



## **The Confusion of Identity Exploration in Middle School**

Curriculum Unit 16.02.09  
by Alexandra Novak

### **Introduction**

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Establishing one's identity is arguably one of the most crucial things learned in 6th grade. Identity not only plays into how a child sees themselves, but it also effects how others see that individual. Students often play around with different identities. Students struggle to connect with identities that are passed on by family (what I call "non-negotiable" identities) and identities that students can choose as they grow and change. Developmentally 6th grade students are just beginning to metacognate, and are just beginning to be able to see themselves from an outside perspective, but they often lack the understanding of how to change perceptions of themselves inwardly and outwardly. True confidence is hard to come by in 6th grade, which makes group identities and trying on new identities quite common, though these are not always helpful, appropriate, or true to oneself.

I often see many shifts of identity in each student as 6th grade progresses. When they come to Grade 6 in the fall, students still for the most part seem childlike. They rely on me to tell them what to do each day, and still have an innocence to them. At the same time, many of them have been through traumatic experiences, which often manifest as mental health issues and/or academic and social issues as they enter puberty. Whether they have experienced a traumatic experience or not, 6th graders constantly struggle with making good choices and impressing their peers. I see them grapple with this in each and every decision from throwing a crumpled paper into the trash from across the room to inappropriate sexual interest and behavior.

Additionally, many of my students are first-generation Americans. Many of these students struggle with establishing themselves as American kids while trying to grapple with their home culture and the expectations that accompany that. My intention with this unit is to help my students reach an understanding of who they are through how they feel, and what they have been through so far in life. My intention is to use the existing core novel and supplemental texts provided by the district to delve into and analyze the various identities of those characters. I plan on introducing other supplemental texts that were explored in this seminar. The texts I have chosen target feelings of confusion, frustration, confidence, pride, internal and external struggle, amongst many other pre-teen and teenaged emotions. The texts both analyze and showcase these feelings and struggles with identity relating to the issues and crises my students often face.

Using multiple texts to connect with a novel and oneself are skills that require higher order thinking skills. This

unit will ask students to draw connections and conclusion between their core novel, supplemental texts of varying genres, and examples from their own personal life narratives. This unit encompasses several Quarter One Requirements for the NHPS Literacy Curriculum.

## Rationale

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I want my students to be able to use literature as a means of connection or explanation of what they feel. Students at this age, especially if they are behind in reading levels, struggle to find a way to express their various crises, whether this be relating to the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or to a first generation Chinese preteen named Jin in *American Born Chinese* .

In my unit I hope not only to give my students an understanding of what identity truly means, but also to give them the skills to analyze their own identities, and to learn how to identify with others in order to have a truer understanding of themselves.

An additional intent with the unit it to help my students to understand that identities can be fixed and/or moving; internal and/or external. You can choose some, and some you cannot escape. We use these identities to fit into niches of society that are comfortable to us, and allow us the freedom and confidence to be the best members of society that we can be. Judging and bullying often stem from the bully's own identity crises. I also hope to instill in them that their identity is a fluid concept, and that it can grow and change to fit their evolving life. Most of the decisions we make in how we treat others come from our own issues, and our own issues of identity. I want them to navigate this journey through books echoing the very experiences that shape their decisions and views of themselves.

## Description of Student Population

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The school where I teach is a relatively high-performing PreK-8th Grade Magnet School. The school is predominantly Black and Latino students, with a few Asian Americans, Caucasians and religiously diverse students. Many of our students have parents that are immigrants, and some are immigrants themselves. Our school celebrates its diversity through the magnet themes of "exploration and innovation." Our lessons and curriculum are expected to exemplify hands-on and student-directed learning. Our students are expected to learn through curiosity an intrigue in order to inspire them to always further explore new ideas and innovate them in the ever-changing world. Many of our students have never left New Haven, and almost none have traveled far due to economic restrictions. Our students crave and become extremely engaged in hands-on situations, and when visiting places inside and outside of their city. The majority of the literature they are exposed to comes from school, so I would like to provide them with a vast array of types of literature through this unit.

Almost all of our students have experienced a traumatic event in their early lives. Many of our students have chronic behavior problems as a result of this. This is the very reason that inspiring our children to love learning, to find truths and to seek justice is crucial to their success. Many of our students were not exposed

to anything educational or literary until their first days in Kindergarten. Some students have witnessed violence, death, extreme poverty, and crime. Many have witnessed both the American Justice System and the Department of Child and Family Services at work. Some are homeless while others lack familial or parental presence. These conditions make identity establishment particularly confusing and difficult, especially if families are not supportive or present a lot of the time. Many of these students cannot find an identity, or would even know how to verbalize a need for one. Helping students to find their voices and their expression is a tenuous and meticulous process full of failures and lack of connection. Our school does not contain the resources to help many of these children within our walls, leaving many children completely lost.

