male (Indian, perhaps?) talking to a white female. Lesson 28, "Professionalism," shows similar balance. We see, in this order, a black male physician, a white male police officer, a white judge, and an Asian female nurse. The inclusion of the black doctor, I feel, keeps this lesson from reifying stereotypes.

Others, however, show a clear bias, and this bias tends to be against white males. Lesson 13, for instance, is titled "Stealing." On the two discussion pages there are only two pictures of people: both thieves are white males. This is repeated in Lesson 32, "The Justice System," but is tempered by the inclusion of a white judge and white police officer. Lesson 21 is called "The Homeless and Welfare." Of the four people pictured (five, if you want to include the angel), all are male. While in America there is a stereotype connecting the "Welfare Queen" to black women, there are here only two homeless men, then a man receiving money from above, and finally, a male politician, a positive image since it shows him in a position of power.

Lesson 27, "Cheating," continues this practice of associating white males with negative behavior. There are three pictures of people on

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

the two pages devoted to discussion of cheating: all are males, and three of those four are white males. In the first picture, a blond-haired boy is being called into the principal's office for cheating. (Incidentally, the hand beckoning him belongs to a black male, showing he has a position of power and respect here.<sup>13</sup>)

The second illustration is a bit ambiguous. It shows two boys sitting at their desks next to each other. One boy is not white, while the other boy may or may not be white (he has no nose, a feature the illustrator usually uses to depict whiteness). Also, it is not clear if both boys are cheating or if one boy is trying to copy from the other. Finally, the third picture is not at all ambiguous. This section deals with deceptive advertising and shows a young white male with a wrench in his hand and a sinister look on his face. He is standing in front of a yellow car (a lemon, perhaps?). Taken together, these portrayals constitute a pattern of negative images of white males.

As with *The Multicultural Workshop*, *Talk Your Head Off* attempts to empower women, and sometimes non-whites. For example, Lesson 25 is entitled "War and the Military." There are only two pictures of soldiers in this lesson, and predictably, one is a white female, while the other is a black male. Obviously, this is in stark contrast to the historic makeup of the U.S. military.

Lesson 28, "Government Spending," continues this emphasis on empowerment. Of the four illustrations on pages 110-111, only one includes people. Above this illustration are Question 6 (Would you be interested in becoming a budget director for your country's government? Why or why not?) and Question 7 (If you were the president or leader of your country, what would you change in your country's budget?). Next to the illustration is Question 8 (If you could be in charge of all the government's money, what five programs would you

put on the top of your list to always receive government funding? Why do you support those programs?) Finally, under the illustration comes Question 9 (If you had the power to cut government spending, what programs would you eliminate?).

Now we come to the illustration itself. There is a town hall with a bell above it and dollars flowing through the air. On the left side there is a young black female; on the right side there is a blonde white female. This certainly suggests that the author and illustrator of this book wish to associate women with control of the government purse strings, at the expense, I might add, of the group that traditionally and currently controls it.

### Whither Christmas?

Finally, I wish to address one important aspect of multiculturalism that is not fully appreciated: the disdain for Christianity. There is an excellent example of this in *Talk Your Head Off*. In the Table of Contents, under “Competency Objectives,” there are three goals listed for Lesson 10:

- Ask and answer questions about holidays
- Discuss cultural differences and celebrations
- Discuss holidays celebrated in the United States

Then we move to Lesson 10 proper, pages 37-40. At the top of the page, there are two boxes for preparation. First is a short vocabulary list with words appropriate for this lesson. Next comes a list of “Let’s Talk Words,” in order alphabetically:

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

Dr. Martin Luther	New Year's Day
King, Jr. Day	tell
Father's Day	Thanksgiving
Halloween	Valentine's Day
Independence Day	Veteran's Day
lonely	Washington's
Memorial Day	Birthday
Mother's Day	work

What is odd about the holidays included? Or, to phrase it more properly, what is odd about the holidays **NOT** included? While I might have trouble finding scholarly surveys on which holidays Americans consider to be important, in this case I feel it is appropriate that, as a graduate student in American Studies and as a native-born American, I can use my own experiences and observations to answer this question: Christmas is the most important holiday in America, and Easter might be fourth or fifth overall. Yet neither holiday is even mentioned. Assuming that this text is aimed at those born and raised outside the United States, it seems misleading, to say the least, to not even discuss such crucial holidays in America.

