During a recent meeting in Chicago, Illinois, an African American middle-aged entrepreneur introduced himself as a revolutionary libertarian. He then began to explain more about his identity that emerged during his high school years in the late 1970s. I am always struck by self-ascribed philosophical identities, particularly ones that are complex and multilayered. I inquired more about his self-naming, specifically asking about the texts he read that shaped his philosophy. He mentioned five books—Think and Grow Rich! by Napoleon Hill, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change by Stephen R. Covey, The Discipline of Market Leaders: Choose Your Customers, Narrow Your Focus, Dominate Your Market by Michael Treacy and Fred Wiersema, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t by Jim Collins, and Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne—before offering that his philosophy is really a mix of wide readings that include sociology, history, economics, and politics. Philosophical identities often result from reading nonfiction and fiction texts and find their expressions in the writings and dialogue of teens and adults.

For this first column for JAAL’s Texts and Identities department, I decided to explore the relations between philosophical identities and fictional texts targeting teens and adults to canvass how fictional texts can be leveraged to explore knowledge, reality, and existence and stimulate wide reading. Curious to see what I would find, I conducted a search for images on Google using the combination “teen + text + identity + fiction + philosophy + sociology + history + economics + politics.” The first image of books written for teens and read widely by adults that appeared was The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas (2017). Unclear how her text was connected to philosophy, I searched Google again. The following appeared in a review of Thomas’s book in The Atlantic titled “The Hate U Give Enters the Ranks of Great YA Novels” (Diamond, 2017):

Thomas’s book derives its title from the rapper Tupac Shakur’s philosophy of THUG LIFE....The acronym tattooed across Tupac’s abdomen could be read as an embrace of a dangerous lifestyle. But, as Khalil explains to Starr, just minutes before the cop pulls them over, it’s really an indictment of systemic inequality and hostility. (para. 5)

The Hate U Give was written by a first-time novelist whose stories feature a U.S.-born African American teen. A thread stitched the self-ascribed philosophy of the African American entrepreneur and the young teen, Khalil, in The Hate U Give.

Revolutionary Libertarian and Thug Life

At first glance, the revolutionary libertarian and thug life philosophies seem far apart. However, a careful analysis brings them closer together. Libertarians believe in free will. They seek to maximize political freedom and autonomy, emphasizing freedom of choice, voluntary association, and individual judgment. This judgment was espoused by Khalil, a male character in The Hate U Give. The author captures the fictional character’s philosophical renderings of thug life:

“Like, check this.” He points at me, which means he’s about to go into one of his Khalil philosophical moments. “Pac said Thug Life stood for ‘The Hate U Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody....T-H-U-G L-I-F-E. Meaning what society give us as youth, it bites them in the ass when we wild out.” (Thomas, 2017, p. 17)

Khalil, an unarmed African American male, was killed at the hands of the state in the novel. This fictional killing makes national headlines, mirroring the unarmed killings of African American boys and men in the United States that inaugurated the Black Lives Matter movement. I quickly found myself on the winding road to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s (1986) philosophy of nonviolent resistance undergirding the Montgomery Bus Boycott and practiced as part of the Black Lives Matter movement with die-ins and street demonstrations designed to raise consciousness and choke economic activity.

As I began to look at the intersections of these philosophical identities, I found myself reaching for texts across multiple disciplines and modes, both fiction and nonfiction. Chief among the texts were the Great...
my search for philosophical connections. Each word I read served as a compass toward the next text in my search for philosophical connections.

In his psychological treatment, Erikson (1968) described a stage of identity that occurs when “the adolescent now looks for an opportunity to decide with free assent” (p. 129). The adolescent “would rather act shamelessly in the eyes of his elders, out of free choice, than be forced into activities which would be shameful in his own eyes or in those of his peers” (p. 129). Each word I read served as a compass toward the next text in my search for philosophical connections.

Philosophical Ships at Texts’ Distant Shores

Individual philosophies are influenced by personal encounters that lead to deep engagement with ideas or extended reflections. Some action has to be taken in order for the identity to be self-ascribed. Texts and contexts breathe life into philosophical identities (Tatum, 2008). In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Zora Neale Hurston (1991) wrote,

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. (p. 3)

Teens and adults in and outside of fictional texts often express their identities at a distance to their philosophy. There is a greater prevalence to name an identity without the associated study of texts to unpack the significance of the identity. A philosophical identity is more than the naming of an identity; it is an examination of an identity. Although some will offer that they are bisexual, straight, Muslim, Christian, feminist, goth, conservative, or liberal, to name a few examples, others will stew in an identity crisis, leaving their identity without the associated study of texts to unpack the philosophy of self, in which one tries on an identity that inevitably will be incomplete and complex. The complexity may lead to deep reading, writing, and thinking until one arrives at a philosophy with a comfortable fit. However, I want to warn that the philosophy one has gone into a text may not be the same philosophy coming out. This is the fluid nature of philosophy, identities, and texts, especially for teens. The next time someone shares a philosophical identity with me, I bet that it is informed by texts. Also, the philosophy that a writer pours into a text can lead to a different philosophy for readers who travel through and exit the text. The revolutionary libertarian who may have commonalities with thug life served as a reminder.

It became clear from The Hate U Give that examining philosophical identities in fictional texts has the potential to nurture the study of identities outside the text, particularly when characters and events mirror broader societal challenges. There is also strong potential to leverage fictional texts to stimulate wider reading across the academic disciplines to inaugurate a study of an adopted identity.

In the same way that the author’s writing was informed by the thug life philosophy when penning her text, the fictional character, Khalil, embodied the thug life philosophy that was used to justify his killing.

Philosophy in and Philosophy Out

Philosophy at its roots is asking questions and seeking understanding for a wide range of phenomena. The teen years are an optimal period to explore and try on new identities. The adult years are equally ripe for identity exploration and formation, and texts across disciplines are great tools for both philosophical and identity exploration. Who am I, what is life, and what is my purpose? are three questions for philosophy 101, but they are three of the most difficult questions to answer because they are in constant negotiation. With regard to teachers and their adolescent and adult literacy students, one of the more challenging questions is, Which texts do I put in front of my students, and why? (Tatum, 2009). For teens and adults, self-selecting texts can be equally challenging.

The text and identity tent is wide and broad, with room for everyone. However, there is no singular path to invite others into the tent. Perhaps it starts with the philosophy of self, in which one tries on an identity that inevitably will be incomplete and complex. The complexity may lead to deep reading, writing, and thinking.
Near the end of *The Hate U Give*, Thomas (2017) writes, "Once upon a time there was a hazel-eyed boy with dimples. I called him Khalil. The world called him a thug" (p. 442). I wonder how the lives of the entrepreneur in Chicago and the fictional character, Khalil, would be different if they swapped philosophical identities. The author of *The Hate U Give* would have to write a new ending to her text that places philosophy and identity exploration at its core. This fictional text allows teens and adults to connect the dots and understand the identities of others while embracing their own.

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**The department editor welcomes reader comments.**

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