Grade Level: 9-12

Time Frame: 60-75 minutes

Learning Objectives: Students will use Thomas Sayers Ellis' poem “Or” as a model for writing their own poems that reflect on some aspect of their identity and how they and others may or may not define the self.

Prior Skills and Knowledge: This assignment will work best with students who have spent time discussing, studying, or otherwise reflecting on how inequality, stereotypes, and identity can affect individuals or whole groups. This is not an introduction to these ideas but could complement a larger study of these themes.

Required Resources: Thomas Sayers Ellis poem, “Or,”
(http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/178676)

Sequence of Activities

Journaling—10 to 15 minutes

What language or words (if any) capture who you are? If you had to be defined in terms of one thing, what do you wish it was? What criteria should be used to define human beings?

Read poem and discuss—30 minutes

Some questions that could guide but should not limit your discussion include:

- Who do you think the speaker is? How do you think that speaker feels about the word “or”?
- How does the word “or” function in the poem?
- Often, “or” implies a choice between things. What kinds of “choices” are being given in this poem? Do these “choices” provide flexibility? Do they complicate the ideas of race and further enhance our understandings? Or do they lock down the concept and limit it?
- How do people you encounter talk about your race? Make a list of nicknames, slang, media or film references, jargon, etc. that you have heard.
• When and how are you asked to identify your race? (Job applications, census reports, etc.) Are you comfortable being reduced to a race, an ethnicity, a color, a word? Why? Why not?
• What, if anything, is this poem asserting or reclaiming?

**Writing Activity**—30 minutes or longer

Pick a global identity marker that society uses to put you into a category, whether it is race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, age, political beliefs, or any other you can think of.

Then, pick a conjunction—or, and, but for, nor yet, so—that will serve as a hinge that holds your poem together.

Use the conjunction to subvert the identity marker (ideas of race, gender, ethnicity, etc.) to suit your agenda, not society’s. The conjunction can help you to be limiting, contradictory, expansive whatever you choose. Consider what kind of poem you want to write when choosing your conjunction.

Using the journal writing you have already done, plus your new ideas sparked by the discussion and Ellis’ own poem, craft a poem about how your identity is treated, seen, not seen, categorized, or uncategorized. Or, write about how you wish your identity would be treated, seen, not seen, categorized, or uncategorized.

**Share**—10 to 15 minutes

Ask for volunteers to read work aloud. Some questions that may guide the reflection and sharing include:

• What was it like to write with a conjunction?
• Did it feel limiting or liberating?
• Why did you pick the conjunction you did?
• How does it function in your poem?