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Black & Queer Lives: Intersecting Identities of the Harlem Renaissance

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Introduction

In this country, there wages many debates about what should and shouldn't taught in the classroom. There are many people who feel that dealing with certain topics such as race or sexuality are bringing politics into the classroom. I don't disagree with these individuals, but I would counter that keeping them out of the classroom is equally politically. Discussing these issues in the classroom would be a liberal viewpoint, however, not discussing them is a conservative viewpoint, and not, as many have suggested, a neutral standpoint. The status quo in many parts of this country has been conservative for many years and, in other parts, it has been more liberal. In doing work with this class, and developing this unit, I realize there are people who are going to be upset. So, I want to open this with a plea to you.

As an educator, my job cannot be completed if my students' basic needs aren't met. It's why I am expected to serve breakfast to my students in the morning. It's why I send my kids to the bathroom when they ask. It is why when I am concerned about something that is happening to them I have to report it. Part of ensuring student success in my classroom is ensuring student safety, both physical and emotional. I don't allow inappropriate language in my class. I don't allow students to bully one another because of their race, religion, nationality, gender, sexuality, or any other qualifier. It is my job to ensure that when kids are in my classroom that they are safe.

I am a gay educator. Those two identities, being gay and being an educator, are separate but important to who I am. They aren't masks that I can put on and take off when I enter the school building. Pretending that one doesn't shape the other would require mental gymnastics that I haven't engaged with since I was in the closet. I don't see the need to hide who I am. Part of me being me is talking with my hands and other signals that might suggest I am a little more crooked than straight. Do my kids care? Some do. Some don't. When students do make it an issue, it is an opportunity for me to demonstrate the reaction I expect my students to demonstrate in a situation where another student attacks their identity. I don't get mad in the moment. I just try to bring the incident to smooth conclusion without escalating it and then later addressing the issue privately.

The fact that I am gay doesn't define me as a person or as an educator, but rather is a part of the broader spectrum of who I am as a human being. This is not something that is unique to me. It is true of the students in my classroom and the artists they study.

Understanding a whole person is important. Being able to recognize that people are more than just a label is important. It is also important to know that labels do exist and the role they play in society. In many of the works students will encounter in this unit, a person's sexual orientation or gender identity may not appear to play a role in the work, but the culture surrounding that identity, and their ability to show that identity plays a role in the way they approach their work. Though, as stated above, sexuality and gender identity alone do not play the only role in this though examining the intersectionality of the author's life and work should be done.

Rationale

I am a middle school teacher working in a school of about 420 students. The population dropped dramatically during COVID as we remained online for almost a full year which resulted in many suburban families returning to schools in their home district. Furthermore, we continue to gain more and more multilingual students which has shifted the demographics of our school's landscape dramatically. As I develop this unit, I plan for my current seventh graders who will be eighth graders next year. A good quarter of my students are multilingual. I would say a much smaller percentage than usual (around 10%) are receiving special education services, however I expect the district to send us more students in both of those demographics. A large portion of my students have been in my school for three or more years and those who are in the new category tend to fall into the significantly below grade level category for reading. The reason this is important is because identity is at the core of the unit and the core of most middle schoolers' own self-discovery journeys.

As I addressed in the introduction, there is value in understanding a whole person and valuing a person for who they are. Having grown up a closeted teenager, I am aware of the statistics on LGBTQ+ youth and suicide. The rate is much higher among those who belong to the community because of the social stigma that is associated with those who identify as such.¹ Furthermore, we have seen declines in these numbers with things like the passage of LGBTQ hate crime laws.² As an educator and as a gay man, the attacks on the Trans community is alarming. Knowing the connection between legal recognition and saving lives is what drives the work that I am doing in this unit. With awareness and exposure comes understanding and acceptance. This isn't about recruitment, but about the possibility of changing minds. I am not a fool. There will be pushback on elements of this, but even one kid recognizes that they are seen, it is important.

