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Using Transmedia Storytelling to Teach Identity in Today's Class

Getting students to read anything at all is the first obstacle teachers face in the classroom. This is why the teacher should use the broad range of new media resources available in order to engage the student in many different ways. New media is an essential option for the teacher because it not only incorporates cutting edge technological resources, but it also piques students' interest in the core themes being presented in canonical books and acts as a way for the student to better comprehend more complicated texts. The many different ways of transmitting a narrative and teaching a unit is called transmedia storytelling. It uses multiple formats and platforms and spans different devices in order to tell a single narrative. The aim of transmedia storytelling is to engage the reader on as many different levels as possible so as to reach a wide range of readers and dig deeper into text more so than has been in the past.

New media, as defined in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, is the toolset that teachers can draw from to create transmedia storytelling. New media encompasses comics and graphic novels as well as digital media such as websites, blogs, videos, interactive fiction, video games, and social media. Graphic novels alone are becoming increasingly accepted in the classroom setting. This early form of new media helps students understand material that may be difficult to interpret or talk about, such as identity. Through the use of images in conjunction with text, Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* is one such example, blending the accessible format of the graphic novel with themes of identity, acceptance, discrimination, culture and

tradition. Using *American Born Chinese* as my centerpiece work, new media as the toolset, and transmedia storytelling as the vehicle of my unit of study, I will highlight just a few of the vast amount of resources and potential activities to be used in the classroom as a way to teach self-identity and even transition into traditional novels.

The purpose of this unit of study isn't so much to be used as a definable unit in and of itself but more to draw attention to new media and transmedia storytelling as viable ways to get the students engaged in more ways than the old traditional practices.

Introduction:

The most important characteristics of transmedia storytelling are interaction and creation. The digital age has spawned a space where the student can now participate as the storyteller alongside established creators. This ability to create is vital for getting the students engaged with the text on a deeper level. It allows the student to express their thoughts and interpretations about literature in more ways than traditional writing or discussion can.

There are three aspects to introduce: 1. Identity, both of the self and others; 2. transmedia storytelling; 3. *American Born Chinese* and Yang. To lead into the unit I would have the students create a blog of their own in class. Good sites to use would be Weebly.com as well as Wordpress.com. The first homework assignment would be to customize their blog in any way they felt comfortable and as any identity they wanted to be known as¹. No one would know who is who unless they wanted others to know. This will allow them to express themselves without fear of repercussion or bullying since I as the teacher would be the only one to know who was who. Another introduction method to utilize from the start would be to play "Come As You Are"

¹ I understand that technology, albeit much more accessible today than in the past, still may not be available for some students outside of school. This is something that must be taken into consideration when creating lesson plans and executing this unit. Using the first day of class to issue a survey or poll to the students would be a good way to discreetly see what would work for the class as a whole.

by Nirvana for them in class and have them comment on what they think Cobain meant in his song. Ultimately, the blog would be the main source of their writing and homework assignments.

After establishing their blog, a few different ways to introduce self-identity are:

1. Have the students create a post about what they feel their personal identity is by way of an “I am” poem. Providing a template for the poem may help kick start their imagination and guide them through the activity.
2. For those students that are artistically inclined, they may also draw or render an avatar of their identity and could either scan it into their post, take a picture of it when completed, or post a link to the 3D rendering they created.
3. Another option would be to make a video and upload it on Youtube, or make a song and do the same.

Either way, the point early on is for them to identify their identity. Most importantly, whichever option they choose, they need to write a rationale as to why they feel that their identity is as such and why they expressed their identity in the way they did (poem, music, etc.). We will be coming back to these posts later to see if their outlook has changed at all after reading the centerpiece work.

Once they feel comfortable with their own newly-defined identity, I would start the process of having them explore other people’s journeys to self-identification. One way is through the website <http://shallow-depths.com/mirror/mirror.html>. This is an interactive fiction game that is playable online. It was created by Cha Holland, who describes herself as: “a scientist by day, with a background in ecology and currently studying geospatial information. [She] thinks life is art, and games are one of the many interesting aspects of life.” The game was created as a way

for Holland to express her struggle with identity. The game does a good job of telling a narrative through interaction.

