

**What Does It Mean to Be an American?
Individualism and Connectedness to Others in Multi-Ethnic American Literature**

Brian Wolf
Bellaire High School

INTRODUCTION

This unit will be taught to my sophomore Pre-AP English II students at Bellaire High School. The students in my Pre-AP English II classes comprise a culturally and ethnically diverse group. My students include Anglo-Americans, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Jewish Americans. The demographics of Bellaire High School are roughly as follows: 45% white, 35% Hispanic, 10% Asian, and 10% African-American. Demonstrating the highest academic achievement and improvement of any comprehensive high school in HISD, Bellaire High School is one of the highest performing schools in the city and state. Bellaire High School has a reputation for rigor, in Pre-AP/AP classes as well as in academic classes. The literature included in this unit is all at a high school reading level or above. The literary focus of Pre-AP English II is primarily American literature, though this unit could easily be taught in any course that includes American literature.

OBJECTIVES

The student will: write in a variety of forms using effective word choice, structure, and sentence forms with emphasis on organizing logical arguments with clearly related definitions, thesis, and evidence; write persuasively; write to report and describe; and write poems, plays, and stories (ELA.10.1A); write in a voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose (ELA.10.1B); develop and organize ideas in writing to ensure coherence, logical progression, and support for ideas (leads, thesis statements, bodies of support reflecting logical progression and coherence through narration, description, argument, analysis, and/or reflection, and conclusions) (ELA.10.1C); use prewriting strategies to generate ideas, develop voice, and plan (ELA.10.2A); develop drafts, alone and collaboratively, by organizing and reorganizing content and by refining style to suit all occasion, audience, and purpose (ELA.10.2B); produce legible work that shows accurate spelling and correct use of conventions of punctuation and capitalization such as italics and ellipses (ELA.10.3A); demonstrate control over grammatical elements such as subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, verb forms, and parallelism (ELA.10.3B); produce error-free writing in the final draft (ELA.10.3D); use published, teacher-developed, and student-generated models of criterion and quality-based rubrics, including the TEA rubrics, to apply to his/her own writing in process and to critically evaluate his/her completed compositions and those of others for mechanics, content, organization, and style (ELA 10.5.A); read daily in independent-level materials (ELA 10.6A); establish a purpose for reading such as to discover, interpret, and enjoy (ELA 10.7A); read silently with comprehension for a sustained period of time (ELA 10.7I); read extensively in multiple genres in such varied sources as diaries, journals, textbooks, maps, newspapers, letters, speeches, memoranda, electronic texts, and other media (ELA 10.8B); read world literature, including classic and contemporary works (ELA 10.8C); use elements of text to defend his/her own responses and interpretations (ELA 10.10B); compare and contrast varying aspects of texts (ELA.10.11A); generate relevant, interesting, and researchable questions (ELA.10.13A); focus attention, interpret, respond, and evaluate speaker's message (ELA.10.14A); engage in critical, appreciative, and reflective listening (ELA 10.14B); use

effective verbal and nonverbal strategies in presenting oral messages (ELA 10.16D); use appropriate appeals to support claims and arguments (ELA 10.16E); make relevant contributions in conversations and discussions (ELA 10.16F); use language and rhetorical strategies skillfully in informative and persuasive messages (ELA 10.17D); and justify the choice of verbal and nonverbal performance techniques by referring to the analysis and interpretations of the text (ELA 10.18B)

RATIONALE

My unit will not be taught in single week, or even a single grading period. Instead, my unit will serve as a thread that weaves together several of the major works that I teach over the course of the year. My unit will engage students in an ongoing dialogue that examines how people (specifically, characters) make critical decisions in their lives, with particular emphasis on how those decisions balance the human need to discover, possess, and celebrate one's individualism, with the equally human need to preserve and honor one's connectedness to others. As characters age, immigrate, and integrate, the balance between their individualism and their relationships with others will inevitably shift. The shift may occur abruptly at times, as in moments of crisis or decision, but more often, the shifts in balance are ongoing and organic—the product of a complex mix of freedoms, relationships, attitudes, and responsibilities, all of which may vary greatly depending not only on the ethnicity of the author, but also on the time period in which the literature was written. Additionally, an awareness of the balance between one's individualism and one's relationships to others may emerge over time; in some cases, the balance is articulated in retrospect, as one looks back on his own life, and in many cases, the history of his people. As such, students will, in the course of their study, consider the literature in historical and social context, as well as within the context of authors and characters balancing the dynamic and shifting balance of individualism and community. Finally, the readings included in this unit reflect a variety of ethnicities.

UNIT BACKGROUND

One aspect of being a human is that each of us is an individual, blessed and perhaps sometimes burdened both with myriad freedoms and with innate instincts of self-interest and self-preservation. Another sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory aspect of being a human is that each of us lives in a community of relationships—relationships with family, friends, neighborhoods, strangers and, indeed, a society at large. While some of these relationships are inherited, others are forged throughout life. Americans of every background invariably struggle in some manner or degree to find a balance between their individual freedoms on the one hand, and a shared sense of connectedness to others—at times a collective responsibility for one another's well-being—and, admittedly, common interests, on the other hand. This paradigm does not imply that Americanism is defined simply as a dichotomy of rugged individualism and Good Samaritanism; rather, America continues as it has for centuries to provide a unique context for two particular aspects of what it means to be a human (individualism and communal identity) to flourish and to intersect, and to beget some uniquely American cultural scion.

One's individualism is bound inextricably with the freedoms one enjoys, and as Americans today, we possess a great number of freedoms. The history of freedoms enjoyed by Americans, however, is not a story of universal or equal access. Even today, many freedoms enjoyed by Americans are sadly little more than commodities, some bought and sold, others sorely sought after, and others disregarded, unrealized, or unappreciated. Despite the quantity of freedoms that many Americans possess today, though, a consensus on the qualitative nature of freedom remains elusive. Popular culture has, in recent decades, emphasized notions of self-discovery and self-fulfillment, as the rugged individualism of the American past has cross-pollinated with the “me-

first,” self-help notion of individualism of the late twentieth century. Even as the notion of what it means to be an individual has evolved, those two elements of our humanity—our individualism and our connectedness to one another—remain constant, and they provide a context for understanding the moral framework that all Americans, regardless of background or tenure, inherit by the very virtue of their own Americanism.

This curriculum unit explores this moral framework in the context of multi-ethnic American literature. One earmark of great literature is its ability to capture and to convey universal experience, even among an audience as diverse as today’s high school students. My English II students at Bellaire High School represent diverse ethnic backgrounds. Many of them spent portions of childhood in another country before coming to America, and many others are the children of immigrants. Despite their diverse backgrounds, my students all must navigate the same social terrain—that of Bellaire High School as well as that of the United States of America. It is, therefore, imperative that the literature I teach informs my students’ common experience as much as it speaks to their diverse backgrounds.

