



Who Am I?: Culturally Relevant Text and American Identity

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by Mark Holston

Introduction

Why literature? Why at a time in history when technology provides innumerable ways to teach, inform, and entertain, do we still need literature? The answer to this question is that even with an overabundance of technological interference that vies for student's attention, literature has the ability to transform, to be the vehicle that conveys for students an understanding of the world and themselves, especially at the critical time in their lives—childhood and adolescence, a time when the answer to the question, “Who am I?” is most desired and most needed.

Granted, many students are already reluctant readers, and getting them engaged in reading is not always an easy task, and with the myriad of current distractions presented by technology, the challenge is more daunting than ever. However, the challenge of getting students engaged in literature is more than just getting them to put away their technology—it is deeper than that. Often, students' aversion to reading stems from not seeing themselves or their experiences represented in the curriculum; they feel disconnected or disengaged from what is being taught, and this disconnect is more profound for students of color, especially because the literature that they have been assigned has no relation to their life or experiences, nor does it validate who they are as persons, and often it doesn't address the question, “Who am I?” This is why literature—specifically socially and culturally relevant literature—matters. If students can see themselves in the literature they are reading, literature can be an opportunity to explore their own identity and explore and understand who they are; consequently, they will be excited by what they read, and possibly even develop an understanding of the value of literature and become passionate, life-long readers.

Centering on the culturally relevant text *Catfish and Mandala* by Andrew Pham, this unit hopes to address the universal theme of selfhood, more specifically, self-identity in the context of American identity. The unit gives students an opportunity to explore the theme of otherness and what it means to be American, and to discover their own views of where they fit in as an American and how these perceptions relate to ethnicity, race, and gender. Students will explore the identity conflict that arises from trying to occupy two worlds. At the same time, this unit will use Pham's rich prose to develop the skills of analytical reading and writing.

Background

Mt. Pleasant High School is in San Jose, in the heart of Silicon Valley, the mecca for the world's competitive, dynamic technology industries. This is where the Mark Zuberbergs of the world migrate when they want to be recognized and expand the world's technology. Over the past several decades, beginning long before it was titled Silicon Valley, the Bay Area has been home to a diverse population, and currently the Bay Area is more diverse than ever. Mt. Pleasant High School is emblematic of this diversity. Most of the students at Mt. Pleasant are first-, second-, or third-generation Americans, but in almost all cases they identify themselves as, or are identified as, hyphenated Americans, something other than simply American. My school reflects the demographics of a growing number of schools across America. It is estimated that by the next decade, the majority of students in America's schools will be students of color.¹ When it comes to literacy, Mt. Pleasant's students are no different than your average high school student, and its students' reluctance to engage in literature is reflected in one of our key statistical indicators, the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). The number of students attaining English Language designated "proficient" readers was less than 55%.²

I plan on using this unit with my junior-level English 3 class. When I first started teaching at Mt. Pleasant, placement in a junior level English class was predicated on students' success in their previous years' English courses: students had to obtain a grade of C or better in their English classes during their freshman and sophomore years to enter into English 3 their junior year. If they did not meet these requirements, they were scheduled into one of the many alternative or remedial English classes on campus. This process made for a somewhat academically homogeneous teaching environment, and for the most part, an English 3 teacher could expect his or her students to do their assignments and to engage with the reading on some level, and a majority of the students in an English 3 class were reading at or near grade level. However, a few years ago the district made changes regarding how English classes were structured; gone were virtually all remedial English classes. With the elimination of these classes, the once homogeneous English 3 class became a heterogeneous medley of students with diverse academic abilities: a student who earned an A in a sophomore level honors class, a senior who has up until that point been in English Language Learner classes, a special education student who has a processing disability, a student who had passed his or her sophomore English 2 class, a student who had failed his or her sophomore English 2 class--all now comprise an English 3 classroom.

Rationale

As an English teacher, I find that the challenge is to choose a work of literature and develop a curriculum unit that engages students who are primarily students of color, but also addresses students with diverse academic abilities. Trying to meet these two objectives is why I chose *Catfish and Mandala*. Many of the themes--otherness, self-identity, and culture conflict--that are addressed in *Catfish and Mandala* are relevant to many of my students' experiences and backgrounds. But also relevant to my students in particular is the fact that the writer, Andrew Pham, is from East San Jose, and he attended a high school a short distance from Mt. Pleasant High School. For my students, there is an increased level of interest when they find out that the author of the book they are about to read not only shares many of their experiences, but experienced them on the same streets and in the same neighborhood that they live in. *Catfish and Mandala* is appealing for another reason. While Pham's prose is challenging and full of rich examples of literary writing that make it

ideal for practicing analysis and writing, it is still accessible to students at most reading levels.

