

Saving Ourselves: Exploring Identity and Imagined Realities Through Comics

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Abstract

In this unit, students will study how to read comics as a visual and literary medium with a specific focus on the superhero genre. Designed to address issues resulting from systemic racism and white supremacy without reinforcing a deficit lens, students will examine real issues with a solutions-focused mindset. Through their reading of the series *Spiderman: Miles Morales* and *Ironheart* as well as their own self-selected comics reading, students will practice literary analysis with an emphasis on visual evidence. Then students will turn the superhero comic genre inwards, designing a hero based on themselves and creating a storyline in which the hero solves a real problem facing their community. This unit is focused on topics such as identity formation and community action and is designed to appeal to ninth grade students of color attending a neighborhood high school in North Philadelphia. Students' culminating project will consist of a written and a visual element representing their new hero and their storyline, combining visual art and narrative writing.

Content Objectives

In the current high school English curriculum, there are not many opportunities to use the fantastic as a tool for self- or world-exploration. Ninth grade students like mine in Kensington are often preoccupied with the very real concerns in their life related to safety, poverty, adolescence, and school. It is rare for them to access the fantastic in ways that are both reflective of their own experience and speculative of a (hopeful) otherwise.

I'm fortunate to work in a school run by an administrator who values teacher expertise and autonomy, so I have more or less built my own English 1 curriculum over the last three years. However, since I never had great personal interest in comics or studied them as literature in my experience as a student, I haven't yet built them into my curriculum. With the opportunity to collaborate with Dr. Thomas as well as my School District of Philadelphia colleagues, I've sought to develop a unit that is culturally sustaining and innovative.

In my classroom and others like it, there has been a push to use contemporary realistic fiction. Through novels like *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, two core texts from my classroom, fiction becomes a lens through which to examine social issues that students can relate to. First-person narrators who deal with similar circumstances to our students have been an entryway to studying literature. However, through this realistic fiction, students may feel mired in the reality of a world plagued by systemic oppression. This reliance on traumatic narratives has rightfully come under fire recently, and comes up often in my conversations with other TIP fellows.

From what I can tell, I haven't had (m)any comic book nerd students. Those that are interested in superheroes get their fix from TV or film. The students that have expressed interest in graphic novels tend towards manga. However, I've noticed that students gravitate towards comics for independent reading, probably because they are "easy" to read, relatively short, and there are more images than text on the page. The question is how to teach genre-specific literacy and reach reluctant readers.

Recently, mainstream comic publishers like Marvel have begun to pivot away from "traditional" superhero comics in order to reflect a more diverse readership. This has led to a deviation from what you may imagine as the typical superhero: from Peter Parker to Miles Morales. This pivot has led to more protagonists that are Black, Afro-Latinx, Latinx, Muslim, femme, and/or queer. While some of these characters populate the fantastic, such as the imagined worlds of Wakanda or Sotomayor University, many others populate real(istic) places, such as Brooklyn, Jersey City, or Southside Chicago. Ta-Nehisi Coates was one of the first and most attention-grabbing hires in this wave, including more new storylines for authors like poet and sociologist Eve Ewing, queer author Gabby Rivera, fantasy author Nnedi Okorafor, author G. Willow Wilson, and sci-fi and fantasy author Saladin Ahmed.

Through characters like Miles Morales/Spiderman, Riri Williams/Ironheart, Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, America Chavez/Miss America, or Shuri, these authors are able to reach a wider audience of adolescents that relate to characters whose lives are complicated by typical teenage issues as well as identity formation processes as heroes and members of marginalized communities.

These characters will allow us to familiarize ourselves with the superhero comic genre while showing students ways issues are explored through this medium. After studying tropes and traditions of the medium, students can begin using comics as a tool to explore their reality and speculate about an imagined other. Using "superpowers" or other unique features of the genre, students can imagine solutions to issues in their community or explore the conflicts to which they led.

I think there is potential in using superhero comics as a tool to create an imagined otherwise for students. It will be a semi-realistic bridge between unreachable utopia and our present.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this approach seems as important as ever. I've been involved in many conversations with colleagues since the pandemic disrupted schooling, debating whether or not students should spend class time digging into and understanding the current crisis, or if we should allow them room for escape during school. The students themselves have a range of fluctuating preferences.