As students in 2008 read about the lives of itinerant ranch hands of the 1930s in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, for example, they may have little basis for making overt connections to the characters at hand, unless the students themselves have lived as itinerant workers searching for a place of their own in the world (and some of them may, in fact, have had this experience). Whether or not the students can connect to the external details of the characters’ lives, though, they are able still to connect with the universal human and American experiences that the novel embodies. This unit will allow students to explore how Americans of different ethnic backgrounds navigate the moral decisions that must, by their very nature, balance individualism and relationships to others. Students will encounter stories and characters that offer access to universal human experience. Moreover, while there is a valid argument to be made that students’ esteem benefits from reading, hearing, and seeing stories with protagonists that embody their own ethnicity, age, and gender, perhaps there is an even more compelling argument to be made that students’ awareness and understanding of the experiences of fellow Americans of different ethnicity, age, and gender offer students an opportunity to understand and honor the common human experience that Americans share, even with our undeniable and innumerable differences. I believe that an implicit message about the value of ethnicity is delivered to students in the process of my selecting texts for my students to read. Indeed, I want every student to have the opportunity to see his or her own ethnicity represented in the literature we read, but more than that, I want every student to see his or her classmates’ ethnicity represented in the literature as well.

To this end, students will consider the following questions (among others): How do the characters make decisions that define the course of their lives, even when those decisions might require that they abandon or betray their family or community? How do the characters balance their own needs with the needs of their family and community? How do the characters discover their own individualism—by conforming to family, community, and societal expectations, or by abandoning them? Within the context of individualism and community, do characters make decisions based upon a moral hierarchy or instead based upon a system of moral absolutes? In turn, what are the elements of that moral hierarchy or that system or moral absolutes?

By incorporating novels and stories by authors of different ethnic backgrounds, my unit will also develop students’ understanding of the importance of perspective. By and large, works of literary merit enliven characters not of a single ethnic background. In fact, authors often reveal artfully rendered social criticism via their portrayal of Americans of different ethnic backgrounds. Unfortunately, this social criticism is not always universally recognized and understood. For example, many readers fail to recognize Mark Twain’s deep and powerful convictions about the humanity of every person, regardless of one’s ethnicity, as portrayed in *The Adventures of*

Huckleberry Finn. Indeed, some incorrectly see Twain's portrayal of Jim as derogatory and assume that any portrayal of a slave is a negative portrayal of African-Americans. Likewise, readers may misconstrue John Steinbeck's portrayal of Crooks in *Of Mice and Men* and thereby fail to appreciate Steinbeck's criticism of early 20th century American society for its alienation of those who differ from the mainstream in age, ethnicity, gender, or physical ability. In Walter Van Tilburg Clark's novel *The Ox-Bow Incident*, Sparks functions as the conscience within the novel, for he is the one character who truly understands the injustice and downright horror of mob justice and lynching, but some readers may fail to appreciate Sparks' central role in the novel and instead perceive Clark's portrayal of this African-American character as negative or even racist. Each of these white American authors reveals much about his understanding of American society through the portrayal of non-white characters. Presently, Twain, Steinbeck, and Clark are all included in the curriculum I teach. By including non-white American authors in this unit, I will lead students through an examination of how Americans of different ethnicities (not just Anglo) depict other ethnicities. This unit will engage students in ongoing dialogue about how authors of different ethnic backgrounds present their understanding—and criticism—of American society through the depiction of characters of different ethnic backgrounds. In turn, my unit will also engage students in dialogue about how all members of our American society—not just authors—reveal our beliefs about society as a whole via the stories we tell one another—stories *about* one another, as well as about ourselves. These stories, as my students will discover, often reflect a uniquely American preoccupation with difference, whether that difference is a matter of age, gender, ethnicity, or physical ability.

***The Color of Water* by James McBride**

The Color of Water by James McBride provides a unique perspective from which to examine this American preoccupation with difference. In this memoir, McBride recalls an upbringing in which he initially does not recognize his mother, who is white, as being of a different race than he and his siblings. The son of an African-American father and a white Jewish-American mother, McBride grows up primarily in an African-American community. As he matures, he slowly learns more about his mother's background, and, as an adult, returns to his mother's hometown in Virginia where his grandfather, a man he never met, was once a prominent rabbi. The story that McBride tells is one of a journey, or rather, of two journeys, for he intertwines his own memoir with that of his mother; the result is a story of "mother's and son's voices playing off each other like jazz riffs on memory" (Budhos 32). The result is two parallel stories—stories that remain parallel not only as the shared story of mother and son, but moreover as stories of self-discovery, of challenge, and ultimately of great personal decision. Both mother and son face decisions that, while profoundly personal, are inextricably tied to the relationships in their lives—relationships to family and to community. As my students begin reading the text, I will introduce, as a pre-reading focus, the concept of the importance of relationships. I will also use this concept as a basis for ongoing class discussions of the text as students make their way through the memoir.

McBride's memoir reflects a common trend in memoirs of ethnic authors: "to tell the journey of the assimilated self, and to pay homage to one's roots" (Budhos 33). An important part of this journey for McBride is the very "discovery of racial identity" as a man of both black and Jewish heritage (Smith). As such, *The Color of Water* is not only the story of James McBride—it is also the story of race relations in American society. He writes extensively of his relationships with his family members, but he also writes of "his relationship with history" (Smith). Moreover, his memoir "doesn't shrink down race relations in America to a stage prop, handy for self-dramatization. It amplifies the race issue. And what a difference" (Smith). By telling the story of race relations in America as his own life story, "McBride connects to our shared past by way of memory—and so allows us to connect with it, too" (Smith). McBride himself says, "The whole point of *The Color of Water* really is about the commonality of the human experience, and

that's really kind of why it was written" ("Interview: James McBride"). Given America's racial diversity, assimilation is something that all Americans face. This common experience will be one means by which my students will connect with McBride's memoir. The assimilation that McBride faced growing up, though, was perhaps more intense than what most Americans face. While "[s]everal recent memoirs by black authors explore DuBois's double consciousness of moving between black and white worlds...McBride reveals a double consciousness embedded in the home" (Budhos 32). McBride's mother concealed her Jewish heritage, but "she couldn't conceal her whiteness" (Budhos 32). "Crossing a formidable color line" (Budhos 33) by living in a black neighborhood, marrying a black man, and raising twelve black children, McBride's mother possessed a "natural nobility and courage" (Smith). McBride says that while what his mother did was "extraordinary...she only did what any mother who loves her children would do" ("Interview: James McBride"). And, what she did was to raise her children with a deeply embedded sense of morality, family, and community, and to make sure that each of them received the best possible education, sending them across town to better schools whenever possible, even when doing so meant crossing lines of race and ethnicity. At the time unaware of his own Jewish heritage, "McBride and his siblings attended largely Jewish schools and were taught to respect Jews for their love of education and hard work, but also endured their patronizing attitudes" (Budhos 33). Enduring the attitudes of others is another component of McBride's experience to which most of my students will be able to relate. Not only is this common experience an opportunity for my students to connect with the text, but more than that it is an opportunity for them to consider the effects of their own attitudes towards others. Regarding his black heritage, McBride comments that "I was fortunate to grow up in a part of America, a part of black America, where there was a great deal of morality...and my mother adopted that same culture as her own. So I had the strongest part of the black American cultural experience" ("Interview: James McBride").

