

Exploring Identity(ies) in *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*

The middle school years are a critical time in adolescents' development. As they move toward independence, adolescents struggle with their sense of identity as they not only consider the past but also think about their place in the present and future (e.g., AACAP, 2011; Halverson, 2010). This developmental process also includes understanding the "master narratives" that adolescents adopt and then "reproduce through talk" (Hammack, 2008, p. 236). If it is true that literacy practices shape readers' identities and identifications, then through engagement with texts, students might better come to understand themselves, their peers, and the world (McCarthy & Moje, 2002). More specifically, young adult (YA) literature, with its focus on adolescents, provides a fitting space in which to explore characters' and their own identity(ies) and "might be key to positive identity growth and development" (Alsup, 2010, p. 4).

Numerous researchers have shown the importance of looking at identity in and with YA literature. Niday and Allender (2000), for example, used a cultural studies perspective in their work with secondary and college students to explore how characters border-cross, and Harper (2007) studied masculinity in YA novels with female protagonists. More recently, Blackburn and Clark (2011) examined sexual identity in their study of adolescents and adults who participated in literature discussions using YA literature with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning (LGBTQ) characters and themes.

Building off this work, I offer here another analytic perspective that we can use to discuss identity in

YA literature, Gee's (2000–2001) concept of identity. I show how one group of middle school students explored identity(ies) through a book club discussion of the multiple-award-winning graphic novel *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* (Neri & DuBurke, 2010), which was named an American Library Association (ALA) Great Graphic Novel for Teens and an ALA Notable Book in 2011; it was also selected as a Coretta Scott King Honor book (2011) and an International Reading Association (IRA) Notable Book for a Global Society (2011).

I begin with the perspectives that inform my work. Then, I present the context for the students' discussion. I close with the prompts and activities we used in our discussion.

Gee and Identity

Identity is not something fixed, but rather fluid, relational, and interactional; we make claims about who we are, and others construct who we are, by comparing and contrasting ourselves with others (e.g., Gee, 2000–2001; Mishler, 1999; Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street, 2009; Sarup, 1996). In particular, adolescence is a time where identity formation is in flux as teenagers move in and out of multiple group memberships (sports teams, clubs, etc.), cultures (religious, ethnic, etc.), and subcultures (e.g., goth, emo, gamer) trying to create and define identities for themselves.

Gee (2000–2001) proposed four interconnected perspectives on identity, suggesting that we can use them as analytic lenses to study different aspects of

how identities are fashioned and maintained (see Table 1). Although all four perspectives coexist today, Gee argued that, historically, society has moved from

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a focus on who we are as determined by nature, to the second (who we are as determined by our place[ment] in society), to the third—we are what and who we are largely based on our individual achievements and skills as they are recognized by others. The fourth perspective—“we are what we are

because of the experiences we have had with certain sorts of ‘affinity groups’”—has gained prominence in the last decade (2000–2001, p. 101).

Each of the four identities emerges or is recognized through where and how it comes to be (process), who or what gives it power, and where the source of power comes from. To illustrate each of the four perspectives, Gee used himself as an example. He was born an identical twin (N-identity); this is something developed from nature, not constructed by others. Next, he is a college professor (I-identity); his position is sanctioned by an outside body of some sort. Gee is charismatic (D-identity); this identity is something that others may assign to him and/or he adopts for himself. Finally, he is a “Trekkie” (A-identity); Trekkies have a shared love of the show *Star Trek*.

Gee’s conception of identity is a natural framework from which to read and discuss characters in YA literature because, similar to teenage readers, the protagonists are adolescents undergoing change and identity development at multiple levels and in manifold contexts. Likewise, just like learners’ identities are social constructions influenced by social and cultural contexts (peers, family, media, etc.), so too are characters’ identities. Teachers and students can use the four perspectives to not only generate questions about how identity is functioning for certain individuals (characters) in a particular context or across various contexts, but also discuss the types of master narratives that they and the characters subscribe to.

In the book club, our discussion of *Yummy* was predicated on Gee’s (2000–2001) definition of identity:

The “kind of person” one is recognized as “being,” at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or stable. Being recognized as a certain “kind of person,” in a given context, is what I mean here by “identity.” In this sense of the term, all people have multiple identities connected not to their “internal states” but to their performances in society. (p. 99)

Identity and Yummy

Yummy, the graphic novel authored by Greg Neri and illustrated by Randy DuBurke (2010), presents a wonderful opportunity to introduce Gee’s work to students, not only because of the layering of identities in book, but also because of how others in the story view and talk about Yummy. The book *Yummy* recounts

Table 1. Four ways to view identity (Gee, 2000–2001)

Process		Power	Source of Power
Nature-identity: a state	developed from	forces	in nature
Institution-identity: a position	authorized	authorities	within
Discourse-identity: an individual trait	recognized in	the discourse/dialogue	of/with “rational” individuals
Affinity-identity: experiences	shared in	the practice	of “affinity” groups

events that happened in Chicago in 1994. Eleven-year-old Robert (“Yummy”) Sandifer accidentally kills a neighborhood girl while trying to shoot a rival gang member. At first his fellow gang members protect him, but as police presence in the neighborhood increases, they become nervous. Yummy becomes a liability, and his own gang murders him.

