



American Born Readers: A Multicultural, Multimedia Attempt to Challenge Perspectives and Inspire Reading

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Introduction

My, oh my, how dull the world would be if there were only one narrative. One story to listen to, one perspective from which to view. How bleak, how dreary and humdrum our day to day would be if we had nothing but our own story to hear, and to tell. Yet many Americans, children and adults alike, often have a difficult time challenging themselves to walk a while in someone else's shoes; to perceive situations and people and problems from the viewpoint of another. And who could blame us? We are busy. We have jobs and responsibilities: mouths to feed, bills to pay. And even when those mundane things are taken care of, we have friends to console, shape to get into, TV to watch, and unwinding to do. There are any number of myriad things that keep our perspectives and our minds on one course - our own - preventing us, at times unavoidably, from appreciating the lives and views and experiences of others.

And so sometimes, just like reading, if we want to make it happen we have to do it on purpose. As deliberately as we strive to turn off our screens, put down our iPad or phone, and open a good book to access that part of our minds, we must put down our mundane personal perspective. We must close up and shelve our single, own narrative, so we can open up our souls to the stories of others. This, like reading, is rejuvenating. It reminds us that we are and are not alone, that we are and are not unique, that we are and are not all one human family. Recognizing the differences in *everyone*, worldwide, helps us both appreciate those differences, and perhaps even more so, appreciate that, as the immortal words of Maya Angelou remind us: "We are more alike my friends than we are unlike."¹

That's the goal, isn't it, of educating a young person: to make them feel like they belong, while also fostering their growth as a unique person, capable of contributing to the community in which they belong? Can we foster this without regularly outlining experiences of people with whom they can relate? It seems to make sense; it certainly does to me. Yet as hard as we try we still have to depend on Black History Month, or Women's History Month, or Hispanic Heritage Month, and that's because most people other than white men are still marginalized in general American instruction. Can I generalize that much? Yes. I am a white man and I was educated in this country and I have never once felt marginalized or unincluded. I have been teaching in a diverse community for seven years and have spoken to hundreds of students who profess that they have. They are *resigned* to Shakespeare at this point. Why not change it up a bit?

Background

I teach a group of students who would be considered diverse by American standards. There are rich and poor and in-between; African-American and Latino and White and Asian; girls and boys and transgender and gender fluid, gay, straight, queer and bi. In some cases, they are born, find themselves, or even choose to be at an intersection of several of these indicators and quite a few more unmentioned ones. Janet Mock, whose work is included in this unit, is a writer who can say the same. She is black and Hawaiian, comes from poverty, and is a transgender woman. It is fair to say that she is representative, or at least part of, what in America is considered a “counter-culture” to the mainstream. She says: “I know intimately what it feels like to crave representation and validation, to see your life reflected in someone who speaks deeply to whom you know yourself to be, echoes your reality, and instills you with possibility.”² She is not validated by a standard American English curriculum that depends on writings of mostly white men, and neither are many of my students.

This curricular unit will serve as a gateway for inner-city high school freshmen (although it could and should be considered for *any* high school freshmen anywhere) into a world of literature and multimedia that represent us all. The intended timeframe is one to two marking terms, depending on how much of the unit any given instructor would wish to use; it incorporates two performance tasks (products) – a memoir and a literary analysis. However, while this unit is intended in one way as a means for students to view themselves in literature and by way of that perceive their own significance and potential, this is not only so students find *themselves* represented in what they read and study. It is of equal import to view and experience the stories of folks *other* than ourselves. If, as David Denby says of the relationship between identity and reading, “identity [is] the first step toward respect and self-respect,”³ then it will be worth our time to utilize literature and several other media to explore both these sides of identity. This unit will examine how discovering ourselves through stories of ourselves and others can awaken interest in knowing more about both through reading.

Rationale

Janet Mock stresses in no unclear way the importance of finding stories that reflect our own – of having our fears and doubts and hopes and inspirations reinforced by others who have trod our path and tell us that we can make it. These concepts will be central to the work chosen for students to study in this unit. Additionally, we will strive to focus as much as we can on stories from folks outside of our own culture and perspective. In her TED Talk, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about the danger of what she calls a “single story.” She equates it to early books she read: “How impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. . . I loved those American and British Books I read [growing up in Nigeria]. But the unintended consequence was that I didn’t know that people like me could exist [in books].”⁴ Adichie goes on to equate this type of single view to people, revealing that her American roommate at her American college was indeed shocked to find that she listened to Mariah Carey and not “tribal music,” and even surprised that she knew how to cook. This person had a single internal story about what it means to come from Africa, and could not imagine that a person from Africa could be like her. This type of perspective is dangerous. Simple misunderstanding of culture between college roommates may seem innocuous but it is a

smaller example of multi-cultural misunderstandings that can lead to, or be rooted in, prejudices. A single story is a dangerously limited way to confront literature, or art, or history, or each other.