Luckily, our teachers and staff alike are a highly dedicated and caring team of individuals. We as a staff feel that once we can engage our students in learning, we can launch them into caring about something, or about finding a way to express who they are. This unit will provide the means and resources to connect our students to others who have experienced what they have experienced emotionally and physically. That is the beauty of literature: so many of us can relate and connect and find solace in the mutually experienced feelings of complete strangers.

## ***The Skin I'm In* By Sharon Flake**

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It is a requirement every year in Quarter One to read aloud a book called *The Skin I'm In* By Sharon Flake. This book will be the foundation of my unit. My plan is to teach five lessons throughout the duration of the novel at different appropriate points in order to analyze the identities of five of the main characters: Maleeka, Char, John-John, Caleb and Ms. Saunders. I plan on using other texts to compare with *The Skin I'm In* as they apply to specific characters and their situations.

*The Skin I'm In* is the story of a 6th grade girl at McLenton Middle School named Maleeka. Her father has recently died, leaving her mother in a deep depression. Her mother has taken to sewing to keep her mind off of her grief but it not very skilled. She makes clothes for Maleeka that her classmates bully constantly. Maleeka wears the clothes to school to make her mother feel better. However, when Maleeka arrives at school, she changes into trendier clothes lent to her by a bully named Charlese Jones in exchange for her "protection." Char is an older student who stayed back once or perhaps twice. She has very nice clothes and is popular amongst boys and other students. Char orders Maleeka around and if Maleeka does not heed her every order, she does something mean or embarrassing. Char is popular more by intimidation rather than by charm. Char has two sidekicks, twins named Raina and Raise. They echo all of Char's sentiments, and the three of them hold court in the girl's bathroom where they smoke cigarettes and skip class. Maleeka is bullied by Char and a boy, John-John, due to her extremely dark skin. Char only lets Maleeka wear her clothes if she does Char, Raina, and Raise's homework every day. When Maleeka cannot complete it some nights, Char is extremely mean to her.

The book explores a series of difficult situations for Maleeka. Woven into the story is Maleeka's relationship with a new teacher named Ms. Saunders. Maleeka also has a love interest, Caleb, who broke up with her due to peer pressure and because of his extreme guilt, is always trying to win back Maleeka's affections. The story climaxes toward the end when to get back at Ms. Saunders for giving Char a failing grade, Char, Raina, and Raise convince Maleeka to join them in vandalizing Ms. Saunders' classroom. They accidentally start a fire and Maleeka is forced to take the credit. Maleeka finally stands up to Char at the end of the book, and Char is sent

to live with family far away.

Throughout the book Maleeka is torn by her emotions and pain due to the traumatic events in her life at home and the bullies at school. Her trauma has clouded her ability to be confident or to be guided by adults close to her, as they too are affected by grief and loss. Maleeka finds her voice through writing after an assignment given to her by Ms. Saunders. I want my students to analyze the identities fighting for ownership of each character, and eventually choose one that they feel exemplifies their own experience.

I feel that my students will be able to relate to some of the main characters in the book. Below you will find character analyses and resources to use in order to analyze those characters. The unit consists of five lessons each looking closely at five main characters: Maleeka, Ms. Saunders, Charlese, John-John, and Caleb. The students will analyze how the characters see themselves and how they appear to others. They will also analyze what each character possesses in terms of sources of identity (non negotiable identities, such as physical appearance, family history, events you have experienced), and what each character chooses to show the world from these traits. The students will also take a look at whether the characters invent identities to showcase that do not reflect who they truly are. After analyzing each of these characters, my students will conduct an analysis on themselves using the same criteria. Each analysis will have suggestions for excerpts from other literary resources and rationales for each. The students will use text evidence from both *The Skin I'm In* and the supplementary reading excerpts to show how they connect with the various characters.

