

## *Paradise is for Pussies: Star Trek and the Myth of the Bad Mother*

**Clare L. Boulanger**

*Mesa State College*

*In his famous article on the Nacirema, Miner implies that Americans are reluctant to consider themselves in the same terms they freely apply to others. For instance, we expect that such peoples as the Utes or the Yanomami adhere to myths, but in our own society the word "myth" has come to refer to something that is patently untrue. We believe we labor to dispel myths, not abide by them. This line of thinking takes us away from the anthropological meaning of myth, which, as Middleton put it, is: "a statement about society and man's place in it and the surrounding universe" (1967: x). From this vantage point, it is clear that if we look for myth only in the guise of sacred text (which Americans do not generally call "myth"), we will fail to comprehend one of the primary means through which the vital process of enculturation—the learning of one's own culture—is accomplished.*

*As a graduate student in anthropology, Clare L. Boulanger pursued a concentration in American Studies and wrote her M.A. papers from two ethnographic projects carried out in the United States, the first on political decision-making in Vermont, the second on class symbolism in western Massachusetts. While she went on to conduct her dissertation research in Malaysia, a country that remains her primary geographical focus, she continues to have an interest in Americanist work. In the article below she hopes to justify her lifelong dedication to Star Trek through a (mostly) serious anthropological treatment of the series. Currently she is a professor of anthropology at Mesa State College in western Colorado.*

*An earlier version of this paper, "The United States and the Power of Myth," was read at the 102nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in November of 2003. An abridged version of the conference paper was published in the FOSAP Newsletter (Bulletin of the Federation of Small Anthropology Programs) 11, 2 (Fall 2004): 15–17.*

The great anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 448) famously assayed the cockfight among the Balinese as “a story they tell themselves about themselves.” “Stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” is an apt definition for the term “myth,” and many scholars have taken up the phrase in this capacity. However, it should be remembered that for Geertz, culture itself was “an ensemble of texts” (1973: 452), and hence all cultural phenomena, not merely those we recognize as myth, could be “read” to gather the sort of meaning one might receive from a story.

This principle can be helpful in fashioning an anthropological understanding of a people I call “Usans,” after the abbreviated name of their country. Formerly, anthropologists referred to this group as the Nacirema, although Usans tend to refer to themselves as Americans. Since “American” could rightfully be applied to the denizens of all the countries in the Americas, for Usans to reserve “American” strictly for themselves would seem somewhat audacious. It should be mentioned, however, that Usans have been prone, historically, to audacious behavior and that such peoples as the Canadians and Mexicans may just as soon cede any claim to “American” to avoid being identified with Usans.

There is much to be read, following Geertz, in Usan culture. Montague and Morais (1976), for instance, subjected the game Usans call football to the same sort of treatment meted out to the Balinese cockfight. At first glance, games would not seem to have much in common with myth. If football is a story Usans tell themselves about themselves, the story would seem to have countless variations, as no two matches are alike in terms of who does what and how the points are scored. But Montague and Morais note that beyond the details of each match, the game does in fact tell a story, over and over again, and it is a success story. Usans can gain from football the conviction that self-sacrifice is necessary for a team to function effectively and that teamwork eventually reaps rewards. Since this conclusion is not so easily reached when one performs what seems to be a minor task for a large corporation, what transpires on the football field, like any good ritual, renders the point obvious. Diligence in the office cubicle is bound to serve some greater end, even if it is not readily discernible on the level of the individual.

Usan society is steeped in mythology of this sort, no less so than any other society and perhaps more so, given the plethora of channels—radio, television, billboard, World Wide Web, church pulpit, classroom, and so on—through which it can be disseminated. What emerges is a huge and disorderly mythological corpus, but the latter condition does not solely result from the former. Mythology, like culture itself, is often contested, and a myth may be less a charter for right behavior, *à la* Malinowski (1926), than a battleground where oppositional elements are unmasked and forced to fight. In the same article in which they describe Usan football, Montague and Morais offer as counterpoint a second icon of the era—the rock star. While the football player is self-sacrificing, the rock star is self-indulgent, but each attains success in Usan society. The larger issue is that every society wrestles to establish an appropriate balance between the group and the individual, and no society resolves the matter absolutely. Rather, myths can clarify that such a struggle exists and stake out the end-points of a continuum within which actual human conduct is continually adjusted relative to what often can be portrayed as a common goal despite the disparate means used to attain it.

