



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2017 Volume II: Literature, Life-Writing, and Identity

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## **Finding Me, Knowing You: Exploring and Expressing Identity through Language Arts**

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“I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act. It is an act that can be met with hostility, exclusion, and violence. It can also lead to love, understanding, transcendence, and community.” -Janet Mock<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

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When I was fifteen, I wrote my first zine. I cut and pasted it together, had my mom make a few copies of it at work, and then I took it to school to pass out to friends and potential friends. As I wrote and published more, it became a part of my identity. It became less about how I perceived pop culture and more about how I saw myself. How I saw my friends. How I was lovelorn. Which bands I liked. What feminism meant to me. My zines reflected what I liked and who I thought I was each time I felt the urge to stay up all night and write. My zines are basically a running record of how I changed and how my identity developed over approximately eight formative years of my life. I wanted badly to know who I was and to connect with like-minded people who would help me continue to grow into who I am today, for better or worse.

I never felt as if I fit in with any social groups in my hometown, so I looked outward. It was several years before I had access to the Internet, so I relied on letters and “friendship books,” which is how I found out about zines. A friendship book is a small, usually staple-bound book where each person decorates a page and includes their interests along with their address in order to find new pen pals. One of the pen pals I met through a friendship book sent me her first zine and it blew my mind that even I could just self-publish and self-promote my way into friendship and belonging. Being a “zinester” became a huge part of my identity, and I learned more about different cultures and identities than any white, poor, small-town West Virginia girl could have done without leaving home. What does this have to do with my students? In short, I was a teenager once, and I developed my identity while learning about different cultures and “kinds” of identities through reading, writing, and sharing. I was both validated and challenged by people I encountered, and I emerged on the other side of puberty and young-adulthood ready to fight for people whose identities, unlike mine, were

marginalized.

One of the very best friends I met through zines was Cuban-American and queer. I met him before he transitioned into the first transgender and then transsexual man I knew. I was immediately supportive even though I didn't really understand it at first. The only thing I really had to understand came easily: he needed to do whatever he needed to do to feel comfortable in his own skin. My only real concern was the threat of transphobia, which made me fear for his safety. Later, my concerns were focused on his health, as he got testosterone and medications from the Internet because he didn't have insurance. He was one of my best friends and I just wanted him to be whoever he needed to be without psychological and physical pain. He was an amazingly gifted writer and had experienced abuse that was honestly beyond my comprehension, but he was still one of the funniest people I had ever known. We would stay up on the phone making jokes that only we were nerdy, weird, and dark enough to get. We both loved *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the comparatively short-lived soap opera *Passions*. In short, we connected on a level that transcended gender, and I want my students to make those kinds of connections with people they encounter. Our differences are strengths, and I want my students to start understanding that.

## Rationale

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Unlike me, my students do come from marginalized cultures and communities. However, like me, they come from a fairly homogenous community. The difference lies in the reasons for our homogenous isolation. I am from West Virginia, which was (and still is) predominantly white and poor. My students, however, live in Richmond, Virginia, a deeply (re)segregated city where people of different races, cultures, and incomes all coexist, but with few exceptions only encounter like-people within their economic and racial bubbles.

Currently, in lieu of making zines and writing letters, my students maintain their own running records through social media. The nature of social media is one of immediacy, and (for my students) often just of pictures or live videos, so there is not much time or room for reflection. It has always been my job to get students to slow down in order to have periods of active reading during which they engage with the text by using reading comprehension strategies. Students usually want and expect instant gratification, which makes this task challenging. Their need for instant gratification and "flashiness" can lead to a fractured view of their still-forming identities and lack of connection to larger historical events that have had a hand in shaping the conditions in which they exist.

The disconnect between the larger narrative of United States history and students' personal histories is problematic, but whether or not the students understand the historical events does not negate their experiences. However, I do want them to understand how shared history and the systems of power and subjugation affect the conditions in which we thrive or struggle. Their existences and identities as they understand them will be more deeply understood once they also understand the social constructs that are in place. I believe that if my students are more aware of historic and social contexts, they will be better equipped to break free from the various traumatic cycles they have been thrown into. Conversely, the few who are not marginalized will begin to understand how their privilege works, and how they can respect and assist their marginalized peers. By learning their places in history and by reflecting on their own senses of self, my students will be able to better understand how their identities are shaped by their experiences as they grow.