Throughout *The Color of Water* "the sheer strength of spirit, pain, and humor of McBride and his mother as they wrestled with different aspects of race and identity" is evident (Budhos 32). McBride never pretends to have had an easy time of it; in fact, he even says, "most of my life has been failures. People just see the few successes" ("Interview: James McBride"). Perhaps the greatest success for both McBride and his mother is their transcendence of ethnic and cultural boundaries, for both mother and son lead lives that have crossed such boundaries. McBride's "family's alloy of cultural influences, the mistrust and respect for Jewishness, is painfully familiar...Ruth transformed her stringent Orthodox background into a Christian fervor that ruled the house" (Budhos 33). That very fervor was an essential part of McBride's childhood—"a black childhood infected with both a soaring faith in the church and his own Jewishness, however unnamed" (Budhos 33). Ultimately, McBride describes his outlook as "not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul" (Budhos 33). I will emphasize this element of McBride's self-identity with my students and will ask them to consider their own sense of identity in a similar fashion by asking them what different cultural influences have shaped their own sense of identity. McBride's understanding of his sense of identity did not come without a cost—a "painful but fruitful self-reckoning" (Budhos 33). Moreover, he "realizes that his own split is the black and white divide that he has not been able to fuse within himself" (Budhos 33), not merely the external divide that he experiences in a racially complex America. Like many Americans, McBride may have internalized attitudes towards race that dominate American society, for he "dishes up some important truths about growing up as a mixed-race kid in a country built on white supremacy, where one is seen as either a pathetic half-breed, or black, with no in between" (Budhos 33). Despite the prevalence of these profoundly negative attitudes in American society, McBride's mother raised her family with "humor and strength" and her "nonsense, loving description of the world she adopted is eloquent testimony to the black community's capacity to absorb difference" (Budhos 34). Always "the sensitive kid who

watched closely” (Budhos 33), James McBride discovers in his mother, in his childhood, and in his own life, the capacity to transcend difference, particularly racial difference, but he does not do so by ignoring racial differences or by attacking them with the vehement zeal that often characterizes struggles with racial identity. Instead, McBride transcends the boundaries of racial difference via his relationships with others, beginning with his relationship to his own mother and siblings, extending to the black community in which he was raised and eventually the Jewish community in which his mother was raised, and ultimately to a family of his own, a family built on understanding, acceptance, and a profound sense of personal identity, the kind that can not be handed to a person, even from mother to child, but can only be won for oneself from a life of genuine acceptance of oneself and of others for who they are, regardless of background—racial, ethnic, or otherwise. Ultimately, this is the lesson I hope my students will glean from McBride’s memoir.

***Bone* by Fae Myenne Ng**

Bone, by Fae Myenne Ng, presents the story of a Chinese-American family living in San Francisco, California. While the mother and father/step-father are Chinese-born, the three daughters are “young Chinese-American women, born in California, equally proud of and confused by their ancient heritage and their rapidly expanding future” (Miller). Throughout the novel, readers discover a family “struggl[ing] with the characteristic dilemma of the children of immigrants, finding a resolution to the conflict between the demands of heritage and those of assimilation” (Kich). Told from the point of view of the eldest of three daughters, *Bone* unfolds the many complex layers of “the struggle of the family to come to grips with the crisis” (Arfaroui), besieged as they are with grief and confusion in the wake of the middle daughter’s suicide. The setting of the tragedy, as well as the family’s attempts to deal with their loss, reflect the cultural forces at play within the family: “this family crisis is played out in largely private domestic scenes, so that the broader milieu of San Francisco’s Chinatown is always...reflected in the microcosm of their existence” (Kich). Each of the main characters—the older sister, the younger sister, the mother, and the father/step-father—faces a different combination of confusion and guilt in the wake of the suicide, but what each character shares in common is that the paradigm of individualism and connectedness to others remains at the core of how they cope individually with the tragedy. This paradigm of individualism and connectedness to others will be the initial focus point beginning our study of the novel, as well as the context in which we discuss the characters and the decisions and dilemmas they face. Ultimately, this paradigm will also serve as a bridge, connecting each of the other works included in this unit with those studied throughout the year.

Coping with the suicide in markedly different ways, each of the characters faces a “challeng[e] [to] the stability and coherence of identity” (Kim)—identity that for the Mah and Leon (mother and father/step-father) is based upon and reflects traditional Chinese values, for Leila (older sister) a hybrid of Chinese and American values, and for Nina (younger sister) almost entirely American values. Not only does each character face the tragedy in his or her own way and in this context of Chinese/Chinese-American/American values, but moreover the relationships themselves among the family members “are profoundly affected and ultimately defined by the crisis of ...Ona’s sudden suicide” (Kich). While the novel does not follow the tragedy-brings-a-family-together path that readers might expect, it does make clear that every relationship within the family is challenged and ultimately redefined by Ona’s suicide. Students will have the opportunity to make personal connections with the text by considering how they and their families have dealt with challenges and losses, as well as how each of the relationships within the family may have been affected differently by those challenges and losses.

In the wake of the suicide, Leila, the eldest sister and the novel’s narrator, struggles to remain dedicated to the values and expectations of her parents while still living her own life—a life that

in many ways does not meet with her parents' approval. This is one aspect of Leila's experience to which many students will be able to relate, regardless of their own ethnicity, for the struggle of children to balance their own values with those of their families is universal. Leila's struggle is one in which she "attempt[s] to find a center that is neither too Chinese nor too American, thus informing us of the complexity of her Chinese American consciousness" (Gee). Indeed, "Leila seems to value the ability to see simultaneously from the Chinese and from the American point of view" (Gee). Early in the novel, readers see the hybrid Chinese-American values reflected in Leila's actions. For example, when Leila marries Mason, she does so without telling her parents, despite the fact that they would not have disapproved of the marriage. Her willingness to marry without her parents' knowledge reflects the independence and individualism that she has cultivated as an American, while the secrecy itself is more emblematic of her Chinese heritage. The secrecy also seems in part to be a reaction to some of the circumstances surrounding Ona's suicide. While the novel never explicitly resolves a single cause, per se, of Ona's suicide (there is even a suggestion that the death may have been accidental rather than suicide), Leila discloses compelling details about Ona's relationship with Osvaldo, the son of Leon's former business partner. While relations with his business partner were good, Leon approved of the relationship between Ona and Osvaldo; however, after Leon learns that his partner has cheated him out of his money, Leon forbids Ona to see Osvaldo, issuing an ultimatum that she refuses to accept. Leila hints that both the forbidden love affair and Leon's outright rejection of Ona as a result of her continuing to see Osvaldo contributed to Ona's suicide. Given this background, one can see that Leila's secrecy about her own marriage is perhaps preemptive in nature, for she does not even allow for the possibility of her parents' approval or disapproval until she and Mason are married. Leila's secrecy, though, is a struggle in and of itself, for she is "caught between traditional Chinese female submissiveness and middle class American individualism" (Gee). Ironically, though, in her decision to say nothing about the marriage to her parents until it has taken place, Leila manifests one of her parents' traditional Chinese values—secrecy. In fact, the element of secrecy is seen throughout the story itself, as Leila picks and chooses not only what she tells her parents, but what she tells readers, as well, for the novel "assigns spacious rooms for secrets and silences, respectively domestic as well as public, emphasizing among other things that children pick them up from their parents" (Arfaroui). Leila mimics the silence that she herself learned from her parents, as "secrecy [is]...a fundamental trait of both the narrator's voice and the...family" (Arfaroui). Indeed, Leon himself reacts to Ona's death with the very silence that Leila embodies, only further stressing for Leila the hybrid Chinese-American values that she attempts to balance. As one critic notes, "The silence, guilt, and superstition with which Leon copes with his biological daughter's death magnify Leila's sense of binarism between Chinese and American cultures" (LeBlanc). Leila's attempts to balance her own values with those of her family provide an ideal opportunity for students to explore Leila's moral framework as one of hierarchy or absolutes, for her decisions are based on a need to define her own individualism and to preserve her relationship with her parents. Again, this experience is one to which most students will be able to relate.