Individuals within societies also vary a good deal as to the extent they invest belief in mythology. Most Usans are aware that George Washington never chopped down a cherry tree,

but they appreciate the moral of the story nonetheless. Many Usans believe in the Bible, but not necessarily literally in all instances—they may doubt, for example, that there was ever an Adam and Eve or a worldwide flood. Still, they take to heart what they see as the lessons of the Bible without necessarily taking the Bible at its word. Other myths have become part of what Bourdieu has termed the “habitus” (featured in, e.g., Bourdieu 1977). They are so firmly embedded in our consciousness that we are barely aware of their existence, even though they may guide what we think and do. Only an irritant like an anthropologist, whose discipline demands a degree of personal dislocation from the habitus, may occasionally be able to dislodge others as well, hopefully to worthwhile effect.

My favorite Usan tale of this sort is what I call “The Myth of the Bad Mother,” which I introduce in my course on Usan culture under the rubric, “Manifest Destiny—It’s a Guy Thing.” As these titles indicate, the Bad Mother myth is overtly about gender. The Bad Mother stands in contrast to the Good Mother, who expeditiously individuates her child. The Bad Mother, however, refuses to release him (masculine pronoun intended) to become his own person. She may keep him shrouded in infancy, and/or she may feminize him, jealously preventing him from attaining his rightful manhood by misdirecting him toward inappropriate pursuits. The climax of any retelling of the Bad Mother myth is when the hero breaks away from his mother’s stifling influence and becomes productive not only on his own account but on behalf of others beyond his immediate kin (Figure 1).

Like so many Usan phenomena, as Linton (1937) elegantly pointed out many years ago, the Myth of the Bad Mother has its origins elsewhere. Indeed, it seems to reach into the most ancient strata of Indo-European thought. For example, in one version of his life story, the Greek hero Heracles undergoes a period where he is taken in by Queen Omphale (whose name refers to the umbilical connection). He dresses as a woman and does women’s work until such time as he realizes he must resume his adventures. Similarly, Odysseus is distracted from his voyage home by the nymph Calypso, who detains him in a womblike cave. Gilmore (1990: 39) reminds us of the German legend of Tannhäuser, who escapes the indulgent care of Venus to return to noble, manly battle. But the retelling that addresses most specifically the notion of masculinity as it has been celebrated in our society is that of the master mythographer Sigmund Freud, in, among other sources, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1961). According to Freud, there is nothing the (male) infant desires more than cathexis with a love object, that is, his mother, at least in the earliest stage of his life. For the sake of civilization, however, it is imperative this desire remain unfulfilled. This is because the dyad of mother-and-infant is a sterile one; it is only when the infant is thwarted in his quest to unite with the love object that he learns to channel his productive energies outward, toward the needs of society. Hence civilization is tragically but necessarily founded on the defeat of this most basic form of self-gratification, and only a Bad Mother would interfere with such an essential process.

The Bad Mother mythic formula is central to the plot lines of many classic Usan books and films. The renowned WWII romance *Casablanca*, for example, can be “read” thus. Rick, an able-bodied and intelligent expatriated American, could be contributing substantially to the war effort but instead languishes in Morocco, running a seedy café. Any greater ambitions on Rick’s part are scuttled by the memories of a love affair from which he has never fully recovered. His love object is Ilsa, a Bad Mother who haunts him because she has not been effectively rejected. Circumstances conspire to bring Ilsa back into his life, thus

