

TENTH EDITION

Rereading AMERICA

CULTURAL CONTEXTS FOR CRITICAL THINKING
AND WRITING



Gary Colombo • Robert Cullen • Bonnie Lisle

**REREADING
AMERICA**

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REREADING AMERICA

Cultural Contexts for Critical
Thinking and Writing

TENTH EDITION

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PREFACE FOR INSTRUCTORS

ABOUT REREADING AMERICA

Designed for first-year writing and critical thinking courses, *Rereading America* anthologizes a diverse set of readings focused on the myths that dominate U.S. culture. This central theme brings together thought-provoking selections on a broad range of topics—family, education, technology, success, gender, and race—topics that raise controversial issues meaningful to college students of all backgrounds. We’ve drawn these readings from many sources, both within the academy and outside of it; the selections are both multicultural and cross-curricular and thus represent an unusual variety of voices, styles, and subjects.

The readings in this book speak directly to students’ experiences and concerns. Every college student has had some brush with prejudice, and most have something to say about education, the family, or the gender stereotypes they see in films and on television. The issues raised here help students link their personal experiences with broader cultural perspectives and lead them to analyze, or “read,” the cultural forces that have shaped and continue to shape their lives. By linking the personal and the cultural, students begin to recognize that they are not academic outsiders—they too have knowledge, assumptions, and intellectual frameworks that give them authority in academic culture. Connecting personal knowledge and academic discourse helps students see that they are able to think, speak, and write academically and that they don’t have to absorb passively what the “experts” say.

FEATURES OF THE TENTH EDITION

A Cultural Approach to Critical Thinking Like its predecessors, the tenth edition of *Rereading America* is committed to the premise that learning to think critically means learning to identify and see beyond dominant cultural myths—collective and often unconsciously held beliefs that influence our thinking, reading, and writing. Instead of treating cultural diversity as just another topic to be studied or “appreciated,” *Rereading America* encourages students to grapple with the real differences in perspective that arise in a pluralistic society like ours. This method helps students to break through conventional assumptions and patterns of thought that hinder fresh critical responses and inhibit dialogue. It helps them recognize that even the most apparently “natural” fact

or obvious idea results from a process of social construction. And it helps them to develop the intellectual independence essential to critical thinking, reading, and writing.

New Issues This edition of *Rereading America* includes a new chapter (Chapter Three) devoted to the topic of emerging technologies. Growing up wired to cell phones, the Internet, and social media, today's students inhabit a world that embraces the promise of all things technical. Not since the 1950s has America been so infatuated with the power and promise of science and engineering. We've come to accept as a matter of faith that there is a technological fix for almost every problem—even for the problems that technology creates. In “The Wild Wired West: Myths of Progress on the Tech Frontier,” students will have the opportunity to examine American attitudes toward technological innovation and to assess their own attachment to electronic media. Google executives Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen invite readers to dream about how computers will improve our lives in coming decades. Selections by Internet critics Sherry Turkle, Charles Seife, and danah boyd challenge students to consider the personal and political costs of social media use. Contemporary feminists Laurie Penny and Emily Witt ponder what life online has meant for women and the future of long-term relationships. Selections by Lori Andrews and Henrick Karoliszyn challenge students to consider how online data mining and data-driven “predictive policing” threaten our civil liberties. The chapter's Visual Portfolio and Further Connections questions encourage students to consider how today's high-tech revolution is transforming attitudes about ourselves—and even about what it means to be human.

Timely New Readings To keep *Rereading America* up to date, we've worked hard to bring you the best new voices speaking on issues of race, gender, class, family, education, and technological progress. As in past editions, we've retained old favorites like Gary Soto, Stephanie Coontz, John Taylor Gatto, Malcolm X, Jonathan Kozol, Mike Rose, Barbara Ehrenreich, Jamaica Kincaid, Jean Kilbourne, and Michael Kimmel. But you'll also find a host of new selections by authors such as Sarah Boxer, Diane Ravitch, William Deresiewicz, Sherry Turkle, Robert Reich, Rebecca Solnit, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Sherman Alexie. And like earlier versions, this edition of *Rereading America* includes a healthy mix of personal and academic writing, representing a wide variety of genres, styles, and rhetorical strategies.