## Lessons: Character Analyses

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The following section provides information regarding the lessons intended to be taught during the reading of the Quarter One Core Novel, *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake. Each "lesson" uses supplemental texts to analyze the five main characters in the book. I want the students to explore these conflicting identities *through* the use of outside text and the voices of other authors. During this unit, the students will keep a journal. Each day, the students will answer a "do-now" or journaling question related to the character lesson that particular day. The students will use the notebook to draw connections to the characters in *The Skin I'm In* and the characters in the supplemental texts. Each character section features five main questions. The students will answer these in their journal using page numbers and excerpts from *The Skin I'm In*:

*How does (The Skin I'm In character) see him/herself? What are his/her "non- negotiable" identities? How does the world view him/her? How does he/she conduce his/herself at school, versus at home? Are any of their identities a farce?*

The last question referring to identities that may be considered a farce, d=some additional explanation may need to occur. By using this question, we are asking students to explore whether or not they adopt identities to appear to be something they are not in order to fit in. Sometimes, we can wear these well and act accordingly, and other times they feel grossly unnatural, and are something one cannot possibly keep up forever. This is typical of Middle school students, and I feel it is an important aspect of themselves to analyze. It is easier to identify it in the characters in this book, and with this question, I am hoping they can translate the idea to how they present themselves to the world. Students will also answer some or all (or variations of) the following questions of each character analysis:

*What does (character from The Skin I'm In) have in common with (character in supplemental text)? What advice do you think (character from The Skin I'm In) could offer to (character in supplemental text,) and vice-versa? How might (character from The Skin I'm In) help (character in supplemental text) to understand their own struggle?*

*Can you identify with any of the emotions or decisions felt or made by the characters today? Why or why not? Explain using examples from the chapter.*

I have provided information for more supplemental texts than is reasonable or necessary. It is up to the teacher's discretion to choose texts that will work well with their own individual classes. Each supplemental text example features a short summary, and a short rationale for its use in line with *The Skin I'm In*.

## **Maleeka Madison , Supplemental Resources**

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### **Citizen By Claudia Rankine**

***"When you are comfortable in your own skin, you become truly you."* (page 146)**

This quotation captures the essence of the conflict Maleeka is having. Maleeka was told her dark skin was beautiful by both her deceased father and her ex best friend and boyfriend, Caleb, both in poems. Maleeka was proud of her skin while she had strong and healthy relationships with those two people. Maleeka loses her father and Caleb around the same time. This is a very traumatic event in a middle school girl's life. Her quest to love herself is definitely one of the main themes in the novel. This short excerpt from Claudia Rankine's book captures the notion that identity cannot be solid until you wholly accept yourself. This is a complicated and painful part of growing up, especially for students who have also experienced trauma.

I feel that it is crucial to teach this novel while analyzing what Maleeka has been through in order to understand how her experiences have informed her choices. This is something that we need our students to notice, understand, and eventually relate to. It could truly be a therapeutic experience for some of our students. In understanding how trauma effects their own lives helps to arm them with the skills to take on new challenges and to come out successfully on the other side.

### **Locomotion By Jacqueline Woodson, Select Poems**

***"Memory"* (page 5)**

In this poem, the poet and main character Lonnie is describing memories of his parents who died in a fire leaving him and his sister orphans. They were then sent to separate foster homes. The memory is a painfully nostalgic description of his mother's love for him and his sister. Much of Lonnie's identity is shaped by the abrupt and traumatic loss of his loving parents. Maleeka is similar. Her father was the source of her confidence, and without him she is having trouble finding it on her own.

Many of our students have experienced loss or traumatic loss in their young lives. Some have lost parents, siblings, friends and neighbors to violent acts. When someone is torn from your life at a young and impressionable age, that can leave scars that are intense and deep in our students' lives. It launches an

identity crisis because these kids have less or no guidance in these confusing times. Puberty by nature is a confusing and complicated time for any young person, but compounded with trauma can truly disrupt their capabilities to succeed. It is crucial for our students to find commonality with the books they read. This in turn helps them to become more engaged in their schoolwork because they can see a true purpose in learning. When their learning helps them to cope and engages them in new material at the same time, real difference can occur. "Poetry is a free elixir" (Dwayne Betts) that can truly help students to come to terms with, and overcome, the adversity many of them have prematurely faced.

### **"Describe Somebody" (pages 22-23)**

In this poem, Lonnie is describing traits of his classmates during a class discussion before a poetry activity. Most of them are physical traits but some describe the interests of each person. Two of his classmates, Eric and Lamont, are talking in the back and are not engaged whatsoever. It is implied that this is normal behavior for them. They begin to make fun of poetry and say its nothing more than "lots and lots of stupid words." At the end of the poem, Lonnie describes how Eric is a fantastic singer in their mutual churches' choir. He contemplates writing his poem about this, but changes his mind, and the poem ends with him saying, "Eric would be real mad if I told the class / about his angel voice" (page 23). In this poem, Lonnie is dealing with the complexities of having interests and talents that may not be considered "cool" or "acceptable," much as Maleeka hides her intelligence and purposely fails many of her classes.