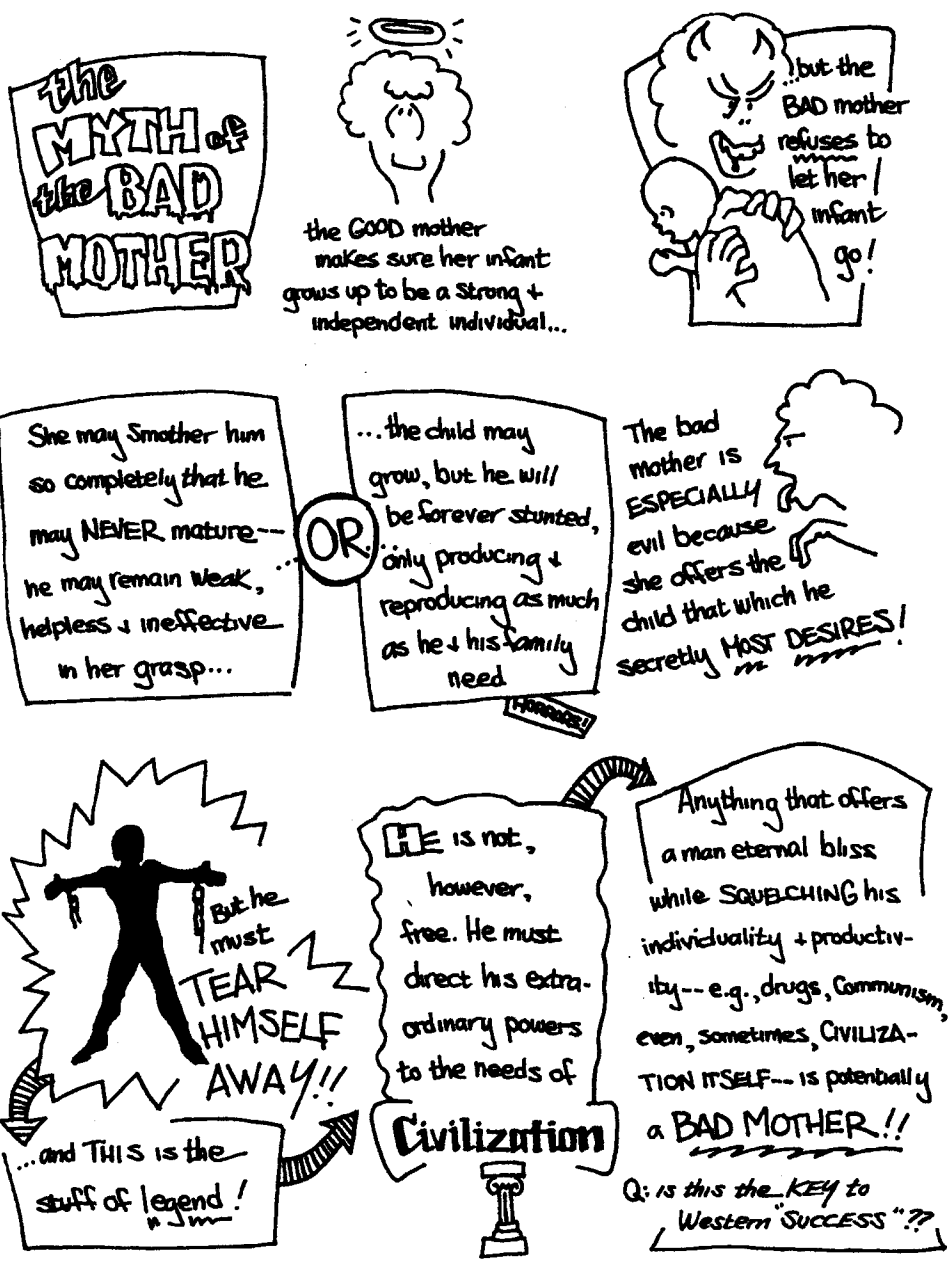


FIGURE 1 The Myth of the Bad Mother.

giving Rick a second opportunity to win his freedom, but not before it seems he might once again succumb to the blandishments of cathexis. In the long run, however, he manages to shake off his ill-starred attraction and nobly restores Ilsa to her husband's side. Only then is Rick able to undertake his own manly share of battle, and the conclusion to the film implies that he, in concert with his (male) partner-in-crime, will go on to frustrate many a Fascist design.