Leila's hybrid Chinese-American values can also be seen in other aspects of her relationship with Leon. In the wake of Ona's death, Leila is the family member who must deal with the practical aspects of the tragedy—talking with the police, making necessary arrangements and the like, for neither Mah nor Leon is fluent enough in the English language or the mechanisms of American society to handle these tasks. As such, Leila assumes responsibilities that would, under different circumstances, belong to Leon, and in so doing she must balance her traditional role as Chinese daughter with her ironically parental role towards her own parents. Leila's parental disposition towards her parents is especially evident in her relationship with Leon, who relies on Leila's help and guidance not only in responding to Ona's suicide, but in other matters as well. Her "struggle to blend individual and cultural self-identities while

remaining a part of her family is demonstrated in her dual role as parent and child to Leon” (LeBlanc). A further layer of irony emerges when one recognizes that Leila and Leon share one important aspect of identity. Leon himself was a “paper” son—that is, one who paid a large sum of money to a man (who was not his biological father) with legal residential status in the United States in order for Leon to be able to come to the United States as this man’s son. As such, Leon assumed the name of his “paper” father, along with additional familial responsibilities, even though the man was not his biological father. Initially, Leon’s relationship with “Grandpa Leong is nothing but a business transaction, but at certain points in the novel, Leon is Grandpa Leong’s son” (Kim). Much like her stepfather Leon did with his “paper” father, Leila assumes responsibilities as the eldest child of Leon, even though she is not his biological daughter. The shared struggle for identity that both Leon and Leila face is one in which they both “must work within legal, political, and familial discourses to establish their identities, their ‘ancestry,’ and their cultural place in America, all of which are subject to contingency, and all of which are contested” (Kim).

An important instance of Leila’s assuming this familial (and ironically parental as well as filial) relationship with Leon occurs when Leon must navigate the bureaucracy of the Social Security system, something he is unable to do without Leila’s help. Acting as an intermediary between Leon and the clerk by translating the clerk’s statements and requests, though, is only a small part of the role that Leila plays. When the clerk demands documentation of Leon’s past, Leila must reconstruct the truth of Leon’s often untruthful past. Leila makes the “decision to preserve Leon’s fragmented American identity” even though doing so is not without “conflict” for her (LeBlanc). The conflict arises from Leila’s already having rejected some portions of the traditional and dutiful role of the Chinese daughter in favor of a more American sense of individualism; as such, returning to this more traditional role is difficult for Leila. Leila has made no secret of embracing more American values in favor of her parents’ more traditional Chinese values: not only did she marry without her parents’ knowledge, but also she chooses to live and work outside of Chinatown and to partake of all things American, from diet to dress, despite the overt rejection of family heritage that such actions imply. Leila could even be seen as a “nonconformist, acting with an American sense of individualism or outspokenness, while in traditional Chinese culture the role of the eldest daughter in a Chinese family would demand the she respond with acceptance or deference” (Gee). Balancing her individualism with her obligations to Leon, though, Leila ultimately assumes the task of reconstructing Leon’s past—and symbolically his identity—and in so doing behaves more like the traditional Chinese daughter, “an obedient daughter blind to Leon’s failing” (LeBlanc).

Despite the internal conflict she endures, and a sometimes overt and obvious frustration with Leon, Leila ultimately sorts through Leon’s past, symbolically contained in an old suitcase full of documents, photos, and various odds and ends. In fact, “the papers in his suitcase are a material trace of the past, the ‘conversion’ from Chinese to American” (Lowe qtd. in Kim). An essential part of his manufactured identity, “the papers Leon has amassed over the years function to authenticate his presence in the U.S.” (Kim). Even so, the documents are “full of inconsistencies in date of birth, name, origin, etc., and mixed as they are with other documentation...represent Leon’s defiance of a disciplinary system of identification meant to ‘fix’ him” as a Chinese man living and working now in America (Kim). Leon’s rejection of America and its values is clear, though, in his lifelong attempt to dupe the American legal system by never being truthful about who he actually is; in his suitcase Leila finds a myriad of false names and other documentation. Feeling as though Leon’s lifetime of efforts—both his actual labor and his attempts to contrive a false American identity—have been in vain, Leila worries that “not only the wage labor from which Leon will now retire, but the work he has put into constructing an authentic Chinese-American identity” will count for nothing (Kim). This realization pains Leila, for she “loves and reveres Leon, the merchant seaman, the fry-cook, the welder, her mother’s second husband, father

of Ona and Nina” (Miller). Additionally, Leila judges the men in her life, including Leon, “according to an American standard of work or ideal of success, believing that they should be gainfully employed, working conventionally from nine to five” (Gee). Unwilling to see Leon’s life and labor amount to nothing, though, and “knowing how happy he appears after partaking in his different lifestyle, that of a merchant seaman,” (Gee) Leila locates the necessary documents in the suitcase to legitimize Leon’s labor record for the Social Security office. Even so, Leila “understands what he, ironically the ‘father’ of her American life, does not—that he has no redeemable self in this system. He is lost” (Miller). Ultimately, Leila, the paper daughter, redeems her step-father Leon, a paper son himself, within a system of American values. The real irony of the situation, though, derives from the fact that it is Leila’s hybrid Chinese-American values that allow her to redeem Leon, for had she remained devoted exclusively to her parents’ Chinese values, she would lack the wherewithal and fluency within the system of American values and society that permit her to redeem Leon and his life of labor and false identity. In the end, with the need to “construct (and reconstruct) [Leon’s] identity...Leila feels herself threatened by erasure” (Kim), thereby suggesting that Leila’s (re)construction of Leon’s identity is as much an effort to define her own identity as his.

Leila’s hybrid Chinese-American values are evident not only in her interactions with her parents, particularly with her step-father Leon, but also in her manner of dealing with Ona’s suicide. “Because [she is a]...first generation American, the process of [her] self-definition inevitably involves considerations of what it means to be both Chinese and American” (Kich). The process of understanding herself, and her role within her family, is challenging, for “there is no historically defined Chinese American woman” (LeBlanc). Kafka addresses Leila’s process of self-definition across hybrid Chinese-American cultural values as one of “journeying from ‘ambiguous consciousness’ to ‘self-affirmation’” (LeBlanc). Ona’s suicide forces Leila to confront not only her relationship with her parents, but moreover the act of suicide itself. Confronting Ona’s suicide becomes, for Leila, a process of confronting her own identity, for Leila and Ona were both burdened with the same pressures of trying to balance and integrate Chinese and American cultural values. Following Ona’s suicide, “Leila splits her time ...between the past in Salmon Alley with Mah and the future at the Mission with Mason” (LeBlanc). Integrating her own past and present, as well as her Chinese and American values, is neither simple nor easy for Leila, whose “identity becomes a site of struggle between her past and future, with no self-affirming present” (LeBlanc). In fact, Leila “enters no-woman’s land between what she can leave behind and what she can take with her” (LeBlanc). Leila must navigate a present and a future that allow her to realize and manifest her own identity—that of a Chinese American woman. Never fully leaving behind her Chinese heritage, though, Leila transcends her ambiguous identity in order to define an identity in which she understands and accepts her hybrid Chinese-American values. Ultimately, Leila’s self-definition as Chinese-American is an act of individualism—an act, though, by which she maintains her connectedness to her family and their Chinese values. Leila’s act of self-definition occurs at the end of the novel via her “invention of new language...Leila’s neologism ‘backdaire,’ the last word of the novel” (LeBlanc). This single word that Leila invents represents her integration of her Chinese and American values, and the novel thus closes with the assurance that Leila has, in fact, found a way to integrate and balance the Chinese and American elements of her life, “affirm[ing] a self who transcends dual personality by resisting reduction to a single ethnic identity” (LeBlanc).

