

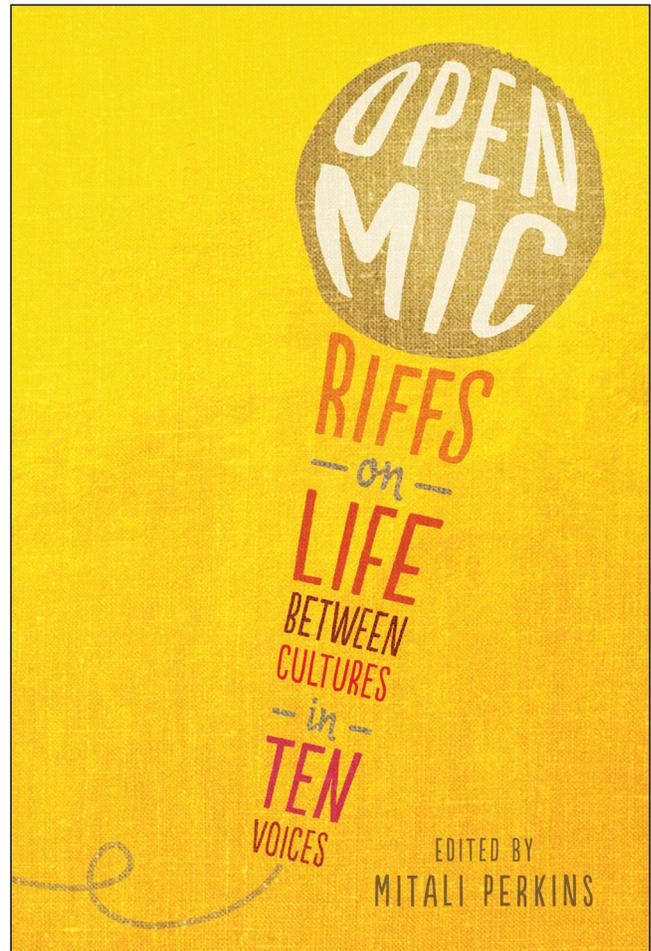
OPEN MIC

RIFFS ON LIFE BETWEEN
CULTURES IN TEN VOICES

EDITED BY MITALI PERKINS

INTRODUCTION

Listen in as ten YA authors—some familiar, some new—use their own brand of humor to share their stories about growing up between cultures. Henry Choi Lee discovers that pretending to be a tai chi master or a sought-after wiz at math wins him friends for a while—until it comically backfires. A biracial girl is amused when her dad clears seats for his family on a crowded subway in under a minute flat, simply by sitting quietly between two uptight white women. Edited by acclaimed author and speaker Mitali Perkins, this collection of fiction and nonfiction uses a mix of styles as diverse as their authors, from laugh-out-loud funny to wry, ironic, or poignant, in prose, poetry, and comic form.



COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

This guide is designed to help your students engage with the text through discussion questions, writing prompts, and research activities that may be performed independently or in small or large groups. The nature of the questions themselves, as well as the variety of suggested response formats and opportunities for interaction with peers, will help students develop proficiency in many of the college and career readiness anchor (CCRA) standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Although some of the most obvious connections to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts are listed below, this guide is designed to be versatile and extensible to meet the specific needs of your classroom.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1–3 Key Ideas and Details

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.1–6 Conventions of Standard English, Knowledge of Language and Vocabulary Acquisition and Use



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND WRITING PROMPTS

1. In her introduction to the anthology, Mitali Perkins writes that she sees humor as helping to relieve tension and break down barriers between people. She also thinks humor has an important relationship to power, so she suggests three ground rules. Think about comedy in books or movies or stand-up comedians you've seen recently. Have they played by the same rules? If not, did it affect how funny they were, or how comfortable you felt laughing?
2. "Becoming Henry Lee" by David Yoo
Henry first resists and then embraces racial stereotyping in his struggle to belong socially. How do these early experiences ultimately shape his response to the JV wrestling team's stereotyping of the drama kids? How might the JV wrestlers' comments themselves indicate an attempt to live up to cultural expectations of male athletes?
3. "Why I Won't Be Watching the *Last Airbender* Movie" by Gene Luen Yang
Gene Luen Yang used a webcomic to respond to the casting of the movie *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and advocate for a boycott. Have you ever been bothered enough by something to take action (like participating in a boycott) or speak up (perhaps through social media)? If so, did you, as the author says in the comic's last panel, "do it respectfully and give good reasons"? What kind of reaction or result did you see, if any? If you haven't had this experience yet, what kind of situation might provoke you to do so? Have you ever seen a friend, family member, or celebrity speak out against something? Did it change how you felt or acted? Why or why not?
4. "Voilà!" by Debbie Rigaud
What people say and what others hear don't always match—even when they're speaking the same language. How can our expectations, assumptions, and body language influence our ability to make connections with others?
5. "Three-Pointer" by Mitali Perkins
How do Mitali Perkins and her sisters initially navigate between their parents' culture (in their home) and the local culture (in their school)? How do Mitali's sisters adapt again after they move out of the house and to a different school environment? How much do you think has to do with the universal experience of growing up, versus the particular experience of being a first-generation immigrant?
6. "Like Me" by Varian Johnson
 - When Griffin repeats a joke his cousin laughed over, about his lack of basketball skills, the joke gets only polite, quiet laughter from his friends at school. Why would the same joke be received differently in different contexts? Why do you think Griffin would choose to repeat a joke he himself found "lame"?
 - What does it mean that Violet's language changes when she talks to Griffin versus Mrs. Whittaker? Why is Griffin jealous of the ease with which she switches?
 - How is Griffin surprised by Violet? How is Violet surprised by Griffin? Why?