Why Culturally Relevant Literature

In *Why Literature?: The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*, Christina Vischer Burns illustrates the challenge of trying to engage students in literature that they may be culturally and socially disconnected from. She writes, “A text only decades older than my students, but still culturally removed from most of them, can also present challenges. The student of mine who found the characters’ names in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* to be ridiculous...was ready to dismiss the entire novel as too far-fetched to be in any way believable, but his frustration suggested that he was experiencing a clash of cultural assumptions.”³ Teachers of students of color know all too well the frustration students feel when confronted with a text they feel “culturally removed from.” One example is teaching a text such as J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. Initially, many of my students have a hard time understanding how a rich, white, prep school kid from 1950’s *Leave It to Beaver* America, can have such an overtly cynical attitude towards *everything*. The protagonist Holden Caulfield’s experiences are so alien to many of my students that they have a hard time relating to the main character or his story. It is true that one of the roles of teachers is to help students make connections between their own experiences and the seemingly dissimilar events of a text; indeed, one of the joys of literature is exploring and being exposed to a world utterly distinct from one’s own, with differing and diverse ideas, while at the same time uncovering the connections to your own personal world. This is what I do with *The Catcher in the Rye*. I’ve had students from diverse backgrounds engage in and connect with Salinger’s Holden Caulfield in a very impactful way--and I still teach *The Catcher in the Rye* to my sophomore students. In fact, I would argue that students of color *should* read classic, Anglocentric literature. To deny students the reading of these works and thereby deny them access to the cultural literacy that they should have, especially if they plan to pursue their education beyond high school, is doing them a disservice. In many respects I agree with Carol Jago when she advocates in her book *With Rigor for All: Teaching the Classics to Contemporary Students*, the importance of teaching “classic” literature. She claims, “a critical reading of literature results in a deep literacy that I believe is an essential skill for anyone who wants to attempt to make sense of the world.”⁴ Jago’s position does have its merits; however, too many times when it comes to reading classic literature, making “sense of the world” represents a myopic view of the world. Far too often the world of students of color is not represented, and that’s a problem. We cannot continue to give students only literature that makes them feel that their experiences are not part of mainstream American society. Using culturally relevant texts can, in fact, be a bridge to these classic works. Iliana Alanis, in her article “Developing Literacy through Culturally Relevant Texts,” points out that “When teachers use culturally relevant texts, students have a better understanding of the books and, as a result, become more engaged in their reading. Their enjoyment and interest increase, and they become motivated to read more.”⁵

But just as students should read classic literature to know and understand the world presented from one perspective, it is just as important for students--both the students of color and white students--to understand other worlds, worlds that are presented through the use of a diversity of texts that represent the full spectrum of varied experiences. This is why *culturally relevant* literature matters. Writing in her *Why Literature?* Burns quotes C.S. Lewis regarding literature’s ability to help students examine how they view themselves and the world around them, and foster their awareness and empathy towards other cultures, “We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a

selectiveness peculiar to himself...we want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well with our own.”⁶ Gloria Ladson-Billings in her article “But That’s Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy” further illustrates the need for culturally diverse literature because it gives students the tools to become not only better students, but also better citizens: “...students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities. If school is about preparing students for active citizenship, what better citizenship tool than the ability to critically analyze the society.”⁷ Ultimately, advocating for culturally relevant literature does not call for expunging all classic literature by white authors; however, it does present teachers with an opportunity to increase student comprehension and engagement, provide a basis for transitioning to less relatable works, and explore a more sophisticated perspective on the world.