Leila’s struggle for self-definition occurs within the context of an entire family struggling to understand Ona’s suicide. Specifically, the manner in which Leila’s mother, Mah, and younger sister, Nina, attempt to deal with Ona’s suicide further exemplifies the complicated mix of Chinese and American values that defines their family. On the one hand, Mah embodies traditional Chinese values while at the same time behaving in ways that seem to be more American and less Chinese than one might expect. On the other hand, Nina embodies primarily

American values with very little attempt to adhere to the traditional Chinese values of her parents. Clearly, “one of the themes that Ng addresses in her novel is immigration” (“Fae Myenne Ng). Mah held high hopes for her three daughters and their lives in America, and she reflects a common outlook held by immigrants in that the hopes that drove her to find a life in America for herself and her daughters were more centered on her children than herself. That is to say that Mah embodies “the paradox that the generation of immigrants often saw the American Dream in their children because their margin for survival in this country was not much of an improvement over their bleak possibilities in the old country” (Kich). For Mah, Ona’s suicide is not just the loss of a daughter; it also is the ultimate failure of a mother to provide for her daughter the better life that coming to America seemed to promise. Ona’s suicide is the worst possible ending to the American Dream that Mah sought for her three daughters; the American Dream has ended in nightmare. Mah blames herself for Ona’s suicide, for she “thinks the bad luck began with her faulty choice in men—her first marriage to Lyman Fu, and especially her extramarital affair with Tommie Hom, who was also her boss” (Kim). Despite her strong adherence to most Chinese values, particularly “traditional Chinese family loyalty” (Gee), Mah’s affair ironically reflects a rejection of those traditional Chinese values, for she “rejects the terms of her role as a green card wife when she seeks personal fulfillment beyond the given parameters of that identity” (LeBlanc). In this sense, even Ma has become somewhat Americanized, and she regards her own Americanization as the cause of Ona’s suicide. Mah’s Americanized values are seen not only in her extramarital affair, but moreover “Mah’s acceptance of American values [is seen] when she finally allows Mason [Leila’s boyfriend] to stay over at their apartment” (Gee). Mah is ultimately plagued with guilt that her extramarital affair and the license for personal and sexual freedom that she implicitly granted to her daughters through her own illicit behavior contributed both to Ona’s turmoil over her relationship with Osvaldo and ultimately to her suicide.

To the extent that Leila represents hybrid Chinese-American values, her younger sister Nina represents the rejection of traditional Chinese values in favor of American values. Nina’s rejection of her cultural heritage is seen first and foremost in her abandonment of Chinatown, and by extension, her own family, for Nina is “self-exiled in New York; she chooses to be American” (LeBlanc). Whereas Leila conformed to many Chinese cultural norms, “Nina, the younger sister, can be seen as the quintessential assimilationist” (Gee) in her embodiment of American rather than Chinese values. While Ona pursued a forbidden love with Osvaldo, and Leila married without her parents’ knowledge, Nina goes even further in rejecting her family’s Chinese values when she becomes pregnant (she is not married) and has an abortion. Not only that, Nina’s rejection of Chinese values becomes even more explicit when she tells her parents of the pregnancy and abortion. Leila is dumfounded by Nina’s need to tell her family of the abortion, for “Leila cannot understand the utterly unrepressed nature of Nina’s American individualism and independence; she cannot imagine being as American as finding confession therapeutic and unburdening” (Gee). In the wake of Ona’s suicide, Nina’s behavior upsets Leila when Nina arrives in San Francisco dressed gaily and donning an attitude of unconcern. Nina does not rush home, nor is she preoccupied with attending to her parents’ grief, and ultimately “it is because Nina does not fulfill her traditional Chinese responsibilities that Leila cannot forgive her” (Gee). Nina ultimately discovers and possesses her own sense of individualism as an Americanized Chinese woman, but her individualism comes at a cost to her relationships with her parents and sister. Nina makes little effort to conform to her parents’ expectations, and while on the surface she seems to be fulfilled by the pursuit of a life she has chosen for herself, she never is fully able to unleash herself from the familial and cultural bonds imparted to her by her parents.

In the end, every member of the family and every relationship within the family are affected by Ona’s suicide. The struggles faced by the members of this family reflect not only an attempt to understand the death of a daughter and a sister, but the struggle of immigrants and their children to discover and maintain their own identity while simultaneously maintaining their

relationships with one another. While both parents generally remain true to the values of their cultural heritage as they cope with their daughter's death, both cope with the tragedy by rejecting aspects of that heritage in ways that, while unconventional, reflect that even they have an innate need to deal with life on their own terms. Ng herself commented that "I can't write about all of China" ("Fae Myenne Ng"), but she deftly renders for her readers a family whose varied mixture of Chinese and American values, and obvious interdependence upon one another, reflect universal aspects of humanity to which all readers can relate. In the face of unspeakable loss, these characters walk further down the path not only of understanding themselves, but of understanding their connectedness to one another. In *Bone*, there is no final answer about Ona's suicide, no neatly packaged explanation of how or why the tragedy occurred. In fact, "at the end, we understand, as much as anyone can, what led up to and followed Ona's suicide, and that knowledge allows, the reader as well as Leila, to accept the impossibility of understanding the act itself" (Kich).

"Condolences to Every One of Us" by Allan Gurganus

In the short story "Condolences to Every One of Us" by Allan Gurganus, from the collection of stories and novellas *White People*, the reader is presented with a letter from an elderly, middle-class white woman. The story "concerns a busload of Americans from Toledo on Father Flannigan's Tour of the World in Tongaville and a widow writing to the freshly-orphaned daughter of a Midwestern couple inadvertently massacred during an uprising" (Gillespie). As Maria writes to the daughter of her travel companions and attempts to recount for her the details of her parents' deaths, Maria in fact tells a much deeper and broader story. She writes not only of how her friends were killed, but more than that, she writes about how she and the group she was with carried with them on their travels a mindset that was ultimately naïve—about themselves, one another, and the world outside of America—despite the fact that they were white Americans, well-to-do enough that they had the means to travel abroad. Maria's letter is one of self-discovery and self-disclosure, and while she must ultimately reconcile herself to the role that she played in the deaths of her friends the Madisons, she also must confront her own prejudices and the limitations that those prejudices have imposed on her understanding of herself—indeed her sense of identity—as white, as an American, and as a woman. Reading Maria's letter will become for my students an opportunity to evaluate how the struggle to discover, possess, and explain one's individualism, as well as one's connectedness with others, can challenge and harrow even a character whose life is as seemingly benign as this old white woman's; indeed, this struggle is not the exclusive domain of non-white Americans—it is a struggle that belongs squarely to us all.