The stories we tell have tremendous power with regard to identity. They can reinforce our sense of power and security, while they can also impair or even destroy those things. Hilde Lindemen Nelson in her book *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair*, proposes that narratives of the dominant culture, or “master narratives,” and exposure to them, can be damaging to the identities of those who are not of the dominant culture and could perceive themselves as less. She defines a master narrative as “the stories found laying about in our culture that serve as summaries of socially shared understandings.”⁵ Also, it is damaging to the very members of the dominant culture who, often unconsciously, go along minding nothing of any culture outside their own. Why would they need to? They see themselves everywhere – the main focus of popular films, books, and music. Why make the time and effort necessary to search out cultures and experiences outside of your own when yours, the life and experience you already know, is so prevalent and accessible, requires no extra effort, and reinforces everything with which you are comfortable and secure?

This question seems hypothetical, but there is an answer: because it is damaging. It fills the dominant culture with ignorance and unconscious (or conscious) arrogance. While at the same time, the suppressed or misunderstood culture suffers prejudice based upon that pervading and unchecked misunderstanding. Adichie’s story about her college roommate may seem harmless, maybe to some even insipid, but really it is simply a lighter, more subtle example of an American condition that is much more dangerous and harmful.

In this unit, we will look at *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine, a genre-defying epic poem of sorts where she professes to suffer greatly from seemingly small things as an African-American woman. A man at a store who cuts blatantly in front of her in line and, upon noticing, apologizes and says truthfully that he did not see her. A store clerk asking her if she thinks her credit card will work even though he asked no such thing of her friend who checked out before her. An as-of-yet unmet new therapist insisting with violent language that she (Rankine) get off her property, only to apologize after realizing that this is in fact her new client. “You take in things you don’t want all the time,” she says.⁶ It can and does make people feel like less; to feel unappreciated, undervalued, and even unseen. These persistent vexations can seem insignificant when isolated. But day after day, time after time, piling up into an amalgam that becomes a part of one’s identity, they can lead to significant psychological and emotional impairment, and when surfacing back up into the world can erupt into unrest, upheaval, even violence.

This is the damage of dominant versus suppressed culture. This is the danger of a single story.

So we will look at many stories: of other cultures, of experience, of hardship and triumph, of anxiety and strife and suffering born of being outside of the dominant culture. We will focus a lot of our time on what Nelson would call “counter-stories – a story that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one that commands respect.”⁷ These stories are intended to both repair damaged identities (those misrepresented by the master narratives of a dominant culture) by piecing together the positives of one’s identity, and to illuminate the misrepresented story *for* said dominant culture.⁸ The dominant group may not even realize they are undervaluing the suppressed group. It’s common for both to believe the single story of the dominant culture. Hence the importance of multicultural study.

Some of the counter-stories highlighted herein have a positive, inspirational tone; some have a fairly negative, exploratory, or even intense tone. We will deal with both negative and positive examples of human nature and human experience. It will be necessary to ask ourselves tough questions and explore challenging texts,

concepts, and sometimes read stories that are difficult to read, understand, or accept. If anyone questions this, easily point them toward inclusion of standard curricular texts like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Jungle*, *Lord of the Flies*, and other disturbing, desperate, negative portrayals of sad or unjust truths about human nature. Just because the texts spotlighted in this unit are not part of the standard canon (read: dominant culture) does not mean their themes of adversity should be discounted due to their challenging or intense nature. In fact, that is *exactly* what makes their study, scrutiny, and consideration necessary. We need to explore stories of adversity and extreme experience to face and confront adverse, extreme realities. But there are also texts in this unit with wholly positive viewpoints and messages, humor, even inspiration. Students and their teacher, through this unit, will be shocked and horrified by some of the art herein, and in turn lifted into the hope of what could someday be – and what in some cases already is – through art, literature, spirit, and effort.

This unit will propose (or agree with the presupposition) that multicultural texts and reading are important to identity, and that identity driven texts promote reading. David Denby, a writer for *The New Yorker*, recently released a book called *Lit Up*, wherein he outlines his experience spending time in English classrooms in the northeast tri-state area, analyzing what works – instruction, teacher-student rapport and interaction, and the books themselves that are most effective – for students to improve their reading or even, really, to become readers. He shares some interesting, authentic examples of what happens when students begin reading multicultural texts like *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *The Kite Runner*: “[the students’] reading and talking became an act of liberation and self-creation.”⁹ Exploring experiences outside of our own complicates our thinking and therefore stimulates us intellectually far more effectively than topics comfortable and domestic to us. Additionally, according to Jill Campbell of Yale University, in multicultural fictional texts – texts through which we encounter characters and experience different from our own – we encounter a narrator we don’t know, and therefore nothing is being asked of us. We are not being asked to invest anything, or to prove who we are.¹⁰ And so while reading, we can be ourselves completely and therefore have an unfettered lesson on who we are based on our reaction to their experience. “If not life-saving, it can help us [learn to] survive as well as to thrive.”¹¹