Identity and Selfhood

Teachers at any grade level are familiar with the varying ways in which students struggle to determine selfhood; throughout the course of a year, teachers may observe students struggle through varying phases of cultural, ethnic, or gender identity. The search for and the forging of one’s identity have significant academic implications for students. Research has shown that “ethnic identity development is linked to students’ academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, and most importantly, self-esteem.”⁸ Much of the research on identity development is centered around James Marcia’s work on adolescent development. Using Marcia’s work as a foundation, Jean Phinney developed a three-stage model for ethnic identity formation. Phinney categorizes the initial stage as Unexamined Ethnic Identity. In this stage, adolescents neglect to explore their own identity, but instead, “accept the values and attitudes of the majority culture.” In the second stage, Ethnic Identity Search/Moratorium, “adolescents encounter a situation that initiates an ethnic identity search.” The final stage, Ethnic Identity Achievement, occurs when adolescents accept who they are and have a “clear confident sense of one’s own ethnicity.”⁹

When teachers consider Phinney’s model for ethnic identity formation, it is important to recognize the role that literature can play in helping students through the progressive stages. At adolescence, many students of color are so focused on assimilation into the “majority culture” that they have never explored their own ethnicity, or, more simply, many students are indifferent to the exploration of their own identity. The second stage requires the encountering “that initiates an ethnic identity search.” The text, the work of literature that asks students to examine their own ethnicity, “initiates” the exploration of their own ethnic identity. And it is through the analysis of the literature and the process of exploring their own identities through a thoughtful, culturally relevant curriculum that students can hopefully reach the ideal stage. Bruns further illustrates this point by highlighting literature’s unique ability to promote students’ exploration and understanding of their own identity. “Seeing or discovering something of ourselves in a literary work can come with a shock when the resulting insight is troubling or as a relief when we find that some part of our self is shared with another. These experiences of recognition are important for self-knowledge and at times for comfort or consolation, but they can also serve an even more valuable function as the words of texts can give tangible shape to aspects of our own experience that we can’t otherwise grasp.”¹⁰

For many students of color, their otherness in American society allows society to determine their identity

before they are allowed to go through the process of discovering it for themselves. To put it differently, Johnathan Culler, in his article “What is Literature Now?”, makes this point by referencing Tzvetan Todorov’s article for *New Literary History*, “The Notion of Literature,” in which he acknowledges, “Whatever else literature may be he concludes, ‘it is one significant determinant of the contents of selfhood.’”¹¹ When the literature is relevant to students’ own experiences, the ability to see themselves in the “actions and reflections of literary characters”¹² the construction of selfhood becomes more expedient. The literature in the classroom may afford one of the few opportunities for students to develop a deeper self-awareness, and it is important that the literature speaks to their experiences.

It is interesting to note that Andrew Pham’s search for identity parallels the three stages that Phinney outlines in her theory of ethnic identity formation: Pham begins his journey accepting and claiming that he is simply an American; not until prodded does he acknowledge his ethnicity as a Vietnamese-American. It is this situation among others that initiates Pham’s “ethnic identity search.” Finally, it is Pham’s accepting and embracing his ethnicity as a Vietnamese-American, with emphasis on the American, that he achieves in the final stage.

Otherness in the Context of American Identity

Andrew Pham’s sense of *otherness* and his search for identity are experiences to which many students of color can relate. In *otherness*, the dominant society is perceived as the norm and judges those who do not meet the norm. Often students of color feel marginalized when they are perceived by the dominant society as not belonging and as being different in some fundamental way. This marginalization can also be manifested in the school setting. For example, many times African-Americans are marginalized because their mode of dress or behavior may not be sanctioned by the majority’s norm of what is considered appropriate. The result, as Gloria Ladson-Billings observes in her article “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” is that school can become an inhospitable place for students of color, “perceived as a place where African-American students cannot ‘be themselves.’”¹³ Correspondingly, if students feel that their behavior or appearance may not be accepted as the norm, what happens when they are systematically confronted with classroom texts that fail to reflect their culture or experiences, essentially discounting who they are as students, reinforcing their otherness? These experiences become tacit reminders that there is no place for them in the paradigm of what is considered appropriately *American*. Conversely, while a lack a representation in literature can lead to feeling excluded from the dominant society, the appropriate, relevant choice can authenticate their own experience, and also present students with an opportunity to discover and define for themselves their place in our society. As Cristina Vischer Bruns asserts in her book *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*, literature has the ability to “result in a changed or even transformed sense of the self, as formerly unconscious moods or states become available for self-knowing and as the object or experience encountered in transitional space leaves its imprint on the world.”¹⁴ Admittedly, the exploration of otherness through literature does not negate the conditions that are associated with the status of otherness, but it does give students a greater understanding of the world that they inhabit. This understanding has an empowering effect on students and has the ability to change the dynamics of the classroom. As Iliana Alanis points out in her article “Developing Literacy through Culturally Relevant Texts,” “Using students’ ‘funds of knowledge,’ can make the classroom an environment in which all children feel a sense of belonging and accomplishment.”¹⁵ The appropriate choice of literature gives voice to students of color by validating their experiences and making them feel less like outsiders in the classroom, giving them an

inviting environment to confidently express themselves.