Any stereotypical impression that the reader might have of Maria is quickly dispelled as her letter unfolds. Maria is haunted by her experience in Africa and forthrightly states that she is writing the letter in part at the suggestion of her son-in-law, who "says I should write down all I know, the sooner the better, to get it out of my system" (Gurganus 25). For Maria, the letter is "confessional, therapeutic, necessary" (Malin). While the reader has no reason to doubt that Maria is a humble and reverent woman, neither humility nor reverence excuses Maria from the guilt she harbors over what happened in Africa. For Maria, and also by extension for the reader, "the lines between correct and criminal behavior blur" (Malin). "[A] sort of unease runs through" the story, as Maria is a "white [woman] who know[s] [she] could be whiter" (Gates). Indeed, Maria is one of many characters in the collection "who want some sort of forgiveness" (Gates). That Maria is a "white" woman reflects a recurring theme of Gurganus' collection—namely, that "white people...suffer on account of" (Garrett) their whiteness—whiteness not necessarily being the color of their skin, but the attitudes they hold towards themselves and others. Here, though, "[w]hite" does not merely refer—obnoxiously—to Caucasian skin tones" (Gillespie). Rather, "whiteness" itself is ambiguous" (Malin). Rather than using whiteness as a symbol of innocence,

purity, or knowledge, Gurganus instead uses whiteness as a symbol of “sickness, pain, blankness, rigidity” (Garrett). While a surface-level impression of Maria might be that she is an old-fashioned “good” white woman, her letter reveals that she is a woman pained not only by her experience in Africa, but also by the realizations she has regarding her own attitudes following her ordeal in Africa. More than that, Maria’s “white” travel companions reflect a deep level of dysfunction, including self-centeredness, fear, and prejudice. Maria writes the following about her white American travel companions: “I never thought I’d be ashamed of my home country, but certain know-it-all attitudes and rudeness towards Africans had embarrassed me more than once” (Gurganus 28).

At the time of their deaths, the Madisons are attempting to photograph a rebellion in Tongaville. Blindly unaware of what is happening and the dangers they face, they are killed by an angry mob. In her letter, Maria writes the following about Mr. Madison:

He just forgot his place and took way too much for granted. He thought all people on earth were as good-natured as himself, and with as much free time, and would pose for him. But he overlooked hunger. That is bound to make terrible changes in people’s dispositions. (Gurganus 36)

Maria’s account of what happened is as much a revelation of what Mr. Madison was thinking as it is a revelation of a broader attitude with which she herself identifies. She understands what Mr. Madison had been thinking because she herself shared the same naïve attitude prior to her trip to Africa. Maria and the Madisons were ordinary people, and the fate of the Madisons ultimately reflects the “dangerous glamour in ordinariness” that runs through many of the stories in the collection (Gates). The real indictment, however, is not of the Madisons, but rather of the other members of the tour, all of whom, with the exception of Maria, refused to help the Madisons in any capacity whatsoever. In describing how the other members of the tour stood by and did nothing, Maria writes the following:

I’d turned into just as big a coward as the rest, so who am I to point the finger? All the same, I won’t forget how it is to be the person who needs help, and to see your people, lined up like in a department-store window, and everyone refusing you. Your dearest friends on earth doing that. (Gurganus 34)

Here, the “white” people standing by and doing nothing are anything but free of culpability; clearly Maria’s recognition of their indifference reflects a moral indictment of their failure to help and of their overt sin of omission.

The broader indictment that Gurganus issues in this story is not directed at a single group of people or a single ethnicity, but rather at a broader kind of American identity. In fact, “For Gurganus...in some way, everyone in America—Baptist, Jew, or Catholic—is a Protestant, because the Protestant work ethic was transplanted and flourished here” (Gillespie). Gurganus himself states that “All my stories are about a kind of struggle against that puritan ethic...they’re an attempt at honest and ruthless self-examination in the face of these expectations of ourselves we’re all strapped with—expectations we often fall short of” (Gillespie). Maria’s letter embodies not only this struggle, but the disappointment in oneself that accompanies it. As such, Maria discloses in her letter what she has learned about herself, a self-understanding that comes late in life and not without a price. Embedded in this self-understanding, though, is a recognition of how connected people are to one another. Maria writes her letter to her friends’ daughter—a woman she has never met, yet her need to tell the story and her recognition of the daughter’s need to hear the story are inescapable. Likewise, Maria realizes not only how dependent she and her travel companions were upon one another, but more than that, how connected all people are to one another, including foreigners in a foreign land. Maria’s realization that “[w]hite or black, people are more miserable and less willing to be scenery than the National Geographic would like us to

believe” (Gurganus 36) ultimately reflects an epiphany that is as profound as it is unexpected for an elderly white woman from Toledo. As the title suggests, the condolences offered in this story are not for the Madison’s daughter alone, but for all of us who fail to see one another for the human beings we truly are. Reading this story and evaluating it in the context of one’s individualism and one’s connectedness to others will afford students the opportunity to understand—and hopefully internalize—a lesson that Maria has learned herself, albeit late in life, namely, that we fail ourselves and others when we fail to see and take ownership of our deep connectedness with others—all others, those of our own kind, as well as those who are not of our own kind.

“If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me What It Is” by James Baldwin

In his essay “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me What It Is,” James Baldwin examines issues of identity and language, two elements with immediate relevance to a dialogue about individualism and community. Examining Baldwin’s non-fiction essay (and Rodriguez’s as well) will provide students the opportunity to consider the overall paradigm of this unit—individualism and connectedness to others—in a context with implications that are immediate, personal, public, political and certainly controversial, as issues of identity and conformity realistically are. Baldwin argues that Black English is indeed a language of its own—that it can not and should not be regarded as slang or even as dialect. In his argument, Baldwin offers compelling insight into how language embodies the experience and heritage of a people, while at the same time allowing those people to maintain individualism as well as solidarity in a society where theirs is not the language of all, nor is theirs the hegemonic race. According to Baldwin, “Language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other.” In this sense, language functions in a manner that not only allows a person (or a group) to identify and understand himself, but moreover allows one to impose identity (be it false, accurate, or otherwise) upon others. Baldwin asserts that “People evolve a language in order to be able to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality they cannot articulate.” If one lacks the means to articulate his own experience—indeed, his own life—by what means can he preserve his own identity? Baldwin goes on to explain that “one’s temporal identity” is the “achievement” of language. In this sense, one can see the absolute necessity of possessing a language that belongs to oneself, for if one lacks his own language, he certainly lacks the means to articulate (and presumably even understand) his own identity.

Baldwin extends his argument about the relationship between language and identity with an explanation of how language functions in both a private and public manner. According to Baldwin, “[language] reveals the private identity, and connects with, or divorces from, the larger, public, or communal identity,” for at the moment when one begins to speak, he has “confessed [his] parents, [his] youth, [his] school, [his] self-esteem, and alas, [his] future.” In so doing, a person defines himself for others in a very public way, but more than that, he does so in a way that designates himself either as part of the hegemonic group or as *not* part of the hegemonic group. In essence, it is through our language that we define and disclose our identity, both private and public. Eventually, though, even the private language becomes public, given the inevitability of one’s language eventually being spoken aloud.