Like all myths, the Myth of the Bad Mother is subject to variation. The Bad Mother, for instance, is not always represented as female or even as feminine, though the effect she has on her victim remains the same. Mind-altering substances, machines, and socialist systems of government have also been cast in the role of the Bad Mother, depriving men of their individuated masculinity. Beyond Freud's belief that rejection of the love object is a key component in the making of civilization, in some media products civilization is depicted as *overelaborated*, and hence itself takes on the qualities of a Bad Mother. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, for instance, McMurphy and his asylum mates are beset by an especially oppressive civilization, represented by the avatar of castrating bitches, Nurse Ratched. When McMurphy and his merry band contrive to escape from the asylum, it is hardly coincidental that their outing involves drinking, whoring, sailing, and other hyper-masculine pastimes. *The Shawshank Redemption* echoes the plotline of *Cuckoo's Nest*, although *Shawshank* is less obviously misogynist and ends far more happily.

In my class, I touch on these examples briefly, saving time for a full examination of my favorite source of Usan mythology, *Star Trek*. In considering *Star Trek* a worthy object of anthropological analysis, I am in good company; see, for example, Claus (1976), Kottak (1990: 101–5). The *Star Trek* phenomenon began in the late 1960s, when what has become known in Trekker circles as The Original Series (TOS), chronicling the adventures of the starship *Enterprise*, was aired. Though TOS lasted only three seasons, it had a tremendous impact on Usan popular culture, and long pent-up demand ensured the six-season success of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) eighteen years later. A plotline introduced on TNG gave birth to both *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Star Trek: Voyager*. Finally, there was *Enterprise*, a prequel to the other series. *Enterprise* was canceled in 2005, and there are currently no realistic plans for reviving it or spawning yet another series, though given *Star Trek's* extraordinary history and still-extant fan base, no one can say definitively that this phenomenon has run its course.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Bad Mother figures abound in TOS. In the name of eradicating the scourge of Communism, the United States had become embroiled in a bloody and dispiriting conflict in Southeast Asia, and citizen support for the war effort had tailed off dramatically. Indeed, during this era Usans were questioning virtually the gamut of traditional ideals. In such troubled times, the appeal of myths that renew faith in one's society and culture may be enhanced. For Usans, the Myth of the Bad Mother amply serves this need.

The pilot episode of *Star Trek*, where Captain Pike rejects an idyllic life of fulfilled fantasies, sets the tone for the entire run of TOS (ironically, the pilot was not aired, but became the story-within-a-story for a two-part episode of TOS called "The Menagerie," in which Pike actually takes up the proffered fantasy life, but only after it becomes clear that his years as a productive man are over). Other episodes that more or less fit the Bad Mother mold include "The Return of the Archons," in which a machine strictly regulates the behavior of its

but the  
AD mother  
fuses to  
at her /  
infant  
go!

ne  
ESIRES!

at offers  
bliss  
ING his  
productiv-  
e, Communism,  
CIVILIZA-  
e potentially  
HER!!

ey to  
CESS "??

humanoid subjects; "The City on the Edge of Forever," in which Captain Kirk must allow the woman he loves to die so that the timeline that leads to the glorious conquest of space can be restored; "The Apple," in which a machine maintains a population of infantilized humanoids in a sterile environment; and "The Paradise Syndrome," in which Kirk, stricken with amnesia, settles into marital bliss with a comely Indian maiden (I kid you not) until First Officer Spock rudely recalls him to duty through a Vulcan mind meld.