In this lesson, pages 38-39 give eleven points to discuss, and again Christmas and Easter are neither mentioned nor shown in the illustrations. Finally, on page 40 there are exercises using holidays. The first lists the eleven holidays from above, this time in a different order, and asks the students to elicit this information:

What do you know about the United States? In which months do these holidays occur? How do people celebrate? What is the reason for these holidays? Work in small groups to complete the chart.

Next comes a fill-in exercise in the following format:

1. The happiest holiday is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The most interesting holiday is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
3. The liveliest holiday is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The worst holiday is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The best holiday is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

Again, it seems inconceivable to me that such questions could be asked when students are not allowed to consider Christmas or Easter. I suspect the vast majority of Americans have wonderful memories of Christmas morning or Christmas dinner with the family or going to Christmas Mass. It is very possible that Americans would choose Christmas to answer four of the five above questions.

For others, Easter might be the answer for some questions because of its traditions of hunting for Easter eggs, etc. In addition, the long build-up to Easter provides a degree of drama to the holiday. Beginning with Mardi Gras, the carnival that is the last chance to indulge before the fasting of Lent begins, through the forty days of Lent itself, then through the experience of the important Holy Week up until Good Friday with its Passion Play and, for Christians, the crucial fact of Christ's death on the cross and His later resurrection, the religious meaning of Christianity is conveyed in multiple ways. Thus, Easter also has a combination of religious and cultural aspects.

Because of these omissions, I wrote Brana and Harlan West, author and illustrator, respectively, of *Talk Your Head Off*, and this is part of the reply I received:

Now we would like to respond to your question regarding the omission of Christmas and Easter in our American holiday section. We had those holidays in our original manuscript, but were asked to change them to make the text secular . . . .

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

Most public schools in California will not use a text unless it is secular in nature, and follows the California Modal Standards. Since we work in Los Angeles, we complied with those standards.

While Christmas and Easter certainly have their religious aspects, the Federal Government still considers Christmas, at least, an official holiday, which applies to California as much as any other state. To argue that the inclusion of two of the most important holidays in the United States would somehow keep the textbook from being “secular in nature” is to stretch definitions too finely. What is little appreciated, however, is the fact that the denigration and marginalization of Christianity and Christian symbols is an integral part of what multiculturalism is in America, particularly when Christianity is paired with white culture.

While there is simply no room here to make the provocative and complex arguments about the source of this anti-Christianity within the multicultural movement, I would like to suggest a likely source for it: American Jews. In my own Ph.D. dissertation I have devoted many pages to this issue, but here I would only like to steer interested readers to two excellent and considered treatments of this subject. First comes John Murray Cuddihy’s “unpacking” of Sigmund Freud et al. in *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* where he posits an ongoing *kulturkampf* between Jews and European Christians.<sup>14</sup> The theme of a “war on gentiles” is more extensively developed in Kevin MacDonald’s trilogy on Judaism as an “evolutionary group strategy.”<sup>15</sup> For my purposes here, I will only briefly relate examples of how Jews have tried to drive (white) Christians from the American public sphere.

Many American Jews have actively used the courts and other means of adjusting public life in order to remove or mute the presence of symbols and words they find offensive or potentially threatening. For example, as Stephen Feldman documents in his book *Please Don't Wish Me a Merry Christmas*,<sup>16</sup> there has been a decades-long effort to make a major Christian holiday less public in America. At a practical level, his plea has already been translated into cultural fact: "Happy Holidays" and "Season's Greetings" are now ubiquitous greetings as the end of December nears. Jewish aversion to Christian symbols has indeed resulted in a much more neutral public arena. As political scientist Benjamin Ginsberg, in his 1993 work *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State*, writes:

religious symbols and forms of expression that Jews find threatening have been almost completely eliminated from schools and other public institutions. Suits brought by the ACLU, an organization whose leadership and membership are predominantly Jewish, secured federal court decisions banning officially sanctioned prayer in the public schools and creches and other religious displays in parks and public buildings.<sup>17</sup>

One other area worth considering in my attempt to outline a Jewish sense of opposition has to do with the use of the Christian calendar, which, David Biale writes, "in the West . . . imposes Christian teleological assumptions on all events it describes. For this reason, many Jewish scholars prefer to use B. C. E. and C. E . . . although even that seeming neutrality speaks for Christian rather than Jewish time constructs."<sup>18</sup> The vast majority of the books in my collection written by Jews employ the B. C. E./C. E. notation, in stark contrast to most non-Jewish writers I have come across in my career, including Asian ones. Perhaps Irving Howe has it right: "The culture of the Jews, no