Objectives

While the learning in this unit is hopeful that students will come away with more than reading and writing practice, we will also consider these skills while exploring the many facets of multicultural study. Students will come away with several understandings beyond the fact that reading is fundamental to both their success within the parameters of the learning herein, and understanding of the human condition and themselves.

Students will explore and analyze “counter-stories” to the dominant American culture, including perspectives of: African-Americans, transgendered people, Nigerians, women, Chinese-Americans, people who grew up in poverty, people at an intersection of two or more of these, and more. We will spend time on stories presented in standard text format such as short stories and essays, as well as poems, videos, and multimedia pieces like graphic novels and multimedia books of poetry, narrative, and visual art. If the purpose of utilizing multicultural study is to challenge our thinking by exploring the perspectives of people other than ourselves, then the purpose of utilizing multimedia formats is to further complicate our thinking and engagement while experiencing these stories.

Students will tackle these topics and formats in order to construct two important products. First, after

analyzing and exploring the stories and experiences of others, they will once again look inward in order to craft their own Personal Narratives, or Memoirs. Students will be able to synthesize themes in multicultural works by describing their own such experiences using the source texts and videos as inspiration for both content and style, and class discussions and analysis of said sources as evidence.

Students will then combine both skills and synthesis from multicultural and multimedia sources into the study of both – a counter-story graphic novel – in order to construct a literary analysis. After reading *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang, students will be able to construct an in-depth literary analysis, showing both learning from the previous multicultural texts as well as revelations, new ideas, and “a-ha moments” bread of both.

In order to accomplish all of this, we will explore and celebrate the significance of stories to our human identity.

The Stories of Others, the Making of Ourselves: Teaching Strategies for Multicultural Learning

Part 1: Multicultural, Multimedia Studies and the Personal Narrative

In her sweeping first chapter, Nelson “defines” identity at least four times, with different wording but similar feeling, while describing different aspects of narrative repair of damaged identities. This indicates that even a scholarly work on the subject cannot produce a single, definitive meaning of the huge scoping concept of identity. One could spend a lifetime debating it, and that life would be well-spent, and still conclusions would change and evolve and adapt. Our identities involve everything we perceive, everyone we meet, everyone whom we care for or who cares for us, and everything we watch, see, listen to, and read.

The reason that it is important to explore identity in art also harkens to why it is important to explore any human condition in art. It is formative, it is reflective, it is beautiful. To use, for example, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in the context of *otherness* or being alone: the creature in the book, created from parts of dead human bodies, given life through science, is utterly alone.

There is no more foremost an example of this condition, this loneliness. It stands therefore as, although hyperbolic, a prime example of what it may feel like to be an outsider. This creature had no like person, no mirror for personality or action or agency. He ended up an outcast, a pariah, and turned to severe violence. Again, if we view this as hyperbole, it may help us understand a bit better the instance of crime within communities outside the dominant culture. When there is less opportunity to have mirrors of ourselves in art and media, in fact when we see a lot of adverse versions or examples of ourselves in art and media, it is more difficult not to buy into it, not to believe it of ourselves. Or, at very least, to be frustrated and offended by it. Either way, this condition affects people who deal with it daily in their lives, because what members of a dominant culture can fail to understand is that it does *not* affect theirs in anywhere near the same degree, if at all.

The first texts we will deal with in this unit will confront students immediately with the black-white divide in America through two powerful pieces: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine, and “White Fragility” by Robin DiAngelo. *Citizen*, a multimedia, genre-defying book of poems, narrative and images, is a hard-hitting

account of the experiences – and, importantly, ruminations on those experiences – of a black woman and of what she perceives as general black American experience. This book alone is the first foray into our multimedia approach, but we will then take that a step further by pairing it with an analytic essay in “White Fragility.” Students will respond to both in different ways (see Classroom Activities). If students are moved, if perspectives are disrupted, then these texts have fulfilled their intended purpose. If students are not surprised, if viewpoints are reinforced, the texts have done their job. If there are students who are offended or defiant or disagree with viewpoints or content from these texts, then a conversation needs to be had. Everyone, of course, is entitled to their opinion, and since what these counter-stories are intended to do is correct existing rifts between peoples due to the influence of a dominant culture, they must be confronted with sensitivity and decorum. Just like these authors, each student deserves a voice. It will be necessary to prelude the study of this material with a conversation about what a “safe” learning atmosphere consists of. It’s a conversation many educators and students have on a fairly regular basis and is always recommended when teaching any material dealing with big issues. And these issues are *huge*. For resources on recommendations for having this conversation with your students, see the Teacher Resources section below.