The final portion of Baldwin’s essay contends with the conditions under which Black English arose. Baldwin asserts that “Black English is the creation of the black Diaspora,” as slaves came to America from different tribes, each unable to speak the language of the other. Baldwin theorizes that “slavery could never have lasted as long as it did” if slaves had been able to speak to one another. Black English thus emerged “by means of brutal necessity” as a language “dictated by what the language must convey.” In this sense, Baldwin’s argument reinforces the notion that language is a vehicle not only for individuals to understand and define themselves, but

moreover for a *community* of individuals—each indelibly bound to one another through common experience and common need—to understand and define themselves collectively, as a people, as a community. Baldwin concludes his essay with an assertion as to why the white hegemony in America has refused to accept or even acknowledge Black English as a language: to do so would force the white hegemony to acknowledge aspects of itself, including by implication its treatment of Black Americans, that it is unwilling to face. In the final analysis, Baldwin’s argument lays a moral foundation for understanding not only the viability of Black English as a legitimate language in and of itself (i.e. not a dialect of American English), but also the absolute moral necessity of Black English as a language by which Black Americans can understand and define their own experience, so as not to allow their identity and experience to be defined by the white hegemony.

“Aria: Memoir of a Childhood” by Richard Rodriguez

To the same extent that Baldwin argues that Black English is a language that should not be supplanted by the white American hegemony’s standard English, Richard Rodriguez argues that he and every other American, regardless of background or ethnicity, have “the right, and the obligation, to speak the public language”—standard English (358). Both Baldwin and Rodriguez address the private and public aspects of language, but Rodriguez articulates a childhood wherein Spanish, his native language, was for him “a private language, my family’s language” (357). Both Baldwin and Rodriguez see language as a means by which to identify and define oneself as part of a community, and more specifically as *not* part of the hegemonic group. Rodriguez recalls that “To hear its [Spanish’s] sounds was to feel myself specially recognized as one of the family, apart from *los otros* [“the others”]” (357). Whereas Baldwin sees a threat to identity in the use of standard English in lieu of the language of one’s own community or ethnic group, though, Rodriguez sees the threat to one’s identity in *not* using standard English, the language of the hegemonic group and the public language of American society. Rodriguez contends that not learning, mastering, and ultimately using the public language amounts to not having a voice in the public realm of American society.

Rodriguez recalls a childhood in which he initially spoke only Spanish. As one who was unable to understand—and certainly unable to use—standard English, Rodriguez saw himself as an outsider, one who was unable to fully participate—in school, in his neighborhood, in life itself. Even something as simple as going on errands left Rodriguez feeling detached and disenfranchised from the community. Rodriguez writes, “Nervously, I’d arrive at the grocery store to hear there the sounds of the gringo, reminding me that in this so-big world I was a foreigner” (357). For Rodriguez, speaking only Spanish, his family’s “private language,” left him unable to participate in society beyond the menial and mundane tasks such as going to the store (357). Ultimately, Spanish became for Rodriguez “a ghetto language that deepened and strengthened my feeling of public separateness” (358). So strong was his feeling of disenfranchisement that Rodriguez “did not believe...that [he] could speak a single public language” (358). While Rodriguez concedes that he would have benefited in some manner had his teachers spoken his family’s language—he would not have been as fearful, and he would have felt more connected to them—he recognizes that ultimately it would have been to his disadvantage for his teachers to have spoken to him in Spanish rather than English, for doing so would have allowed him to “evade...learning the great lesson of school: that I had a public identity” (358). For Rodriguez, his public identity was contingent upon a single crucial factor: his ability to speak the public language, standard English.

Whereas Baldwin regards the imposition of standard English (the language of the white hegemony) upon non-whites as tantamount to the white hegemony’s imposition of its notions of identity upon all others, Rodriguez argues for the moral imperative of those who are not part of the white hegemony to learn standard English in order for non-whites to define and own (not

lose) their public identity. Rodriguez concedes that individualism is central to a discussion of language and identity, but he does not concur with advocates of bilingual education who assert “that children lose a degree of ‘individuality’ by becoming assimilated into public society” (362). Instead, Rodriguez contends that “the bilingualists oversimplify when they scorn the value and necessity of assimilation” (362). For Rodriguez, the factor that advocates of bilingual education fail to understand is the distinction between private and public identity. Rodriguez goes so far as to assert “that, while one suffers a diminished sense of *private* individuality by being assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of *public* individuality” (362). In the final analysis, Rodriguez regards learning standard English as a requisite component, even a precursor, to taking full ownership of one’s public identity. Both Baldwin and Rodriguez assign comparable weight to the centrality of language in defining and acquiring public identity. However, the two clearly differ in their convictions regarding the role that the language of the hegemony plays in articulating that identity. Whereas Baldwin sees the language of the hegemony as a vehicle by which the hegemonic group ultimately defines non-whites in its own terms, replete with the hegemonic group’s prejudices and instincts for preserving its own supremacy, Rodriguez sees the language of the hegemony as the only means by which non-whites have the opportunity to genuinely possess and articulate their own identity, and thus to resist the identity that the hegemony will otherwise foist upon them. In the end, both Baldwin and Rodriguez underscore the imperative for non-whites and non-speakers of standard English to challenge and resist the white hegemony’s imposition of identity upon them, but clearly they differ in their understanding of the role that the white hegemony’s standard English plays in the realization, articulation, and ownership of identity.

IMPLEMENTATION: LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan 1: Multi-genre Project for Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*

Objectives: ELA.10.1A, ELA.10.1B, ELA.10.1C, ELA.10.2A, ELA.10.2B, ELA.10.3A, ELA.10.3B, ELA.10.3D, ELA 10.6A, ELA 10.7A, ELA 10.7I, ELA 10.8C.

Introduction: Students will develop a written composition on a topic pertaining to identity, family, and/or community. In conjunction with the written project, students will create a non-written component of a self-selected genre, including but not limited to sculpture, paper mache, mobile, shadowbox, watercolor, charcoal, pastel, oil paint, music, or interpretive dance.

Concept Development: Students will have finished reading *Bone* before they begin this assignment. Over the course of their reading, students will have examined, both in writing and in class discussion, issues pertaining to identity, family, and community. Specifically, students will consider the characters of Leila, Nina, Mah, and Leon. A pre-writing class discussion will include the following sets of questions:

- 1) How does Leila develop an identity that includes elements of her Chinese culture and the American culture in which she lives? How do you, as a high school student, balance cultural expectations of your own family with the needs and/or demands of your social or peer group?
- 2) What trade-offs, both positive and negative, does Nina make in rejecting her Chinese heritage and embracing an exclusively American identity? Is it necessary for a high school student today to reject his or her family or cultural heritage in order to assimilate into mainstream society?
- 3) In what ways, and at what cost, do Mah and Leon retain elements of their Chinese cultural heritage while simultaneously making concessions to American society in their need to assimilate and provide for their family? In what ways do you see elders in your family and community make similar concessions today? What is the cost (and perhaps pay-off) for an elder in a family or society to make an effort to assimilate, even when doing so involves abandoning or betraying certain elements of his or her culture?