7. “Confessions of a Black Geek” by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich

Growing up, the narrator felt her identity was best defined by the integration of two words: Black and geek. She thought her high school was well integrated among races until she began to encounter the expectation—held by friends and teachers alike—that there should be conflict between the two labels. As someone living very comfortably, even passionately, in a well-rounded, complex, multidimensional identity defined by more than a single distinguishing cultural marker, she found herself ultimately struggling to be seen for both what she had in common with her peers and how they differed. Have you experienced society trying to shove you into one label even at the expense of another aspect of your identity? How can our personal identities, or sense of self, differ from the ways society tries to define us? How can we balance our individual and collective identities? Which is more important where you live? Why?

8. “Under Berlin” by G. Neri

How are the narrator and her father able to find humor in making a game out of the racism they encounter on Berlin’s subway, the *U-bahn*? Could you do the same thing in that situation?

9. “Brotherly Love” by Francisco X. Stork

The narrator’s father and his brother have very different concepts of what it means to be a “real” man. How is it possible that two people within the same culture and family can have such different interpretations of it?

10. “Lexicon” by Naomi Shihab Nye

In the final stanza of the poem, author Naomi Shihab Nye writes: “And then there would be language worth trading” (page 121). Cite other lines from the poem to explain the types of words and social conditions that she feels are prerequisites to that cross-cultural connection.

11. In several of these stories, the main character lives in a place where there are very few—or no—other people from his or her cultural background. He or she is then expected not only to navigate the complex space between cultures but also to serve as a sort of “cultural ambassador,” representing the entirety of one culture to the other. What are some examples of times in your own life where others have had this expectation of you or, looking back, you might have unconsciously placed this role on someone else?

ACTIVITIES

1. The live-action adaptation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is not the only instance of a film, television program, or play in which actors were cast to play characters who are meant to be, or were originally intended to be, of a different race or ethnicity. Similarly, book characters are sometimes represented on a book’s jacket by an image of someone of a different race from that portrayed in the book. Find five examples of this kind of cross-casting, and choose one to research further. See if you can find editorials, op-eds, or blog posts expressing opinions about what factors influenced the artistic decisions. In your own opinion, did this representation affect the integrity of the work?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

2. Research a celebrity or historical figure who crossed cultural boundaries or lived between borders. Write a brief report, create a poster using print or digital media, and prepare a three- to five-minute presentation on his or her life, contributions to society, and cultural identity. Be sure to include a bibliography and properly cite your sources.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.5 Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

3. Choose two of the stories from this anthology. Compare and contrast the ways the authors address stereotypes and identities. Then consider some of the labels and associated stereotypes that someone else might apply to you. How do your actions, appearance, and/or attitude affirm or contradict these stereotypes?

Label	Stereotype	Affirmation	Contradiction

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

4. In “Talent Show,” author Cherry Cheva (a Thai-American woman) chooses to write from the point of view of Josh (a white boy). Suggest at least three possible reasons the author might have chosen to write the story from Josh’s point of view rather than, say, from the character Gretchen’s point of view or from that of another character in the story. Support your argument with observations from your own personal experience of the story as a reader, what you know about writing techniques, and/or Mitali Perkins’s introduction to the anthology.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

5. Several of the stories in this collection emphasize the role of language and word choice in how we communicate and connect with others. Modern, mainstream English borrows words from many other languages, and many English-speaking individuals pepper their speech with additional words and phrases that they encounter at home or while traveling. What are some of your favorite words, and why? Look up the etymology (origins and linguistic evolution) of five of your favorite words, as well as two words you learned only recently. Any surprises?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

6. Have a class debate about using humor to discuss race. Read the following statements to the class and designate an area of the classroom to each.

- It is never acceptable to use humor when talking about race; the potential to offend is too great.
- Some humor is acceptable when talking about race, but only when making fun of your own race.
- It is acceptable to use humor when talking about race, but with caution.
- It is acceptable to use humor when talking about race all the time; people are too serious about race.

Students can then stand in the area that corresponds to the statement they agree with (or students with different ideas can create a new area). Let each student explain their reasons and try to persuade other students to agree with them. Students can change their mind and move around the room based on how persuasive an argument is.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Guide written by Michele Gorman, co-author of *Connecting Young Adults and Libraries: A How-to-Do-It Manual*.



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