Visual Portfolios In addition to frontispieces and cartoons, we've included a Visual Portfolio of myth-related images in every chapter of *Rereading America*. These collections of photographs invite students to examine how visual “texts” are constructed and how, like written texts, they are susceptible to multiple readings and rereadings. Each portfolio is accompanied by a series of questions that encourage critical analysis and connect portfolio images to ideas and themes in chapter reading selections. As in earlier editions, the visual frontispieces that open each chapter are integrated into the prereading assignments found in the chapter introductions. The cartoons, offered as a bit of comic relief and as opportunities for visual thinking, are paired with appropriate readings throughout the text.

Focus on Media We've continued the practice of including selections focusing on the media. Chapter One includes a selection by Sarah Boxer analyzing depictions of families in animated films. In Chapter Two, Carmen Lugo-Lugo examines the ways media stereotypes shape students' assumptions about Latino/a professors. Nearly every reading in Chapter Three focuses on Internet culture and the impact of social media. Chapter Four includes a selection by Diana Kendall on the media's role in disseminating myths of material success. Chapter Five offers analyses of gender issues in the media, including Jean Kilbourne on images of women in advertising and Joan Morgan on black feminism and hip-hop culture. In Chapter Six, Cheryl I. Harris and Devon W. Carbado explore how bias shaped media reports of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Focus on Struggle and Resistance Most multicultural readers approach diversity in one of two ways: either they adopt a pluralist approach and conceive of American society as a kind of salad bowl of cultures or, in response to worries about the lack of "objectivity" in the multicultural curriculum, they take what might be called the "talk show" approach and present American culture as a series of pro-and-con debates on a number of social issues. The tenth edition of *Rereading America*, like its predecessors, follows neither of these approaches. Pluralist readers, we feel, make a promise that's impossible to keep: no single text, and no single course, can do justice to the many complex cultures that inhabit the United States. Thus the materials selected for *Rereading America* aren't meant to offer a taste of what "family" means for Native Americans or the flavor of gender relations among immigrants. Instead, we've included selections like Melvin Dixon's "Aunt Ida Pieces a Quilt" or John Taylor Gatto's "Against School" because they offer us fresh critical perspectives on the common myths that shape our ideas, values, and beliefs. Rather than seeing this anthology as a mosaic or kaleidoscope of cultural fragments that combine to form a beautiful picture, it's more accurate to think of *Rereading America* as a handbook that helps students explore the ways that the dominant culture shapes their ideas, values, and beliefs.

This notion of cultural dominance is studiously avoided in most multicultural anthologies. "Salad bowl" readers generally sidestep the issue of cultural dynamics: intent on celebrating America's cultural diversity, they offer a relatively static picture of a nation fragmented into a kind of cultural archipelago. "Talk show" readers admit the idea of conflict, but they distort the reality of cultural dynamics by presenting cultural conflicts as a matter of rational — and equally balanced — debate. All of the materials anthologized in *Rereading America* address the cultural struggles that animate American society — the tensions that result from the expectations established by our dominant cultural myths and the diverse realities that these myths often contradict.

Extensive Apparatus *Rereading America* offers a wealth of features to help students hone their analytic abilities and to aid instructors as they plan class discussions, critical thinking activities, and writing assignments. These include:

- *A Comprehensive Introductory Essay* The book begins with a comprehensive essay, "Thinking Critically, Challenging Cultural Myths," that introduces students to the relationships among thinking, cultural diversity, and the

notion of dominant cultural myths, and that shows how such myths can influence their academic performance. We've also included a section devoted to active reading, which offers suggestions for prereading, prewriting, note taking, text marking, and keeping a reading journal. Another section helps students work with the many visual images included in the book.