Adolescence is a crucial time in identity development. I want this unit to help my students understand the events and conditions that shape their identities so that they can make peace with what troubles them and move forward toward adulthood. My adolescent students are working on forming their identities, so they have a hard time accepting identities they see as “different” or maligned by their culture(s) in any way. I want to help my students understand how history and experiences combine to shape identities. Students will follow characters and writers as they explore what forms their identities, while simultaneously examining their own concepts of their teenage identities. As they go through this process—of learning about themselves and the identities of both characters and historic/public figures—the goal is that each student will learn to appreciate, accept, respect, and understand identities different from their own.

Over the course of our readings, the students will have to confront their own prejudices and fears in order to understand how people figure out their identities. What may surprise them is that those prejudices and fears do not only apply to identities different from their own. For example, the protagonist of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Ari, has to work through his own fears of homosexuality before finally admitting that he wants to kiss his friend Dante, and I’m certain some of my students are facing similar identity crises. That’s the whole point of this unit: to help students work through their “issues” in order to be more comfortable with and aware of themselves and others. I do not expect this to work immediate magic—the students will have to be open to and ready for this kind of exploration.

## Background

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After teaching seventh-grade English for five years, this year, I will be teaching high school English for the first time since my student teaching experience. This coming year, I will be teaching at the same school in which I student-taught, which also happens to be where the majority of my former middle school students attend high school. Therefore, I pretty much already know where my students come from, and may already know them personally. My students live in the south side of Richmond, Virginia, which remains a deeply segregated city with very little funding for its most vulnerable students. The majority of my students are African American or Latinx and many of them live either on or adjacent to Jefferson Davis Highway (Jeff Davis or J-D, for short) without knowing that they are living on a road named for the slave-owning President of the Confederate States.

This year, I will be teaching ninth and tenth grades, but I am writing this unit for my ninth grader students. However, this unit can be easily modified to meet the standards of ninth-twelfth grades. I do know that I will face many of the same impediments to teaching and learning that I experienced while teaching middle school, and I know many of the rising ninth graders because I taught them when they were in seventh grade. This year will likely be even more challenging, as some of the more ambitious and intellectually curious students are slated to attend magnet schools instead of their zone school. The majority of my students hate reading and writing unless it is short and written by a peer on any social media they can access via their smartphones. A unit about identity is especially compelling as they begin their first year of high school.

## Content Objectives

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This unit focuses on a selection of short readings or excerpts from a variety of genres and writers. The pieces are selected based on themes and issues that I hope will help the students gain a better understanding of what shapes their own identities while becoming more respectful of and empathetic toward those whose identities may be far different from their own. It is important that students understand that everyone has reasons why they interact with the world in a certain way, and that people should be free to exist and express their identities in any way they feel comfortable.

The types of literature we will cover are fiction (novels, short stories), expository and persuasive nonfiction (essays, speeches), memoir, and poetry. We will read excerpts for the sake of time constraints, but I will urge the students to seek the full texts outside of class. The readings represent a variety of American identities (race, class, sex, gender, sexuality) that the students will either identify with personally (sameness) or will encounter over the course of their lives (difference).

I will begin the unit by defining identity and having the students define identity before we focus on concrete and then abstract aspects of identity. Students will examine and express concrete, physical features of identity before we begin exploring intangible, abstract aspects of identity.

### Defining Identity

Before the students can really begin exploring “kinds” of identities, we will need to address an essential question: What is identity? Philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson describes it as “the interaction of a person’s self-conception with how others conceive her: identities are the understandings we have of ourselves and others.”<sup>2</sup> The majority of this interaction takes place unconsciously, but developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson notes that the process becomes conscious when “inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated ‘identity consciousness.’”<sup>3</sup> In order to really define this conscious identity, we need to look at texts that address these moments of aggravation or elation.

