



## BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

Rénard B. **Harris** & S. d. **Collins**



# Seriously, Can We Talk Laugh about Race?

Voices from *Open Mic*

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/page/the-alan-review-columns>.*

**F**or this issue’s “Book in Review” column, close friends and colleagues S. d. Collins and Rénard Harris join forces to tackle the formidable subject of “race.” Two friends, one column, one writing voice, and one heck of a topic. Race has been the focus of countless hours of conversation over the course of our two decades of friendship. If we were to create a t-chart comparing the two of us, it would look something like the following:

Rénard	S. d.
Tall	Not nearly as tall
Thin	A bit fluffier
Dancing Ropes of Braids	Tangled Mess of Curls
Eyes the Color of Amber	Eyes Crossed
City Mouse	Country Mouse

As if those differences weren’t enough, we then have the issue of “race.” On surveys that ask about “race,” one of us checks the box to the right of “African American,” while the other one checks the box next to “White.” We are ebony & ivory; chocolate & vanilla; pepper & salt.

Without a doubt, we are very different. On the other hand, our similarities far outweigh all of our differences. In his compellingly empathetic book,

*Every Day* (2012), David Levithan writes, “No matter what our religion or gender or race or geographic background, we all have about 98 percent in common with each other. . . . For whatever reason, we like to focus on the 2 percent that’s different, and most of the conflict in the world comes from that” (p. 77).

Still, even between long-time friends, race matters.

Race matters because our race helps us determine who we are. It is from our race that we cull pieces, no matter if those pieces are minuscule or monstrous, of our individual identities. It is the color of our skin, the shape of our eyes, the texture of our hair, and the shape of our bodies that embody the flags we wave to represent us when we step into a room.

Although it is our right to define ourselves based on our race, when others outside of our race begin to define us based on how we look, problems arise. Even worse is when those of one race control the opportunities of those of another.

A major issue in our US public education system is that, although it advocates supporting diversity, the system’s values align primarily with those of the White, middle class. For many students of color from low-income homes who do not assimilate into the world defined by White, middle-class people, the consequences are extremely harsh; those students too often become dropouts, are expelled, or graduate with far less life preparedness than their White peers.

If the goal of our educational system is to prepare children to be part of society and possess the knowledge, skills, and attitude to navigate the globe, what can we do in the classroom to help our learners? Race matters in the classroom always and is essential when

the teacher's goal is to welcome every person into the learning community and treat each person equally, especially those of minority races from low-income homes who have been marginalized.

Issues such as the one above are packed with intensity and encased with passion, sometimes creat-

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ing an explosion of ill will when they aren't discussed with the proper care. The paradox of race is this; race matters, but people of different races are not always able to discuss it.

For this reason, it is our honor to spotlight *Open Mic: Riffs on Life between Cultures in Ten Voices*, edited by Mitali

Perkins, in this issue dedicated to "Race Matters." Having grown up "between cultures," Mitali reminds us, "The best way to ease the situation [of conversations about race] is with humor" (p. ix).

Mitali, the mic is all yours!

### **A Bit of Background on Open Mic**

#### **About the Book**

*Open Mic* is an anthology of ten pieces written by ten authors of differing backgrounds. However, all the authors share a couple of things in common: 1) they've spent most of their lives living in the margins of race and between cultures; and 2) they are able to write about their lives between cultures with infectious humor.

Some of the pieces are more memoirs, while some are more fictional; two of the pieces are written in free verse, and one is in the form of a comic. All of the offerings, regardless of their style or genre, are tightly crafted so that not one word is wasted on the reader. This also makes for a slim anthology—a total of 127 pages—which might help teachers sell the book to developing readers.

Each contribution offers what editor Mitali Perkins refers to as a "mirror" and/or a "window." Some will read *Open Mic* and see a reflection of themselves, be it the Indian American experience, the Korean American experience, the Latin American experience, the African American experience, and so on. For

others, reading *Open Mic* will be more like peering through a window into the specifics of someone else's life, a view that has the potential to demonstrate how similar we are to someone we thought to be so different.