Neri, a teacher in Los Angeles at the time, was impacted by the story and wanted to explore whether Yummy was a victim or a bully. Based on public records, personal stories, and media reports, Neri crafts Yummy’s story. Among the stories Neri heard were the neighborhood accounts of Yummy’s father being in prison “for drugs” and his mother’s multiple arrests for “drugs and prostitution.” Because his mother also physically abused him, he was removed from her care and alternated between his grandmother’s house and the streets. Yummy could hug a teddy bear at night after robbing someone at gunpoint. In short, he was a little boy living a very grown up and rough life. In the author’s note, Neri writes, “When Yummy was found

dead and all the facts came out, I wasn’t sure who the bad guy was” (unpaged).

Since Yummy is not alive to tell his own story, Neri writes from the perspective of Roger, a made up “friend” of Yummy who narrates the events for readers. In trying to answer the question “Why did this happen?” Roger talks to people in his neighborhood about Yummy, each person vocalizing his or her opinion as to what went wrong and who the real Yummy was (see Fig. 1).

DuBurke’s black-and-white illustrations skillfully support and enhance the text story. Panels of differing sizes and shapes with distinctive ratios of black to white enhance the mood and tone.

The novel also incorporates the perspectives of newscasters, psychologists, and politicians. All of these citizens and stakeholders speak to Yummy’s identity—who they think he is (see Fig. 2). Readers never really hear Yummy’s perspective or voice; all we have is what others think he might have said or what they said about him based on whatever knowl-



Figure 1. Roger’s wondering about the real Yummy



Figure 2. Some outsider perspectives on Yummy

edge they had. It is this third person, and this sometimes far-removed identity construction, that I wanted the students to think about.

Context of the Discussion

Our discussion of *Yummy*, which occurred on two concurrent Mondays after school (60 minutes each), was part of a larger funded project—a yearlong series of book club discussions centering on social respon-

sibility.¹ Participants included 15–20 sixth- and seventh-grade students who signed up specifically to read the graphic novel. Book clubs, “small, collaborative groups whose purpose is to enhance literacy and personal and social growth” (Polleck, 2010, p. 51) are transformational spaces because of the conversation that takes

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place among participants. According to Wolk (2009), “young adult literature is one of the most meaningful and enjoyable ways for students to inquire into social responsibility because . . . within these stories are moral and ethical quandaries, just as there are endless civic issues” (p. 667). I hoped that our discussion of *Yummy* might interrupt some of the cultural narratives the students may hold regarding who commits crimes and why.

Yummy was also selected because it related to four areas of social responsibility: caring and empathy; social problems and social justice; power and propaganda; and, war, peace, and nonviolence (Wolk, 2009). These areas of social responsibility align with how I view identity and identity construction: teaching *Yummy* could be considered an “act of supporting and challenging” students’ identities related to these themes and offering a space for the students “to explore how their identities [in terms of these themes] are hybrid” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 233). I was further interested in how students’ assumptions, perceptions, and thinking regarding identity, especially in terms of how we label others, could be challenged and/or transformed through reading and discussing *Yummy*.

Discussing Identity(ies)

Because of students’ potentially different, culturally based responses to the text, and the need for students to be able to develop a personal response to the novel, as an entry to discussion I first posed questions that incorporated reader response theory; I then posed questions that incorporated aspects of critical literacy and other literary theories. All of these initial questions related to identity in some form—the identity of the author, the identity of the reader (or potential reader), and/or *Yummy*’s identity. These provided a bridge for using Gee’s four perspectives. Reader response questions (e.g., How do you react to *Yummy*? Could the events described in *Yummy* happen here?) were designed so that students could make connections among *Yummy*, the story, and themselves and their experiences. Critical literacy (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) questions (e.g., Why do you think *Yummy* was the way he was?) prompted students to question the characters’ multiple viewpoints of *Yummy* and broader social and cultural issues impacting the story. By asking about the possible reasons for what happened to *Yummy* and how his fellow gang members treated him, we were getting closer to talking about *Yummy*’s identity(ies). Additional questions touched on aspects of deconstruction (i.e., binary opposition) and cultural studies theory because both of these pointed the discussion even more to Gee’s identity perspectives (e.g., Characters in the book seem to talk about *Yummy* as being “good” or “bad” and as a “child” or “grown up thug.” Is he totally in one or the other or does he move? How and why do you think he moves?).

Once we were finished with the discussion questions, we were ready to tackle Gee. I handed out the “Who Is *Yummy*?” sheet (see Fig. 3) and explained to the students that we were going to talk about identity. In making the worksheet, I went through the novel and looked for places where others labeled and/or described *Yummy*. I purposely left out some key identities (such as gang member) so that students would be prompted to add them.