When I arrived in my school, I recognized that the literature we were reading didn't celebrate the lives of black and brown people. We read "Monster," by Walter Dean Myers, that told the story of a black youth jailed for a crime in which he participated that resulted in a death, and the story of Emmett Till. The only works my students were reading and identifying with were about dead black boys or incarcerated ones. This wasn't acceptable. The district has made more strides to do better in reaching students of color. We have classroom libraries celebrating the lives of people of color and have started to do the same with LGBTQ+ people. It is important that students understand intersectionality and that some of the individuals they read in school are people who identify somewhere outside the lines of straight, white, cisgender, and male. This unit is meant to be a bridge to continue the work that is needed in so many communities around the country with a specific focus on my own population.

The Queer History of the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance was an arts movement that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s in the New York City borough of Harlem. It was the result of a number of factors leading to an explosion of creativity that continues to be celebrated today.

One of the historical events that led to the Harlem Renaissance was the Great Migration. The Great Migration was the movement of formerly enslaved African Americans from the South to the North after the dissolution of the Civil War. African Americans arrived looking for economic opportunities and had a hope for a new start. Events such as World War I had increased production and manufacturing needs resulting in an abundance of job opportunities in large urban centers in the northern United States.³ One of the communities that many African Americans settled in to take advantage of these opportunities was Harlem.

A critical component of the Harlem Renaissance was identity. Alain Locke, a well-regarded philosopher, developed the idea of the New Negro. Locke's new identity theory saw African Americans had embraced their own individuality rather than focusing on the reaction of one's self to the outcomes of events like the Civil War and Reconstruction. In this space of self-dependence and self-respect, Locke felt art was sure to blossom.⁴ In embracing his own identity, Locke was also noted for having carried on same-sex relationships.⁵

Even in this age of new freedom, there was still a level of restraint, societal and personal, regarding queer people. Only Richard Bruce Nugent was an out gay man, while many other men who loved men and women who loved women didn't embrace that identity in public. Their thoughts and feelings still came across in their work. Among these writers were Langston Hughes, Nella Larson, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen. Performing artists such as Gladys Bentley and Jimmie Daniels were also popular queer figures during the Harlem Renaissance.⁶

Concurrently with the literary movement, the vibrant nightlife of Harlem allowed for other areas of the arts to flourish. With nightclubs popping up throughout the area, capitalism encouraged African American singers and performers to develop their talents. While other boroughs were under intense scrutiny because of Prohibition, the laissez faire policing of Harlem allowed for venues to serve alcohol without as much fear as their white counterparts. This also led to other unpatrolled vices which attracted people of all races to Harlem, which, again, led to economic prosperity for those in the region. With this acknowledged, it should be noted that much of the real estate in the area was under the control of white people living outside Harlem itself. This intersectionality cannot be ignored because while the artistic benefits were plentiful for African Americans, there was not always access to all of the business opportunities that the area was known for.⁷

In this space artistic expression and a new level of liberation, queer people were able to live more comfortably for a number of reasons, but still lived with fears. An emphasis on social gatherings brought together diverse groups of people. In order to pay landlords, rent parties were held to collect the funds needed to maintain housing. Often, economic opportunity would win out over social morality, if that was even a problem. Money was money no matter who it came from. Furthermore, salon style gatherings, like those held by Alexander Gumby and A'Leila Walker, also attracted, and welcomed, a large crowd of queer people. Additionally, the existence of buffet flats, spaces where rooms could be rented by the night, drew in large gay crowds as well.⁸

Other spaces in Harlem during the Renaissance welcomed people with less rigid gender presentation. Gender

non-conforming performers were frequently seen at spaces such as Edmond's Cellar. Harry Hansberry's Clam House was the spot where the featured performer was Gladys Bentley, who would perform wearing a man's tuxedo and top hat.⁹ Bentley was known to flirt with women in the audience while she sang her songs, which included lyrics at times about the women she had been romantically involved. Bentley publicly married her white girlfriend in 1931 in a civil ceremony.¹⁰ Other spots such as the Hamilton Lodge were the home of Harlem costume balls "where both men and women dressed as they pleased and danced with whom the wished."¹¹ Welcoming spaces allowed a queer community to thrive.