Issues of Identity in *Catfish and Mandala*

In *Catfish and Mandala*, the concept of identity takes on many dimensions, and the way Pham explores, struggles with, and comes to a resolution about his identity is the impetus for students to explore their own identities. As an ethnic American confused by his otherness and his place in America, Pham feels compelled to seek out his identity by returning “home,” to Vietnam. But while in Vietnam, Pham quickly realizes that his status as a *viet kieu*, a person born in Vietnam who returns to visit, makes him an other in his homeland, the place of his birth. “I tell them I’m Vietnamese-American. They shriek, ‘*Viet-kieu!*’. It sounds like a disease.”¹⁶ For many students of color, Pham’s experiences are relevant to their own experiences. Mexican-American or Filipino-American students living in the United States, often born and raised in America, are usually identified, and identify themselves, as simply *Mexican* or *Filipino*; this societal and self-designation emphasizes their ethnicity and reinforces their otherness, but ironically when these students return to visit their ethnic homeland they are not seen as *real* Mexicans or Filipino; their position is something else, a cultural hybrid. So, like Pham confronting his *vietkieu* status in Vietnam, they find themselves straddling two worlds, but not fully accepted in either one, others in both their ethnic homeland, and in America.

In Pham’s memoir the theme of identity is not limited to the ethnic or racial identity; sexual or gender identity is also explored in the memoir through his depiction of his sister Chi/Minh, who is transgender. Chi’s gender identity and Vietnamese heritage result in a dual *otherness*; she is ostracized in her own community for being transgender, while at the same time she is marginalized as a Vietnamese immigrant in American society. Being the oldest of Pham’s siblings and having spent the longest time being raised in Vietnam, Chi has an identity rooted firmly in Vietnamese culture, while the younger siblings have assimilated American values and customs more readily. Chi’s inability to assimilate in America while being pulled away from the country that she identifies with leaves her rootless, without the ability to establish an identity in either place. Early in the memoir, the readers are informed that Chi has committed suicide, compelling one character to tell Pham, “Your sister died because she became too American.”¹⁷ Throughout his journey Pham is haunted by Chi’s death. For students, Chi’s inability to assimilate, her struggles with gender identity, and her ultimate suicide are all compelling topics for discussion. While discussing identity, many students may be going through these issues themselves.¹⁸

Strategies and Activities

This six-week unit will be taught to my eleventh grade English 3 students at the beginning of the second semester. Many, but not all of them will take the SAT at some point during this semester. There has been a significant shift in the Collegeboard SAT, the exam that plays a critical factor in determining college admittance. Traditionally the SAT essay has been an argumentative or persuasive essay. However, now the SAT essay is a rhetorical analysis essay. This is a major shift for students, most of whom are unfamiliar with this type of analysis and essay response. This unit will help prepare them to write this type of essay.

Building Schema and Activating Prior Knowledge

By helping students activate their prior knowledge, they are more likely to make sense of the text they are reading. Consequently, they are more likely to remain engaged in the text, understand the relative importance of the information, and understand new information. Additionally, the accessing of background knowledge will help students build background knowledge and develop schema for understanding the text. A significant portion of *Catfish and Mandala* takes place during the Vietnam War. Some of our Vietnamese students are familiar with the history of Vietnam and the Vietnam War because the stories have been passed down through the experiences of their parents and grandparents. However, for many students this is unfamiliar or ancient history. Nevertheless, students can activate prior knowledge by focusing on universal themes that appear in Pham's text. For many students, these themes are relatable. For example, otherness, identity, and cultural conflict. These themes can be activated through journals, quick writes, discussions, or debates.

The unfamiliarity of the historical events that Pham refers to in his memoir may present challenges for some students. One way of building content knowledge is through film. Showing portions of the PBS documentary *The Fall of Saigon* is an excellent way for students to understand the circumstances and conditions surrounding Pham's family when they flee Vietnam. It is also a way to connect to the universality of the immigrant experience and discuss the circumstances that exist that cause people to leave where they come from and start a new life in a new world. The documentary *Daughter from Danang* gives students an introduction into the clash of American and Vietnamese values. The film tells the story of an orphan child that is airlifted out of Vietnam in 1968 and raised in a small town in Tennessee. Similar to Pham, she returns to Vietnam in search of her identity, but is confronted with a family in Vietnam that expects more than she is willing to give. The fictional film *Journey from the Fall* traces the struggles of one Vietnamese family's survival in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon. Many of the events in the film parallel Pham's family's experience and provide excellent background for students.