Arguably, however, "This Side of Paradise" (written by Dorothy Fontana) provides us with the purest rendition of the Bad Mother myth. In this episode, the Bad Mother is a consciousness-altering substance, known as "spores," but there is a distinct feminine cast to the evil involved here in the person of Leila, a woman from Spock's past who lures him into spore use. Leila belongs to a contingent of humans charged with setting up an agricultural colony on Omicron Ceti III, but well after the colony had been established, it was discovered that the planet was uninhabitable due to chronic radiation. Kirk and the *Enterprise* crew had been assigned the unhappy task of retrieving the bodies of the colonists. Upon reaching their destination, however, they are astonished to find the colonists alive and well, though not living in the way proper humans should—they engage only in the amount of agricultural activity necessary to sustain them, and there has not even been any population growth from the time they arrived. It turns out the spores are responsible for this steady state, because while they protect the humans from radiation, they also strip a man of his drive to achieve. Eventually everyone from the *Enterprise* falls under the spell of the spores, and the crew happily prepares to abandon its mission to join the colonists. Kirk, however, recovers the strength of will to throw off the spores and then induces the others to do the same. The colonists suddenly realize they have been deterred from their aspirations; the first words uttered by their leader, Sandoval, as he regains his presence of mind, are "We've done nothing here. No accomplishments, no progress." Since the colonists cannot survive on the planet without the spores, they are evacuated to a new planet where, as Sandoval says, they can "get some work done." Back on the *Enterprise*, as Omicron Ceti III recedes from view, Dr. McCoy compares the ship's departure to a second exile from Eden. Kirk counters with a stirring speech on how men were not meant to live in Paradise, how they must "struggle, claw their way up, scratch for every inch of the way." Spock's final assessment of his experience was that he was happy for the first time in his life. But this happiness, of course, had to be displaced by the necessary discontent that accompanies the state of being civilized.

The popularity of Bad Mother mythology waxes and wanes, and in TNG, whose post-Vietnam scriptwriters were evidently more reflective regarding the pitfalls of imperialism, such themes are somewhat less pronounced, although the eventual archvillain of the series, an alien group known as the Borg, is a Bad Mother *par excellence*. The Borg is made up of members of a variety of species, "assimilated," via prostheses whose mechanical function is regulated by a Queen, into a collective entity. The Borg appear in both *Voyager* and *Enterprise* as well, and they are germane to the plots of the first two *Next Generation* films. *Deep Space Nine* featured a number of scurrilous species, but the ultimate enemy, the Dominion, is governed by a race of Founders whose individuality is drowned in a collective pool called the Great Link; when the Founders need to generate a humanoid representative, she takes female form. If Bad Mother imagery, despite these examples, can be said to recede in TNG through *Voyager*, it returns to prominence in the last *Star Trek* series.

*Enterprise* is situated squarely on a Bad Mother premise—after the Vulcans land on Earth, they try to suppress the human ambition to explore space, believing humans to be at an infantile stage of species development. The *Enterprise* is only allowed to take flight with Vulcan supervision, in the person of the female Commander T'Pol. The series arc eventually moves away from this opening gambit, but the first season of *Enterprise* is remarkable for its misogyny (see Minkowitz 2002).

Bad Mother mythology surfaces in the *Star Trek* film series as well. The film that serves as the bridge between TOS and TNG movies, *Star Trek: Generations*, features a classic Bad Mother story line: Kirk must be retrieved from a dreamlike state where all of his wishes come true to perform one last manly, heroic act. In *Star Trek: First Contact*, the Borg Queen appears as a temptress, seducing *Enterprise* officers into the Borg collective. *Star Trek: Insurrection*, wherein the *Enterprise* crew defends a seemingly backward people against its enemies, might at first glance appear to repudiate the Bad Mother myth, but during the course of the film we learn that the persecuted villagers are actually technological sophisticates who have deliberately chosen their “primitive” lifestyle. These people, then, have not subverted “progress,” but have in fact become so “advanced” that their everyday lives can be lived more simply.