This is a very typical middle school conundrum. In my experience, almost every student I have ever had has had either a "secret" or not-well-known hobby or interest. As their teacher, I very much enjoy learning these new things about my students. It truly helps me to understand them and what type of learning suits them best. It is important for us teachers to remember that these pieces of their identity must remain private until they are ready to share them. We should encourage them to pursue their goals with pride, but respect the process. Using this excerpt could help students to understand that they all indeed have talents that maybe are not public knowledge. Perhaps as a supplemental activity, students could each share or illustrate something they are good at, that not everyone knows about.

### **Frankenstein By Mary Shelley, Classical Comics Graphic Novel Adaptation**

Frankenstein is a lengthy and challenging text for 6th grade students in terms of reading level and language style and use. About half of the students at my are below grade level in reading. But the themes in Frankenstein of identity and rage associated with school trauma shaping that identity are too strong to ignore. Themes of "freak" and "creature" are so connected to the way so many pre-pubescent 6th graders feel. Maleeka always feels that way, as she is constantly bullied about her appearance and lacks a solid parental structure, much as the creature in Frankenstein does. Much of the Creature's identity develops from his abandonment by his creator Dr. Frankenstein. He was born "benevolent and good", but terrifyingly ugly. Society imposed an identity on the Creature through their assumptions that he was evil due to his ghastly appearance. This angered him to the point where he became the very thing he never was or would have been with love from his creator.

Many 6th graders can relate to the feeling of having an identity imposed upon them. Some students come from a family of high-achieving students or, conversely, low-achieving students and are often assumed to fall in line with that pattern. Some students accept what society labels them as, and others do not for a plethora of different reasons. In *The Skin I'm In*, Maleeka purposely fails math to disrupt the assumptions of her high intelligence to her peers. Many students do this in order to seem tough or hard. Many students seek approval from their peers as opposed to adults especially if they have not historically had positive adult role models.

Unfortunately this leads to students obtaining attention for poor choices, which often gains popularity among peers. Maleeka feels so out of place that the only identity she can find is one that aligns her with Char for a duration of the book. Maleeka also often feels like the Creature as she is ruthlessly teased for her dark skin, something which she cannot help and does not define her. When teaching this point, it is *crucial* to **not** imply that extremely dark skin is likened to the extreme ugliness of the Creature in Frankenstein, but rather to stress how your outward appearance can often gain the judgment of others.

### **American Born Chinese, By Gene Luen Yang**

This graphic novel is set up with three alternating stories. The first is of a Chinese-American boy trying to balance his Chinese family culture with his desire to be seen as American in a world where they only see his Asian-ness. The second story is a fictional legend about a Monkey King who is constantly seeking identities which he is not, and who sells his soul to obtain traits he sees as ideal. They do not fit who he truly is and cause him many troubles. The third story is of an extremely purposely offensive character who embodies the harshest and most offensive Asian stereotypes. He makes life for his American cousin unbearably embarrassing. As the novel draws to a close, you as the reader begin to see the parallels and connections between the three stories, and may resolve that they are all of the identities that the main character feels fighting for the title of his true, or main identity. The novel explores the complex nature of being the American born child of an immigrant, as well as the conflicting feelings we often feel regarding our “non-negotiable” identities and who we truly want to be seen as to the world.

Maleeka writes a journal from the perspective of a slave girl named “Akeelma” (whose name is a variant of her own) to metaphorically talk about her problems with her teacher in a way, through an assignment, that is discreet and non-obtrusive. This graphic novel serves a similar purpose. It is a way for a teenaged first generation American to grapple with the aspects of his identity battling for a spot at Number 1. The novel concludes by streaming the stories together and drawing to a conclusion incorporating aspects of all three competing identities and explaining how they informed one another.

If our students were able to analyze the aspects of their identities possibly battling in their minds, they could draw out the crucial aspects of themselves and how their identity is formed. Many of my students would absolutely relate to Jin being first generation American preteens. I see that identity crisis on a daily basis. Students whose parents come from abroad are constantly trying to balance the love (or distaste) for the strong role traditions take in their lives with the lure of the world of American teenagers. Many of them are able to reconcile the two. Those students usually have strong adult presences in their lives. Many students do not have this for a plethora of reasons. Many parents work multiple jobs, many parents travel back and forth from their home country to America, and many feel uncomfortable coming in to schools for many reasons, to name just a few. If these students were able to connect with one another and identify with that very *identity crisis*, they could begin to form their own solid identity.