In a striking moment of teaching remotely, I recently asked my students this Do Now question: "How can reading and writing be helpful tools during this pandemic?" I expected that students would suggest reading about current events on the news and staying informed, but I was surprised that most of my students that participated identified reading and writing as tools for escape, distraction, or even transportation. In the US school system, literacy is a utility that students will use as workers, but only to the extent that it is convenient for the boss. In the conversations surrounding test scores and graduation rates, it's hard to remember that reading and writing can be pleasurable activities.

Reflecting on this revelation, it feels silly that an English teacher hadn't remembered this more emotionally sustaining, non-utilitarian view of literacy. Speculative genres and comics often serve this function explicitly. These narratives often satisfy our need for all to end well, inspiring us to stay hopeful regardless of the circumstances. This motivation to read is just as valid as any "useful" application. I'm glad to have this reminder, especially in the midst of a collective crisis, so that it can inform the ways I build this unit and attempt to reach my students in the future.

It is extremely difficult to plan this unit in a moment where everything, including how, when, and where school happens, is uncertain. I will be planning this unit as if it can be implemented in a "typical" school year, with students and teachers working together in person.

Teaching Strategies

This unit will unfold as a genre study in the comics medium as well as superhero genres specifically. My approach must begin with a crash course in comics literacy. Pulling from work by Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, for the first few days my students and I will explore comics as a genre and discuss the "rules" that guide the reader through a narrative.

In the past, I've included photographs related to the content I'm teaching to allow students the opportunity to visually analyze a "text" in a different form, and to connect reading material to them more directly. I've used different frameworks for this, but the most effective seems to be See/Think/Wonder. This includes guiding students through the process at first, and then giving them the opportunity to explore visual texts themselves. I hope to approach comics in the same way, taking single pages or even panels and letting students observe and analyze what they see and sharing their discoveries with each other.

In addition, I want to explore the types of visual cues comic writers and artists use to narrate the story beyond words. Facial expressions, body language, color, shadowing, paneling, and other visual cues supplement words in conveying meaning. Therefore, students must acclimate themselves to this type of visual reading.

We will also take the time to discuss the genre of superhero comics, with students compiling information about characters they know from popular media. I especially hope to discuss the narrative arc that usually takes place in comics, including the origin story, a crisis perhaps brought on by an arch nemesis, and the eventual happy (or at least satisfying) ending. Students will begin to reflect on why these stories are so popular in our culture.

After about a week of familiarizing ourselves with the medium and the genre, students will begin to investigate two characters: Miles Morales/Spiderman and Riri Williams/Ironheart. Using the skills they will have already practiced in reading fiction, they will read for literary elements like characterization, theme, and tone. However, this is where we can begin to push ourselves into the realm of comics: students should be searching for visual elements as evidence from the text rather than relying solely on written text.

Students will begin to study both teen superheroes, and we may even read and analyze the two characters in conjunction with each other. In one issue of *Ironheart*, Riri and Miles work together and it is hinted that they have a rocky history. Looking back into the realm of the *Champions* series will allow us to see these characters exist and interact with each other, along with other, perhaps more traditional heroes.

My hope is that students will feel some level of connection with these characters. One of the aspects of their characterization that makes them so attractive is their personal growth that comes through hardship. The fact that these young people are "heroes" and do amazing things in the service of others does not mean that they don't struggle navigating a complicated world and finding one's place in it. In particular, I want to work with students to understand Riri/Ironheart and her relationship to violence and trauma she has dealt with since childhood.

In addition to our study of Miles/Spiderman and Riri/Ironheart, students will select another character or series to read independently, capturing notes in a double-entry journal on literary elements like characterization, plot, theme, and tone. This will provide the opportunity for students to choose any kind of hero from my classroom library, including some of Marvel's aforementioned new storylines as well as more "classic" superheroes, narrative nonfiction in graphic novel form, or even zines. By applying their new knowledge to the student-chosen text, they will practice reading and analyzing the medium and expose themselves to other tropes or artistic choices.

At this point, once we have analyzed these characters and synthesized our knowledge about them, students will begin applying the lens of the superhero comic in their own life. As a beginning character development exercise, students will name their own character traits, with an emphasis on talents, skills, and positive qualities. Students will begin to brainstorm how these real traits can be reimaged as powers, and then start to consider themselves as characters in a superhero comic.