On the face of it, the prevalence of Bad Mother mythology in *Star Trek* and other Usan sources would seem to bode ill for women in Usan society. How are actual women and men affected when they see the feminine so consistently demonized? Clearly the Bad Mother myth strengthens stereotypes that are deployed against women in a number of ways. Men may chafe against the “limitations” they complain are imposed upon them in marital relationships, employers may regard an aggressive female employee as a “ball-buster” and undermine her quest for promotion, and men and women alike scorn the “mama’s boy” and deride his mother for thwarting his achievement of manhood. However, in today’s United States, a decades-old drive to achieve gender equity has shifted acceptable female behavior toward what was once solely the masculine norm, resulting in a culture where the individuation of girls is treated scarcely differently from the individuation of boys. In this historical moment, then, the version of gender laid out by Bad Mother mythology bears less and less resemblance to real life, and hence the Bad Mother has perhaps become, as Stoler (1991: 54) has put it, more iconic than pragmatic. Still, Usans who prefer gender as it is currently constructed in our culture should not rest easy, since Bad Mother imagery remains at large and has been applied to other gendered purposes with the intent of denying human rights. I suggest, for example, that the Bad Mother reared her ugly head in the 1992 campaign to pass Colorado’s notorious Amendment 2, a measure designed to overturn local laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination. A conservative Christian organization, Colorado for Family Values, put out several pamphlets identifying (male) homosexuals as vampiric, sucking away life-giving semen while returning only death, in the form of AIDS. In a tract entitled *The Psychology of Homosexuality*, the anonymous pamphleteer claims that throughout history, “homosexuals have been considered non-productive and hence inimical to the well-being and even the survival of the community.” Discrimination against homosexuals, far from being wrong, was rather a social imperative, “like discrimination against the able-bodied who refuse to work.” Hence male homosexuals, like a Bad Mother, were shown not only to deprive men of their masculinity (in a variety of horrifying ways) but to deny civilization the vital labor that true men contribute. Doubtless swayed by such arguments, a majority of the Colorado electorate

supported Amendment 2, although it was later deemed unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court (see Boulanger 1995).

The Bad Mother myth does what Ortner (1974) has claimed all human societies do—align female with nature and male with culture. Women are shown to retard cultural progress, at best achieving only a level of subsistence—“mere” survival—that any animal can achieve. Such an alignment may certainly constitute a disadvantage for women, but it also denigrates subsistence production. And if, at this moment in Usan history, it has become socially unacceptable to cast such aspersions on women, there is and has been no such moratorium on derogatory remarks levied at those few humans remaining on the planet whose ambitions and technologies consign them, in our terms, to backwardness. Indeed, the idea that hunter-gatherers and subsistence horticulturalists must be modernized is barely questionable outside of subversive anthropological circles. The Myth of the Bad Mother, then, accomplishes two related aims: it valorizes men who escape the clutches of women and it valorizes human *endeavor* over animal *existence*. In pursuing the latter aim we humans seek to lay down a vast buffer zone between culture and nature. Nonetheless, even in our currently “advanced” state, we remain haunted by nature—we contract disease, we die, and on a societal level our greatest works are destroyed by the vagaries of earth and sky. So long as we renew the paranoid vision of nature as a malevolent force that seeks to subdue the human spirit, there can never be too much space between nature and culture, and hence we continue to widen the gap.

A less conspicuous but still related aim of Bad Mother mythology is to displace the self-sufficiency of subsistence-oriented society with the *faux* individualism of self-reliance. Usans tend to conflate individualism with independence, but as Hsu (1972) once pointed out, the Chinese peasant village of his day could readily provide for itself, whereas Usans, enmeshed in vast networks of interdependence, could not on their own satisfy even the most basic daily needs, a helplessness that has only been exacerbated in these times when globalization has intensified. The irony, Hsu noted, is that the Chinese peasant will brag about how well his sons care for him, while the Usan tends to minimize the considerably greater dependency he has on a much larger group of people. Bad Mother mythology helps to obscure these economic connections by reducing them to a psychological parable where the hero, entirely in accord with the designs of the industrial/post-industrial state, makes the “choice” to fulfill ends beyond the fundamentals of survival.