For each aspect of this introductory multicultural study, we will be pairing two works, each in differing media. This will challenge students to learn that: 1. multiple sources *and* multiple formats are important to explore to discover truth; 2. art is many things, as is literature; 3. the students, too, can draw on art-forms to explore their own experience through creative expression, as they write their own Personal Narrative. This Personal Narrative, the first performance task (product) for this unit, is outlined in the Classroom Activities section.

Citizen: An American Lyric and “White Fragility”

In *Citizen*, Rankine explores days-in-the-life of a representative African-American woman through a genre-bending work of narrative, visual art, and poetry. This format, right away, inspires engagement and interest. The cover is a provocative image by David Hammons – it depicts an image of a black hood torn from a hooded-sweatshirt that appears to be suspended in stasis, torn, formed as if holding, but empty of, its wearer. Inside, she holds nothing back about her adverse experiences as a black woman. She explores tender moments with her husband and friends, but far more frequent are the nagging instances of racism she faces. One of the most intense is a moment when she is scheduled to see a new therapist – a trauma counselor – and comes to her door to meet her for the first time. “When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house! What are you doing in my yard?” The speaker, shocked and despondent, responds that she has an appointment. “You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that’s right. I am sorry. I am so sorry, so, so sorry.”¹²

There will be people in class who can relate to this experience. There will also be people who, like me, cannot. The intense awakening to, or reinforcement of, the reality that these types of interactions are part of, nay, define the difference between a dominant and a suppressed culture, are exemplified through Rankine’s experiences in *Citizen*, and analyzed in DiAngelo’s scholarly essay “White Fragility.”

From DiAngelo: “For many white people, a single required multicultural education course taken in college, or . . . in their workplace is the only time they may encounter a direct and sustained challenge to their racial understandings.”¹³ I’m sure my white students will be surprised to consider this, as well as any of my students – they deal with these challenges daily and are usually quite mature and forwardly-minded about it. Sometimes I feel like I’m in a bubble of racial acceptance (and acceptance of other descriptive identity-markers). We should be so lucky for racism and discrimination to be limited to these bubbles instead. But

even my students need to read this literature to see some of what's going on, to analyze it and to argue about it, and to write about it, and to change it. This was made apparent to me when one of my black teenage male students once told me he didn't even realize the amount of violence perpetrated by police against black people until the media coverage of the killing of Trayvon Martin.

Interlacing the stories and art of Claudia Rankine and the social analysis of Robin DiAngelo, this opening to multicultural studies for freshmen is intended to serve as a shock to the system, hopefully inciting awareness and understanding that the tone of this class will often flow thusly. We will be dealing with heavy subject matter, having conversations that are large in scope and loom over every American. There will be opinions. There will be sharing, emotion, perhaps disagreements. All will inspire debate, class discussion and, for sure, written response. Students will spend time writing analytically about the art and poetry of Rankine, and responding artistically to the dense, academic narrative of DiAngelo. This is outlined in detail in the Class Activities section.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "The Danger of a Single Story" and "Olikoye"

"Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people but can also repair that broken dignity."¹⁴ -Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a young-ish, attractive, eloquent Nigerian woman with an appealing accent. I describe her thusly because these attributes contribute to her being a good spokesperson, aesthetically, as it were, for the exact subject she is proselytizing: not tying yourself to a single story about a person, or culture, or anything. It is ironic then that we all have similar ideas about what makes a person attractive, regardless of other aspects of their identity. Janet Mock, for example, a writer whose work will be analyzed in the next section, is a very attractive woman by classic American standards. She just so happened to be assigned the gender of male at birth. Spokespeople representing transgendered people or, for this section, Nigerians, or any subgroup of people seem to need to have some sort of marker or flair of attraction to be paid attention to; to be heard. It makes sense that they would decide to tackle that American flaw *next*. They have bigger fish to fry yet, so to speak.

But for now, we look at Adichie, not because of these attributes or indeed not despite them, but simply because she has an important message, and tells wonderful stories. In this unit we will take a look at one of those stories - "Olikoye" - a high school-friendly, sentimental story about a woman in Lagos. We will start with the creative short story and then foray that conversation into her TED talk on the danger of the single story. After reading "Olikoye," a story about life very different from the one we know in America, we first use the idea of names to talk about otherness and how we feel about our own perspectives and worlds as compared to how often we think on that of others.