#### **About the Author**

Mitali Perkins, whose first name means "friendly," is a citizen of the world. Born in Kolkata, India, Mitali moved to New York City when she was seven years old. As a teenager, her family moved across the United States to suburban California. She has also crossed borders into Mexico, Africa, and the United Kingdom. Crossing borders: that's what Mitali Perkins does best.

Mitali learned early in her life that one of the most powerful ways to open people's hearts and minds is through stories (2013, April 10). While in New York, Mitali took her library books to the fire escape where, surrounded by blue skies and red railings, she would sit, snack on SweetTarts, and read and read and read. As an adult, Mitali created a virtual version of her peaceful place in the form of a blog titled "Mitali's Fire Escape: A Safe Place to Think, Chat, and Read about Life between Cultures."

Cultural identity is a strong thread that Mitali weaves throughout most of her work. Her novels include stories about Indian American young women (*Monsoon Summer*, 2004; *The Not-So-Star-Spangled Life of Sunita Sen*, 2005), a Bangladeshi girl disguised as a boy (*Rickshaw Girl*, 2007), and Burmese boy soldiers (*Bamboo People*, 2010). Mitali's next novel, *Tiger Boy*, is coming in April 2015.

### **Using the Book in the Classroom**

#### **Prereading Activities**

Before becoming involved in discussions regarding race, it is helpful to understand our unconscious psychological dispositions toward people who are different from us. It is our thoughts, conscious or unconscious, that determine how we treat others.

#### **WHAT ARE YOU THINKING WITHOUT KNOWING YOU'RE THINKING IT?**

Professors Anthony Greenwald (University of Washington), Mahzarin Banaji (Harvard University), and Brian Nosek (University of Virginia) designed the "Implicit Association Test" (IAT) to probe unconscious

biases. The results of more than one million IAT tests suggest that most people have unconscious biases. For example, nearly two out of three White Americans show a moderate or strong bias toward, or preference for, Whites, as do nearly half of all Black Americans. To find more about your unconscious biases, follow this link: <http://www.understandingprejudice.org/iat/>.

#### RACE—The Power of an Illusion

California Newsreel produced a three-part documentary about race in society, science, and history. Series executive producer and co-director Larry Adelman (2003) explains, “What we discovered is that most of our common assumptions about race—for instance, that the world’s people can be divided biologically along racial lines—are wrong. Yet the consequences of racism are very real.” Learn more about the validity of your beliefs about the human species and race by engaging in California Newsreel’s interactive tutorials: “What Is Race?,” “Sorting People,” “Race Timeline,” “Human Diversity,” and “Where Race Lives” ([http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_General/000\\_00-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm)).

#### Interdisciplinary Connections

*Open Mic* contains various undercurrents of social, political, and cultural issues. The resources listed below allow for teachers and learners to explore topics more deeply and to delve into other content areas.

#### Immigration

“Immigration Challenges for New Americans,” Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/immigration/>

“Mexican American Migrations and Communities,” Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/mexican-americans/>

“U.S. Immigration Policy: What Should We Do?” The Choices Program

[http://www.choices.edu/resources/twtn\\_immigration.php](http://www.choices.edu/resources/twtn_immigration.php)

#### Race Relations

“Digital Archive of Primary Source Documents from the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” The King Center (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change)

<http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive>

“Poll: 61 Percent of African-Americans Say US Race Relations Getting Worse,” CBS DC

<http://washington.cbslocal.com/2014/02/04/poll-61-percent-of-african-americans-say-us-race-relations-getting-worse/>

“11 Facts about Discrimination against Latinos,” Do Something: Young People + Social Change

<https://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/11-facts-about-discrimination-against-latinos>

#### Social Justice

Social Justice Solutions (A social worker-conceived and operated organization committed to creating a socially just world)

<http://www.socialjusticesolutions.org/>

Think Progress (Editorially independent, nonpartisan, progressive, and committed to accuracy)

<http://thinkprogress.org/>

#### Group Discussion Questions

The page references in the following discussion questions refer to *Open Mic: Riffs on Life between Cultures in Ten Voices*.