## **Ms. Saunders, Supplemental Resources**

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Maleeka’s new English teacher Ms. Saunders is new to the school. It is implied that she is working for some sort of program similar to Teach For America, and that she has money and a more lucrative job waiting for her when she is finished with McLenton Middle School. Miss Saunders has what sounds like either vitiligo or a large

scar on her face causing irregular coloring. Ms. Saunders is confident; Ms. Saunders cares for the students deeply despite their reluctance to give her the time of day. Ms. Saunders references times in her life where she was faced with questions of identity, and attempts to use her own experiences to help her students to use their identities for good and for confidence in themselves. She urges students to be proud of themselves. Ms. Saunders sees Maleeka's potential and takes a special interest in her despite Maleeka's reluctance. The student that gives Ms. Saunders the hardest time is also Maleeka's bully Charlese Jones. She continues to try and reach out to Charlese, and refuses to allow her to fail. She sees potential in Char that Char simply cannot see, and never responds too. Maleeka and Ms. Saunders develop a positive relationship through an assignment that was given to Maleeka, the journal entries from the perspective of a slave girl.

## **Locomotion By Jacqueline Woodson, Select Poems**

### **"Commercial Break" (pages 12-13)**

In this poem, the main character Lonnie, a young Black orphan living in foster care, describes the white-washed society he sees on television and in the teachers in his school. His teacher, a white woman named Ms. Marcus, is Lonnie's absolute favorite teacher. She gets him to love poetry and to use it as a means to express his grief over losing his parents in a deadly fire, and his sister to another foster home separate from his own. In this poem, he describes her as being out of touch with him and his fellow Black classmates. He essentially describes her as a white woman who has no concept of racial adversity since she is of a white-normative society and upbringing. Maleeka, and Char, and the other students often feel this way about Miss Saunders because she has expensive clothes, and after a few years she will be able to return to her cushy job making much more money than she does as a teacher if she so pleases. The students see her as wealthy and therefore not being able to relate to them even though she herself has faced quite a lot of adversity due to her pigmented skin disorder or scar on her face.

I think that it is important for students to be able to relate to their teachers. There are many schools of thought on how much is appropriate or necessary to share with students regarding your personal life. I have found that the more my students know about my life, the more they feel they can trust me. I am constantly sharing examples from my own life that I feel would be relevant to informing their connections with text. I try to use my experiences to "break the ice," or help bridge the gap between real life and books. This poem would help students to connect better with their own teachers as well. In *The Skin I'm In*, Miss Saunders has been made fun of just as much as Maleeka for something physical and out of their control. Maleeka and the students harp on the fact that she has lots of money rather than focusing on something that could connect them. They are fully aware of what Miss Saunders has faced, but choose something different to focus on. This coupled with the poem about Lonnie's teacher, could help students to see that teachers work very hard to help them improve their situations. Just because some of your teachers may have a different story than you does not mean they can't help you to understand something about yourself. When students can trust their teachers, they let them in to help.

### **"All of a Sudden, The Poem" (page 53-54)**

Here, Lonnie describes a poetry class where the students begin to mock another student's idea about something metaphorical and deep. The class ends up taking the mockery too far, and Ms. Marcus becomes fed up, and with pain in her eyes and a calm voice, she tells the students it is time for math. Ms. Saunders puts forth a lot of effort to try and motivate Char but to no avail. Rather, she receives quite a bit of flack from Char's older sister, her legal guardian. In the poem, Lonnie sees how frustrated she is that the class turned something beautiful and constructive into a big joke that no one could come back from. He identifies with her,



because he loves poetry, her, and her class. This poem highlights the feelings of trying your best and trying lots of new strategies to repair problems, and watching none of them work, and your efforts crash and burn.

This can complement “Commercial Break,” further deepening the relationship between teacher and student. This poem can also be used to help students see that they have all felt frustrated due to failure. Self esteem is so fragile in middle school, and sometimes small failures can deeply dissuade students from remaining engaged in class. It is important for our students to realize that this is a common feeling, and that hard work can pay off a bit, especially with help from their peers.