Identities based on social indicators often intersect and create a spectrum of identities on which “types” of identities are interconnected/intertwined in multiple ways to create unique identities/voices. We now understand these overlapping “types” of identities as intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term “intersectionality” in her 1989 legal text entitled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” to explain how black women were marginalized in both the feminist and anti-racist movements because they didn’t fit perfectly into either group even though their identities were “multiply-burdened” as an intersection of the two.<sup>4</sup> Today, intersectionality has expanded to include other marginalized groups. In an opinion piece for *The Washington Post*, Christine Emba explains:

Although the term was originally used to describe how race and gender could intersect as forms of oppression, intersectionality has broadened to encompass a number of additional social factors — sexual orientation, nationality, class, disability and others.<sup>5</sup>

The broadened concept of intersectionality is important to share with students. The authors we will explore as

a part of this unit, as well as the students themselves, will embody intersectionality as we understand it today. We will explore how the intersectionality of identities creates each individual voice. Through the exploration of texts from authors who represent a variety of identities, students should begin to understand their own, likely intersectional, identities.

### **From Physical to Abstract Identities**

The concept of identity is fairly abstract, and my students have difficulties understanding abstractions. I believe these difficulties are developmentally based, and I only have to look back at my educational psychology notes to remember that Jean Piaget's "formal operational stage," where children begin thinking in abstract ways, occurs from age eleven through adulthood. From my observations and experience, Piaget's theory is fairly accurate, but many of my students seem to take a little longer to begin thinking abstractly because they are rarely asked to think critically or metacognitively outside of the classroom.

In order to build a bridge from students' experiences to abstract thinking, it will be helpful to begin in the physical realm. The physical body is concrete and my students are acutely aware of their bodies, so why not begin there? Aspects of identity manifest physically in, on, or through the body, and can be experienced with the senses. Race, class, sexuality, and gender all leave traces on our physical bodies, sometimes changing them (leaving marks or transitioning) or erasing them entirely.

These manifestations are not always damaging or traumatic, and we can explore the more celebratory side of physical identity by starting with a piece from Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* entitled "Hairs." In "Hairs," the main character, Esperanza Cordero, describes the different heads of hair in her family. She quickly glosses over Papa's hair, her own hair, Carlos' hair, Nenny's hair, and Kiki's hair before lingering on her mother's hair, which merits a whole paragraph of imagery. Everyone's hair is a part of their identity, and students can use this short chapter as a model for their own writing about hair. They can describe their own hair along with the hair of their family members, taking more time to describe the hair belonging to the person most important to them, or the person whose hair is a bigger part of their identity. A person's hair is also an indicator of race or culture, which is also important to discuss with my students.

From hair we can move to teeth. While the majority of this unit's content features texts from persons of color, I am also interested in something that affected me personally: poverty manifesting in the teeth, which isn't exclusive to white poverty or my personal experience. Nevertheless, I found an easily accessible short essay entitled "Filling," by Sailor Holladay, a white woman who grew up working class. I, like Holladay, "come from a long line of bad teeth."<sup>6</sup> Since many of my students assume that most white people are wealthy, I think it is important that they read texts that tell a different story. We all have teeth, but they are in various stages of repair or disrepair often based on income. If you're genetically predisposed to having "bad" teeth, the preventative care you receive is directly tied to your circumstances. I knew I made it out of poverty once I stopped getting cavities and was able to start replacing the metal fillings with porcelain, but I still fear the stereotype of the toothless hillbilly that reappeared on the "throwback" Mountain Dew label. Mountain Dew ruined and continues to ruin many Appalachian teeth.

Teeth naturally bring us to food, which my students could talk about for hours. My students already realize that diet is a part of their identities, so the key to this aspect of the unit is to get the students to express their identities through food writing. Before they explore food through their own writing, it is important for the students to read how other authors have shown parts of their identities. Given the emphasis on nonfiction reading and essay writing in eighth grade, the majority of my ninth graders will be very inexperienced with

poetry outside of song lyrics. They still struggle with figurative language that isn't obvious, and they have pretty limited vocabularies. But perhaps the way to poetry is through the stomach. Kevin Young edited a food-themed anthology called *The Hungry Ear: Poems of Food & Drink* that has many poems that my students will find accessible and enjoyable. Beyond the obvious food references and food imagery that will appeal to their love of all things tangible, students will be able to begin grasping deeper, more abstract meaning from the poems.