"Olikoye" uses all Nigerian names. Most notably is the titular character, the newborn, whom the mother (narrator) names for the Nigerian Health Minister of the time Olikoye Ransome-Kuti. It is clear through this story how revered he was by the proletariat class for his efforts to educate the people on proper hygiene for childcare and ensure vaccinations were given to all babies in Nigeria (during a time when there was high infant mortality rates; when that was just a part of life for many). Mini-lessons on general knowledge of Nigeria and on Ransome-Kuti himself are appropriate here, and are outlined further in the Classroom Activities section.

This is a good story; one students will likely enjoy. It is sensitive and engaging and has a baby in it! It is

intended to open the door here for students, and to give a voice to this author whom they likely haven't yet heard of. Establishing credibility of an outsider is important, if for no other reason (and the hope is that there is no other reason, but these conversations presuppose that there often is) than they are not commonly exposed to stories from other countries. Even though American books, films and music flood cultures worldwide, we will see through Adichie's TED talk and discussion of it that this consideration in and of itself cuts us off from experiencing wonderful stories like "Olikoye," we being too overexposed, too flooded by our own single story.

Adichie begins her TED talk with a story of when she began reading at age 4 in Nigeria. She read mostly American and British children's books and so for a long time only thought there were such stories. It seems so mundane to us Americans. Of course she read American and British stories. Don't we all? What Adichie attempts to educate us on through this talk, what we will explore here as a class, is that we take for granted that America is the dominant culture worldwide, and how easy it is for us to disregard that and think we don't need to know anything about other cultures. "Because of America's cultural and economic power, I had many stories of America. I had read Tyler and Updike and Steinbeck and Gaitskell. I did not have [only] a single story of America,"¹⁵ Adichie professes. This is dangerous for both parties – Americans, and other cultures who only have the opportunity to view the world through that western scope. "So that is how to create a single story. Show a people as one thing; as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become."¹⁶ Growing up in Nigeria, she did not see herself in the world's stories, and so in a way did not see herself at all.

And this, as we will strive to do in this unit, can be seen as dangerous from both sides. It was unfortunate for Adichie to grow up without seeing herself in stories. It is also dangerous for Americans, or any subgroup of American or indeed humans, to *only* see *themselves* in stories. In an increasingly global landscape it is not only dangerous culturally, morally and existentially to persist with single, uninformed stories of people different or far from ourselves, it can also conceivably hinder future prospects, options, and opportunities. Focusing on stereotypes and assumptions based on media or movies (single stories) "flattens [the] experience"¹⁷ of others and in doing so has the potential to mute or restrict our own experience. When we deny ourselves a more dynamic perspective, we deny ourselves possibilities for change and enlightenment. Some people somehow are okay with this. But we are also denying ourselves opportunities for joy.

"I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person," Adichie says in her TED Talk which we will explore in detail. "The consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."¹⁸

Transcending Culture and Physical Self: Janet Mock and Geena Rocero

Race has been an issue in this country since its inception. Gender equality has been for nearly as long. Gay rights have been a hallmark of civil rights during this century. Yet the rights and even the stories of transgendered, multi-gendered, and gender fluid people are still considered by many as taboo, and are even in many cases under attack. Arguably, the counter-stories of trans people are among the most important for study – certainly the most modern – in this context (the purposeful exploration and analysis of counter-stories).

We will spotlight two empowered activists for transgender rights, Janet Mock and Geena Rocero. The first, Mock, is the author of a recent, groundbreaking memoir in which she reveals her experience and revelations surrounding her life and world as a black, Hawaiian trans woman who grew up in poverty and family strife.

Geena Rocero, a model, has an effective story to tell for introducing this aspect of the unit. I have shown her TED talk “Why I Must Come Out” to students in class before. The talk opens upon a tall, beautiful Asian woman, talking about her experience as a model. She is the very picture of the gender-normative woman in beauty, dress, voice, and demeanor. She reveals about 10 minutes into her talk that she was assigned the gender of male at birth, while projecting a picture of what appears to be a little boy on a screen. The little boy is, of course, herself, and she continues on with the story of her transition, surgery, family support, and entry into a career as a successful model. She goes on to talk about activism for trans rights and it always inspires a good conversation.

After this introduction to transgender studies, students will read the introduction to Janet Mock’s memoir, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More*, wherein she begins with a story of romance. She meets a man after moving to New York City with whom she is utterly enamored. In her well-written description of his pursuit of her, their meeting in a club, and subsequent first date, she pairs the anxiety of new love that we can all relate to so well with another type of anxiety that is less relatable to many: the anxiety of a woman over how to tell a man she just met and is romantically interested in that she was assigned the male gender at birth and has transitioned.

Many activities, journals, discussions, reflections and writing can be easily inspired by these rich sources, and will lead to the students’ writing of their Personal Narratives, outlined in the Classroom Activities section below.