## **Charles Jones, Supplemental Resources**

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Char, as she is called, is orphaned and lives with her sister. Her sister throws overnight parties with an implied presence of drugs and sexuality. As pieces of Char’s life come out in the book, it is obvious as to why she has decided to identify as a mean bully. She craves attention, power, and control as would any child who lacks all three. Char, like many of my students, simply lacks the knowledge to turn her life around for the better. Char questions her identity just as much as any other child. However, she has figured out that being a bully shields her true pain. Char has no family, no supervision, and no guidance. Her sister shows her no love, and simply pays her for doing whatever she asks. She has more of the role of maid than child and sister.

When these unnatural identities and roles are forced upon children, they tend to lash out. I have seen this many times in my teaching. Many of our students will be able to relate to the notion that many of them become the negative things people tell them that they are despite their truth. As teachers, it is important for us to explain that this process is not organic, and that they do not need to conform to what society assumes. All children possess potential.

### **Citizen, By Claudia Rankine**

#### **Pages 23-36**

In this excerpt, Rankine delves into an analysis of professional tennis player Serena Williams behavior as described by the media and tennis officials. The media has traditionally described Williams as many pejorative words to describe her animated reactions. What the media does not let on to is the extreme racism that Williams has outright experienced in the White-dominated sport. This excerpt explains the sources of Williams’s very real rage and truly justifies all of her behavior and reactions. Be aware that racial slurs are featured in this excerpt.

Though our school has some teachers of color, the staff is predominantly white. This is consistent with the United States as a whole. White culture (and countless others) assert the importance of politeness and remaining calm in frustrating situations. This is an unreasonable request for students that have experienced trauma and violence as a means of overcoming frustrations. It is crucial that we as educators understand these experiences. They provide us with the necessary information we need to properly help our students find their voice. With that, we can then help them to develop positive workplace and school behaviors. Many of our students lash out, and we punish them for it. This excerpt perfectly outlines why that is not a successful or reasonable approach.

Secondly, this excerpt provides a look into how the media portrays certain events and how reality is often skewed. It showcases how dangerous uninformed perspectives can be as well as how dangerous it can be to take the media's word without questioning. It proves the importance of asking questions and researching something in order to categorize truth from falsehood, especially in terms of race.

### **Locomotion By Jacqueline Woodson, Select Poems**

#### **"Me, Eric, Lamont & Angel" (pages 26-27)**

In this poem, Lonnie describes a conversation between himself and his three friends. They are "one-upping" each other by sharing tales of horrible things they have witnessed. When it gets to be Lonnie's turn, he says, "Never seen nothin'." Watching his parents and his home burn was the most horrible of all of the stories, but he decided to keep it from his friends. Like Char, the loss of his parents embarrasses Lonnie. It is not something that is discussed, perhaps because Char and Lonnie do not want to be identified as orphaned, or without a loving parent. They both put on different fronts to try and escape loss as identity. In this poem, Lonnie is angry, like Char. Many of our students hide from their traumas for fear of being seen as different. What they do not realize is that this is a very common feeling, and that they are not alone in it.

#### **"Haiku Poem" (page 59)**

"Ms. Marcus wants to/ see all my poems. No way. / Some things just your own." In this poem Lonnie expresses that much of his thoughts and poems are not for anyone else. Some of his pain is not to be talked about, shared, or worked through. In this instance he feels isolated, alone, and that no one will ever help him out of that. Char's behavior indicates giving up on having love in her life. Char does not have a loving home and confronts the world very defensively and with aggression. She cannot feel love in the same way that people who haven't experienced the loss of both parents can. Her behavior is a direct and understandable response to the trauma she has encountered in her young life. It is important that our students have an outlet for their emotions or traumatic events. This outlet can be private, and can be very helpful.

### **Monster By Walter Dean Meyers**

Though this is the core novel for 8th grade in New Haven, aspects and quotations from it could very well supplement *The Skin I'm In* while also building background knowledge for when they revisit the book in two years. *Monster* is about a young black boy who is on trial for a crime we as the audience never know if he truly committed or not. The book is a collection of excerpts from his own journal, conversations with people throughout the trial, and transcripts from the trial itself written by Steve in the manner of a screenplay. There is one quotation that I feel related directly to Char in *The Skin I'm In*. The main character Steve is asking his lawyer why she seems frustrated with the case. She explains to Steve why she will lose the case- it's because the jury only sees stereotypes. "You're young, you're Black, and you're on trial. What else do they need to know?" In this sad moment she is presenting Steve with the idea that she thinks the jury all assume young black boys are guilty of crimes despite solid proof of innocence due to old stories and stereotypes. The theme in this scene explores superimposed identities based upon things we cannot control.