This will be a small start towards a long-term project of designing a comic book character and storyline. Students will have the option of writing either an overview of the character and story or an issue of the comic. Regardless of their choice, students will create both a written and a visual element. My hope is that students who are inclined to the visual arts can have fun experimenting with the medium, while others who may feel intimidated by creating art can explain more through their writing. Students will create an image of their hero, with visual symbols of characterization. I will also encourage students to use whatever tools or media with which they're comfortable for creating their character visually.

In the next step in their creative process of developing a comic, students will identify some of the external conflicts in their lives that they see affecting themselves, their families, and their communities. They may choose to focus on systemic issues like poverty or very specific issues like litter in the street. Then, we will work as a class, in groups, and individually to understand these issues thoroughly.

Next, students will imagine solutions to these problems, no matter how "unrealistic" they may seem. This kind of radical imagining is essential to the creation of superhero comics, as well as an important part of a student's political education. Through imagining ideal scenarios, students may develop new insight into the structural causes of external conflicts in their lives, and it will allow them to consider their ideal scenario and the changes needed to bring it about. My intention is for students to feel agency in their communities; although identifying issues may lead one to feel overwhelmed or hopeless, by using their superhero comics as a creative lens they can become solutions-focused. To facilitate this, we may use real stories of organizing and resistance to help generate ideas.

Once students imagine their solutions, they can begin to consider how a superhero may respond as a way to help the community. Based on their previously determined talents/powers, students will come up with their hero's approach to supporting the community. This will help students begin planning the script or narrative description of their comic. Students can work with a selection of graphic organizers used to map out plot and conflict as prewriting exercises. Examples of this kind of storyline exist in both *Spiderman* and *Ironheart*, tying in modern political issues with questions of ethics and morality.

At this point in the unit, as we begin to focus more on the student's creations, I hope to collaborate with the art teacher, who usually teaches the entire 9th grade class. If he is able to fit it into the art curriculum, I think the students would benefit from the extra technical help he could provide through lessons about creating visuals for comics. In working with the art teacher, it may be best to collaborate with other 9th grade English/English 1 teachers working in self-contained classrooms for English learners or students with IEPs. This more inclusive approach opens up many possibilities for school culture building beyond this academic unit.

Finally, students will be able to draft and revise their written element (such as a script or a narrative description) and their visual element. At this point, students should have most elements of their story planned, particularly the characters, the setting, and the conflict. The next step will be their first draft of writing, to be completed via Google Classroom using their Chromebooks. I will be having conferences with students about their writing in progress on a rotating basis. They will also choose a partner to be a peer reader to give feedback on the writing.

Because this assignment lies outside the domain of so-called academic writing, I will encourage students to read each other's work with a focus on craft. Elements like spelling, grammar, and usage will take a backseat for this text. I plan to address this with students and to explain the markers of successful writing for this assignment. We'll go over the project rubric in detail so students can understand the approach in peer editing and in their own work. It will also be an important moment for students to reflect on their purpose of their writing as authors.

Here we deviate slightly from our typical writing process. Rather than following the structured tools for preparing for academic writing such as literary analysis, students will be given the opportunity to map out their story in a variety of ways. I will recommend for many to create something like a mind map or flowchart to help with their sequencing, but students will have many materials or ideas to experiment with. This will replace the more traditional outline. This open-endedness may overwhelm some students, so familiar graphic organizers for writing will be made available.

Depending on the ability to tie in with their art class, there will be time in class for work on the story as well as complete their visual element. Of course, some students may devote more attention and energy to perfecting their projects. However, students will have a rubric or checklist to work from to ensure they're meeting standards.

When or however feasible, I hope to close the unit with a celebration showcasing student work. If businesses are open and fully operational, it may be an opportunity to visit Amalgam Comics and Coffee a short walk away from our school. However, regardless of the scale, students will be given the opportunity to display their project and to enjoy each other's writing. Depending on student input, this could be something as simple as time to read comics and enjoy a snack or a more "comic con" approach that could even include students cosplaying (dressing up) as their original superheroes.

Throughout this process, I plan to complete my own version of the project alongside the students. I think it is important to show you are willing and able to try the same things we expect of students, especially with a project that may feel risky. Personally, I'll also feel that risk in sharing my visual art and ideas, but my project can function as an example, especially since we do not yet have other student work as a reference point. Plus, this sounds like fun.