Part 2: American Born Chinese and Literary Analysis

For the second part of this unit, students will synthesize their learning from the previous multimedia study while compounding upon the multicultural theme, combining two types of media in a counter-story graphic novel. The book, *American Born Chinese* (2006) by Gene Luen Yang, is a graphic exploration of the experience of a Chinese-American boy, his struggles to fit in while maintaining the identity of a culture from which he is descended but unaware, and also a touching look at adolescence (particularly the early excitement and anxiety of romantic feelings. Even in a multicultural studies unit, we can find some time to address some of the things these teenagers will be going through regardless of their origin or identity).

While it is a true counter-story, exploring the Chinese-American experience from the perspective of the titular boy, it is also relatable to many if not most American kids, especially freshmen starting at a new school. The heading on the back of the book describes the story as including “Three very different characters, one simple goal: To Fit In.”¹⁹ Many students share that burden or, at least, the perception of it, which for them makes it just as real. Through *American Born Chinese*, we will explore an example of that experience in Jin, the main character in question, whose struggle is not only internal: he is teased by classmates, rejected by peers and girls, and even misrepresented (and indeed misunderstood) by well-intentioned but culturally insensitive teachers. The narrative is literally illustrated in the comic cells of a graphic novel, and in three separate storylines: Jin’s at home and in school, a Monkey King who has designs on being a god, and a white boy with a (highly) stereotypical Chinese cousin who embarrasses him at school and affects his relationships. We learn ultimately, of course, that these are all different aspects of Jin’s own struggle with identity, other’s acceptance of him, and, most importantly, his ultimate acceptance of himself. In this way, the study of this book will synthesize those exact themes focused on in Part 1 of this section.

In the end, Jin learns what I hope my students have by now – that even after exploration and discovery, this self-acceptance is not complete. He learns that it grows over time and through experience and thoughtful

consideration of oneself, one's surroundings, and our interactions with others. This, ultimately, is the lesson to express to students, and doing so through the graphic novel format does several things. It is, in some ways, more accessible to students of this age. As a source, it is less challenging and provocative than other sources we've analyzed in this unit, though no less complex or emotive. The graphic novel has also in recent years become as viable a literary genre as any. In her article, "Between Realism and Genre Fiction: *American Born Chinese* and *Strange Fruit*," Jiahong Wang reminds us that graphic novels "have not only attracted modern readers' attention but also earned the acknowledgement of scholars."²⁰ Wang goes on to cite Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1992), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), and indeed Yang's *American Born Chinese* (all, by the way, rife for multicultural reflection, study and immense enjoyment) as hallmarks of the evolution of the graphic novel as a viable and valuable literary genre, not to mention popular. It is with this scholarly acknowledgement that we will tackle this graphic novel. Also, however, anecdotally and informally speaking, kids just love it.

By this point, it is hopeful that we have accomplished something through this unit: the general understanding that our consideration of others and their experiences is imperative to the understanding of ourselves and our growth. Through the experiences and reflections of Rankine, DiAngelo, Adichie, Rocero, and Mock, we have hopefully come to appreciate that we all experience life differently, and all those experiences, as well as our own, are equally valuable, important, and worthy of respect. I have mentioned before that I expect this will not be hard-learned for many of the students I teach, so I am also hopeful that by this point they have also considered that it may be hard-learned for others in this world, and it is important to proliferate counter-stories and stories of others for our whole human family to grow and understand, and that the multicultural material in this unit and beyond are imperative to that global understanding: that humanity cannot persist under a mere single story.

Therefore, by the time we tackle *American Born Chinese*, students should be able to take these skills and understandings, incorporate the new dimensions offered by reading a graphic novel, and apply it to an analysis of literature, outlined below in the Classroom Activities section.

Classroom Activities

From the Young Adult literature classic *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli:

"Maniac kept trying, but he still couldn't see it, this color business. He didn't figure he was white any more than the East Enders were black. He looked himself over pretty hard and came up with at least seven different shades and colors right on his own skin, not one of them being what he would call white (except for his eyeballs, which weren't any whiter than the eyeballs of the kids in the East End). Which was all a big relief to Maniac, finding out he wasn't really white, because the way he figured, white was about the most boring color of all."²¹

Some of the texts in this unit make assumptions or, at least, generalizations about what the main dominant culture is in America - white culture, and what the main suppressed culture is in America - black culture. And it is important to call attention to this American condition to illuminate and eliminate it. However, not every

individual is unaware or uncaring or uninvolved in this “cause.” Some don’t need as much illumination, as it were, while still realizing the need for elimination. Like Maniac Magee, a lot of my diverse student population is better at not seeing color. The same is true for many if not most educators I know, and I very much hope is generally true of educators. The following classroom activities will labor under the presumption that most people reading and/or implementing this, and the students for which it is intended, are already starting from a platform, a basis of generally non-discriminatory (or at least not *intentionally* discriminatory) views of life and people and America. In short, these activities, really this whole unit, assumes the best of people. If we don’t start with that hope, what this unit is attempting will be much more difficult.