- *"Fast Facts" Begin Each Chapter* Several provocative statistics before each chapter introduction provide context for students and prompt discussion. For example, "60% of Americans say that they have witnessed offensive behavior online. 70% of young adults 18 to 24 say they have been threatened, harassed, or stalked online."
- *Detailed Chapter Introductions* An introductory essay at the beginning of each chapter offers students a thorough overview of each cultural myth, placing it in historical context, raising some of the chapter's central questions, and orienting students to the chapter's internal structure.
- *Prereading Activities* Following each chapter introduction you'll find prereading activities designed to encourage students to reflect on what they already know about the cultural myth in question. Often connected to the images that open every chapter, these prereading activities help students to engage the topic even before they begin to read.
- *Questions to Stimulate Critical Thinking* Three groups of questions following each selection encourage students to consider the reading carefully in several contexts: "Engaging the Text" focuses on close reading of the selection itself; "Exploring Connections" puts the selection into dialogue with other selections throughout the book; "Extending the Critical Context" invites students to connect the ideas they read about here with sources of knowledge outside the anthology, including library and Internet research, personal experience, interviews, ethnographic-style observations, and so forth. As in past editions, we've included a number of questions linking readings with contemporary television shows and feature films for instructors who want to address the interplay of cultural myths and the mass media. In the tenth edition, we've increased the number of questions focusing on writers' rhetorical and stylistic strategies. These questions are now identified "Thinking Rhetorically" for easy reference; when they are included, they appear as the final question under "Engaging the Text."
- *"Further Connections" Close Each Chapter* These questions and assignments help students make additional connections among readings. They also provide suggestions for exploring issues through research and include ideas for community projects.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Critical thinking is always a collaborative activity, and the kind of critical thinking involved in the creation of a text like *Rereading America* represents collegial collaboration at its very best. Since publication of the last edition, we've heard from instructors across the country who have generously offered suggestions for new classroom activities and comments for further refinements and improvements. Among the many instructors who shared their insights with us as we reworked this edition, we'd particularly like to thank Douglas Armendarez, East Los Angeles College; Tolu Bamishigbin, University of California, Los Angeles; Sheena Boran, University of Mississippi; David Bordelon, Ocean County College; Jane Carey, Quinebaug Valley Community College; Kirsti Cole, Minnesota State University; Rachelle Costello, Indiana University, South Bend; Virginia Crisco, California State University, Fresno; Peter DeNegre, Tunxis Community College; Tiffany Denman, Sacramento City College; Peter Dorman, Central Virginia Community College; Chip Dunkin, University of Mississippi; Randa Elbih, Grand Valley State University; Maria Estrada, Mt. San Antonio College; Karen Forgette, University of Mississippi; JoAnn Foriest, Prairie State College; Kimberly Hall, Harrisburg Area Community College; Barbara Heifferon, Louisiana State University; Cristina Herrera, California State University, Fresno; Robert Imbur, University of Toledo; Danielle Lake, Grand Valley State University; Catherine Lamas, East Los Angeles College; Danielle Muller, Los Angeles City College; Pamela McGlynn, Southwestern College; Charlotte Morgan, Cleveland State University; Eduardo Munoz, East Los Angeles College; Kylie Olean, University of Hartford; Heather Seratt, University of Houston-Downtown; Phil Wagner, University of California, Los Angeles; Jessica Walsh, Harper College; Vallie Watson, University of North Carolina at Wilmington; Judith Wigdortz, Monmouth University; Mary Williams, San Jose State University.

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Gary Colombo
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THINKING CRITICALLY, CHALLENGING CULTURAL MYTHS

BECOMING A COLLEGE STUDENT

Beginning college can be a disconcerting experience. It may be the first time you've lived away from home and had to deal with the stresses and pleasures of independence. There's increased academic competition, increased temptation, and a whole new set of peer pressures. In the dorms you may find yourself among people whose backgrounds make them seem foreign and unapproachable. If you commute, you may be struggling against a feeling of isolation that you've never faced before. And then there are increased expectations. For an introductory history class you may read as many books as you covered in a year of high school coursework. In anthropology, you might be asked to conduct ethnographic research — when you've barely heard of an ethnography before, much less written one. In English, you may tackle more formal analytic writing in a single semester than you've ever done in your life.