But how motivational is the Bad Mother myth? Can it be, as I have indicated in Figure 1, “the key to Western ‘success’?” In concert with other Usan myths and the way they are operationalized economically, socially, and politically, I believe the Myth of the Bad Mother is in fact an effective call to action. Henry (1963) once identified all culture as absurd, and the secret to maintaining a culture is to prevent its adherents from fully recognizing that fact. In the United States we accomplish this through a very well-integrated set of institutions, along with a ruthless suppression of alternatives (see Hall 2002), although enough of these are allowed to exist in the margins to cull off troublemakers. Those contradictions that occasionally emerge in the mainstream become objects of ridicule, as Usans, perhaps more so than other peoples, deploy a cutting sense of humor to force those aspects of Usan life that make us most uncomfortable into a conceptual cage where they are less threatening (Robbins 1993: 66–7). In this environment, the Bad Mother story, as often as it might be consciously recognized in the works of Freud or the writers of *Star Trek*, also operates effectively as a hidden template on which our subconscious actions may be modeled.

### Exercise

Arensberg and Niehoff once wrote, "Whether in the conduct of foreign affairs or bringing up children or dealing in the marketplace, Americans tend to moralize" (1971: 215). This is no less true of our television series, and in fact, *Star Trek*, especially in its original incarnation, exemplifies this tendency. Discuss another television series (do not neglect sitcoms and talk shows) with an eye toward its moral message—How are Americans supposed to behave? What are they supposed to value? What happens to them if they refuse to adhere to these behaviors and values? Can they return to a righteous path after they have strayed? How?

### References

- Arensberg, Conrad M. and Arthur H. Niehoff. 1971. *Introducing social change: a manual for community development*. Chicago: Aldine Atherton.
- Boulanger, Clare L. 1995. *Imagining the anti-community: the demonization of the homosexual in Colorado*. Paper read at the 94th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*, trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Claus, Peter J. 1976. A structuralist appreciation of "Star Trek." In W. Arens and Susan P. Montague, eds, *The American dimension: cultural myths and social realities*, 15–32. Port Washington, NY: Alfred Publishing Co.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1961. *Civilization and its discontents*, ed./trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gilmore, David D. 1990. *Manhood in the making: cultural concepts of masculinity*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hall, John A. 2002. A disagreement about difference. In Siniša Malešević and Mark Haugaard, eds, *Making sense of collectivity: ethnicity, nationalism, and globalisation*, 181–194. London: Pluto Press.
- Henry, Jules. 1963. American schoolrooms: learning the nightmare. *Columbia University Forum*: 24–30.
- Hsu, Francis L. K. 1972. American core value and national character. In Hsu, ed., *Psychological Anthropology*, 241–262. Cambridge: Schenkman.
- Kottak, Conrad Phillip. 1990. *Prime-time society: an anthropological analysis of television and culture*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Linton, Ralph. 1937. One hundred per cent American. *The American Mercury* 40: 427–429.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1926. *Myth in primitive psychology*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Middleton, John. 1967. Introduction. In John Middleton, ed., *Myth and cosmos: readings in mythology and symbolism*, ix–xi. Garden City, NJ: Natural History Press.
- Minkowitz, Donna. 2002. Beam us back, Scotty! *The Nation* (March 25): 36–37.
- Montague, Susan P. and Robert Morais. 1976. Football games and rock concerts: the ritual enactment of American success models. In William Arens and Susan P. Montague, eds, *The American dimension: cultural myths and social realities*, 33–52. Port Washington, NY: Alfred Publishing.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 1974. Is female to male as nature is to culture? In Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds, *Woman, culture, & society*, 67–87. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Robbins, Richard H. 1993. *Cultural anthropology: a problem-based approach*. 1st ed. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 1991. Carnal knowledge and imperial power: gender, race, and morality in colonial Asia. In Micaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the crossroads of knowledge: feminist anthropology in the postmodern era*, 51–101. Berkeley: University of California Press.