Other social events had queer connections. For example, a significant social event of the Harlem Renaissance was the marriage of poet Countee Cullen to Yolanda DuBois. The wedding was described in many of the papers of the time, including many of the preparations leading up to the event. The bride and groom invited 1,200 guests (it is estimated 3,000 attended) to the affair at the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem where Countee Cullen's father was the pastor.¹² On April 9, 1928, the two shared their vows. The bridal party consisted of eighteen attendants. Groom had nine members in his party, among them poet Langston Hughes.¹³ Hughes wrote about the event in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, where he described the event between a discussion of singer Florence Mills' funeral and a religious revival by the Reverend Dr. Becton, emphasizing the grandness of all three events.¹⁴ Ultimately the marriage was dissolved with rumors of the groom's desire for the same gender.¹⁵

Found Poetry

A critical component of the Harlem Renaissance was poetry. Poetry is a concept that some students find very exciting because the length is less intimidating than the longer works of narrative text, though this isn't always true. On the other hand, the shorter length usually requires a deeper analysis of what goes on, which can also be anxiety provoking. I teach a large number of multilingual students and like for them to be able to access the material like their English proficient peers. For this reason, part of the culminating project for this unit will be the creation of a found poem.¹⁶

A found poem is a poem made up of words, phrases, and texts that have already been written. It is the poet's job to arrange the material in a way that they find meaningful. There are two major types of found poems: (1) blackout poems and (2) cut up poems. In a black out poems, the poet removes words by darkening them and leaving only selected words to help create a new meaning. In a cut up poem, the poet is taking words and phrases from different works in order to create a new work.¹⁷

If there are students who want to expand beyond this, they can create other types of poems. Poetry is a subject that would typically be covered in seventh grade with Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover*, which will be referenced at the start of the unit. Developing further connections by exploring the work did the previous year in the poetry unit will help to activate student's background knowledge in order to make stronger connections in this unit.

Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers was born August 12, 1937, in Martinsburg, West Virginia, under the name Walter Milton Myers. When he was two years old, his mother died and he was taken in by Florence and Herbert Dean who raised him. In honor of the family who took him in, Myers would later change his middle name from Milton to Dean.

Shortly after being taken in, the Deans took Myers to New York City for work opportunities, and they settled in the Harlem neighborhood. Growing up, Myers was an avid reader who found reading an escape from the problems of the world, partially from issues with a speech impediment. Myers experiences in Harlem helped to shape who he was. He once spotted Langston Hughes, a prominent Harlem Renaissance writer, sitting on the porch of Hughes' home one day. In this environment, Myers soon developed his own passion for writing.¹⁸

Professionally, Walter Dean Myers wrote for several genres, but he was most well-known for his works in young adult fiction. Among these works included *Fallen Angels*, a story of young man from Harlem who served in the Vietnam War. Another one of his more famous works is *Scorpions*, which told the tale of a young man who was asked to take possession of a firearm. Additionally, Myers was the talent behind *Monster*, which told the story of a young kid on trial for murder due to his involvement in a robbery gone wrong. For *Monster*, Myers was awarded the Coretta Scott King Award as well as the Michael L. Printz Award. He collaborated on some of his works with his son, Christopher.¹⁹

On July 1, 2014, Walter Dean Myers passed away at the age of 76 at Beth Israel Medical Center in Manhattan, New York.²⁰

Countee Cullen

On May 30, 1903, Countee LeRoy Porter was born. At an early age, Porter came to be in the care of his grandmother. Some sources state his mother had died,²¹ while others stated that she had abandoned him and came back later to try and reconnect.²² Porter was a very private individual, which contributes to some of the misinformation.