College typically imposes fewer rules than high school, but also gives you less guidance and makes greater demands — demands that affect the quality as well as the quantity of your work. By your first midterm exam, you may suspect that your previous academic experience is irrelevant, that nothing you've done in school has prepared you to think, read, or write in the ways your professors expect. Your sociology instructor says she doesn't care whether you can remember all the examples in the textbook as long as you can apply the theoretical concepts to real situations. In your composition class, the perfect five-paragraph essay you turn in for your first assignment is dismissed as “superficial, mechanical, and dull.” Meanwhile, the lecturer in your political science or psychology course is rejecting ideas about country, religion, family, and self that have always been a part of your deepest beliefs. How can you cope with these new expectations and challenges?

There is no simple solution, no infallible five-step method that works for everyone. As you meet the personal challenges of college, you'll grow as a human being. You'll begin to look critically at your old habits, beliefs, and values, to see them in relation to the new world you're entering. You may have to re-examine your relationships to family, friends, neighborhood, and heritage. You'll have to sort out your strengths from your weaknesses and make tough choices about who you are and who you want to become. Your academic work demands the same process

of serious self-examination. To excel in college work you need to grow intellectually—to become a critical thinker.

WHAT IS CRITICAL THINKING?

What do instructors mean when they tell you to think critically? Most would say that it involves asking questions rather than memorizing information. Instead of simply collecting the “facts,” a critical thinker probes them, looking for underlying assumptions and ideas. Instead of focusing on dates and events in history or symptoms in psychology, she probes for motives, causes—an explanation of how these things came to be. A critical thinker cultivates the ability to imagine and value points of view different from her own—then strengthens, refines, enlarges, or reshapes her ideas in light of those other perspectives. She is at once open and skeptical: receptive to new ideas yet careful to test them against previous experience and knowledge. In short, a critical thinker is an active learner, someone with the ability to shape, not merely absorb, knowledge.

All this is difficult to put into practice, because it requires getting outside your own skin and seeing the world from multiple perspectives. To see why critical thinking doesn’t come naturally, take another look at the cover of this book. Many would scan the title, *Rereading America*, take in the surface meaning—to reconsider America—and go on to page one. There isn’t much to question here; it just “makes sense.” But what happens with the student who brings a different perspective? For example, a student from El Salvador might justly complain that the title reflects an ethnocentric view of what it means to be an American. After all, since America encompasses all the countries of North, South, and Central America, he lived in “America” long before arriving in the United States. When this student reads the title, then, he actually does *reread* it; he reads it once in the “commonsense” way but also from the perspective of someone who has lived in a country dominated by U.S. intervention and interests. This double vision or double perspective frees him to look beyond the “obvious” meaning of the book and to question its assumptions.

Of course you don’t have to be bicultural to become a proficient critical thinker. You can develop a genuine sensitivity to alternative perspectives even if you’ve never lived outside your hometown. But to do so you need to recognize that there are no “obvious meanings.” The automatic equation that the native-born student makes between “America” and the United States seems to make sense only because our culture has traditionally endorsed the idea that the United States *is* America and, by implication, that other countries in this hemisphere are somehow inferior—not the genuine article. We tend to accept this equation and its unfortunate implications because we are products of our culture.

THE POWER OF CULTURAL MYTHS

Culture shapes the way we think; it tells us what “makes sense.” It holds people together by providing us with a shared set of customs, values, ideas, and beliefs, as well as a common language. We live enmeshed in this cultural web: it influences

the way we relate to others, the way we look, our tastes, our habits; it enters our dreams and desires. But as culture binds us together it also selectively blinds us. As we grow up, we accept ways of looking at the world, ways of thinking and being that might best be characterized as cultural frames of reference or cultural myths. These myths help us understand our place in the world — our place as prescribed by our culture. They define our relationships to friends and lovers, to the past and future, to nature, to power, and to nation. Becoming a critical thinker means learning how to look beyond these cultural myths and the assumptions embedded in them.