Discussion and Debate

Discussion and debate are effective ways of stimulating critical thinking, developing a greater understanding of the text, and clarifying information. Discussion topics would focus on theses of Pham's memoir, and students would be encouraged to support their ideas with events from the text, as well as their personal experiences. Discussion can be conducted in a variety of formats. Two ways are classroom discussion or Socratic seminars. Sometimes students are reluctant to speak in front of an entire class, so small group discussions are an effective way to increase participation. After discussions, students will write a written response. These responses can be shared out with the entire class.

Another way of discussing the issues of otherness, identity, and cultural conflict is through four corners debate. A four corners debate requires students to show their position on a specific statement (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) by standing in a particular corner of the room. This activity elicits the participation of all students by requiring everyone to take a position. (See Appendix A.)

Rhetorical Analysis and the Rhetorical Triangle

Aristotle believed that from the world around them, speakers can observe how communication happens and use that understanding to develop sound and convincing arguments. In order to do that, speakers needed to look at three elements, graphically represented by what we call the rhetorical triangle. The three elements that formed the points of Aristotle's original Rhetorical Triangle are: writer or speaker, audience, and subject.

Context and purpose are additional elements added to the triangle.

According to this approach, these factors determine the persuasiveness of your argument. Your writing – and any other form of communication – needs to take all of these into consideration. Applying the rhetorical triangle to Pham’s text, students will gain a deeper understanding of how Pham using language to achieve his purpose. (See appendix B.)

The Speaker or Writer: Determining who the writer is helps the reader understand the writer’s point of view, credibility, and biases. What is the speaker’s background, profession, economic status, age, gender, etc.?

The Audience: When you communicate, in writing or verbally, you need to understand your audience. To whom is the writer speaking? How do you know? Does the audience already have a bias? Does the speaker already have credibility with the audience? The subject matter, tone, and word choice are all clues as to whom the writer is speaking.

The Context: When you read and write a text, think about the context in which the reading and writing takes place. When was it written? Is it historical or contemporary? Is it in response to an important or critical event?

The Subject: What is the speaker or writer speaking or writing about?

The Purpose: Why? What prompted the writer to write this article? What is the rhetor (speaker or writer) trying to accomplish? Does the writer propose something, convey specific information, convince you of something, or try to sell a product or idea? (See Appendix C.)

Rhetorical Analysis and Writing

Rhetorical Analysis and Writing Activity 1

Students may be familiar with some of the literary terms that they need to know to write an effective literary analysis, and some of the terms may be entirely new to them. And though they may be able to identify or define some of the terms they may be familiar with, they have little experience completing the key aspect of rhetorical analysis: analyzing *why* a writer chooses a particular literary technique and explaining how that effect helps him or her achieve that purpose. By isolating key terms, using short passages and having students answer guided questions in groups, students are able to become acquainted with these terms and how to analyze them before moving on to analyzing longer passages. (See Appendix D.)

Rhetorical Analysis and Writing Activity 2

Take the first two paragraphs of Chapter 15 of *Catfish and Mandala* and have students practice rhetorical analysis by having them analyze Pham’s attitude towards Saigon. This passage is a critical point in the book. Pham has returned to Saigon, his childhood home, in search of his identity. However, it is at this point that Pham realizes that he dislikes Saigon and its people and that he is nothing like them.

Give students a copy of the Saigon Passage (See Appendix E): Read carefully the passage from Andrew Pham’s memoir. Then analyze how Pham uses language to represent his attitude towards Saigon. Students might consider such elements as imagery, diction, syntax, figurative language and tone. Divide students into groups with three students in each group. Have each group read the passage and discuss Pham’s attitude towards Saigon. Assign each group a rhetorical strategy (imagery, diction, syntax, or figurative language) and

have students annotate the passage focusing on their groups rhetorical strategy. Have students present their annotations and group work on the smartboard or on an overhead. Students will explain how the particular rhetorical strategies that they have identified convey Pham’s attitude towards Saigon. Other students will make the same annotations on their paper. Model for students the format for a rhetorical analysis essay using the Saigon passage that they just worked on.

