

SKINS

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[Assignment: Consider what work-related futures your family, friends, counselors, mentors, or other influential people in your life have envisioned or hoped for you. Then, in an essay, describe these expectations and explain how consistent they are at this point in your life with your own current goals and why the similarities and differences might exist.]

(1) Out of the works we've read and discussed in *Rereading America*, only the poem "Waitresses," (519) by Ranice Henderson Crosby, has managed to haunt me, to last in my subconscious through pages and pages of other readings. Only this one poem, about the intertwining of work and self-esteem, has managed to make me pull back, confront some aspects of myself, and feel afraid.

(2) In this poem, Crosby describes a day at work for a waitress, deliberately leaving the images and terms generic enough so they can apply to almost any career. Beginning with "I think they give us uniforms/so we remember who we are," Crosby journeys through the mind of a waitress, introducing the idea that our career and others' reaction to it play a major role in the shaping of self-image. This is shown throughout the poem, as, for instance, the waitress, describing her mandatory "gigantic grin," says (of her customers): "I don't think they even notice/when we show our teeth/and raise our hackles./we're always smiling/and nodding/and pleasing." But it is in the last two lines--"as for me/my uniform feels like skin"--that we become fully aware of how this effort to constantly please has begun to affect this woman's self-esteem. In just eight words, Crosby forcefully sums up the notion that listened to too long, others' opinions can influence us to the degree that we begin to mold ourselves into them. And this is true of a lot of spheres of life, not just waitressing.

(3) I really resonate to these last eight words.

(4) From my very first meeting with others here, it has been clear to me that most of us here are trying to fulfill expectations that have already been set for us. For some students, these expectations are achievable, and when they go home at Christmas they will please all those whose influences molded them, all those like teachers, parents, and friends who urged them along this road to college. For others, the expectations will not be fulfilled. Perhaps, too much was expected from them. Now these students will be letting others down. And if they have really internalized these expectations, they will be guilt ridden and feel like failures--the inevitable result of wearing others' expectations like skin.

(5) To a certain extent, I feel I belong to this second category. Although no one ever sat me down and told me what was wanted or expected of me, I know that in some ways, I've managed to "please" my parents--I take my vitamins and I haven't flunked out. Over vacations, I come home and work, doing everything basically that a good, responsible person can

until vacation ends and I resume my career as a "student"--a career I honestly didn't choose for myself, but had thrust upon me from the age of two and a half.

(6) But I'm not making everyone happy. My friends and I constantly have to rearrange plans because I work nights and because I try to make the boss as happy as I can. I've never had the nerve to call in sick for fun. This is what my stepfather calls "life as an adult": wearing numerous skins in an attempt to make everyone happy.

(7) But I cannot bring myself to believe that life in the "real" world will be like this. Will I have to keep wearing different skins, skins other than my own, in order to keep everyone happy? This is what Stephen Cruz means when he says, "All I had to do was behave myself" (Studs Terkel, *Rereading* 80) and living out the "don't rock the boat" (81) syndrome. But I cannot bring myself to believe we will always have to "get in line" (81), to accept the skin so that we become what others visualize us to be.

(8) Currently, I'm a student. I am also a cashier, a job that most people classify as "okay for a while." Although it is not a job where you "build or create," as Mike LeFevre (Terkel, *Rereading* 520) constantly stresses, I have to admit that I like my job, that, like the short order cook in Jim Daniel's poem, I feel some pride when, after a shift, I count out and discover I pulled in over four thousand dollars (I work at Walgreens). At that moment I realize the "pressure, responsibility, success," (Daniels *Rereading* 517) of working at the job and become aware that I like dealing with people and helping them out, traits commonly found in jobs women do, according to Arlie Hochschild in "Gender, Status, and Feeling" (*Rereading* 551). Although I don't go to the extent of the stewardesses that Hochschild describes, telling customers "Nice jacket you have on" (555), I do try to be as friendly as I can and generally find that I feel good afterwards, a skin that, as of now, hasn't strangled me yet.

(9) Though I'm still up in the air as to what exactly I'll end up doing, I can say this much: it will have to make me feel good about myself, allow me the freedom to express myself in one way or another, and, most of all, be only one skin--a nice big one that stretches over everything.

Works Cited

Columbo, Gary et al., eds. *Rereading America*. New York: St. Martin's, 1989.