You may associate the word “myth” primarily with the myths of the ancient Greeks. The legends of gods and heroes like Athena, Zeus, and Oedipus embodied the central ideals and values of Greek civilization — notions like civic responsibility, the primacy of male authority, and humility before the gods. The stories were “true” not in a literal sense but as reflections of important cultural beliefs. These myths assured the Greeks of the nobility of their origins; they provided models for the roles that Greeks would play in their public and private lives; they justified inequities in Greek society; they helped the Greeks understand human life and destiny in terms that “made sense” within the framework of that culture.

Our cultural myths do much the same. Take, for example, the American dream of success. Since the first European colonists came to the “New World” some four centuries ago, America has been synonymous with the idea of individual opportunity. For generations, immigrants have been lured across the ocean to make their fortunes in a land where the streets were said to be paved with gold. Of course we don’t always agree on what success means or how it should be measured. Some calculate the meaning of success in terms of six-figure salaries or the acreage of their country estates. Others discover success in the attainment of a dream — whether it’s graduating from college, achieving excellence on the playing field, or winning new rights and opportunities for less fortunate fellow citizens. For some Americans, the dream of success is the very foundation of everything that’s right about life in the United States. For others, the American dream is a cultural mirage that keeps workers happy in low-paying jobs while their bosses pocket the profits of an unfair system. But whether you embrace or reject the dream of success, you can’t escape its influence. As Americans, we are steeped in a culture that prizes individual achievement; growing up in the United States, we are told again and again by parents, teachers, advertisers, Hollywood writers, politicians, and opinion makers that we, too, can achieve our dream — that we, too, can “Just Do It” if we try. You might aspire to become an Internet tycoon, or you might rebel and opt for a simple life, but you can’t ignore the impact of the myth. We each define success in our own way, but ultimately, the myth of success defines who we are and what we think, feel, and believe.

Cultural myths gain such enormous power over us by insinuating themselves into our thinking before we’re aware of them. Most are learned at a deep, even unconscious level. Gender roles are a good example. As children we get gender role models from our families, our schools, our churches, and other important institutions. We see them acted out in the relationships between family members or portrayed on television, in the movies, or in song lyrics. Before long, the culturally determined roles we see for women and men appear to us as “self-evident”: it

seems “natural” for a man to be strong, responsible, competitive, and heterosexual, just as it may seem “unnatural” for a man to shun competitive activity or to take a romantic interest in other men. Our most dominant cultural myths shape the way we perceive the world and blind us to alternative ways of seeing and being. When something violates the expectations that such myths create, it may even be called unnatural, immoral, or perverse.

CULTURAL MYTHS AS OBSTACLES TO CRITICAL THINKING

Cultural myths can have more subtle effects as well. In academic work they can reduce the complexity of our reading and thinking. A few years ago, for example, a professor at Los Angeles City College noted that he and his students couldn’t agree in their interpretations of the following poem by Theodore Roethke:

My Papa’s Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
 Could make a small boy dizzy;
 But I hung on like death:
 Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
 Slid from the kitchen shelf;
 My mother’s countenance
 Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
 Was battered on one knuckle;
 At every step you missed
 My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
 With a palm caked hard by dirt,
 Then waltzed me off to bed
 Still clinging to your shirt.

The instructor read this poem as a clear expression of a child’s love for his blue-collar father, a rough-and-tumble man who had worked hard all his life (“a palm caked hard by dirt”), who was not above taking a drink of whiskey to ease his mind, but who also found the time to “waltz” his son off to bed. The students didn’t see this at all. They saw the poem as a story about an abusive father and heavy drinker. They seemed unwilling to look beyond the father’s roughness and the whiskey on his breath, equating these with drunken violence. Although the poem does suggest an element of fear mingled with the boy’s excitement (“I hung on like death”), the class ignored its complexity — the mixture of fear, love, and boisterous fun that colors the son’s memory of his father. It’s possible that some students might overlook the positive traits in the father in this poem because they have suffered child abuse themselves. But this couldn’t be true for all the students in the class. The difference between these interpretations lies, instead, in the influence of cultural myths. After all, in a culture now dominated by images of the family that emphasize “positive” parenting, middle-class values, and sensitive fathers, it’s no wonder that students

refused to see this father sympathetically. Our culture simply doesn't associate good, loving families with drinking or with even the suggestion of physical roughness.