As a result of his grandmother's passing in 1918, Cullen came to live with Reverend Frederick A. Cullen in Harlem. During this time, Cullen was exposed to African American politics and culture as a part of the family of an influential pastor. Hearing about and living the African American experience shaped his work as a writer as did his formal education by mostly white educators.²³ In high school, he was an honor student, school newspaper editor, and achieved awards for his poetry. After graduation, Cullen attended New York University where he was the winner of the Witter Brynn Contest for his writing. After achieving his undergraduate degree, Cullen went on to attain a masters at Harvard University.²⁴

In 1928, two significant events impacted Cullen. The first was he married Nina Yolanda Du Bois, the daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois, a noted African American intellectual. Secondly, he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship resulting in him leaving for France to write poetry. After returning, Cullen divorced his wife in 1930.²⁵ While

Cullen remained a private person, his friends were mostly gay men. Later, Nina Yolanda Du Bois stated their marriage broke up because of Cullen's attraction to men.²⁶

While Cullen may mostly be known for his poetry, he was also a novelist, playwright, and children's book author. His first volume of poetry was entitled *Color*. Some of his other volumes of poetry included *Copper Sun* and *Ballad of a Brown Girl*. In 1932, Cullen published *One Way to Heaven*, which turned out to be his only novel. He later published a play *The Third Fourth of July*. Cullen's work managed to attract attention of a diverse audience of readers from all races. Some of his work, such as *Heritage*, represented his desire to reclaim his art's African roots. Ultimately, Cullen felt all poetry was just poetry, not to be designated differently by race.²⁷

In his final years, Cullen continued to write while he also taught at a public school. He married Ida Mae Robertson in 1940, and they remained married until his death. On January 9, 1946, Cullen died from complications stemming from high blood pressure and uremia in New York City.²⁸

Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri, to his parents James Hughes and Carrie Langston. Hughes was raised by his grandmother, Mary Langston, until her death in 1914. Inspired by Carl Sandburg, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Walt Whitman, Hughes began writing poetry while he still attended high school in Cleveland, Ohio. Hughes briefly attended Columbia University in New York City, but left due to the racism he experienced. His experiences at Columbia did allow him to experience the growing arts movement in Harlem, New York.²⁹

Hughes was a prolific writer known for his work in multiple genres. He was most known for his poetry, specifically for being the inventor of jazz poetry, a genre that mimicked the sound of the musical genre of the same name. He was known for such poems as *The Weary Blues* and *Let America Be America Again*. Across all genres, Hughes' work dealt with the African American experience. He once stated, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."³⁰ In his thirties, Hughes dabbled in playwriting when he and Zora Neale Hurston developed the 1930 production *Mule Bone*. He wrote for musicals as well. At different periods of his life, Hughes wrote for newspapers focusing on issues facing African Americans such as segregation and Jim Crow laws.³¹

In considering Hughes' identity, writer Andre Bagoo presented several interesting thoughts regarding who Hughes was and how he identified. While he identified as African American, his family line did include white and Native American family members. While never identifying as gay, Bagoo cited letters from Hughes to Alain Locke with references to Walt Whitman's poems including "Song of the Open Road" and "Calamus." The poems are often considered to have homosexual tones to them.³² Among the ones who knew him personally, Locke identified as gay.³³ Biographer Arnold Rampersad suggests that Hughes presented and identified as asexual.³⁴ The lens of identity is one way to examine the meaning of Hughes' written words.

On May 22, 1967, Langston Hughes died from medical complications stemming from the treatment of prostate cancer.³⁵ Since his death, Hughes has been remembered in a number of ways including his written work.

Besides this, one of his poems, "I, Too," was written on the wall of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Also, Hughes' home in Harlem located on East 127th Street was recognized as a New York City landmark since 1981.³⁶

Oscar Micheaux & Alice B. Russell

Husband and wife Oscar Micheaux and Alice B. Russell were prominent figures in the film world during the Harlem Renaissance. Micheaux was the first African American independent film producer. Russell was an actress, writer, and producer. Their work was notable for dealing with contemporary issues facing African Americans at the time while also being entertaining. One specific aspect about their work that stood out was the diverse character types that they included in their film. At the time, most African American characters in film were racist caricatures presented by white filmmakers. Micheaux presented wealthy, as well as working class, African Americans and represented many different stock types (ingénue, hero, etc.) that had not necessarily been seen in film with African American actors in those roles.³⁷