Overall, this unit should take around four to six weeks to implement, depending on the school schedule at the time of implementation. Students will spend almost half of this time creating, designing, and writing about their own characters and comics. I plan to provide sufficient class time to complete the entire project during class, but depending on curricular demands or time constraints students could be asked to supplement this work independently for homework.

Classroom Activities

These plans are written for a ninety minute block that meets daily, which is the case for English 1 at my school and many other neighborhood high schools in Philadelphia. Every day students participate in independent choice reading for thirty minutes upon arrival. This time will be especially useful once students have begun their study of comics and graphic novels. Each day is broken into 2-3 main activities, depending on our place in the unit.

Reading Without Words

This will take place during the first week of the unit, as an entryway into analyzing vi

Essential Question	How can we “read” images or visual art? How can we use visual evidence to support our ideas?
Objectives	SWBAT practice the See/Think/Wonder protocol. SWBAT analyze a visual text citing specific evidence from the image.
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CC.1.3.9–10.A ● CC.1.3.9–10.B ● CC.1.3.9–10.C ● CC.1.3.9–10.E ● CC.1.3.9–10.K ● CC.1.5.9–10.A ● CC.1.5.9–10.D
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 image, projected via Smartboard or projected onto a whiteboard - 6 (or more as needed) images, printed and laminated or covered w photos, especially if hoping to engage students’ cultural literacy t of photographs.) - 6 dry erase markers and paper towels or tissue to use as erasers
Opening	<p>(5 minutes)</p> <p>Teacher will display one photograph as students enter. Students will respond to the following Do Now prompt in their notebook <i>What is going on in this image? How do you know?</i></p> <p>Instruct the students to write down their responses because we will return</p> <p>Students will then transition into independent choice reading.</p>
Reader’s Workshop	<p>(30 minutes)</p> <p>Independent choice reading.</p>
Class Activity	<p>(15 minutes)</p> <p>Teacher will review the Do Now question with the class, asking for volunt specific details they noticed, leading them to their response. Students sho that?” if they are sharing conclusions without their initial observations.</p> <p>(20 minutes)</p> <p>Once the class is ready to move on from the first photograph, the teacher</p>

	<p>many ways our brain takes shortcuts to reach quick conclusions, which is intentionally slow down this process to make deeper and more informed work we can learn how to “read” images.</p> <p>Teacher will split students into 6 (or more as needed) groups of 4-5 students (teacher) should assign one person to be a note taker and another who will use an erase marker, and capturing notes on a See/Think/Wonder organizer drawn on a protocol as a group to make inferences about the photo. We’ll quickly review the board for students to see while they work. Explain to the class that they are responsible for helping the rest of the class understand it. Then, allow students to work uninterrupted other than quick check-in questions from the teacher as the</p> <p>(15 minutes) Each group will take no more than two minutes to share their conclusions and processes they discussed. If time runs out, complete the share out the next</p>
Exit Ticket	<p>(5 minutes) Instruct students that their “homework” is to try reading any visual text they</p>

<p>Reading Comics for Characterization</p> <p><i>This should take place at least a week after the original See/Think/Wonder activity. Much of this lesson will focus with an eye towards comics and superhero genres specifically. The class will start their reading of comic books like Morales/Spiderman and Riri Williams/Ironheart the same week. This should take place either before or after the</i></p>	
Essential Question	<p>How do we read comics in order to engage deeply with the text? What can we learn about a character from visual cues?</p>
Objectives	<p>SWBAT practice analyzing literary elements in comics. SWBAT describe a character citing only visual elements as evidence.</p>
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CC.1.3.9–10.A ● CC.1.3.9–10.B ● CC.1.3.9–10.C ● CC.1.3.9–10.E ● CC.1.3.9–10.K ● CC.1.5.9–10.A ● CC.1.5.9–10.D

Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compiled images of popular superheroes from recent film and TV to be used - 6 (or more as needed) pages from comics copied/printed and laminated or placed in a clear plastic protector. If possible, any words on the page should be omitted.
Opening	<p>(5 minutes)</p> <p>Teacher will project the following question as students enter class, which they will answer on a sticky note:</p> <p><i>Do Now: What are some ways authors help us get to know their characters? List at least two.</i></p> <p>Instruct the students to write down their responses because we will return to this question during our independent choice reading.</p> <p>Students will then transition into independent choice reading.</p>
Reader's Workshop	<p>(30 minutes)</p> <p>Independent choice reading. Teacher should encourage students to browse available materials, including graphic novels or zines to increase their familiarity with the medium and its various styles.</p>
Class Activity	<p>(15 minutes)</p> <p>As a whole class, begin by sharing responses to the Do Now question and review the acronym STEAL (speech, thoughts, effect on others, actions, and appearance) as a class. Ask students to restate what they remember about how authors reveal their characters in writing.</p> <p>Next, go through several photos of superhero characters from recent film or television. Show each photo to the class one by one, ask students what kind of character they see in front of them and what evidence in the form of visual cues they see in the image. Try to mix heroes and villains. Discuss how colors or symbols may convey meaning.</p> <p>(20 minutes)</p> <p>Refer to the See/Think/Wonder protocol, ask student volunteers to describe what they learned from the previous exercise with this protocol. Ask students why they think this protocol is effective. Explain to the students that we will be using that same process to practice analyzing what authors reveal about their characters in writing.</p> <p>Again, split students into 6 (or more as needed) groups of 4-5 students, giving each group one of the superhero photos. Instruct students that they are to use the See/Think/Wonder protocol to get to know the character in the photo. One student will capture notes, and one will share out with the class. All students will be uninterrupted for at least five minutes while cycling around the class.</p> <p>(15 minutes)</p> <p>Each group will take no more than two minutes to share their conclusions with the class.</p>

	group's thought processes they discussed. If necessary, teachers should prompt details the group used to draw conclusions. If time runs out, complete the share before moving on.
Exit Ticket	(5 minutes) If you were in a comic or cartoon, what would be a part of your signature look

<p>Getting to Know Your Inner Hero</p> <p><i>This lesson will be at the halfway point in this unit, as the class transitions from mainly reading and analyzing to creating their own. Students should have a strong understanding of the characters Riri Williams/Ironheart, Morales/Spiderman.</i></p>	
Essential Question	What makes a hero? What are heroic qualities I have? How can I use those to make change?
Objectives	SWBAT describe their talents and skills. SWBAT reimagine themselves as a character with superpowers.
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● CC.1.4.9–10.M ● CC.1.4.9–10.O ● CC.1.4.9–10.T ● CC.1.5.9–10.A
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sample Identity Chart completed by the teacher to be shared with students - Projected directions for activity, including a timer
Opening	<p>(5 minutes)</p> <p>Teacher will project the following question as students enter class, which they write in their notebook: <i>Do Now: What kinds of qualities does a superhero have? List as many as you can.</i></p> <p>Instruct the students to write down their responses because we will return to this during independent choice reading.</p>

	Students will then transition into independent choice reading.
Reader's Workshop	(30 minutes) Independent choice reading. Teacher should encourage students to browse available novels, or zines to increase their familiarity with the medium and its various styles.
Class Activity	<p>(15 minutes) This segment of class will begin by reviewing the do now question: students will share their responses and consider the various ways characters they know are "heroic." Highlighting different divergent paths that lead to becoming a hero, students will hopefully identify how their own identity shapes their own powers or approach to their work.</p> <p>(15 minutes) Touching on our previous units' discussions centered around identity, as well as the characters of Riri Williams/Ironheart and Miles Morales/Spiderman, students will explore the question of identity and powers inward. Using an identity chart format, students will list their own unique talents, skills, or other positive characteristics. They should aim to connect these characteristics. It is important for the teacher to emphasize that students will be encouraged to take about ten minutes to complete the identity charts in their notebooks. They should encourage students to work with a trusted classmate or friend to ensure that they are able to share their positive characteristics and power, which admittedly may feel challenging. This activity can be useful in guiding the students' own work. In accordance with the teacher's teaching style, teacher should be open with students about their own process for completing the identity chart. Students should have about ten minutes to work on this activity uninterrupted while the teacher rotates through the class providing support.</p> <p>(20 minutes) For the remainder of class, students will be tasked with creating a corresponding comic book character for each of their noted characteristics. Students should be encouraged to imagine their own characters in their own comics, potentially acting heroically in their own communities. This may feel like a challenging creative leap for some, so students should be encouraged to look to <i>Spiderman</i> and <i>Ironheart</i>, as well as any other comics they have access to in order to find inspiration. Students should also be encouraged to start making connections between their own characteristics and the physical appearance of their superhero, based on our practice analyzing the physical appearance of superheroes. Students will be instructed to keep this work in a safe place because it will act as a character design.</p>
Exit Ticket	(5 minutes) What is one of your superpowers? How would that power come in handy today?

