



“Identity Repair” based on Thomas Sayers Ellis’ *Skin, Inc.*
by Elizabeth Falcón

Grade Level: 9-12

Time Frame: 60 - 75 minutes

Learning Objectives: Students will discuss and examine the concepts of race and identity, and how society categorizes and (mis-) represents us. Students will then engage with the concept of the identity repair poem, a concept introduced by Thomas Sayers Ellis in his book, *Skin, Inc.* Students will use the poem, “Or,” by Ellis as a literary model. Students will then create their own “identity repair” poem.

Prior Skills and Knowledge: Appropriate for any skill level. No poetry writing experience required.

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

Optional Resources:

Thomas Sayers Ellis’ bio page on the Poetry Foundation: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/thomas-sayers-ellis>

Arizona State Standards Addressed:

Reading

Strand 2: Comprehending Literary Text

Concept 1: PO 1, 2, 3, 6

Students will read the poem, “Or,” by Thomas Sayers Ellis and evaluate and interpret the poem for how language is shaped through literary elements (Strand 2, Concept 1, PO 1) to evoke readers’ emotions (Strand 2, Concept 1, PO 2), analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of the poem represents a view or comment on life (Strand 2, Concept 1, PO 3), and discuss how

meaning is enhanced through various features of poetry, including sound, structure (e.g., meter, rhyme scheme), and graphic elements (Strand 2, Concept 1, PO 6).

Writing

Strand 1: Writing Process

Concept 1: PO 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7

Prewriting: Students will generate ideas through prewriting, specifically written brainstorm, discussion, and drawing (Concept 1, PO 1). They are given a purpose--to write an “identity repair” poem--and an audience--each other and society at large--(Concept 1, PO 2-3). They will create their own controlling idea that the identity repair poem centers around (Concept 1, PO 4), create a written record of ideas (Concept 1, PO 6), and will be given a limited amount of time in which they must complete the assignment (Concept 1, PO 7).

Strand 2: Writing Elements

Concept 1: PO 2, 5

Concept 3: PO 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Concept 4: PO 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Ideas and Content: Students will be asked to write with an identifiable purpose (Concept 1, PO 2) and are tasked with creating a poem with original ideas and insight (Concept 1, PO 5).

Voice: Students will be creating an original, engaging voice, aware of audience and appropriate for the application and purpose (Concept 3, PO 1-5).

Word Choice: Students will use accurate, specific, powerful words and phrases that deal with the issue of identity (Concept 4, PO 1). Students will use vocabulary that is original, varied and natural to create, subvert, and repair an identity (Concept 4, PO 2). They will be writing a poem containing clear images, literal and figurative language, and subverting or transforming clichés into unique language they can claim as their own (Concept 4, PO 3-5).

Sequence of Activities:

Introduction: What is your skin, anyway? 10 minutes

Write for 10 minutes about your skin.

A few ideas to get started...

What's your skin's earliest memory?

What does your skin smell like?

How does your skin move?

Describe creases, scars, moles, tattoos--do any of these have a story?

What's your skin's favorite texture to touch?

If your skin was a state, what state would it be?

How many colors are in your skin?

What's underneath your skin?

Identity Discussion, 10 minutes.

How do you and people you encounter talk about your skin? Make a list: nicknames, slang, media, film.

When and how are you asked to identify by skin or race? (On applications, etc.) How do you identify yourself? How do you feel about how you identify?

Are you content with the words used to identify you? Are you comfortable being reduced to a race, an ethnicity, a color, a word?

"I am not merely *in*
this thing I am *in*. I am *it*." Thomas Sayers Ellis, from the poem, "Skin, Inc."

Discuss Ellis' book title, *Skin, Inc.* 10 minutes.

The collection refers to itself as "identity repair poems." What does this mean? How do you repair an identity? What do you think an identity repair poem should look or sound like?

Write a list of criteria on the board based on what students say.

Thomas Sayers Ellis on the identity repair poem--"The "publishable" American poem seems to have skipped over a certain amount of **honesty, boldness, and activism** in the name of 'craft.' An identity repair poem is one that acknowledges that many of the tools in the 'taught toolbox' need cultural improving."

Read the Poem, “Or,” and discuss, 15 minutes.

Ask students to read aloud--either one student or they can go around and each read an “or” phrase.

Who do you think the speaker is? How does the word “or” function in the poem?

Discuss words students might not know and to what they allude. (Diaspora, Noir Orpheus, Senghor, Florida Zora, Yoruba, etc.)

Often, “or” implies a choice between things. What kinds of “choices”--if any--are being given in this poem?

What moments of honesty, boldness, and activism do you see represented in this poem?

How does Ellis try to make the language form to his ideas, rather than let the language shape his ideas?

How does Ellis use this poem to transform language to reflect or mirror the kind of change (improving) he wants to see in “the toolbox” and/or society?

Ask students to re-read the poem.

What associations does the poem unlock for you? What experiences does it make you think of from your own life?

Does this fit your definition of an identity repair poem?

Writing Activity, 20 minutes.

Each student will make an identity repair poem.

Part 1. Branding

Begin by asking students to read over their “skin freewrite” from the beginning of class and to consider their thoughts and answers during the identity discussion. Ask them to consider their own identity as defined by society or others. They can add anything they wish.

Give each student a blank (unlined) piece of paper.

Ask them to consider to these prompts and create a visual poem on the blank piece of paper:

What makes you you?

If you were going to incorporate this identity, how would you brand it?

What symbol would you use to represent it?
What language would you use?
Design a logo.
How would you sell it? Market it?
Write a tag line (or several) for this identity.

Part 2. Breaking Free

Now, look at the criteria generated on the board from the identity repair discussion. How does selling, marketing, branding, etc. interact with the idea of identity repair? (It probably runs counter to the idea of identity repair, so...)

See if you can (through language) subvert or “graffiti” the branding that you’ve just done to make room for an individual voice, an individual identity even, in the midst of all that commerciality. Make us see that that identity is unique, not commodifiable, you are a human being, even as your identity is being confined and reduced to sellable phrases.

Share, 10 minutes.

Ask students to go around and share their work with the class. How did it feel to reduce yourself to a brand or a symbol, then break out of it? etc. What did they learn from the process

Extension/Optional Activity:

(This would work best with a small group of older students who are respectful of each other and are sincere about dialog regarding race, ethnicity, gender, etc.)

Instead of the part 1 listed above, do the following.

Part 1.

Gather students’ papers from the skin free-write and redistribute them randomly among the class. Each student should have someone else’s skin free-write.

Tell the students to begin by reading over the “skin freewrite” in front of them (to themselves).

Prompts:

If you were going to incorporate this skin, how would you brand it?
What symbol would you use to represent it?
Design a logo.
How would you sell it? Market it?
Write a tag line (or several) for this skin.

Then follow up with Part 2 and sharing as listed above.