Rhetorical Analysis and Writing Activity 3

After working with the Saigon Passage, students will write a summative assessment rhetorical analysis that mimics the strategies they employed as a class analyzing the Saigon Passage. (See Appendix F.)

Appendix A: Teacher Resources

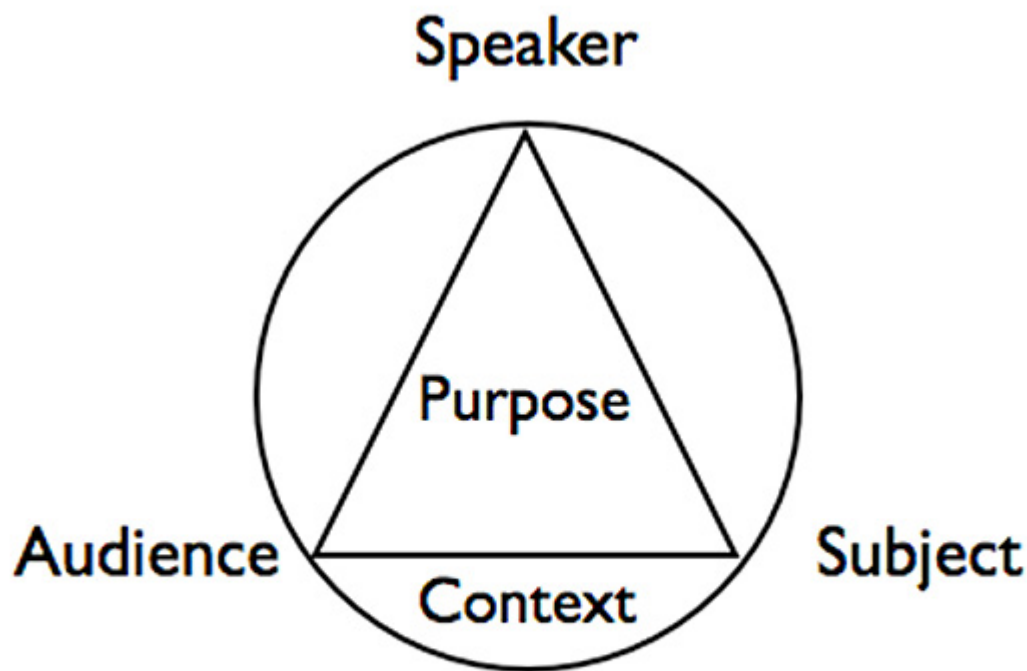
Catfish and Mandala Discussion Questions

1. What compelled Pham to make his journey back to Vietnam?
2. Considering the sacrifices Pham’s family made to get to the United States, does Pham have an obligation to do well and take advantage of all the opportunities given to him?
3. Should the values of one culture be carried over to another culture even if they conflict?
4. How did Pham’s expectations of his trip differ from what ultimately happened?
5. Compare Pham’s journey to another character’s journey in literature. How are they alike or different?
6. Why are some of the chapters italicized and titled “Fallen Leaves”?
7. “The hardships of a pilgrimage lend no courage for facing mecca” (62). What connotations are given by the word “pilgrimage” and why does Pham use this word? How would the sentence be different if the word “pilgrimage” were changed to “journey” or “vacation”?
8. Is Pham running away from something or to something?
9. Are the Vietnamese justified in being resentful of the Viet Kieu?
10. “These Vietnamese, these wanting-wanting-wanting people. The bitter bile of finding a new world I don’t remember colors my disconsolate reconciliation between my Saigon of Old and their muddy-grubby Saigon of Now” (102). Has Saigon changed or has Pham changed? Did Pham idealize or romanticize his childhood? Is it natural to look back at a part of your life and only remember the best parts?

Essential Questions for Discussion

1. How do a person’s experience, cultural identity, and family background influence his or her choices and inform his or her character?
2. Does a person have an *obligation* to do well and take complete advantage of all the opportunities given to him or her?
3. Should the values of one culture be carried over to another culture even if they conflict?
4. Who are the insiders/outsideers in a society/social group?
5. How do the qualities that define an outsider/insider affect his or her relationship in a society/group?
6. What are the disadvantages of being an outsider?