Char is seen as a child who is headed toward a difficult and felonious lifestyle due to the fact that her sister treats her like a servant and she has no family or guidance. She becomes the messed-up orphan everyone assumed she would always be despite who she really may be deep down. Many of our students succumb to the pre-assumed identities placed on them, often from strangers. There are families of multiple children from impoverished situations that are often assumed to perform in certain ways, and without positive

reinforcement from anyone, end up becoming exactly what people say they are.

## John-John, Supplemental Resources

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John-John is very short and plays the roles of quasi-bully and class clown in school. He also chimes in when Maleeka is being bullied. John-John is a victim himself of bullying on the streets of his neighborhood, but has figured out how to be the bully at McLenton Middle School to avoid being the victim there. He is constantly seeking the attention of girls, and constantly is trying to prove that he is “a man”. John-John repeats a song he made up about Maleeka’s dark skin throughout the book, and seems to pull it out to deflect attention away from his shortcomings. One of the turning points in the book features Maleeka coming to his defense when a group of gang-members are beating John-John in their neighborhood. Many of the identities that he and Maleeka sport throughout the book change and turn drastically at this point in the story. John-John’s identity in school seems to stem from his lack of “toughness” on the streets. He adopts the identities that his bullies have to assert control over his peers at school. He tries on a different identity to survive just as Char and Maleeka do.

Many of my students adopt this “bully” persona to hide their true pain. This year, two of my students got into a fist-fight. One student’s father is dying, and recently traveled back to Africa to die. This student is very bright, and very hard working. He is also a talented athlete and is well spoken. His parents are both from Ghana and tout the importance of his cultural heritage. Like many first generation immigrants, he is caught between identifying with his family and that of an African-American teenager. The second student receives Special Education services. He comes from a long line of brothers and sisters in an extremely impoverished family with little to no parental guidance. His 8th grade sister gave birth this year. These two boys rarely interact, and have no knowledge of their reciprocating struggles. This displaced anger and lack of ability to voice their pain took the form of a fist fight.

This type of interaction happens often. It is my hope that through this unit and these texts that students like this will find a common ground and be a source of support for one another rather than always feeling the need to make an enemy.

### Locomotion By Jacqueline Woodson, Select Poems

#### “LaTenya II” (page 95)

In this poem, Lonnie describes an interaction with his crush LaTenya. She is jumping rope with her friends and he finally works up the urge to talk to her. When he does he notices strange scars on her hands. When he asks her about it she becomes horribly defensive and snaps some mean words back at him. He is taken aback, so is unable to tell her he truly finds her beautiful despite that, but can only muster up one word. John-John often puffs up his chest at school to fend off ravenous bullies of a taller stature. He makes fun of Maleeka to appear stronger. He is picked on relentlessly by bigger boys in his neighborhood, and therefore acts different in different parts of himself. John-John is insecure about his physical attributes and takes it out on Maleeka much as LaTenya takes it out on Lonnie. This poem helps students to understand why kids make fun of one another. If kids had an understanding of what each other was dealing with, they may not always turn to violence.

### **“New Boy Poems I, II & III” (pages 29-30, 41-42, 72)**

In these three short poems, Lonnie documents the treatment of a new boy who moved from the south. His clothes, accent and mannerisms are different and he appears to be quite poor. The students make fun of him relentlessly much as John-John does to Maleeka. Eventually the new boy in the poems stands up for himself against some of his classmates and proves his worth on the soccer field at recess. In *The Skin I’m In*, John-John and Maleeka eventually work out their differences after Maleeka proves herself to John-John by helping him against some bullies. This poem would help enhance the idea that being united and getting along with your peers helps us all to feel like we belong.

## **Caleb, Supplemental Resources**

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Caleb is the last character we will analyze. Caleb is an intelligent mixed-race boy at McClendon Middle School. He is in lots of clubs, and does a lot to try and better the school. He is generally quite positive, and seems to get along fine with his peers. Caleb was at one time Maleeka’s boyfriend and best friend. They both felt like outsiders in many ways, and connected on that. Before the story began, it is told to the reader that Caleb ditched Maleeka after their peers relentlessly bullying her on a bus. He conformed to the group rather than be the outlier to stand up for her— typical behavior of many middle schoolers. Of course this action deeply hurt Maleeka. Caleb spends the better part of the novel trying to apologize and win back her affections. His guilt was immense and he demonstrates that he knows how Maleeka must be feeling betrayed and alone. But, as any hurt person may do, she ignores him and does not fully believe him until the end of the novel.