It would be great to begin discussing food poetry with "Butter," a poem by Elizabeth Alexander, which is a great example of how a poet can use descriptions of food to express her racial identity. She moves from concrete descriptions of dishes containing butter, but then ends with an allusion to a racial stereotype that she both rejects and embraces: "We are/Mumbo and Jumbo's children despite/historical revision, despite/our parent's efforts, glowing from the inside/out, one hundred megawatts of butter."<sup>7</sup> In one stroke, she rejects "historical revision" in order to embrace the overtly racist image of Sambo. In "Butter," Alexander doesn't care that the food is stereotypical because in these childhood memories, she and her brother are joyful and glowing... and butter makes everything taste better. We can celebrate and critique our identities by reading and writing about the things we eat.

Our voices, our vocabulary and our accents, are also part of our identities. In *Hillbilly Elegy*, J.D. Vance recalls a moment when, among other class markers, he noticed that people in power had "TV accents" while he and his family did not. He was in court with his family after a traumatic incident happened to him at the hands of his mother, and he takes in the scene around him:

I remember sitting in that busy courtroom, with half a dozen other families all around, and thinking they looked just like us. The moms and dads and grandparents didn't wear suits like the lawyers and judge. They wore sweatpants and stretchy pants and T-shirts. Their hair was a bit frizzy. And it was the first time I noticed "TV accents"—the neutral accent that so many news anchors had. The social workers and the judge and the lawyer all had TV accents. None of us did. Those people who ran the courthouse were different from us. The people subjected to it were not.<sup>8</sup>

This moment seems to be when young Vance gets his first taste of class differences vis-à-vis different accents and wardrobes. While Vance is referring to how "hillbillies" talk versus a "neutral" accent, my students can easily make the jump from Vance's experience to their own experiences with "TV accents" or with people who do not use the same slang that they do. OR the fact that one of their teachers always wears business suits, so she is "classy." Vance's memoir touches on manifestations of class identity that I believe will resonate with the students. Particularly, I will have the students read an excerpt from page 69-80, which recounts the incident with his mother, the courtroom, and a trip to California that made him further realize his hillbilly identity. On the surface, J. D. Vance is the picture of the white privilege he certainly benefits from as an adult. However, his identity is more complicated beneath his surface markers, and I think my students will be surprised by how much they can relate to this part of his memoir.

Hair, food, teeth, and voices can all be experienced via the senses. While we may have different hair, eat different food, have different dental histories, and different voices, humans have these features pretty universally. By being rooted in the physical realm, students can easily understand how identity manifests in tangible ways. Once we have explored the physical realm of identity, we can begin exploring how we can infer or draw conclusions about aspects of a person's abstract identity based on how abstract concepts affect their

physical bodies.

## Racial Identity

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates asks, “In accepting both the chaos of history and the fact of my total end, I was freed to truly consider how I wished to live—specifically, how do I live free in this black body?”<sup>9</sup> Coates acknowledges and understands history’s influence on his identity, and that identity is still in pursuit of liberation. While there are limitations when addressing history’s influence on individual identities, history is integral to African-American identity as explored in the pieces my students will read in this unit. James Baldwin echoes Booker T. Washington. Claudia Rankine and Ta-Nehisi Coates echo James Baldwin. The more things change, the more things stay the same. We remain “down in the ditch” that Booker T. Washington warned us about in “An Address on Abraham Lincoln.”<sup>10</sup> In an essay entitled “Many Thousands Gone”, James Baldwin explains how African Americans, as all people, cannot escape their historical origins:

For it means something to be a Negro, after all, as it means something to have been born in Ireland or in China, to live where one sees space and sky or to live where one sees nothing but rubble or nothing but high buildings. We cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key—could we but find it—to all that we later become.<sup>11</sup>

Your ancestors’ origins, triumphs, and traumas mean something; their lives and experiences are a part of your identity, and knowing those events and their effects can help you make sense of how you interact with the world. Even if you do not know your origin stories, you cannot escape their effects. Baldwin continues: “The man does not remember the hand that struck him, the darkness that frightened him, as a child; nevertheless, the hand and the darkness remain with him, indivisible from himself forever, part of the passion that drives him wherever he thinks to take flight.”<sup>12</sup> You may not know or remember the events that shaped your life, but those experiences stay with you. They are a part of your identity, and they influence how you experience and respond to everything you encounter. You cannot control those automatic responses. Conversely, in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine conveys the same inescapable influence of one’s origins in a more nuanced way:

To live through the days sometimes you moan like a deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who knows; truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about.<sup>13</sup>

You cannot control your reaction, just as you cannot control the events that spark the reaction. Both Baldwin and Rankine seem to describe the ultimate effect that a history of violence and subjugation has on an individual: meaning and responses that were predetermined by what came before.

Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son in *Between the World and Me*, which evokes James Baldwin’s “A Letter to My Nephew.” Excerpts from Coates can be read alongside Baldwin’s letter in its entirety where they both speak of the realities of black identities in the United States fifty-three years apart: Coates published *Between the World and Me* in 2015 and Baldwin wrote his letter in 1962, exactly ninety-nine years after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. When reading the two, one is immediately struck by just how little has

changed in the half-century between the texts. Baldwin and Coates are participating in the “running record” of racial identity, in which they detail just how firmly we have remained in the ditch. Baldwin explains:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that for the heart of the matter is here and the crux of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason.<sup>14</sup>

The letter is attempting to offer explanation with a warning that young James is going to face subjugation and oppression simply because history placed him there. The irony of “this innocent country” is lost on no one, and the dispute with this country continues to this day with new voices interrogating this country and its violently imposed racial identities. Coates adds his voice, addressing his son but inviting all of us to witness:

I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it. I tell you now that the question of how one should live within a black body, within a country lost in the Dream, is the question of my life, and the pursuit of this question, I have found, ultimately answers itself.<sup>15</sup>

Both Baldwin’s argument and Coates’s “question” have the same crux, which is essentially a continuance of acknowledgement and interrogation. Both writers advise the next generation to recognize that this world is theirs, and they must learn how to live in it. Or as Nas (and Pete Rock) sang in the time between Baldwin and Coates, almost as a meditation: “It’s mine, it’s mine, it’s mine - whose world is this?/It’s mine, it’s mine, it’s mine - whose world is this?/The world is yours, the world is yours.”<sup>16</sup>

I intend to have students read Baldwin’s letter alongside excerpts from Coates and excerpts from Rankine. They will compare and contrast the three authors’ works, likely noting more similarities than differences. When students read these texts and make the connections between them, they will also see where they can contribute to the conversation. My students are very aware of their races, but the majority of them are too busy living to really examine how it affects their identities and conditions. Janet Mock explains this functional blindness well when remembering the women in her family:

My grandmother and my two aunts were an exhibition in resilience and resourcefulness and black womanhood. They rarely talked about the unfairness of the world with the words that I use now with my social justice friends, words like *intersectionality* and *equality*, *oppression*, and *discrimination*. They didn’t discuss those things because they were too busy living it, navigating it, surviving it.<sup>17</sup>

My students, like Mock’s grandmother and two aunts, are resilient and resourceful, but they really have not had the time to think about these social justice concepts. By contextualizing and offering voices of African American writers who came before them, my students should be able to see themselves and their families reflected in the texts.



## Gender and Sexual Identity

Most students can understand how their personal experiences contribute to their own burgeoning identities, but they have very little exposure to the experiences of people different from them. Most personal experiences that people experience are directly related to the intersections of their societal indicators.

While some students already identify as LGBTQ or questioning, one of this unit's goals is to tackle homophobia and transphobia (or the internalized versions of both) by sharing fictional narratives, poems, and memoirs about and/or by LGBTQ writers. Because of the homophobia I have witnessed within my school's community, I believe it will be most effective to read texts that aren't overtly "gay," because the students would shut it out quickly. But here's the thing: gender and sexual identity are everywhere. LGBTQ writers are woven throughout the whole unit. The fact that LGBTQ writers have always been here and will continue to be here is an essential understanding I need my students to grasp. Being queer is not abnormal; it just *is* and will continue to be.

The fact that Janet Mock appears throughout this unit is not an accident. She is a visible, living example of intersectionality. She is transsexual, native Hawaiian and African American, female, a former sex worker, and a sexual abuse survivor who grew up in poverty. Her identity is an intersection of all of her societal indicators and experiences. As we read, we will explore other authors whose intersectionality includes their gender identity and sexual orientation. I am especially interested in exploring poetry by LGBTQ poets of color, which include Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Langston Hughes. By highlighting these intersectional writers and ensuring their visibility, students will ideally become more comfortable with these types of identities in textual representation and in real life.

