Handout 1.3 Two Names, Two Worlds

In the poem below, student Jonathan Rodríguez reflects on how his name represents his identity:

Hi I’m Jon………..No—Jonathan
Wait—Jonathan Rodríguez
Hold on—Jonathan Rodríguez
My Name, Two names, two worlds
The duality of my identity like two sides of the same coin
With two worlds, there should be plenty of room
But where do I fit?
Where can I sit?
Is this seat taken? Or is that seat taken?
There never is quite enough room is there?
Two names, Two worlds
Where do I come from?
Born in the Washington heights of New York City
But raised in good ol’ Connecticut
The smell of freshly mowed grass, autumn leaves
Sancocho, Rice and Beans
The sound from Billy Joel’s Piano Keys
And the rhythm from Juan Luis Guerra
I’m from the struggle for broken dreams
Of false promises
Of houses with white picket fences
And 2.5 kids
The mountains and campos de la Republica Dominicana
And the mango trees
I’m not the typical kid from suburbia
Nor am I a smooth Latin cat
My head’s in the clouds, my nose in a comic book
I get lost in the stories and art
I’m kinda awkward—so talkin’ to the ladies is hard
I listen to Fernando Villalona and Aventura every chance I get,
But don’t make me dance Merengue, Bachata
Or Salsa—I don’t know the steps
I’ve learned throughout these past years
I am a mix of cultures, a mix of races

“Una Raza encendida,
Negra, Blanca y Taina”

You can find me in the parts of a song, en una canción
You can feel my African Roots en la Tambora
My Taino screams en la guira
And the melodies of the lyrics are a reminder of my beautiful Spanish heritage
I am African, Taino and Spanish
A Fanboy, an athlete, a nerd, a student, an introvert
I'm proud to say: Yo soy Dominicano
I'm proud to say, I am me
I am beginning to appreciate that I am
Una bella mezcla
I am beginning to see that this world is also a beautiful mix
Of people, ideas and stories.
Is this seat taken?
Or is that seat taken?
Join me and take a seat,
Here we'll write our own stories

Connection Questions

1. What does Rodríguez mean when he uses the phrase “two names, two worlds”? What two worlds does his name represent?

2. What assumptions does Rodríguez think others might make about his identity because of his name? Which of those assumptions are true? Which are false?

3. What does your name suggest about your identity? To what extent does it influence how others think about you? How does it affect how you think about yourself?

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Jonathan Rodríguez, untitled poem.
Author Lori Duron and her husband, Matt, have two children, both boys. Duron writes about the reaction of her young son, C.J., the first time he saw a Barbie doll:

For days after C.J. discovered her, Barbie never left his side. When I’d do a final bed check at night before I retired for the evening to watch reality television and sneak chocolate when no one was looking, I’d see his full head of auburn hair sticking out above his covers. Next to him there would be a tiny tuft of blonde hair sticking out as well.

The next time we were at Target near the toy aisle—which I've always tried to pass at warp speed so the kids don't notice and beg me to buy them something—C.J. wanted to see “Barbie stuff.” I led him to the appropriate aisle and he stood there transfixed, not touching a thing, just taking it all in. He was so overwhelmed that he didn’t ask to buy a single thing. He finally walked away from the aisle speechless, as if he had just seen something so magical and majestic that he needed time to process it.

He had, that day, discovered the pink aisles of the toy department. We had never been down those aisles; we had only frequented the blue aisles, when we ventured down the toy aisles at all. As far as C.J. was concerned, I had been hiding half the world from him.

I felt bad about that, like I had deprived him because of my assumptions and expectations that he was a boy and boys liked boy things. Matt and I noticed that C.J. didn't really like any of the toys we provided for him, which were all handed down from his brother. We noticed that C.J. didn't go through the normal boy toy addictions that Chase [C.J.’s older brother] had gone through: he couldn’t care less about balls, cars, dinosaurs, superheroes, The Wiggles, Bob the Builder, or Thomas the Tank Engine. What did he like to play with? We didn’t worry ourselves much about finding the answer (a case of the second-born child not getting fussed over quite like the first-born); we trusted that in time something would draw him in. Which it did. It just wasn’t at all what we were expecting.

At about the eighteen- to twenty-four-month mark of a child’s life, the gender-neutral toys disappear and toys that are marketed specifically to boys or to girls take over. We didn’t realize it until later, but that divide in the toy world and our house being filled with only boy toys left C.J. a little lost at playtime. We
and the rest of society had been pushing masculine stuff on him and enforcing traditional gender norms, when all he wanted was to brush long blonde hair and dress, undress, and re-dress Barbie . . . .

Reflecting on C.J.’s identity, Duron concludes:

. . . On the gender-variation spectrum of super-macho-masculine on the left all the way to super-girly-feminine on the right, C.J. slides fluidly in the middle; he’s neither all pink nor all blue. He’s a muddled mess or a rainbow creation, depending on how you look at it. Matt and I have decided to see the rainbow, not the muddle. But we didn’t always see it that way.

Initially, the sight of our son playing with girl toys or wearing girl clothes made our chests tighten, forged a lump in our throats, and, at times, made us want to hide him. There was anger, anxiety, and fear. We’ve evolved as parents as our younger son has evolved into a fascinating, vibrant person who is creative with gender. Sometimes, when I think of how we behaved as parents . . . I’m ashamed and embarrassed.