Appendix B: Teacher Resources



RHETORICAL TRIANGLE

Source: Mark Holston

Appendix C: Teacher Resources

Speaker	Who is the rhetor (speaker or writer)? What is the rhetor's background, profession, economic status, etc? What persona does the writer assume? Does the rhetor have credibility (ethos) with his or her audience? Why or why not? How does the rhetor establish credibility?
Subject & Context	What is the rhetor writing about? What is the context of the text? What is happening in the world socially, culturally, politically or historically when the rhetor wrote the text?
Audience	To whom is the writer speaking? How do you know? What do they know about the subject? How does the audience feel about the speaker? What are some of the rhetorical techniques that the rhetor uses to appeal to the audience? Why are these techniques effective specifically with this audience?
Purpose	Why? What prompted the writer to write this article (exegesis)? What is the rhetor (speaker or writer) trying to accomplish? Does the writer propose something, convey specific information, convince you of something, or try to sell a product or idea?

Appendix D: Teacher Resources

Diction in *Catfish and Mandala*

Consider

The Nguyens' building is narrow and long, like a matchbox set on its striking side. Within its alley neighborhood, a two-floor cellblock, each residence is sealed with a massive sliding steel door of mesh wire and bars. It is dark and quiet, everyone asleep (71).

Discuss

1. Highlight ten words that contribute to the negative image of the Nguyens' building.
2. What are the connotations of *sealed*? What feelings are evoked by this diction?
3. What does Pham's word choice reveal about his attitude towards the Nguyens' building?

Syntax in *Catfish and Mandala*

I fled down the dark alley, running by instinct, feeling my way with the tips of my fingers on the moist walls. Turn right. Run down another alley. Keep the gun. Drop the bag. Too heavy. Turn again. Run through a larger alley. They were closing in on me. I stumbled over trash. Kept going, heading for the clear up ahead (69).

Look at the passage. Highlight the sentences that are sentence fragments.

1. What is the tone of the passage? (Choose from your list of tone words)
2. Pham begins to describe what happened in the past, but he then switches to the present tense. How does the switch to the immediate tense help him create the tone?

Compare the following revised passage to Pham's original.

I fled down the dark alley, ran by instinct, feeling my way with the tips of my fingers on the moist walls. I decided to turn right and run down another alley. I then decided to keep the gun and drop the bag because it was too heavy. I turned again and ran through a larger alley. Despite my efforts, they closed in on me as I stumbled over trash; I kept going, and headed for the clear up ahead.

1. What difference in syntax (word order, sentence length, sentence focus and punctuation) do you notice between the original and revised passage? Be specific.
2. What are the differences in tone between the two passages? Be specific.

Apply: Using Pham's original passage as a model, describe an exciting situation using short, fragmented syntax.

Appendix E: Teacher Resources

Saigon Passage

What do the diction, imagery, details, syntax, and figurative language reveal about Andrew Pham's attitude (tone) about Saigon.

The Saigon I see isn't visceral. I'd be deceiving you if I took your hand to walk you through it. It isn't just something you see. It's what you feel, an echo in the blood that courses through you. It is a collage, a vanishing flavor, a poison, a metallic tinge, a barbarous joy, strange impressions unconvictable in the usual conventions.

It is easy for me to say because I am cowering in a bar, exclusive, situated high above the muck. Easy, for today I was wounded, my armor finally pierced. Now, through this tinted window, I see a Saigon evening like the dozens of others before. I see the setting sun grinding down on the ancient tree tops and the prickly antennas atop the shouldering buildings. It glowers, a fist of coal in a sea of smog thick as dishwater. In the glimmering heat, the narrow roads swarm with headlights of motorbikes, bright beams wildly fingering the asphalt arteries, companions of the horns, the screeching, badgering, warring horns, persistent always. The air throbs, salty, wet with exhaust, dank with perspiration. The people, the skinny dark people suffocate, enduring.

Kiosks hedge the street, no sidewalks, catching the drift of humanity churned up by traffic. The sandwich makers, old ladies with oily hands, dusty skin like yesterday's bread, lather pork fat onto tiny loaves. On the curbs, the shirtless men sun-jerked sinew in boxer shorts and rubber sandals, squatting on their hams, grill meat over coals in metal pans. A dog, patchy fur over ribs, sniffs the droppings of another. In an alley, a mother and daughter fry dough cakes, selling them wrapped in dirty newspapers. Next to them, laborers hunch on plastic footstools slurping noodle soup from chipped bowls. They are watching an American travelogue dubbed in Vietnamese. Tonight, we tour Yosemite and luxuriate in the hospitality of the Ahwahnee Hotel.