Years of acculturation — the process of internalizing cultural values — leave us with a set of rigid categories for “good” and “bad” parents, narrow conceptions of how parents should look, talk, and behave toward their children. These cultural categories work like mental pigeonholes: they help us sort out and evaluate our experiences rapidly, almost before we're consciously aware of them. They give us a helpful shorthand for interpreting the world; after all, we can't stop to ponder every new situation we meet as if it were a puzzle or a philosophical problem. But while cultural categories help us make practical decisions in everyday life, they also impose their inherent rigidity on our thinking and thus limit our ability to understand the complexity of our experience. They reduce the world to dichotomies — simplified either/or choices: either women or men, either heterosexuals or homosexuals, either nature or culture, either animal or human, either “alien” or American, either them or us.

Rigid cultural beliefs can present serious obstacles to success for first-year college students. In a psychology class, for example, students' cultural myths may so color their thinking that they find it nearly impossible to comprehend Freud's ideas about infant sexuality. Ingrained assumptions about childhood innocence and sexual guilt may make it impossible for them to see children as sexual beings — a concept absolutely basic to an understanding of the history of psychoanalytic theory. Yet college-level critical inquiry thrives on exactly this kind of revision of common sense: academics prize the unusual, the subtle, the ambiguous, the complex — and expect students to appreciate them as well. Good critical thinkers in all academic disciplines welcome the opportunity to challenge conventional ways of seeing the world; they seem to take delight in questioning everything that appears clear and self-evident.

QUESTIONING: THE BASIS OF CRITICAL THINKING

By questioning the myths that dominate our culture, we can begin to resist the limits they impose on our vision. In fact, they invite such questioning. Often our personal experience fails to fit the images the myths project: a young woman's ambition to be a test pilot may clash with the ideal of femininity our culture promotes; a Cambodian immigrant who has suffered from racism in the United States may question our professed commitment to equality; a student in the vocational track may not see education as the road to success that we assume it is; and few of our families these days fit the mythic model of husband, wife, two kids, a dog, and a house in the suburbs.

Moreover, because cultural myths serve such large and varied needs, they're not always coherent or consistent. Powerful contradictory myths coexist in our society and our own minds. For example, while the myth of “the melting pot” celebrates equality, the myth of individual success pushes us to strive for inequality — to “get ahead” of everyone else. Likewise, our attitudes toward education are deeply paradoxical: on one level, Americans tend to see schooling as a valuable experience that unites us in a common culture and helps us bring out the best in

ourselves; yet at the same time, we suspect that formal classroom instruction stifles creativity and chokes off natural intelligence and enthusiasm. These contradictions infuse our history, literature, and popular culture; they're so much a part of our thinking that we tend to take them for granted, unaware of their inconsistencies.

Learning to recognize contradictions lies at the very heart of critical thinking, for intellectual conflict inevitably generates questions. Can both (or all) perspectives be true? What evidence do I have for the validity of each? Is there some way to reconcile them? Are there still other alternatives? Questions like these represent the beginning of serious academic analysis. They stimulate the reflection, discussion, and research that are the essence of good scholarship. Thus whether we find contradictions between myth and lived experience, or between opposing myths, the wealth of powerful, conflicting material generated by our cultural mythology offers a particularly rich context for critical inquiry.

THE STRUCTURE OF *REREADING AMERICA*

We've designed this book to help you develop the habits of mind you'll need to become a critical thinker — someone who recognizes the way that cultural myths shape thinking and can move beyond them to evaluate issues from multiple perspectives. Each of the book's six chapters addresses one of the dominant myths of American culture. We begin with the myth that's literally closest to home — the myth of the model family. In Chapter One, "Harmony at Home," we begin with readings that show what makes the mythical nuclear family so appealing and yet so elusive. Subsequent readings and visual images dissect the myth, exploring and explaining working-class families, flexible kinship structures, multiracial families, and foster parenting. The chapter also explores the economic underpinnings of marriage and examines representations of families in animated films. Next we turn to a topic that every student should have a lot to say about — the myth of educational empowerment. Chapter Two, "Learning Power," gives you the chance to reflect on how the "hidden curriculum" of schooling has shaped your own attitudes toward learning. We begin our exploration of American cultural myths by focusing on home and education because most students find it easy to make personal connections with these topics and because they both involve institutions — families and schools — that are surrounded by a rich legacy of cultural stories and myths. These two introductory chapters are followed by consideration of one of the most durable American myths — our national belief in progress. In Chapter Three, "The Wild Wired West: Myths of Progress on the Tech Frontier," you'll have the chance to explore how technologies like the Internet and social media are reshaping American lives. You'll also be invited to consider how our instinctive faith in technology may blind us to threats to privacy, personal liberty, and civility as we join in the silicon revolution.