Student Practice: As pre-writing, students will respond in writing to one set of questions from the discussion outlined above. Students will then develop their pre-writing into a fully developed 3-4 page, typed, double-spaced essay. In order to accomplish that end, students will be asked to identify elements in their pre-writing that they could develop further, as well as elements of the pre-writing that can be omitted. Through a process of rewriting and revising, students will prepare a final written product ready for publication. Students will also create a non-written visual component expressing the main ideas articulated in their essay. In this non-written component, students will self-select a genre that allows them to visualize and represent concepts they have developed in their essay. Non-written components will be shared and/or performed in class.

Assessment: The written component will be assessed on organization, development, focus and coherence, voice, and conventions. The non-written component will be assessed on correspondence with the written component and communication of ideas and concepts, originality, and overall impact.

Closure: Students will read excerpts from their written components for the class and will perform or present the non-written components.

Resources: class set of *Bone* by Fae Myenne Ng, paper, art supplies.

Lesson Plan 2: *The Color of Water* and Memoir Writing

Objectives: ELA.10.1A, ELA.10.1B, ELA.10.1C, ELA.10.2A, ELA.10.3A, ELA.10.3B, ELA.10.3D, ELA 10.6A, ELA 10.7I, ELA 10.8B, ELA 10.8C.

Introduction: Students will compose a two-voiced memoir in the style of McBride's memoir. Students can choose to write their own memoir interwoven with the memoir of a family member or friend, or students may choose to write a memoir from the point of view of a character from literature or a figure from history, again weaving the memoir with that a family member or friend of the chosen literary character/historical figure.

Concept Development: Students will have read a significant portion of James McBride's *The Color of Water* before beginning this assignment. They will be familiar with the style of the interwoven, two-voiced memoir. In prior lessons, students will have identified parallel elements of content and structure in the two-voiced memoir.

Student Practice: As a pre-writing activity, students will brainstorm a list of times in their lives when something significant happened. The events can be happy, sad, challenging, aggravating, frustrating, disappointing, rewarding, etc. If students do not wish to write about their own lives, they might write from the point of view of a character from literature or a figure from history. Students will then choose two of the occasions from their brainstorm, and will write freely about each of them in a sustained first-person, personal narrative format. Students will then choose one of these two drafts to develop into a two-voiced memoir. Students will be instructed to select one that allows them to bring in the second voice for the two-voiced memoir. The second voice could be that of a friend, family member, or even someone who was simply a witness or bystander to the event. Students will then write the portion of the memoir written in the second voice, remembering that the second voice may tell a different story or a different version of the story told in the first voice. Students will be reminded that different people often see the same situation very differently. The final product will be a two-voiced memoir, with the section for each voice being no less than two typed, double-spaced pages. Students will also select an appropriate title for the two-voiced memoir—one that reflects not just one, but both voices.

Assessment: The final product will be assessed on organization, development, focus and coherence, voice, and conventions.

Closure: Students will read one another’s two-voiced memoirs during silent sustained reading time.

Resources: class set of *The Color of Water* by James McBride

Lesson Plan 3: Student-directed Discussion of “Condolences to Every One of Us” by Allan Gurganus

Objectives: ELA 10.10B, ELA.10.13A, ELA.10.14A, ELA 10.14B, ELA 10.16D, ELA 10.16F, ELA 10.16E, ELA 10.17D, ELA 10.18B.

Introduction: Students will be divided into 3 groups, each with its own role in the discussion. As the discussion progresses, the role of each group will shift so that each group ultimately has the opportunity to 1) ask questions, 2) answer questions, and 3) evaluate the questions and answers of the other two groups.

Concept Development: Sponge activity—students will write for 10 minutes in response to the following prompt: Write about a time in your life when your assumptions about someone else (or a group of people) were proven to be wrong. What did you learn about the other person/group of people? What did you learn about yourself? Next, students will read the short story, and as they do so will identify 10 critical quotations (sentences from the text that convey deeper meaning—theme, tone, symbolism, etc.). Students will write down the 10 critical quotations and will annotate each, explaining the significance and/or deeper meaning/implications of each one.

Student Practice: Students will then be divided into three groups. Based upon the critical quotations they have identified, each group will compose questions to ask other students during the class discussion; the questions must be analytical or evaluative in nature. Moreover, each group may use its own bank of critical quotations to respond to the questions asked of them. When each group has its turn evaluating the questions and responses of the other two groups, they will do so using a rubric. The rubric will include originality, insight, depth (going beneath the surface), connections (to other ideas or quotations, as well as other literary work or characters), and cogency. Each rotation of the class discussion will last 25 minutes. During the discussion, the teacher will function as moderator and facilitator, but all questions will be asked, answered, and evaluated by the students.

Assessment: Students will receive an individual grade for the 10 critical quotations and annotations. This portion of the assignment will be assessed on coherence and development of ideas. Students will also be assessed based on their role in the class discussion. Students will be assessed on the quality and relevance of the questions they ask, the coherence of the responses they give and the support that they offer in response to questions asked of them, and on their evaluation of the other two groups.

Closure: The teacher will facilitate a debriefing of the activity. At the conclusion of the debriefing, each student will write down three ideas (epiphanies or a-ha moments) that he or she gleaned from the discussion. Each student will also complete a short self-evaluation assessing his or her role in each of the three rotations of the discussion.

Resources: class set of “Condolences to Every One of Us” by Allan Gurganus

Lesson Plan 4: Compare/Contrast of James Baldwin “If Black English Isn’t a Language, then Tell Me What It Is” and Richard Rodriguez’s “Aria: Memoir of a Childhood”

Objectives: ELA.10.1A, ELA.10.1B, ELA.10.1C, ELA.10.2A, ELA.10.2B, ELA.10.3A, ELA.10.3B, ELA.10.3D, ELA 10.5.A, ELA 10.6A, ELA 10.7A, ELA 10.7I, ELA 10.8B, ELA 10.8C, ELA 10.10B, ELA.10.11A.

Introduction: Students will compose a well-organized, thesis-controlled compare/contrast essay of James Baldwin “If Black English Isn’t a Language, then Tell Me What It Is” and Richard Rodriguez’s “Aria: Memoir of a Childhood.” The essay will be a minimum of four typed, double-spaced pages.

Concept Development: Pre-Reading activity—for ten minutes, students will respond in writing to the following prompt: “Who you are is based on what you have to say as much as it is on how you say it. Agree or Disagree.” Next, students will read the essays and annotate as they read, noting key points of each essay, questioning or challenging points made in the essay, agreeing with points made in the essay, and extending ideas from the essays (noting other situations/scenarios where the same idea applies).

Student Practice: Students will create a written outline of their annotations for each piece. After doing so, students will create a Venn diagram representing where the ideas from the two essays overlap and where they diverge. The students will then create an essay plan that identifies the major points they intend to make, the textual support for each of their points, and the order in which the points will be made. Next, students will compose a working thesis statement, understanding that the thesis may evolve as the essay takes shape. Once the working thesis has been composed, students will compose the essay. During the revising stage, students will peer edit one another’s papers, not only for the purpose of assisting one another in improving their work, but also for the purpose of seeing authentic student models of the essay.

Assessment: The final product will be assessed on organization, development, focus and coherence, voice, and conventions.

Closure: Students will assess their own papers using the grading rubric prior to turning in the essay.

Resources: class sets of James Baldwin “If Black English Isn’t a Language, then Tell Me What It Is” and Richard Rodriguez’s “Aria: Memoir of a Childhood”

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