Resources

Annotated Bibliography

Abad-Santos, Alex. "The outrage over Marvel's alleged diversity blaming, explained." *Vox*. April 8, 2017.

<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/4/4/15169572/marvel-diversity-outrage-gabriel>

This investigation into mainstream comics publishers' and movie studios builds understanding around the "newness" of diverse comics and some of the commercial and social risk and/or benefit.

Aldama, Frederick Luis. *Multicultural Comics : From Zap to Blue Beetle*, University of Texas Press, 2010.

This book contains useful contextualized analysis about the history of diversity (or lack thereof) in the comics industry. This will help the teacher better understand the genre as a whole and it also provides many examples of trailblazing writers, artists, and characters throughout the medium's history.

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Why I'm Writing Captain America." *The Atlantic*.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/02/we-who-love-america/553991/>

Although I won't be using Coates' *Black Panther* comics as a core text in the unit, I'm interested in understanding some of the ideas Coates brings into the world of writing comics. He is a lifelong comic book geek, but also brings his lens of examining (US) American culture through race. Characters like Black Panther and Captain America are inherently politically charged, and Coates' view on entering the world of comics as a writer may help me frame the analysis and production of the medium with my students.

Eisner, Will. *Comics and Sequential Art: Principles and Practices from the Legendary Cartoonist*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008. Print.

Eisner is widely recognized as a pioneer of modern comics, with a prolific career of published comics as well as commentary on the medium and genres within. This text can be a useful resource in building understanding around comics and their history.

Furino, Giaco. "What Marvel's Push Toward Superhero Diversity Really Means."

Vice. July 15, 2015. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ppxg3k/what-marvels-push-toward-superhero-diversity-really-means-757

See Abad-Santos for annotation.

Gustines, George Gene. "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Creating Black Superheroes." *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/02/fashion/mens-style/ta-nehisi-coates-marvel-comics-black-panther-between-the-world-and-me.html>

See Coates for annotation.

McCloud, Scott, and Mark Martin. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: William Morrow, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2018. Print.

McCloud creates an accessible and inclusive introduction to the medium which is another essential resource in helping students become acclimated to reading in this format.

Murphy, Keith. "Marvel Comics' Ironheart writer Eve L. Ewing is the ultimate Chicago sports homer." <https://theundefeated.com/features/marvel-comics-ironheart-writer-eve-l-ewing-is-ultimate-chicago-sports-homer/>

Like understanding Coates' approach to comics, understanding what Ewing brings with her to the medium will be very helpful to our study of comics. As both a poet and educational sociologist, Ewing brings a unique viewpoint of the experiences of young Black people from settings like Chicago. Through interviews and others texts by or about Ewing, this will inform our analysis.

Vargas, Alani. "'What keeps us coming back is the human struggle': Eve Ewing on writing Marvel's Ironheart." <https://aux.avclub.com/what-keeps-us-coming-back-is-the-human-struggle-eve-1834094447>

See Murphy for annotation.

Student Reading (Core Texts)

Ahmed, Saladin. *Miles Morales: Straight Out of Brooklyn*. Marvel Comics. 2019.

Miles Morales is a teenage Afro-Latino boy from Brooklyn who has to balance fighting crime as Spiderman and succeeding as a student at Brooklyn Visions, a part-time residential magnet school. Morales keeps his superhero identity secret from all except one of his best friends and his parents, although others seem to be catching on.

Ewing, Eve L. *Ironheart Vol. One: Those With Courage*. Marvel Comics. 2019.

Riri Williams, a teenage Black girl from Chicago, is also a genius and protege of Iron Man. Williams/Ironheart is an appealing character with whom to teach because of her struggles with understanding past trauma and hiding behind her powers to push through her vulnerabilities.