1. “Becoming Henry Lee” by David Yoo  
Toward the end of the story exists a scene where Henry and his Korean parents watch a movie in which two White actors play foes. Yoo writes, “As they watched the crime drama together, Henry was stunned to discover that his parents had mistaken the two actors for the same person” (p. 11). What is the significance of this scene? What might Yoo be communicating about racism?
2. “Why I Won’t Be Watching *The Last Airbender* Movie” by Gene Luen Yang  
Study carefully Gene Luen Yang’s art in his comic contribution to *Open Mic*. How does Yang distinguish between Asian Americans and European Americans? What traditional racist stereotypes are

absent from his art? How does Yang's art connect to his final words of the comic, "If something bugs you about the world, say something. Do it respectfully and give good reasons." (p. 19)?

3. "Talent Show" by Cherry Cheva

Cherry Cheva's full last name is Chevapravatumrong, which is ethnically Thai. On the other hand, Cheva was born in Columbus, Ohio, grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and is fully American. In "Talent Show," Cheva writes from the perspective of an adolescent Jewish male whose love interest is an Asian female with a passion for comedy. What is Cheva's message in "Talent Show," and what details does she use to express this throughout her story?

4. "Voilà!" by Debbie Rigaud

The question below comes from Michele Gorman's excellent *Open Mic* teacher's guide that she created for Candlewick Press. (See "Additional Resources" at the end of the column for a link to Gorman's teaching guide.)

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

Perkins explains in the "About the Contributors" section of *Open Mic* that she and her sisters have names that give insight into their characters. "*Sonali* means 'gold,' *Rupali* means 'silver,' and *Mitali* means 'friendly'" (Perkins, 2013a, p. 124). Furthermore, one of Perkins's multifarious strengths as a writer is her ability to describe. Identify passages where Perkins describes people. Why are her comparisons effective? What are the similarities and/or differences in how other authors in the analogy describe people?

6. "Like Me" by Varian Johnson

Although Principal Greer insists that all of the students who attend Hobbs Academy, a boarding school in Vermont, are "cut from the same cloth" (p. 55), Griffin, Violet, and Jasmine certainly contribute to the school's diversity. Still, all three assimilated happily and seamlessly into the majority culture until Griffin heard Violet speak without any teachers or any other White students around. Griffin says:

It's almost magical, the way she switches talking like that. Some people call it slang. Teachers call it bad English. Idiots call it Ebonics. And me—I call it just talking. Like the way you do with family. (p. 65)

Describe the nature of Violet's home language. How does this connect with your own experience of the versatile nature of the way we speak? What insights do we gain into Griffin and Violet's characters based on this scene?

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

Read the poem below (Harris, 2002) and respond to the following prompts/questions:

**Marginalized**

I don't like being in the margin:  
It is like the corner of a room.  
I'm caged,  
My freedom is fenced with barbed wire.  
I wake up with ideas  
But go to sleep with rejections.  
I shout out dreams  
And I am hushed by reality,  
A reality that controls my choices,  
Choices measured by someone else's vision.  
What they cannot see  
Cannot be my choice.  
I choose to have a voice,  
I choose to be heard!  
But I am in the margin.  
No one listens.

—Rénard B. Harris

Cite at least three examples from "Confessions of a Black Geek" that mirror the experience of being marginalized. Compare how "Confessions of a Black Geek" and "Marginalized" are resolved. What actions of the characters account for the different endings?

8. "Under Berlin" by G. Neri

What are at least three specific details/lines of dialogue that cue the reader that Daddy is engaging the family and two unsuspecting German women in a game when he sits between the women on a crowded subway? Although he accomplished his objective of influencing the women to move, was there a cost associated with his "win"? What line completely summarizes the theme of Neri's story?