The second portion of the book focuses on three cultural myths that offer greater intellectual and emotional challenges because they touch on highly charged social issues. Chapter Four introduces what is perhaps the most famous of all American myths, the American Dream. "Money and Success" addresses the

idea of unlimited personal opportunity that brought millions of immigrants to our shores and set the story of America in motion. It invites you to weigh some of the human costs of the dream and to reconsider your own definition of a successful life. The next chapter, “True Women and Real Men,” considers the socially constructed categories of gender — the traditional roles that enforce differences between women and men. This chapter also explores the perspectives of Americans who defy conventional gender boundaries. Chapter Six, “Created Equal,” examines two myths that have powerfully shaped racial and ethnic relations in the United States: the myth of the melting pot, which celebrates cultural homogenization, and the myth of racial and ethnic superiority, which promotes separateness and inequality. This chapter probes the nature of prejudice, explores the ways that prejudicial attitudes are created, and examines ethnic identities within a race-divided society. Each of these two chapters questions how our culture divides and defines our world, how it artificially channels our experience into oppositions like black and white, male and female, straight and gay.

THE SELECTIONS

Our identities — who we are and how we relate to others — are deeply entangled with the cultural values we have internalized since infancy. Cultural myths become so closely identified with our personal beliefs that rereading them actually means rereading ourselves, rethinking the way we see the world. Questioning long-held assumptions can be an exhilarating experience, but it can be distressing too. Thus you may find certain selections in *Rereading America* difficult, controversial, or even downright offensive. They are meant to challenge you and to provoke classroom debate. But as you discuss the ideas you encounter in this book, remind yourself that your classmates may bring with them very different, and equally profound, beliefs. Keep an open mind, listen carefully, and treat other perspectives with the same respect you’d expect other people to show for your own. It’s by encountering new ideas and engaging with others in open dialogue that we learn to grow.

Because *Rereading America* explores cultural myths that shape our thinking, it doesn’t focus on the kind of well-defined public issues you might expect to find in a traditional composition anthology. You won’t be reading arguments for and against affirmative action, bilingual education, or the death penalty here. We’ve deliberately avoided the traditional pro-and-con approach because we want you to aim deeper than that; we want you to focus on the subtle cultural beliefs that underlie, and frequently determine, the debates that are waged on public issues. We’ve also steered clear of the “issues approach” because we feel it reinforces simplistic either/or thinking. Polarizing American culture into a series of debates doesn’t encourage you to examine your own beliefs or explore how they’ve been shaped by the cultures you’re part of. To begin to appreciate the influence of your own cultural myths, you need new perspectives: you need to stand outside the ideological machinery that makes American culture run to begin to appreciate its power. That’s why we’ve included many strongly dissenting views: there are works by community activists, gay-rights activists, socialists,

libertarians, and more. You may find that their views confirm your own experience of what it means to be an American, or you may find that you bitterly disagree with them. We only hope that you will use the materials here to gain some insight into the values and beliefs that shape our thinking and our national identity. This book is meant to complicate the mental categories that our cultural myths have established for us. Our intention is not to present a new “truth” to replace the old but to expand the range of ideas you bring to all your reading and writing in college. We believe that learning to see and value other perspectives will enable you to think more critically — to question, for yourself, the truth of any statement.