## Teaching Strategies

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### Carefully Chosen Short Texts and Excerpts

Due to low reading stamina and absenteeism, it is often best to stick with short texts or excerpts that can be read in one class period. Therefore, I have to carefully choose short pieces, excerpts, and poems that will clearly convey and highlight the aspects of identity outlined in the content objectives.

### Reading Strategies

While working toward my undergraduate English Literature degree, all of my professors preached New Criticism, so I still have a fondness for close reading. As we work with each text or excerpt, I will model close reading and "marking up" the text. Students will either have copies of the works that they can write on, or will use post-it notes to annotate the texts. As we annotate, students will practice the following reading strategies: making connections, asking questions, making inferences, drawing conclusions, summarizing, and evaluating.

### Reader Response Journaling

My students are expected to keep a three-ring binder with organized sections. One section will be dedicated to reader response journaling. As the students read essays, short stories, or novels, they will take note of the following in any form they wish (a chart may be the most functional and visually appealing): page number, quote or event, and response to the quote or event. These responses can be connections, questions, or

analyses of the text. In the reader response journal, I want my students to move beyond summary and into actual interaction with the texts. Since many of my students are reluctant or struggling readers, having them respond to the text in any way they can is crucial.

### **Class Discussion**

Guiding questions, along with the reading strategies and reader response journaling will fuel our class and small-group discussions. The class discussions would probably work well as Socratic seminars due to the nature of the texts.

### **Mentor Texts**

In, *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling & Mentor Texts*, Kelly Gallagher says, "I know my students learn from watching me, but, more important, I want them to learn by standing next to and emulating writing found in the real world. Students write better when they are given mentor texts to help guide them."<sup>18</sup> Like Gallagher, I know from experience that my students would love nothing more than to copy what I write verbatim, or to substitute some of my words for their words, *Mad Libs* style. Copying what the teacher writes can be helpful to an extent, but I need them start emulating writers who are exemplary in their craft. In order to become better writers, the students must practice what good writing looks and feels like.

### **Novel Study (Independent & Group)**

Since some identities can be controversial, I cannot use some of the most important texts with the whole class. Still, it is important that the students have access to texts pertaining to any kind of identity they want to explore. Therefore, depending on their interests or how they self-identify, I will help students find novels that will either reflect their identities or increase their understanding of other identities of interest. Students can work independently, but I will also facilitate literature circles for students who decide to read the same novel.

List of novels for student choice:

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie

*Out of My Mind*, Sharon Draper

*The Skin I'm In*, Sharon Flake

*All American Boys*, Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely

*When I Was the Greatest*, Jason Reynolds

*If I Was Your Girl*, Meredith Russo

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz

*The Hate U Give*, Angie Thomas

*Jumped*, Rita Williams-Garcia

## Activities

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### Activity 1: Hair

I will distribute copies of the “Hairs” chapter from Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. Once everyone has a copy, I will read it aloud to the class. In pairs, the students will break down the text and identify each person whose hair is being described along with the description that goes with each person. Still working in pairs, the students will also respond to the following questions about the longer description of the mother’s hair: Why does Esperanza spend so much time describing her mother’s hair? How do you think Esperanza feels about her mother? What does her mother represent? The student pairs will share their responses with the class. Once they have finished sharing and we have finished discussing the text (structure, figurative language, and tone), I will ask the students to emulate Cisneros by writing about their own families’ hair. If they do not have a connection to their parents, or if they do not have siblings, they can describe the hair of anyone who is important to them. Students should write more about the most important person in their lives, just as Esperanza wrote about her mother. Once they have finished, the teacher will ask for volunteers to read their pieces to the class.

### Activity 2: Food Poetry

Moving from the body to things we put in our bodies, I will distribute copies of “Butter” by Elizabeth Alexander. After reading the poem aloud, I will model close reading of the poem, specifically looking at word choice, figurative language, and structure. The students and I will discuss how this close reading informs their understanding of the poem. Then, I will ask the students to emulate Elizabeth Alexander’s style by writing their own food poem based on the food in their own lives. First, the students will have to prewrite to generate ideas. They will need to list all of the important food in their home culture before they can try to write their own version of the poem. Students will then workshop the poems with a partner or two before submitting their completed poem. The finished product could have a visual component: they may illustrate their food poetry with drawings or pictures cut from ads or magazines. Then the poems can be displayed for everyone to admire.