Oscar Micheaux was born in 1884 near Murphysboro, Illinois. When Micheaux turned 17, he moved to Chicago where he had a number of jobs in fields which included the steel and meatpacking industries. The position with the most profound impact on starting the journey of his life's work in film was his job as a train porter. In this position, Micheaux was able to interact with people of all walks of life, including the wealthy, while also able to save up money of his own. With the money he saved, Micheaux moved to South Dakota in 1904 where he was a homesteader near the Rosebud Sioux Reservation, but he faced hardships such as racial discrimination and the failure of his first marriage.³⁸

In 1913, Oscar Micheaux published *The Conquest: The Story of a Black Pioneer*, his first novel based on autobiographical experiences of living in South Dakota. Micheaux would go on to write seven novels all together. Soon, a film production company sought to adapt Micheaux's work into a film. The company, though, wasn't keen on Micheaux's desire to be involved in the production. Due to their refusal, Micheaux decided to set up his own production company and released the film himself in 1919 as *The Homesteader*.³⁹ Another important work by Micheaux was *Within Our Gates*, which responded to a popular film, *The Birth of a Nation*. Micheaux's film emphasized the dangers of white supremacy in contrast to the previous film which had glorified the Ku Klux Klan. Micheaux would go on to produce 44 films in the course of three decades. Often, the films he produced were formulaic detective tales, but the African American audience was thrilled to see themselves represented in film that the repetition didn't harm Micheaux commercially.⁴⁰

In 1951, Micheaux passed away at the age of 67. After his death, Micheaux was recognized for his contribution to film by the Directors Guild of America and the Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame.⁴¹

Due to the treatment of women of color, less is known about Alice B. Russell, the wife and creative collaborator of Micheaux. It is assumed that her birthdate is June 30, 1889 based on the 1900 U.S. Census. Russell was the daughter of a newspaper editor, who showed her own interest in writing with short stories such as *Naomi*, *Negress*, and her work on the films her husband was producing.⁴²

By 1926, Russell had met Oscar Micheaux and married him in Montclair, New Jersey. In 1928, Russell began to

act in motion pictures. Soon, Russell became involved professionally with Micheaux, who in 1928 produced *Darktown Review*, a film made of shorts where Russell appeared as an extra. In film, Russell often played women who had achieved a college education and were still devoted maternal figures that provided a strong role model for African Americans. Russell continued to work with her husband by writing and producing films alongside him, often going uncredited, but her work was recognized by those who worked with her.⁴³

Alice Burton Russell died January 1, 1985.⁴⁴

Unit Overview

Lesson 1: Who We Are and Where We Come From

In this introductory lesson, the instructor's objective is to link the present to the past. To introduce the unit, the instructor will begin by having the students read work by Walter Dean Myers. The first work the students will be presented with is a short story entitled *Sometimes a Dream Needs a Push* (2007). In this story, the son of a famous basketball player is asked to join a wheelchair basketball team after becoming paralyzed in a car accident. This unit has been written for eighth graders who would have previously read Kwame Alexander's "The Crossover" as seventh graders in my class. Leaning into those connections (basketball / famous parents / overcoming obstacles) will allow easy access to the students.

Before students start reading the story, students will be asked to write a list about their own identity. Students will be given an initial five minute period to write as many thoughts or idea down about their identity. Then, as a class, students will identify the different parts of identity as a class. After completing this, students would take an additional few minutes to jot down any other ideas they have about their own identity. Later, students would be asked to take their list and to write a 7 - 9 sentence journal about which element of their identity do they think is most important to them and why.

After completing the identity journal, students will be asked to examine the author's life a bit more. To accomplish this, students will read two different biographies, *About Walter Dean Myers* and *Walter Dean Myers Biography*, and watching two videos about the man, *Interview with Walter Dean Myers* and *Walter Dean Myers Discusses*. For each video and reading, the students would be expected to determine three key details about the man's life. The videos and readings for this activity can be located in the Reading List Subsection by lesson.