### **Citizen, By Claudia Rankine**

**Pages 139-146**

This poem is written from the perspective of someone who seems to be living outside of his or her own experience. The word “you” is used countless times. This poem showcases the confusion of being a part of a society that is not controlled by oneself in any way, and what living there feels like. The poet feels disconnected, and like their own choices and feelings are secondary to that of the engine of society. Decisions are made based upon those around you and not yourself. The poem concludes with, “the worst injury is feeling you don’t so much belong/ to you.” I interpreted this poem as meaning your decisions are controlled by what those around you impose.

Caleb decided to cut ties with Maleeka when his peers were making fun of him for sitting with her on the bus. In a moment of weakness, he allowed his environment to dictate his decision. He never fully accepted his choice to do that, and is conflicted and feels guilty for a large part of the novel. Though he made a choice that many see as mean and ruthless, it was informed by his environment, and it truly was difficult to make a different choice given the circumstances.

### **Frankenstein, By Mary Shelley, Classical Comics Graphic Novel Adaptation**

**Pages 22-25**

In this excerpt, Dr. Frankenstein creates the creature, then abandons it in sheer terror after seeing its ghastly

appearance and movements. Dr. Frankenstein abandons his creation before giving it a chance to exist and prove its “benevolence” and goodness. This can be compared to Caleb dumping Maleeka in the face of fear as well. Additionally, on pages 70-73, the Creature arrives upon a home in need of food, drink and rest. He is cautious in entering and wary of the fear his appearance strikes. He knocks, and announces who he is and his intentions. An old man tells him to come in, and informs him that he is blind. They have a pleasant conversation and the old man tells the Creature that he understands that he is good and sincere. When the old man’s family returns home, they drive the Creature out violently. The old man did not contest his family’s actions despite his knowledge of the kindness and sincerity of the creature. Caleb did not contest when the whole bus was making fun of Maleeka. He went along with it, and did not stand up for what was right and true.

This excerpt can be used to talk about bystanders. Being a bystander is common in middle school. Students do not want to be outed in any way that is not acceptable to the group. What students fail to realize, is that the bystanders outnumber the bullies and could easily stand up together to help each other out. Students often have strong feelings on this topic, so it would be excellent to discuss in a middle school classroom. Everyone has felt alone at one point or another, and would be able to share something. If you have students that refuse, consider re-reading “Describe Somebody,” (pages 22-23) in *Locomotion* with the class.

### **American Born Chinese, By Gene Luen Yang**

In this novel, the main character Lin is struggling to find his collective identity using aspects of his Asian culture and his desire to be seen as an American kid. He has a crush on a white girl at his school, and throughout the novel awkwardly attempts to win her affections. He does end up asking her on a date, and ends up perming and dying his hair to look more desirable to her. Eventually she loses interest in him, and the athletic jock wins her over using Jin in the process. Jin does not see this coming. Due to his displaced anger over this embarrassing turn of events, he kisses his Asian friend’s Asian girlfriend causing their friendship to end. I feel that this portion of the novel is an excellent parallel to Caleb and Maleeka. Jin’s strong desire to look like someone other than himself causes him to lose his girlfriend. He allows the culture around him to dictate his relationship with someone he cared deeply for.

This happens quite often in middle school settings. Students are easily influenced by peers despite what their conscience may be telling them.

## **Ongoing and Final Assessments**

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In addition to the journal and upon completion of the novel, students will be asked to identify with one character from *The Skin I’m In* and explain why using text evidence from it as well as text evidence from the supplemental resources. The students will be required to read one book from these supplemental resources during Reader’s Workshop and use their notes and finding from that experience to enhance their comparison. The students will create an Identity Analysis of themselves addressing the same questions used to analyze the characters from *The Skin I’m In*. *How do you see yourself? What are your “non-negotiable” identities? How does the world see you? How do you choose to conduct yourself? Are any of your identities a farce?*

The students will be required to support those answers using text evidence from both sources. The students will then explain why they relate to one of the characters from

*The Skin I'm In*. Finally, the students will create a diptych drawing of their face flanked by the character they chose to identify with. These will be private unless the students want them show-cased.

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## Suggested Reading

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Abu El-Haj, Thea, Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, Ferguson, Ron, et. al. *Everyday Anti-Racism: Getting Real about Race in School*. New York, NY: The New Press, 2008.

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