People shout, curse, barter, laugh, whine, edging words into the traffic, hustling for money. The buildings press narrow, ten feet wide, and stretch thrice as long, every other one a storefront, open for business, selling, selling, selling anything, everything. Food, paper, spare screwdrivers, wrenches, rice dishes, Coca-Cola, cigarettes, gasoline in soda bottles, penny-lottery tickets, imported tins of biscuits, and everything has a buyer, everyone is for sale.

Appendix F: Teacher Resources

Hanoi Passage

Read carefully the following passage from Andrew Pham's memoir, *Catfish and Mandala*. Then, analyze how Pham uses language to represent his attitude about Hanoi. You might consider such elements as imagery, diction, syntax, figurative language and tone.

The one thing a solo traveler can count on finding in an area crawling with backpackers and expatriates is a bargain bed for the night. Usually, the food isn't bad either. I have no idea where Hanoi's tourist town is, so I buy a map and meander. It is an easy task since Hanoi is a more sedate city than Saigon. The traffic is much lighter, and in the cooler air under tree-shaded avenues, the smog is more tolerable. Hanoi lives on a scale more comprehensive than Saigon. The trees are smaller, more abundant, and not so tall and tropical like those of Saigon. I stroll along the fine mansions, taking in their faded, colonial French glories, their expressive arches, French windows, and wrought-iron balconies. Every structure holds itself up proudly in a state of elegant decay. At the north end of Hoan Kiem Lake, I find six young Caucasian travelers, lurking timidly on different street corners. Backpackers, baby-faced, flushed even in the tropic winter, treading about, wide eyes eating up all the sights, the details. Their pilgrim hands clench dog-eared copies of *The Lonely Planet Guide to Vietnam*. Alas, I have found my home for the next few weeks...

Our favorite is the street of *nem nuong* diners. Around dinner time, straddling the sunset hour, the street is perfumed and grayed with the smoke of meat sizzling over coals. If you catch a whiff of this scent, you never forget it. It is a heady mixture of fishsauce marinade, burning scallions, caramelized sugar, pepper, chopped beef, and pork fat. Women sit on footstools grilling meats on hibachi-style barbecues. Aromatic, stomach-nipping smoke curls to the scrubby treetops and simply lingers, casting the avenue into an amber haze. When hungry folk flock from all over the city to this spot, they have only one thing on their mind. And the entire street, all its skills and resources, is geared to that singular satisfaction.

The days pass without difficulty. I am at last among friends of similar spirit, all non-Asian, not one of them Vietnamese. And I am happy, comfortable merely to be an interpreter. Every day, we troop off to some part of the city on sight-seeing missions. At night, we congregate for great bouts of drinking and barhopping. We splinter into smaller parties and sign up for organized boat tours in Ha Long Bay and ride rented motorcycles to the countryside. We joke, we romance each other with wild abandon of strangers cohabiting in exotic moments. We ask about Hanoi and its people, we ask about each other. Bonding, trading addresses, and fervently believing that we will never lose touch. (225-226)

Appendix G: Implementing Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.A Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.C Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1.D Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.B Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant

facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.C Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.E Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.B Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.3.D Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6 Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

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Notes

1. School Profile," Mount Pleasant High School, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) Report 2013-2014
2. Ibid.
3. Christina Vischer Burns' *Why Literature?: The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching*, 12
4. Carol Jago, *With Rigor for All*, 7
5. Iliana Alanis, "Developing Literacy through Culturally Relevant Texts", 30.
6. Christina Vischer Burns' *Why Literature*, 15.
7. Gloria Ladson-Billings "But That's Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" 162.
8. Jean S. Phinney "Ethnic Identity: Developmental and Contextual Perspectives", 7.
9. Ibid,
10. Christina Vischer Burns *Why Literature?*,19.
11. Johnathan Culler "*What is Literature Now?*",178.
12. Ibid
13. Gloria Ladson-Billings "But That's Just Good Teaching!," 161.
14. Cristina Vischer Bruns *Why Literature?*, 28-29.
15. Iliana Alanis "Developing Literacy through Culturally Relevant Texts," 32.
16. Andrew Pham *Catfish and Mandala*, 125.
17. Andrew Pham *Catfish and Mandala*, 7.
18. Farah Qureshi "School Climates, Suicide and Gay and Lesbian Students, 2.

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