While this unit takes on many different cultures, backgrounds, and identities, we start with the black-white divide.

***Citizen: An American Lyric* and “White Fragility”**

Journal/Warm-ups

With each sub-section in Classroom Activities we will explore possible warm-up questions and/or journal prompts to use with these resources. For this section I encourage the following:

- What purpose does a multimedia approach (the use of verse, narrative, and images combined) serve for the larger conversation?
- Why is cultural awareness important? What are the dangers of cultural insensitivity?
- What is the significance of Rankine’s consistent use of the pronoun “you” in *Citizen*? What does this say about our experience and how we relate it to others?
- How does the use of images impact Rankine’s message?

The main activity for this section are converse responses to multimedia, synthesizing different media and responding to it in order to exhibit understanding. For excerpts from *Citizen*, students will respond analytically, exploring in writing their response to the work, as well as analysis. Students will partner to revise each other’s analyses and rate whether they are asking deep questions, exploring higher order thoughts, and we will come back as a class to share and analyze – making concrete what Rankine has done in the abstract.

For “White Fragility,” students will be asked to pick what they perceive as the most provocative, controversial aspect of the piece (or, simply, what they believe the unenlightened would have the biggest problem with) and formulate an artistic response: generally visual art, but students can utilize any of the five main artistic disciplines to illustrate their response to this often dense and analytical work. They can respond in art, poetry or creative writing, dance, a skit, or musical response.

“Olikoye” and “The Danger of a Single Story”

Journal/Warm-ups

- What do you imagine when you hear the phrase, “single story”?
- What is the importance of our names?
- What cultures or stories of others would you be interested in exploring outside your own?

To respond to the work of Adichie, students will mostly be exploring. They will research in groups information about Nigeria and Olikoye Ransome-Kuti. They will team up to explore the differences between Yoruba and Bini cultures. They will research popular Nigerian names and ruminate on the difference between those and

American names. How do they sound different? What about these different parts of the world do you think influences our names?

Transgender Voices: Janet Mock and Geena Rocero

Journal/Warm-ups

- Write about an experience you have had that you believe to be integral to who you are today.
- What unique aspects of Mock’s and/or Rocero’s experiences do you think were the most challenging? The most rewarding?

When exploring the words and experiences of Mock and Rocero, students will mostly be reacting, both to the prompts listed above and to inquiry of their own. This is an opportunity to have students formulate questions about differences in lifestyle, and navigating the world based on who we are, who we feel we are, and who we want to be.

Incorporating quotes from *Maniac Magee* and Maya Angelou

At this point in the unit it’s about time to lighten things up a bit. We have looked at hard truths and analyses, now we must take a moment to share our common quality – the fact that we, *all of us*, are humans. We are, genetically, nearly identical. The Maya Angelou quote in the beginning of this unit, “we are more alike my friends than we are unlike,”²² is from her poem “Human Family,” a beautiful, inspiring poem about acceptance, interest in, and celebration of our differences. And it reminds us that, yet, these differences are all shades of the same color, so to speak: that of the human family. That we are all studying these topics together is itself a reminder of this, and we should take time to acknowledge that. Both the Angelou quote and the Spinelli quote at the beginning of this section (about a young white orphan boy who at a young age was never taught about race, and is glad to discover that no color on his body matches what people refer to as “white”) are great class-starters, warm-ups, journal prompts, or simply bases for discussion.

Life-Writing: the Personal Narrative

Students will combine learning from these previous sections to develop a memoir of their own experience, their own life-writing: the Personal Narrative. They will explore their own experience to include what they have learned. They might compare their lives to that of a Nigerian person they research, or a transgendered person. Perhaps they qualify among those categories and wish to compare their experience to that of an American, or cis-gendered person. However they come at it, they will tell two stories: their own, and comparing their own to that of another or others.

Building up to this important project, students will do practiced writing concerning both themselves and the topics and sources we have explored. They will have done several journal entries and responses to warm-up prompts and may refer to them at any time during this process. I will also ask them to consider, along the way, what they would bring to their own memoir in the format of shorter writing assignments. When we explore *Citizen*, they will have written about any adverse experience they have observed or been through personally. When exploring transgender voices, they will have written about their philosophy on overcoming obstacles. Finally, they will have a short writing assignment before I set them off to craft their Personal Narrative – they will write about their past vs. their present selves. In what ways have they grown, evolved, changed, or even regressed. What are their disappointments and triumphs? How do they perceive themselves with regard to their family and friends? The more we can prompt them to explore about themselves with

detail, the better setup they will be for success in this assignment.