Here are some other good resources for exploring other people's identity journeys. I would either have the students read/watch/listen/play these resources and then have them reflect on them in their blogs:

1. "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" by Emily Dickinson (Poem)
2. "Song Of Myself" by Walt Whitman (Poem)
3. "being born" by Andres Montoya (Poem)
4. *Eveline* by James Joyce (Short Story)
5. "Partly Cloudy" by Pixar Short (Short Film)
6. "La Luna" by Pixar Short (Short Film)
7. "Like A Rolling Stone" by Bob Dylan (Song)
8. "Be Yourself" by Audioslave (Song)
9. *Superman on the Couch* by Danny Fingeroth (Book)
10. *Broken Age* by Double Fine Studios (Video Game)
11. *The Longest Journey / Dreamfall* by Funcom (Video Game)
12. "CARL SAGAN: Pale Blue Dot" by Zen Pencils (Webcomic)

I encourage teachers to embrace using media that they are not familiar with. This will help the teacher by learning new material themselves and they can relate to the students while keeping up with the latest new media resources. It will also help the teacher to better introduce transmedia storytelling as a concept to the students. The entire point of transmedia storytelling is to be able to reach every type of reader through various means.

By now the students should have a decent grasp of what identity is and how different people have identified their own personal identity through transmedia storytelling. Now all that is left is to introduce Gene Luen Yang and *American Born Chinese*. I would start by showing a few videos of Yang describing both the novel and his own personal identity journey, such as

www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYCZqt5WSOM and www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UNgwwQeNj8. I would then go over some of the background on Sun Wukong, the Chinese mythological character known as The Monkey King. This is a wonderful place to show art that pertains to the Monkey King, such as www.japaneseprints.net/images/jpg2182.jpg. Mentioning the source of Sun Wukong, Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* is important as well, and reading a few excerpts from *Monkey: Folk Novel of China*, Arthur Waley's English translation, would be a perfect segue into the last link to the Monkey King, *Dragon Ball*. According to Yang, *Dragon Ball* was originally inspired by *Journey to the West*, with Goku acting as a direct parallel to the Monkey King.

With all of this new information on mythological characters and how they tie into our lives now, especially our identities, I would then have the students create their own comic strip of a cultural mythological character in today's age.

Launching:

By now the students will be well versed in identity and the ideas behind *American Born Chinese*, so now would be a great time to have them create a teaser trailer for the novel by using either Movie Maker or iMovie. I would break the students up into groups of six and have them take on the roles of director, producer, editor, and actors/actresses. I would encourage them to research the differences between the roles, and then work together to pick who would do what. Then, I would read to them the synopsis of the story and have them make a teaser trailer based off of the synopsis, what they learned from the Yang videos, and anything from the Monkey King material.

After creating the teaser trailer, we would begin reading the novel, reading one part every week. The students would be responsible for keeping a daily diary on their blogs pertaining to their thoughts, theories, etc. about either the novel or their own identity issues.

Working Through the Unit:

Stopping and assessing after each part of the novel would allow me to do a new activity to keep them engrossed and focused. Before the activities however, I would schedule conferences with them, where they would be free to talk about anything we have done up until that point, or any future assignments on the horizon. Then using some of the resources not used before in the introduction part would be ideal. Some additional resources to use throughout the reading of *American Born Chinese* are:

1. *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (Graphic Novel)
2. *Avatar* comics written by Gene Yang
 - a. Also, many other Yang materials are great to use throughout the reading, including but not limited to *Boxers and Saints*, *Level Up*, *The Shadow Hero*, and “Why I won’t Be Watching The Last Airbender Movie,” his chapter in *Open Mic: Riffs on Life Between Cultures in Ten Voices*.
3. “Alone” by Edgar Allan Poe (Poem)
4. *Second Life* by Linden Lab (Video Game)
5. *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Graphic Novel)
6. *Chasing Shadows* by Swati Avasthi (Graphic Novel)
7. Non-fiction investigations: Common core calls for the use of a lot of non-fiction, and so one way to have the students engage with it is to have them become investigators for these events and stories. For instance, have them find an immigrant that they can interview for a news report. They could use scenarios from Yang’s novel as talking points (Did you ever change your hair just to fit in? Were you told any cultural stories that still relate to you? Which ones?)
8. Twitter accounts: The idea here is to create a twitter account based on one of the characters in the novel. The student would carry out the account as if they were that

character, and interact through the character's voice with the other students in the class and their characters. Comparing how the student portrays the novel's character with how the characters actually act in the novel would be a point of discussion/writing.

It's important that the teacher be open to all sources of identity pertaining to the students. Some students' identities will be focused on culture, others on gender, others on social status, and so on. Although *American Born Chinese* is primarily a cultural identity novel that deals with first generation immigrant issues, the theme and idea of finding an identity is easily adapted to any other type of identity issue. Finding specific poems, videos, games, etc. for those would be beneficial as well. It's also a great way to teach the students the merits of reading literature that may not exactly pertain to their specific lives, but if they dig deeper at the core issues they realize that everyone deals with the same inherent problems.