9. “Brotherly Love” by Francisco X. Stork  
How does the title “Brotherly Love” signify the action of Stork’s story? How does the author use each of his characters to demonstrate how our *perception* of reality is not always accurate? Identify the climax of the story on page 112; what is the point that Stork so eruditely makes without explicitly revealing the actual circumstance of the situation? Which lines from the text support your claims?
10. “Lexicon” by Naomi Shihab Nye  
Nye masterfully and magically weaves carefully selected words and vivid images to create a tender portrait of her father. As suggested by her title, “Lexicon,” words matter—they matter to the speaker of the poem, the poet who constructed the poem, and to everyone else who depends on words to communicate with others. With *tone* being how Nye feels about her father and *mood* being the general feeling that “Lexicon” creates within the reader, what are the tone and mood of Nye’s piece? What words contribute to the tone and mood that Nye establishes? Which of the author’s words create a vivid picture in your mind?

### Post Reading Activities

#### A WORD WITH YOU, PLEASE . . . OR SIX

*Open Mic* ends with Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Lexicon.” By virtue of being a poet, Nye practices the discipline of choosing only the words that pack the most power—“The right words in the right order,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge once described poetry. At different times in “Lexicon,” Nye describes her father with a mere six words: “He was Facebook before it existed” (p. 116), and “He loved the freshness of anything” (p. 120).

Literary legend has it that Ernest Hemingway once accepted the challenge of writing a short story in only six words, which he accomplished: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

*Smith Magazine* (<http://www.smithteens.com>) invites teens to write and submit their own six-word memoirs. Taking cues from the memoirists in *Open Mic* and practicing the discipline of sparse language, write your own six-word memoir—or several. To see what some other teens have written, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejndNExso9M>.

#### LET’S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

At the end of *Open Mic*, Mitali Perkins allows her readers a peek into the lives of each contributor to her anthology in “About the Contributors.” Select one of the authors and conduct a more in-depth author study. As with any good study, think of a question you would love to find out before you begin the study. For example, How did Cherry Cheva become a writer and producer for *Family Guy*? As a part of the research, try to include another story or poem by the same author as well as a critical essay that analyzes the author’s work. Don’t forget to let the readers of your research know where you found your information (cite your references), and make sure your reader can tell the difference between when you paraphrase your sources and when you quote them.

#### TODAY’S TEEN; TOMORROW’S ADULT

James Baldwin writes, “I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am also much more than that” (1984, p. xii). Most of the characters in *Open Mic* are teenagers in the midst of developing into their future selves. It is the discomfort that they encounter that created their interesting stories (Perkins, private communication). With that in mind, choose one of the characters from the anthology and write a character sketch, story, or poem using the same character 10 or 15 years later as an adult. Certainly, use the information you gathered about the characters in *Open Mic*, but also ponder their future experiences. Don’t write shyly—be bold, take risks, and allow your characters to be whomever they are as older versions of themselves . . . be that version positive or negative, or more interestingly, both.

#### LOOK AT MY WORDS, NOT AT MY FACE—MY WRITING, NOT MY RACE

Mitali Perkins believes strongly in the positive potential of social media and how it can help developing writers (be those writers tweens, adolescents, or adults) find their voices (Perkins, private communication). One of the most powerful aspects of the online environment is that we don’t have to be defined by our looks, but only by our words. In order to develop your chops as a writer, consider contributing what you create to one or more of the websites listed below:

*Figment* is a community where you can share writing, connect with other readers, and discover new stories and authors (<http://figment.com/>).

*WritersCafe.org* is an online writing community where writers can post their work, get reviews, befriend other writers, and much more (<http://www.writerscafe.org/>).

*Young Writers Online* is a community of young writers, both new and experienced, dedicated to improving each other's writing (<http://www.youngwritersonline.net>).

*Writing World* provides more than 25 additional websites for young writers to submit their work for publication, share their writing with other writers, receive responses on their writing, and learn more about their craft from reading other writers' pieces (<http://www.writing-world.com/links/young.shtml>).

### Additional Resources

*A teacher's guide for Open Mic* by Michele Gorman and published by Candlewick Press:  
<http://www.mitaliperkins.com/> (Located on the site below "Discuss My Books")

*Mitali's Fire Escape!: A Safe Place to Think, Chat, and Read about Life between Cultures*:  
<http://www.mitaliperkins.com/>

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