You may also note that several selections in *Rereading America* challenge the way you think writing is supposed to look or sound. You won’t find many “classic” essays in this book, the finely crafted reflective essays on general topics that are often held up as models of “good writing.” It’s not that we reject this type of essay in principle. It’s just that most writers who stand outside mainstream culture seem to have little use for it.

Our selections, instead, come from a wide variety of sources: professional books and journals from many disciplines, popular magazines, college textbooks, autobiographies, oral histories, and literary works. We’ve included this variety partly for the very practical reason that you’re likely to encounter texts like these in your college coursework. But we also see textual diversity, like ethnic and political diversity, as a way to multiply perspectives and stimulate critical analysis. For example, an academic article like Jean Anyon’s study of social class and school curriculum might give you a new way of understanding Mike Rose’s personal narrative about his classroom experiences. On the other hand, you may find that some of the teachers Rose encounters don’t neatly fit Anyon’s theoretical model. Do such discrepancies mean that Anyon’s argument is invalid? That her analysis needs to be modified to account for these teachers? That the teachers are simply exceptions to the rule? You’ll probably want to consider your own classroom experience as you wrestle with such questions. Throughout the book, we’ve chosen readings that “talk to each other” in this way and that draw on the cultural knowledge you bring with you. These readings invite you to join the conversation; we hope they raise difficult questions, prompt lively discussion, and stimulate critical inquiry.

THE POWER OF DIALOGUE

Good thinking, like good writing and good reading, is an intensely social activity. Thinking, reading, and writing are all forms of relationship — when you read, you enter into dialogue with an author about the subject at hand; when you write, you address an imaginary reader, testing your ideas against probable responses, reservations, and arguments. Thus you can’t become an accomplished writer simply by declaring your right to speak or by criticizing as an act of principle: real authority comes when you enter into the discipline of an active exchange of opinions and interpretations. Critical thinking, then, is always a matter of dialogue and debate — discovering relationships between apparently unrelated ideas, finding parallels between your own experiences and the ideas you read about, exploring points of agreement and conflict between yourself and other people.

We've designed the readings and questions in this text to encourage you to make just these kinds of connections. You'll notice, for example, that we often ask you to divide into small groups to discuss readings, and we frequently suggest that you take part in projects that require you to collaborate with your classmates. We're convinced that the only way you can learn critical reading, thinking, and writing is by actively engaging others in an intellectual exchange. So we've built into the text many opportunities for listening, discussion, and debate.

The questions that follow each selection should guide you in critical thinking. Like the readings, they're intended to get you started, not to set limits; we strongly recommend that you also devise your own questions and pursue them either individually or in study groups. We've divided our questions into three categories. Here's what to expect from each:

- Those labeled "Engaging the Text" focus on the individual selection they follow. They're designed to highlight important issues in the reading, to help you begin questioning and evaluating what you've read, and sometimes to remind you to consider the author's choices of language, evidence, structure, and style. Questions in the latter category are now helpfully labeled "Thinking Rhetorically," and we've included more of them in this edition.
- The questions labeled "Exploring Connections" will lead you from the selection you've just finished to one or more other readings in this book. When you think critically about these connecting questions, though, you'll see some real collisions of ideas and perspectives, not just polite and predictable "differences of opinion."
- The final questions for each reading, "Extending the Critical Context," invite you to extend your thinking beyond the book — to your family, your community, your college, the media, the Internet, or the more traditional research environment of the library. The emphasis here is on creating new knowledge by applying ideas from this book to the world around you and by testing these ideas in your world.

ACTIVE READING

You've undoubtedly read many textbooks, but it's unlikely that you've had to deal with the kind of analytic, argumentative, and scholarly writing you'll find in college and in *Rereading America*. These different writing styles require a different approach to reading as well. In high school you probably read to "take in" information, often for the sole purpose of reproducing it later on a test. In college you'll also be expected to recognize larger issues, such as the author's theoretical slant, her goals and methods, her assumptions, and her relationship to other writers and researchers. These expectations can be especially difficult in the first two years of college, when you take introductory courses that survey large, complex fields of knowledge. With all these demands on your attention, you'll need to read actively to keep your bearings. Think of active reading as a conversation between you and the text: instead of listening passively as the writer talks, respond to what she says