### Activity 3: Connecting with a Hillbilly

The class will read an excerpt from *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J.D. Vance. After distributing the excerpt (pages 69-80), I will read the beginning of the excerpt to the students while modeling reading strategies aloud and reader-response journaling on paper. Students will complete the reading individually or in pairs while responding to the text in their journals. I will ask the students to primarily make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections as they read and respond. As they work, I will walk around the room to monitor their progress. Once they have finished reading and responding, I will ask students to share one of their connections with the class.

### Activity 4: Compare & Contrast James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Claudia Rankine

As class begins, I will project an excerpt from Booker T. Washington’s “An Address on Abraham Lincoln” and ask the students to explain what they think it means. I will then briefly explain the historical context around it before introducing James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Claudia Rankine. The students will read Baldwin’s “A Letter to My Nephew” in its entirety along with excerpts from Coates’s *Between the World and Me* and

Rankine's *Citizen* in order to compare and contrast the three pieces. They can make their compare and contrast notes in any way they feel comfortable, I will also provide a triple venn diagram for organizational ease. Once they have finished comparing and contrasting using their notes or the triple venn diagram, they will synthesize that information by writing it into paragraph form.

## Annotated Bibliography

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### Teacher Resources

Alexander, Elizabeth. "Butter." In *The Hungry Ear: Poems of Food & Drink*, edited by Kevin Young, 54. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012. This is a great poem to introduce food-themed poetry.

Baldwin, James. "A Letter to My Nephew." *The Progressive*, January 1, 1962. Accessed August 8, 2017. <http://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/>. Baldwin's letter is strikingly relevant today and great for comparing and contrasting with contemporary texts.

Baldwin, James. *Notes of a Native Son*. New York: The Dial Press, 1963. This collection of Baldwin's essays could be excerpted or read in their entirety.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2009. Cisneros's novel is broken down into mostly short, digestible chapters that work well as mentor texts.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015. Coates's work as a whole might be a little too dense for struggling readers, but can be excerpted and discussed to aide comprehension.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989 (1989): 139-167. This is the journal paper in which Kimberlé Crenshaw first coins and explains the term "intersectionality."

DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, Vol. 3 (3) (2011): 54-70. DiAngelo's essay explains American racism and how white people are often complicit in maintaining the system of oppression.

Emba, Christine. "Intersectionality." *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2015. Accessed August 17, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/21/intersectionality-a-primer/>. This is an easily digestible primer on intersectionality.

Erikson, Erik H. *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980. Erikson's theories help educators and students understand the developmental psychology behind identity formation.

Erikson, Erik H. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968. Erikson's earlier work conceptualizes adolescent identity and crisis.

Gallagher, Kelly. *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling & Mentor Texts*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2011. Gallagher justifies and provides lessons for teaching writing through mentor texts.

Holladay, Sailor. "Filling." In *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class*, edited by Michelle Tea, 75-78.

Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2003. "Filling" is a short, digestible essay that could easily be read and discussed in one class period.

McGrath, Campbell. "Capitalist Poem #5." *The Hungry Ear: Poems of Food & Drink*, edited by Kevin Young, 84. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012. This poem is another food-themed poem to share with students as a potential mentor text.

Nelson, Hilde Lindemann. *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. This is a philosophical text about identity.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014. Rankine's powerful genre-bending work can be excerpted and also features scripts for her "situation videos" which would spark excellent classroom discussions.

Vance, J. D. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York: HarperCollins, 2016. Vance's memoir is about growing up as an Appalachian hillbilly in Ohio and Kentucky.

Washington, Booker T. "An Address on Abraham Lincoln." Speech, Republican Club of New York City, New York, NY, February 12, 1909. Accessed August 8, 2017. <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/an-address-on-abraham-lincoln/>. Booker T. Washington's speech is a great way to introduce the roots of contemporary race issues and social justice.

Young, Kevin, ed. *The Hungry Ear: Poems of Food & Drink*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012. Kevin Young edited and contributed to this anthology of food-themed poetry.

## Student Resources

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007. In this novel, the main character struggles with his identity as a Native American who leaves the reservation to go to a majority-white school.

Draper, Sharon. *Out of My Mind*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2010. In this novel, which would be good for struggling readers, a fifth-grader with cerebral palsy and a photographic memory finds a way to speak for the first time.