**Connection Questions**

1. What is the difference between the toys in the “pink aisle” and those in the “blue aisle”? What assumptions do the toys in those aisles reflect about gender?

2. How do you explain the anxiety, anger, and fear Duron describes feeling when C.J. started playing with “girl toys”?

3. How do you respond to the assumptions people make about your gender? To what extent do you embrace and reflect them? To what extent do you reject them?

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2 Ibid., 4.
Julius Lester, a noted author, describes how discovering an ancient form of poetry helped him find his voice and define his own identity:

I grew up in the forties and fifties in Kansas City, Kansas, and Nashville, Tennessee, with summers spent in Arkansas. The forties and fifties were not pleasant times for blacks and I am offended by white people who get nostalgic for the fifties. I have no nostalgia for segregation, for the “No Colored Allowed” signs covering the landscape like litter on the smooth, green grass of a park, I have no nostalgia for a time when I endangered my life if, while downtown shopping with my parents, I raised my eyes and accidentally met the eyes of a white woman. Black men and boys were lynched for this during my childhood and adolescence . . .

I grew up in a violent world. Segregation was a deathly spiritual violence, not only in its many restrictions on where we could live, eat, go to school, and go after dark. There was also the constant threat of physical death if you looked at a white man in what he considered the wrong way or if he didn't like your attitude. There was also the physical violence of my community . . .

One of the pivotal experiences of my life came when I was eighteen. I wandered into a bookstore in downtown Nashville one frosted, gray day in late autumn aware that I was looking for something: I was looking for myself, and I generally find myself while wandering through a bookstore, looking at books until I find the one that is calling me. On this particular day I wandered for quite a while until I picked up a paperback with the word Haiku on the cover. What is that? I wondered. I opened the book and read,

On a withered branch
a crow has settled—
avatar nightfall.

I trembled and turned the pages hastily until my eyes stopped on these words:

A giant firefly;
that way, this way, that way, this—
and it passes by.

I read more of the brief poems, these voices from seventeenth-century Japan, and I knew: This is my voice. This simplicity, this directness, this way of using
words to direct the soul to silence and beyond. This is my voice! I exulted inside. Then I stopped. How could I, a little colored kid from Nashville, Tennessee—and that is all I knew myself to be in those days like perpetual death knells—how could I be feeling that something written in seventeenth-century Japan could be my voice?

I almost put the book back, but that inner prompting which had led me to it would not allow such an act of self-betrayal. I bought the book and began writing haiku, and the study of haiku led to the study of Zen Buddhism, which led to the study of flower arranging, and I suspect I am still following the path that opened to me on that day when I was eighteen, though I no longer write haiku.

I eventually understood that it made perfect sense for a little colored kid from Nashville, Tennessee, to recognize his voice in seventeenth-century Japanese poetry. Who we are by the sociological and political definitions of society has little to do with who we are.¹

**Connection Questions**

1. Why does Julius almost put the book of haiku back on the shelf? What factors lead to his momentary doubt that haiku is for him?

2. What does it mean to “find yourself”? Where does Julius Lester say he finds himself? Where do you go to find yourself?

3. What are you passionate about? How do the things you are passionate about help shape who you are?

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Sociologist Dalton Conley reflects on how the ways in which society teaches us to “organize our reality” can affect our identities:

I am not your typical middle-class white male. I am middle class, despite the fact that my parents had no money; I am white, but I grew up in an inner-city housing project where most everyone was black or Hispanic. I enjoyed a range of privileges that were denied my neighbors but that most Americans take for granted. In fact, my childhood was like a social science experiment: Find out what being middle class really means by raising a kid from a so-called good family in a so-called bad neighborhood. Define whiteness by putting a light-skinned kid in the midst of a community of color. If the exception proves the rule, I’m that exception.

Ask any African American to list the adjectives that describe them and they will likely put black or African American at the top of the list. Ask someone of European descent the same question and white will be far down the list, if it’s there at all. Not so for me. I’ve studied whiteness the way I would a foreign language. I know its grammar, its parts of speech; I know the subtleties of its idioms, its vernacular words and phrases to which the native speaker has never given a second thought. There’s an old saying that you never really know your own language until you study another. It’s the same with race and class.

In fact, race and class are nothing more than a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world, to organize our reality . . . . One of [my mother’s favorite stories] was how I had wanted a baby sister so badly that I kidnapped a black child in the playground of the housing complex. She told this story each time my real sister, Alexandra, and I were standing, arms crossed, facing away from each other after some squabble or fistfight. The moral of the story for my mother was that I should love my sister, since I had wanted to have her so desperately. The message I took away, however, was one of race. I was fascinated that I could have been oblivious to something that years later feels so natural, so innate as race does.¹

Connection Questions

1. What does Conley say about the difference between how black and white people describe themselves? Why do you think he believes that?

2. Do you agree?

3. Make a list of the adjectives that describe you. Which did you think of first? Which took longer to think of? Why were you able to think of some adjectives more easily than others?

4. What does Conley mean when he says that “race and class are nothing more than a set of stories we tell ourselves to get through the world”?
Do you agree? Write working definitions for the words race and class in your journal. You can revise or expand your definitions as you read and analyze the novel.