Additional Suggested Reading for Students

- Anderson, L. H., & Carroll, E. (2018). *Speak: The graphic novel (First edition.)*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC.
- Ahmed, Saladin. *Ms. Marvel Vol. One: Destined*. Marvel Comics. 2019.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet: Vol. One*. Marvel Comics. 2016.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Black Panther and The Crew*. Marvel Comics. 2017.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Captain America Vol. 1: Winter In America*. Marvel Comics. 2019.
- Ewing, Eve. *Outlawed*. Marvel Comics. 2020
- Gay, Roxane and Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*. Marvel Comics. 2017.
- Johnson, Mat. *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery.*, 2018.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. *Shuri Vol. One: The Search for Black Panther*. Marvel Comics. 2019.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. *Wakanda Forever*. Marvel Comics. 2018.
- Rivera, Gabby. *America Vol. One: The Life and Times of America Chavez*. Marvel Comics. 2017.
- Wilson, G. Willow. *Ms. Marvel Vol. One: No Normal*. Marvel Comics. 2014.
- Yang, Gene L. *Superman Smashes the Klan.*, DC Comics. 2020.
- Zub, Jim. *Champions*. Marvel Comics. 2019.

Appendices

Appendix A - Pennsylvania English Language Arts Standards, Grades 9-10

In the English classroom, all of our work will revolve around reading, analyzing, and producing literature. For this unit, everything will focus on the medium of comics and the genre of superhero stories. Comics, although perhaps not held in the same esteem as other forms of literature, are appropriate grade-level texts for ninth graders. Additionally, the use of visual elements to supplement the written word supports students who may otherwise struggle with or avoid reading, especially English learners or students with IEPs. Students will practice specific literacy skills around using the visual elements of a text to support analysis. Furthermore, students practice their narrative writing skills in creating their own comic characters and storylines. Students will practice speaking and listening standards through class discussions and generative activities for their own comics.

1.3 Reading Literature. Students read and respond to works of literature with an emphasis on comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.

- **CC.1.3.9–10.A** - Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **CC.1.3.9–10.B** - Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author's explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject.
- **CC.1.3.9–10.C** - Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- **CC.1.3.9–10.E** - Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it, and manipulate time create an effect.
- **CC.1.3.9–10.K** - Read and comprehend literary fiction on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.

1.4 Writing. Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

- **CC.1.4.9–10.M** - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.
- **CC.1.4.9–10.N** - Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple points of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters.
- **CC.1.4.9–10.O** - Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, reflection, multiple plotlines, and pacing to develop experiences, events, and/or characters; use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, settings, and/or characters.
- **CC.1.4.9–10.P** - Create a smooth progression of experiences or events using a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole; provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.
- **CC.1.4.9–10.S** - Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research, applying grade-level reading standards for literature and literary nonfiction.

- **CC.1.4.9–10.T** - Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

1.5 Speaking and Listening. Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

- **CC.1.5.9–10.A** - Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CC.1.5.9–10.D** - Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning; ensure that the presentation is appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Appendix B - Photoset for Visual Analysis, compiled by M. Luebbert.

When using these photos, it may be useful to omit the titles and dates from students so as not to influence their own interpretation of the images.

“Photography Archive - The Gordon Parks Foundation.” Retrieved July 19, 2020 (<http://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/gordon-parks/photography-archive>).

Suggested images:

- Parks, Gordon. *Ondria Tanner and Her Grandmother Window-Shopping, Mobile, Alabama, 1956*
- Parks, Gordon. *Outside Looking In, Mobile, Alabama, 1956*
- Parks, Gordon. *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956*

Allen, Devin. 2017. *A Beautiful Ghetto*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Allen’s images, many of which can be found on Google or Instagram to transfer easily to class materials, are a look at “inner city” Baltimore, with a focus on the communities, culture, and resistance of Black people. Many of these photos are recognizable to students due to the similar appearance of North Philly and common urban experiences.

Appendix C - Materials & Strategies for Teaching

“Character Maps.” Facing History and Ourselves. Retrieved July 19, 2020 (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/character-maps>).

“Double-Entry Journal - ReadWriteThink.” Readwritethink.Org. Retrieved July 19, 2020 (<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/printouts/double-entry-journal-30660.html>).

“Identity Charts.” *Facing History and Ourselves*. Retrieved July 19, 2020 (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/identity-charts>).

“Plot Structure: A Literary Elements Mini-Lesson - ReadWriteThink.” Readwritethink.Org. Retrieved July 19, 2020 (<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/plot-structure-literary-elements-904.html>).

“See, Think, Wonder.” *Facing History and Ourselves*. Retrieved July 19, 2020 (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/see-think-wonder>).

Meister, Raphaela. “Mind Mapping for Teachers: Tips, Tools, and Lesson Plans.” Focus. Retrieved July 19, 2020 (<https://www.mindmeister.com/blog/teach-mind-mapping/>).