Flake, Sharon. *The Skin I'm In*. New York: Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Paperbacks for Children, 2007. Thirteen-year-old Maleeka is bullied because of her dark skin, but learns to love herself and how she looks.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999. *Monster* is required reading for ninth-graders in my district, and would also be a great choice for small-group novel studies.

Reynolds, Jason. *When I Was the Greatest*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2014. This novel would likely appeal to reluctant male readers.

Reynolds, Jason, and Brendan Kiely. *All American Boys*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2015. This novel is told from the perspectives of two boys who experience an incident of police brutality. One boy is the black victim, and the other is the white witness.

Russo, Meredith. *If I Was Your Girl*. New York: Flatiron Books, 2016. This is a novel about a male-to-female transsexual who moves to a new school and tries to keep her identity a secret until she connects with someone and wants to tell him everything about herself.

Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. New York: Simon & Schuster BFYR, 2012. This beautiful novel is ideal for LGBTQ or questioning students.

Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. New York: Balzer + Bray, 2017. In this novel, the sixteen-year-old protagonist lives two lives: one in her low-income neighborhood and one in the suburban private school. Her life changes when she witnesses a police officer murder

her childhood friend. The subjects of police brutality, protests, activism, and poverty make this book extremely relevant and engaging.

Williams-Garcia, Rita. *Jumped*. New York: Amistad, 2009. This novel tells the story of the events leading up to a fight from the points-of-view of three different teenage girls.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. New York: Puffin Books, 2016. This is an autobiographical novel in verse based on Woodson's childhood as an African American girl growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. It is great for younger or struggling readers.

## Implementing District Standards

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This unit meets multiple standards under the Virginia Department of Education's Standards of Learning. Specifically, they meet the following:

9.4: The student will read, comprehend, and analyze a variety of literary texts including narratives, narrative nonfiction, and poetry.

b) Summarize text relating supporting details.

e) Explain the relationships between and among elements of literature: characters, plot, setting, tone, point of view, and theme.

g) Analyze the cultural or social function of a literary text.

i) Explain the influence of historical context on the form, style, and point of view of a written work.

k) Analyze how an author's specific word choices and syntax achieve special effects and support the author's purpose.

l) Make predictions, inferences, draw conclusions, and connect prior knowledge to support reading comprehension.

m) Use reading strategies to monitor comprehension throughout the reading process.

9.5 The student will read and analyze a variety of nonfiction texts.

a) Recognize an author's intended purpose for writing and identify the main idea.

b) Summarize text relating supporting details.

d) Identify characteristics of expository, technical, and persuasive texts.

e) Identify a position/argument to be confirmed, disproved, or modified.

h) Draw conclusions and make inferences on explicit and implied information using textual support as evidence.

k) Use the reading strategies to monitor comprehension throughout the reading process.

9.6 The student will develop narrative, expository, and persuasive writings for a variety of audiences and purposes.

a) Generate, gather, and organize ideas for writing.

b) Plan and organize writing to address a specific audience and purpose.

e) Elaborate ideas clearly through word choice and vivid description.

## Endnotes

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1. Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness*, xviii.
2. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, 6.
3. Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 23.
4. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," 140.
5. Christine Emba, "Intersectionality," *The Washington Post*, September 15, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/21/intersectionality-a-primer/?utm\\_term=.c393dc830a98](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/21/intersectionality-a-primer/?utm_term=.c393dc830a98), (accessed August 17, 2017).
6. Sailor Holladay, "Filling," in *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class*, 75.
7. Elizabeth Alexander, "Butter," in *The Hungry Ear: Poems of Food & Drink*, ed. Kevin Young (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 54.
8. J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, 79.
9. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 12.
10. Booker T. Washington, "An Address on Abraham Lincoln," February 12, 1909, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/an-address-on-abraham-lincoln/>, (accessed August 8, 2017).
11. James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Notes of a Native Son*, 25-26.
12. James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *Notes of a Native Son*, 27-28.
13. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*, 59.
14. James Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew," *The Progressive*, January 1, 1962, <http://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/>, (accessed August 8, 2017).
15. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 11-12.
16. Nas, "The World Is Yours," from *Illmatic*, 1994.
17. Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness*, 65.
18. Kelly Gallagher, *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling & Mentor Texts*, 16.

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