To Infinity and Beyond:

I would use this unit early, maybe even as the first unit of the school year. The reason is because it is fun, easy to execute, easily adaptable to different classes, and it does a great job of getting the students acquainted with transmedia. It will also act as a way to get them excited for the rest of the school year, even when other units are focused on canonical and classic texts. The most important aspect is to not "run out of steam," especially after introducing the students with such a hyper modernized unit. If you feel uncomfortable having to consistently come up with new media resources throughout the year, scale back on the number of uses of new media and use them sparsely throughout your normal curriculum.

Moving beyond *American Born Chinese* would be rather easy if you stay within the realm of identity. Taking the class into novels such as *Whale Talk* (Chris Crutcher), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Sherman Alexie), *Mexican WhiteBoy* (Matt de la Pena), or *The House on Mango Street* (Sandra Cisneros) would be relatively easy as the students

would understand the identity issues of the novel at the very least. Considering the reading level of the class, one of my favorite novels of all time, *My Antonia* (Willa Cather), would be a great classic novel to eventually lead into. Another classic canonical novel to lead into would be *The Catcher in the Rye* (JD Salinger) as well.

Conclusion:

After reading *American Born Chinese*, I would have the students go back to some of their earlier posts and decide whether they would change or update any of them, and whether they would like to create a new avatar. In any case, writing a rationale as to why they do or don't is critical in their search for identity.

I would also have them get back in their prior groups and create a trailer for the book now that they know exactly what happens and how it unfolds. I would encourage them to emphasize what they felt was the most important aspects of the novel so that their audience would be drawn to that.

Hopefully through the many different ways of relaying the same message, all of the students will be able to grasp onto at least one media type that they enjoy and run with it.

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Why new media?

Getting the students “into” the text is the most important aspect of my unit, and thus the more resources, the better chance to hook even the most reluctant of readers.



The meaning is “in” the text...?

Weebly
Start something

twitter 

You Tube



WORDPRESS

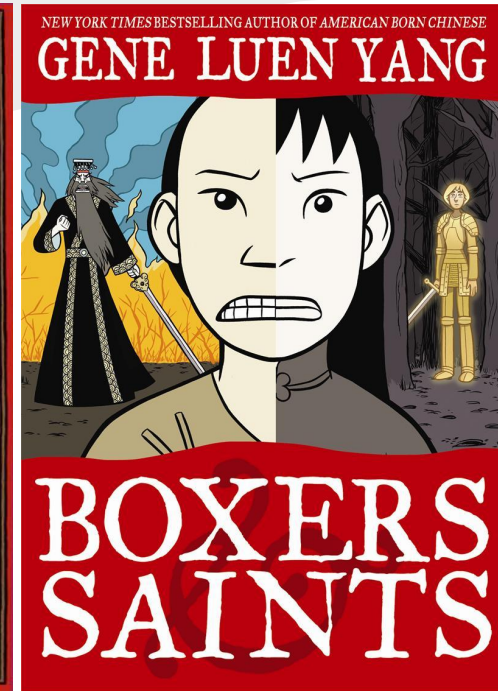
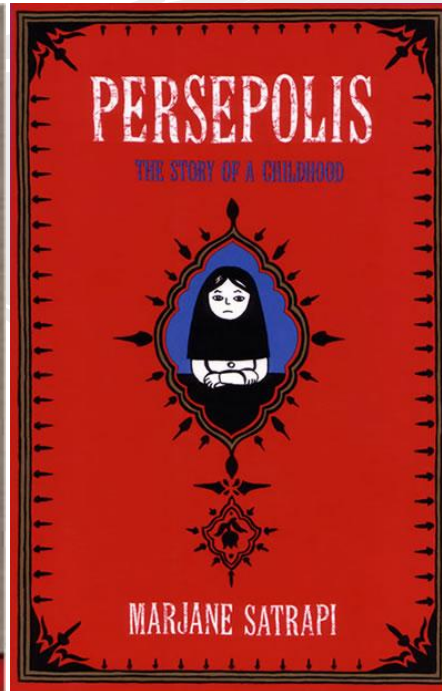
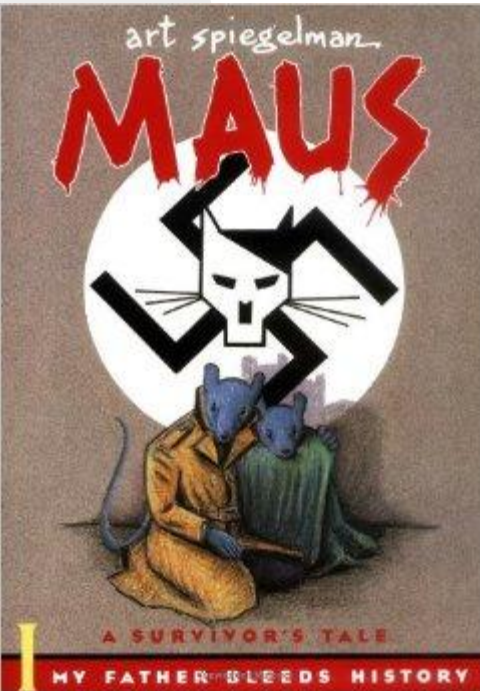