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

matter how comfortably nestled into crevices of American society, remains fundamentally apart: at odds with, perhaps even alien to, the host culture, at least insofar as being Christians or Jews still affects our lives.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, we can see that this textbook adds the animus toward (white) Christians that is also an integral part of the multicultural project. Together with criticism, belittling, and marginalizing of white males, these tactics seek to challenge white male hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

One day I happened to discuss some of the above topics with a fellow teacher. Thinking for a moment, he came up with a quip that fairly sums up the multicultural movement in America. He said, “Pat, white ain’t part of the rainbow.” Though the colors of the rainbow are not ordered along gender lines, his point is well taken; I think it fits the patterns we have seen in the “texts” both literal and filmic we have seen above.

I have argued that multiculturalism is not simply a movement toward universal equality. Rather, I have seen and described it as a political struggle, largely played out in the cultural arena. It is a struggle to empower discrete groups at the expense of one other group: white males. Thus, the positive images so prevalent on one side are contrasted with so many negative images on the other. This is no accident; it is the product of much study and activism. We should therefore endeavor to understand the underlying motives and the stakes to be had so that a more genuinely universal sharing of power can be attained.



Notes

1. Linda Lonon Blanton and Linda Lee, *The Multicultural Workshop: A Reading and Writing Program* (Boston: Heinle : Heinle Publishers, 1995).
2. David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), See also Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993); and Nathan Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
3. I would suggest Ronald Takaki's *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1990) as an excellent starting point.
4. See David E. Stannard, *Before the Horror: The Population of Hawaii on the Eve of Western Contact* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989); and Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter : Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).
5. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 14. Works such as Cleaver's which discuss premeditated rape of white women are not unprecedented. Take, for instance, this review of Wright's *Native Son*, which is currently displayed on the Amazon.com website for the book. The book's dialogue takes place after the character Bigger has killed a young white woman:

In *Native Son*, Wright was aiming at something more. In Bigger, he created a character so damaged by racism and poverty, with dreams so perverted, and with human sensibilities so eroded, that he has no claim on the reader's compassion:

"I didn't want to kill," Bigger shouted. "But what I killed for, I am! It must've been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder . . . . What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. "It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something. . . I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. It's the truth. . ."

*Images of the White American Male in Decline (Patrick O'Brien)*

Wright's genius was that, in preventing us from feeling pity for Bigger, he forced us to confront the hopelessness, misery, and injustice of the society that gave birth to him. (See [http://http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0060809779/qid=1011935177/sr=2-1/ref=sr\\_2\\_11\\_1/002-0362960-0295251](http://http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0060809779/qid=1011935177/sr=2-1/ref=sr_2_11_1/002-0362960-0295251)).

6. Hurst Laviana, Deb Gruver, and Tim Potter, "Brothers held in deaths," *Wichita Eagle*, December 16, 2000.
7. See <http://www.msnbc.com/local/ksnw/162606.asp>, which is still valid as of January 25, 2002.
8. Lesley Koustaff, Brent Gaston, and Paul Shimizu, *Marathon Mouth* (Fukuoka, Japan: Intercom Press, 1999).
9. See, for example, Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).
10. Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2001).
11. Spike Lee is an exception here, insofar as his films often show a range of black characters, from successful architect to crack addict. As for Asian roles, in addition to martial arts stars such as Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan, there are more dramatic roles for Asian actors now. See, for example, *Come See the Paradise*, *Picture Bride*, *The Last Emperor*, etc.
12. Brana and Harlan West, *Talk Your Head Off (. . . and Write, Too!)*, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents, 1997).
13. One filmic portrayal of the virtuous black principal can be found in *American History X*, a tale of a family of virulently racist white male neo-Nazis. Two non-white males try to save these boys — the principal, Dr. Bob Sweeny (two Ph. D.'s) and a Jewish history teacher.
14. John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
15. Kevin B. MacDonald, *A People That Shall Dwell Alone: Judaism as a Group Evolutionary Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994); *Separation and Its Discontents: Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Anti-Semitism*

- (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998) and particularly *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth-Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998).
16. Stephen Feldman, *Please Don't Wish Me a Merry Christmas: A Critical History of the Separation of Church and State* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).
  17. Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fatal Embrace: Jews and the State*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 2.
  18. David Biale, "The Melting Pot and Beyond: Jews and the Politics of American Identity," in *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susan Heschel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 122.
  19. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc, 1983), 587.