American Born Chinese and Literary Analysis

Students will craft a careful literary analysis based on what they've previously learned about their own and other cultures, analyzing Jin's experience and how the author presents that experience though not one, but three different stories.

Students will begin this exploration with similar activities to their foundational short writing leading up to the Personal Narrative. They will explore in writing whether they have experienced or observed similar hardships, questions, or longings similar to Jin. If they have not, what do they think they would do if confronted with those of Jin?

Students will use what they have learned throughout this unit to consider Jin's experience as a counter-story. Why is it important to tell and to hear this story? What is the significance of the format (it being presented through a graphic novel)?

To analyze a piece of literature is an advanced task for a 9th grader, and again, the more detail, the more examples of what exactly to look for when they set out, the more likely they will be successful in this endeavor. And they indeed endeavor here to both read, analyze and write well, and to view themselves and others as important members of this world.

This unit is designed to be implemented over the course of several months: 1 to 2 for the multicultural studies and memoir, and 1 to 2 for novel study and literary analysis. Like any attempt to undertake a survey of different cultures, I feel remiss to disinclude *any* culture based on time constraints, although I have done so here. I encourage educators to expand the scope of this unit to include stories of any and all cultures they may feel are relevant to their students and/or the skills outlined in this unit. I have included a few (although still regrettably limited) further suggestions in the Teacher Resources section below.

Teacher Resources

1. Teaching Tolerance:

Having sensitive multicultural conversations with students where we must confront problems, challenges, disagreements, and perhaps dissent, it is important to set a framework for these conversations. Teaching Tolerance is a great resource. One such lesson can be found at: <http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/my-multicultural-self>. There are also links to other great resources for having these conversations in your classroom in a safe, successful way.

2. Additional Voices:

- Latino Stories: "Woman Hollering Creek," short story by Sandra Cinceros; "Being Indian, A Candle Flame, and So Many Dying Starts," short story by Anna Castillo; "The Chosen Ones," poem by Pablo Neruda

- Stories of Native America: “Every Little Hurricane,” and really any other short story by Sherman Alexie; Sliver of a Full Moon, play by Mary Katherine Nagle; “Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings,” poem by Joy Harjo; “It Has Always Been This Way,” poem by Luci Tapahonso

3. Links to important videos and texts (also found in the Bibliography section):

- Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story”:
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
- The text of Adichie’s “Olikoye”: <https://medium.com/matter/olikoye-b027d7c0a680>
- Text of DiAngelo’s “White Fragility”: <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116>
- Geena Rocero’s “Why I Must Come Out”:
https://www.ted.com/talks/geena_rocero_why_i_must_come_out

Appendix: Satisfying Standards

Locally, this unit satisfies New Haven requirements surrounding the implementation of two freshmen performance tasks: the Personal Narrative (memoir), and the Literary Analysis. These are tasks or projects that are likely required, encouraged, or simply practical in any freshmen classroom.

Nationally, 2017 is a bit of a confusing time for high school standards. However currently CCSS (Common Core State Standards) are still available online and, again, I perceive them as practical and appropriate for any classroom. The following are satisfied by the work in this unit.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.1.a Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

This unit consistently compares sources on topics discussed. In the case of Rankine and DiAngelo, we are looking at alternate claims surrounding similar circumstances. Throughout the unit, there are either alternate or complementary claims that the students are responsible for using as evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.9 Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

This unit is designed for an English class, but also involves and includes considerations in social science, anthropology, and even ethics. To complete it successfully, students will need to synthesize a lot of new information. They will need to prove they’ve absorbed certain opinions and experiences of the authors they read in order to compose their memoirs and literary analyses.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Executing this standard is key to gaining what we need to from these texts. The 11-12 version of this standard mentions addressing where the text leaves things uncertain, and I will be including that more complex

consideration in this unit. There is a lot that is uncertain about identity, race relations in America, and acceptance, of both others and of who we are personally. Synthesizing that will not only allow the students to write effectively based on the reading, but also allow them to move forward perhaps with this understanding in life.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

In analyzing both Rankine and Yang, we will focus on author's structural choices not only in narrative, but in form. We will analyze the multi-media structural choices of *Citizen*, and the choice in general of choosing to present a story as a graphic novel instead of standard narrative.

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Endnotes

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5. Hilde Lindeman Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 6
6. Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), pp. 55
7. Hilde Lindeman Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, pp. 6
8. Ibid, 6
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14. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story" TED Talk
15. Ibid
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17. Ibid
18. Ibid
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22. Maya Angelou, "Human Family"

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