After building background on the author, the students would read *Sometimes a Dream Needs a Push* with a focus on characterization and determining how Myers develops Chris as a character by identifying different parts of Chris' identity. As they read, students will note which moments seem important to Chris' identity in a graphic organizer that has them include: (a) character's actions, (b) element of identity/definition, and (c) explanation. When identifying the element of identity (i.e. basketball player), the students should consider what this element requires them to do (i.e. not only play ball, but commit to helping your team mates). The students should have at least three examples of identity in their organizer.

At the end of the story, students will be asked to identify which element they feel is most important to the character in the story in a response similar to the one they wrote about themselves. Students should have a

claim, at least two supporting pieces of evidence from the text, and explaining the evidence by connecting it back to identity. Students will be encouraged to use their journals as models for this writing assignment.

Finally, students will be asked to compare the identity of Chris in the story to the author Walter Dean Myers and consider what elements Myers may have connected with. For example, Myers had a speech impediment which may have been one of the reasons that he felt he could write about Chris dealing with a disability. In the culminating assignment, students would then be asked to consider why the author felt this was the identity most important to focus on in this story.

Lesson 2: Harlem throughout the Years

Working from the present to the past, it is important to establish that Walter Dean Myers comes out of the vibrant legacy of literary and other types of artists from Harlem, New York. In doing so, it will be important to have students gain background knowledge on the history of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Students would first engage in an examination of history in a three part method.

Students will examine a piece by Walter Dean Myers entitled *Harlem*. In this poem, Walter Dean Myers describes how the city of Harlem developed into a mecca for African American culture. After a mini-lesson on motif, students will read and be asked to identify places color is mentioned in the poem *Harlem*. The students should be able to recognize the value that race and color play in the identity of Harlem. Based on this understanding, students will be asked to determine what they think the poem means.

In the second part, students will receive a mini-lesson on allusions, students will be asked to find examples of allusions in the story. They will generate a list of allusions in a group, which they will use as a source of research about the Harlem Renaissance. In groups, students will work to create a Google slide presentation representing some of the allusions made in the poem as well as generating a list of their own, as a group, of 5-10 additional important people, places, or works to the Harlem Renaissance. The presentation may include screenshots of the written work of others as long as it is cited as this isn't intended to be an extensive research task and the screenshots will work as an introductory assignment to found poetry project later on. Complete work will be shared with the class as a model of what will be expected at the end of the unit.

In the final part of the lesson, students will be asked to consider what they have learned and to respond to the last line of the poem, "A journey on the A train that started on the banks of the Niger and *has not yet ended.*" Students will respond in 10-15 sentences.

Lesson 3: The Many Hats of the Reader's Identity

Reader will consider what impact their identity has as a reader on a text. For this lesson, students will continue to examine Walter Dean Myers' *Harlem*. The objective of this unit will be to consider the impact that the readers' identity plays in understanding the work.

To begin this lesson, students should use their previous journal about identity to consider what role they think their identity as a reader may play in how they read a text. Students should be given about 10 minutes to do this task. Sentence starters could be provided as a tiered instructional tool as well as working in small groups with students for whom writing may be difficult (especially students who are still working on writing in English). Students will share their thoughts with their classmates in small groups before discussing as a class.

Once this is completed, students will re-read the poem *Harlem* identifying with three parts of the poem that

they identify with as a reader. Once they have identified these three, they should use these three parts to demonstrate their understanding of the meaning of the poem. Students should be able to explain how each of their identifying parts relate to their understanding of the poem. Afterwards, students should look at their initial identity essay and consider which of their identities came into play in understanding the poem. Finally, students would consider how their understanding based on themselves differed on their understanding from knowing about Walter Dean Myers.

As a wrap up, students should create a second draft of their initial journal adding new thoughts and reflections they have gathered based on their experience during this lesson. Prior to the new reflections, students will have the opportunity for another student to look over their work for editing and revision errors as well as a chance to examine their work using a journal writing rubric. The final journal will be the culminating assessment in this lesson.