I described the four types of identities and then read the directions aloud to the students. We did the first example (boy) together, discussing how it could possibly be labeled as N-identity, because he was born as a male (as opposed to a female), and as D-identity,

Who Is Yummy?

What does identity mean? Identity can mean several things. Jim Gee, a teacher who studies kids and video games, says there are four types of identities.

1. *N-Identities, or nature-identities*: these are identities beyond our control (being a girl or boy; being black or white) but they become important in how others see, think, and talk about them.
2. *I-identities, or institution-identities*: these are identities authorized (or given) by institutions (government, groups of people, society); people have “roles” (prisoner, teacher) that they accept or reject at different levels.
3. *D-Identities, or discourse-identities*: these are identities that can come about based on how others talk about that identity (he is shy, she is funny); a person can accept or reject how others see him or her, or the person can talk about and create his or her own identity (“I am friendly”).
4. *A-identities, or affinity-identities*: these are identities that come about through loyalty to a set of common/shared activities (track club, book club) or traditions of a group/other people in terms of shared beliefs or behaviors (anti-war group, Nicki Minaj fan club).

Directions: Yummy was given or called each of the words/terms below by himself or others. What I want you to do in pairs or small groups is label each one as an N, I, D, and/or A identity. Be ready to talk about why you gave the labels you did. NOTE: A word/term can have more than one identity label!

Boy	_____	Yummy	_____
Shorty	_____	Monster	_____
Little Killer	_____	Scared	_____
Brother	_____	Family	_____
Friend	_____	Capone	_____
A bully	_____	Kid	_____

Are there any I forgot? If so, put them below and label them.

Figure 3. Identity labels (based on Gee, 2000–2001)

because others called him a boy, meaning a child (e.g., young, immature). Then the students worked in pairs and small groups to complete the rest of the identities before we shared our responses as a whole group.

Using Gee’s perspectives provided a scaffold to discuss identity and worked to expand our discussion. Just asking what Yummy was like or why events played out like they did might have yielded simple answers. For example, when deciding what identity labels could be attached to the term “brother,” the students came up with three related to his membership in the Black Disciples gang: Identity (this label was authorized by the gang), Discourse (Yummy was

called this by the gang, and he accepted this label), and Affinity (his loyalty to and the shared interests of the gang).

After talking about how Yummy was part of an affinity group because of his gang membership, Tim jumped in, saying sarcastically, “Yeah, they really look out for each other [by] shooting a young member.” This led to further discussion about Yummy’s and the gang’s identity(ies) and the uses of the term *brother*. After all, if Yummy was really their brother, a term they called him, how does the meaning change if they then murdered him? And, what do such terms mean in real life and in our relationships with others?

When I asked the group about the term “Little

Killer,” an identity the news media gave Yummy, they stated it could be an I-identity and a D-identity because he was given the label and, depending on one’s interpretation of events, seemed to embrace or reject it. Students discussed why Yummy might have adopted (or not) the identity of “Little Killer” and “brother” more so than “child” and “boy.” We also talked about how terms like “monster” got applied to Yummy. Who called him a monster? Was it deserved? Is that a label

he would have embraced? This led to our discussion of name calling, including from the media, and the impact it has on people and their behavior. It also led to a discussion of how name calling and labeling can impact what people do and say in real life.

Although brief, my initial exploration using Gee’s (2000–2001) perspectives

on identity with the graphic novel *Yummy* provides a useful framework that we can use for discussions with YA literature. First, the four perspectives ask us to think more deeply about identity and the extent to which identity(ies) are embraced or rejected. For example, right before we discussed the Identity sheet, the classroom teacher asked the students, “If you heard that an 11-year-old shot a girl, what would your first impression have been?” The first answer a student came up with was “monster.” By using the Identity sheet, we used a framework to examine the term four different ways. Second, looking at characters’ identity development and endorsing master narratives can provide a mirror for adolescents to examine their own belief systems and the reasons for them. For example, students discussed the fact that some readers might wrongly assume (a master narrative) that only Black people “live in the projects/hood/ghetto.”

By studying Yummy’s identities, we were ultimately able to address the questions that prompted Neri to write the book: Why did this happen? Who was Yummy? Most of the students felt that, ultimately, Yummy was a victim of circumstances beyond his control and that his “narrative” was almost completely due to the influence of the gang.

Final Thoughts

With only two after-school sessions to discuss Yummy, we only scratched the surface of identity. However, our discussion using Gee’s framework has shown me that it can be a valuable addition to help scaffold and structure conversations about identity, labels, and action/inaction. These, in turn, can serve to disrupt the assumptions that students hold about race, culture, gender, etc. If we can push students to think about characters and identity more deeply, then perhaps those same ideas will translate into real life and make a difference in how adolescents perceive and treat others, leading to more positive identity development for everyone.

Note

- ¹ Other young adult novels in the book club include *Gym Candy*, *The Hunger Games*, *The Rock and the River*, and *Hurt Go Happy*. The year-long project was funded by an ALAN Foundation research grant.

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