STEAM™

Transmedia Storytelling

- “Across” media
- Can be anything, but focus on digital media
- Using all of these resources to tell a single story or teach a single theme is important
- The amount of media used is important--the more the better!

Graphic Novels



American Born Chinese



by Gene Luen Yang



Gene Luen Yang

Unit at a glance-Introduction

Three aspects to introduce:

- Identity
- Transmedia storytelling
- Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*

Activities:

- Create a blog to record all writing
- Creating "I am" poem, draw picture, make a video
- Play an interactive fiction game
 - <http://shallow-depths.com/mirror/mirror.html>
- Videos of Yang explaining his story
- Journey to the West -> Monkey King -> Dragon Ball



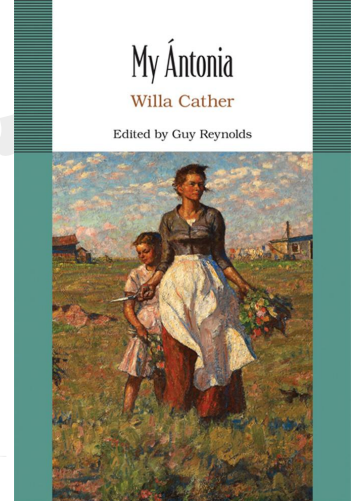
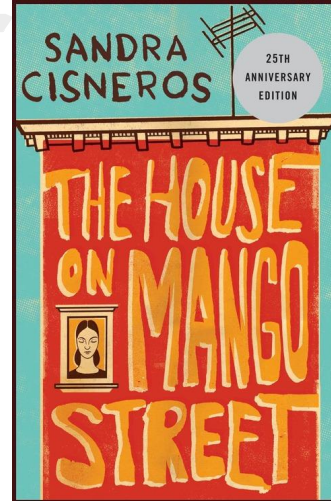
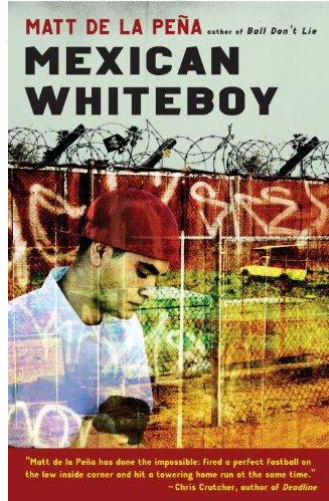
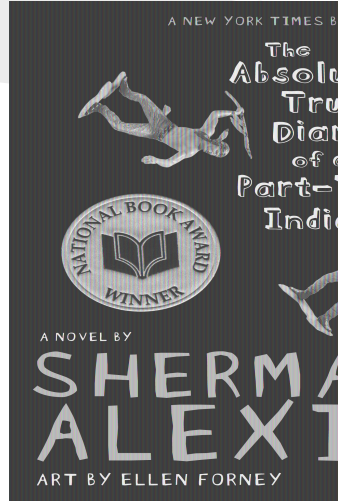
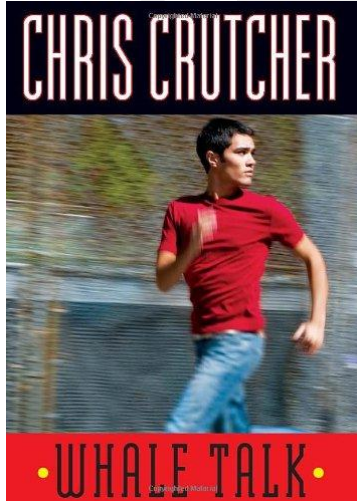
Launching/working through the unit

- Create a teaser trailer for American Born Chinese to launch the unit
- Using poetry, songs, video, graphic novels, video games, etc. to keep the students engaged
- Non-fiction: Investigations
- Fiction: Twitter identities



Moving Beyond the Unit

- Use early in the year
- Link to canonical/classic novels:



Conclusion

- Review earlier posts about identity and reassess
- Create a trailer with emphasis on personal understanding
- Create interactive fiction based on *American Born Chinese*

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