Lesson 4: The Work of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen

Students will look at the poetry of two poets from the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, and examine the role identity could play in the writing of those poems. Furthermore, they will examine how their own identities as readers impact their understanding of the poem as they did in the previous lesson.

In the first day of this lesson, students will read about the life of Langston Hughes. When reading, they will gather information about his birth, early life, schooling, family, career, and what made him famous. They will read two articles and watch a video: (1) Biography.com article on Hughes, (2) *The Life and Legacy of Langston Hughes* from History.com, and (3) *1920s Harlem: Langston Hughes*. Students will be instructed to use these notes while reading Hughes work.

In the next part of the assignment, students will read a series of poems from Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. My suggestions are as follows: *Movies*, *Tell Me, Not a Movie* (these first three grouped together), *Dream Deferred*, *Numbers*, *Green Memory*, *Ballad of a Landlord*, and *Theme for English B*. Before reading, students should first list all of Hughes identities (male, African American, poet, son, etc.). While reading, they will take notes on what the meaning of the poem is by looking for people, places and things. After reading, using their identity list and their notes, they will look for connections in the poems to Hughes' work and determine which identity is most closely aligned with Hughes in any given poem based on both sets of notes.

On the second day, the students will do the same for Countee Cullen. They will read three articles about Countee Cullen: (1) excerpts from Poetry Foundation biography, (2) the Biography.com entry on Cullen, and excerpts from MyBlackHistory's biography on Cullen. Using excerpts serves two purposes. The first is some of the articles are longer or may include things that students may or may not be ready for based on grade level. Also, given that the students will be doing a found poetry project, this will be in a way of an example of how you could use parts of a whole.

In the next part of the assignment, students will read a series of poems from Countee Cullen. My suggestions are as follows: *Tableau*, *Fruit of the Flower*, *The Loss of Love*, *The Wise*, *For a Poet*, and *To Certain Critics*. This part of the assignment follows the same pattern the previous part did. Before reading, students should first list all of Cullen's identities (male, African American, poet, son, etc.). While reading, they will take notes on what the meaning of the poem is by looking for people, places and things. After reading, using their identity list and their notes, they will look for connections in the poems to Cullen' work and determine which identity is most closely aligned with Cullen in any given poem based on both sets of notes.

If time permits, have students consider how the meaning changes when you consider the poem through a different identity. For example, how would the poem read differently if you think of one of the writers as a man or as a poet?

As a wrap up to this, students would write out a biography for one of the poets using all sources, plus additional sources if they want. They will then rewrite their response for one of the poems by their chosen poet and include elements of their biography in how they are reading the poem using the author's identity.

Lesson 5: Marriage of Perception and Reality - Cullen & DuBois

In this lesson, students will examine the nature of truth as it relates to identity. For this assignment, students will be given multiple informational sources describing the marriage between poet Countee Cullen and Yolanda Du Bois, the daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois. Students will consider what information is included, what information isn't included, and why the information is chosen. Once they have done this, they will be asked to take multiple sources and write their own account of the wedding between Cullen and Du Bois.

To begin the lesson, students will be asked to examine three different sources. In the first, a blog posting on Black brides, the second being a biography of Countee Cullen including information on the wedding, and finally an article on the play "Knock Me a Kiss," covering a recreation of the events leading up to the wedding. Students should be considering the purpose of each of the informational texts being presented to them. Also, they should identify what information is included about the wedding, and what information isn't included about the wedding. Finally, students would consider how each article helps to shape the identity of Countee Cullen.

As an assessment, students will take information from all three sources and write their own account of the wedding. This can be told as an informational or literary text including all the information they felt is relevant. Additionally, four to five sentences should be included to explain why they chose to include information regarding the breakup of Countee Cullen's marriage to Yolanda DuBois. In this response, they will answer is it important to know all the details about Countee Cullen's life?

Lesson 6: Celluloid Reality --- God's Step Children

In one of the final lessons, students will examine the work of Oscar Micheaux, a prominent African American film maker during the Harlem Renaissance. Prior to watching his work, students will do the sort of pre-work that was done with similar lessons by examining more about his life. In this lesson, we will also explore the contribution of his wife, Alice B. Russell, who is not only one of the film's stars, but the writer behind the work. These juggling identities for Micheaux (producer, husband) and Russell (writer, actress, wife) will come into play later in the lesson. Also, it might be worth noting if the students have previously identified Cullen and Hughes as queer if they've recognized Russell and Micheaux as straight. It would be an opportunity to consider what is considered a societal norm and how societal norms may impact identity or view of identity.

Allow students to watch the opening slide to "Murder in Harlem." Pause on the slide and point out the producer: A. Burton Russell. Let the students figure out who the producer is and have them consider why the production credit is occurring in this manner.

Then, present students with information on the film *God's Step Children*. Explain the first half of *God's Step Children* is a combination of two popular films made for white audiences, *Imitation of Life* and *These Three*. *Imitation of Life* features the story of a young girl (and later woman) who struggles with her racial identity.

These Three told the story of two women, Karen and Martha, who operate a school in which a pupil spreads a vicious rumor about one of the women carrying on with the local doctor.

Students will examine two plot summaries of the other sources, *Imitation of Life* and *These Three*. While viewing the film, *God's Step Children*, students will look for occurrences where the story overlaps with one of the other two films. Summaries are provided in a subsection at the bottom of the lesson.

Then, provide students with a summer of a play called *The Children's Hour*, which is the original source material for the film *These Three*. In *The Children's Hour*, the lie is that the two women are involved in a romantic relationship. Students should consider what difference it would have made if *God's Stepchildren* had maintained the original storyline. Or would there have been a difference? Why was the change made?

As an extension activity, the teacher could discuss how the idea of passing as white is unique to people of color. In terms of passing, there are also connections to the LGBTQIA+ community as some people passing (both positively and negatively) in other identities. The extent to which this is discussed would be up to the educator and the level of background knowledge students have with other communities.

As a culminating activity, students would consider how identity shapes the characters in the film, particularly Naomi. To pre-write, have students generate a list of all of Naomi's identities. Then, have the students consider the title in terms of identity. The final journal should be about 7-9 sentences.

Lesson 7: Lost and Found - A Poetry Celebrating Identity

In the culminating activity, students will be asked to create a found poem to demonstrate their understanding of the Harlem Renaissance, identity, and the connection between the two. Students would be provided multiple examples of found poems and allowed to work in groups to find some, but not all, the pieces required for their found poem project. Students will understand that the final project will include a piece that demonstrates their understanding accompanied by words that show that their new learning.

Regarding the form of the final project, students will need to have a visual representation of their learning. This can either be a poster, a video, Google slides, or some other visual media to demonstrate all the learning that has occurred. Students would be given class time as well as encouraged to utilize their intervention block time.

After the projects are finished, students will do a learning walk where their work is on display and they will go through and examine the pieces that each made. A final written reflection will require students to reflect on what they did, what they saw others do well, and what they would do differently next time. These written reflections would be used next year with new class of eighth graders.

Reading & Material Lists

In this section, the sources are broken down into several categories. In the first section, a list of resources that would help the teacher develop a better understanding of the topic, or to find new information to expand upon the unit, are presented. In the subsequent sections, there is a list of materials related to the activities in this unit.

Teacher's Reading List

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Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Reading Informational Texts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3

Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.5

Analyze in detail the structure of a specific paragraph in a text, including the role of particular sentences in developing and refining a key concept.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.9

Analyze a case in which two or more texts provide conflicting information on the same topic and identify where the texts disagree on matters of fact or interpretation.

Reading Literary Texts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3

Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.7

Analyze the extent to which a filmed or live production of a story or drama stays faithful to or departs from the text or script, evaluating the choices made by the director or actors.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of

exploration.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.8

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

End Notes

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