Exploring Your Background and Identity

Untitled, Melissa Barales-Lopez, Mia Bella Chavez, Grecia Carey Ortega, Norma Vidal, 2018

**Grade levels:** 9–12

**Duration:** One 45-minute classroom period
Learning Objectives

Can a self-portrait call into question society’s assumptions and lead to positive change?

Message to Educators

Self-portraits can affirm social identity as well as represent how we "perform" identity in doing and being who we are. This lesson asks: Can the act of creating a self-portrait set up important conversations around understanding who you are, how your identity (close friendships, gender, race, sexual orientation) has been formed, and what aspects of yourself you choose to present to the world?

Using photography to take action for social justice, your students will first turn to themselves and their immediate surroundings. This lesson plan includes photography examples to spark discussion, a list of materials, and cues that will help you foster a safe space and lead confidently, as students illuminate their backgrounds and identities.

You do not need to be practiced at facilitating discussions using art to effectively lead this lesson. Getty is committed to supporting meaningful dialogue through art, and the lesson plan was created with educators to carefully walk you through the steps.

As you and your students explore elements of background and identity, you may find yourself in deeper dialogue with each other around questions like: What is the self? Are there multiple versions of the self? Does the self change over time? Is the self a projection or persona? In this conversation, you and your students will move from self-understanding to begin the process of change-making.

Lesson Plan One: Exploring Your Background and Identity

In this lesson, students explore how photography can illuminate aspects of their identity, including cultural backgrounds, family histories, engagement in societal groups, personal privilege, and the points of intersectionality between those. To start this exploration, your students will consider the idea of self-portraiture and the depth of information (or misinformation) that photography can express, by analyzing others’ self-portraits. Following a discussion of the factors that shape background and identity, students then begin to consider their own identities. Students create
their own digital self-portraits pulling from ideas around personal background and identity to take the popular digital photography format to another level. In the final reflection, students connect their own identities to the idea of the self, and to the self-portrait, as they begin to consider the changes they would like to see in their world.

Associated Standards

- Getty SJA LO (Getty Social Justice and Advocacy Learning Objective): Know your family history and cultural background.
- Getty SJA LO: Understand your membership in multiple groups in society.
- Getty SJA LO: Define and discuss “intersectionality.” Consider what is not mentioned in traditional definitions of the term.
- CCSS (California Curriculum State Standard).ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1.D: Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphic, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence, and to add interest.

Materials

- Projector
- Self-portrait from Getty Unshuttered community
- Photograph from Getty Museum collection
- Graphic organizers
- Unshuttered 2.0 Selfie challenge video
- A digital camera or smartphone
Vocabulary

Community
A network or group of people, sometimes living in a particular place, who share interests, values, characteristics, responsibilities, or physical spaces.

Cultural Appropriation
When an individual or group claims rights to the symbols, art, language, or customs of another individual or group, often without understanding, lived experience, acknowledgment, or respect for its value in the original culture.

Culture
A social system of meaning and custom, developed by a group of people to assure the group’s continuity. The system has unspoken rules that shape values, beliefs, habits, patterns of thinking, behaviors, symbols, and styles of communication. Consider using instead: Social identity group, social group

Discrimination
Actions stemming from conscious or unconscious prejudice, which favor and empower one group over others based on differences of race, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, physical ability, religion, language, age, national identity, and other categories.

Ethnicity
A social construct, used to group people based on shared cultural heritage and characteristics such as values, behaviors, language, political and economic interests, history, geography, and ancestry.

Gender Identity (see also: Identity)
A person’s individual and subjective sense of their own gender. Gender identities exist on a spectrum and are not just masculine or feminine.

Identity (see also: Gender Identity)
An individual’s distinguishing characteristics. May include age, gender, religious or spiritual affiliation, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, ability, education, and socioeconomic status. Some identities confer majority status or privilege, while others confer minority status.

Intersectionality
An approach coined and theory developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, scholar of critical race theory, which holds that characteristics such as gender, race, class, and others must be examined in relation to each other, rather than in isolation from each other.
Developed to more fully discuss black women’s experiences and the ways in which they are shaped by the intersection of race and gender.

**Marginalize**
Treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant or powerless; placing them outside of a group, society, or community; and enforcing prejudice through societal institutions.

**Privilege**
Unearned social power granted by societal institutions to members of a dominant group, based on the nature of their identities. It is often invisible to those who have it.

**Race**
A term used to identify individuals as part of a distinct group, based on physical characteristics and heritage. Although at one time the term was purportedly based in biology, race is now understood as a social construct that is not scientifically based.

**Religion**
A system of beliefs, usually spiritual in nature. Often advanced in the context of a formal institution.

**Transgender**
An umbrella term for people whose gender identity or expression differs from the societal expectations of the sex they were assigned at birth.

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**Instructional Plan**

**Introduction**

As young people like your students explore questions about who they are and where they fit in, they begin to define themselves and notice how others define them. The questions for inquiry at the center of this lesson include: How do we understand our own backgrounds? How does background shape identity? How do photographers use self-portraits to illuminate, explain, or perhaps even disguise their backgrounds and identities?
Set the stage

Project the student portrait shown below. Discussion can begin by simply asking students what they notice about the photograph.

*Untitled*, Mia Bella Chavez (cocreated with Melissa Barales-Lopez, Grecia Carey Ortega, and Norma Vidal), 2018

**Questions for discussion:**

- What do you notice first about this image?
- What do you think the subject is communicating about her identity?
- What compositional and photographic elements do you notice, and why?
  
  Include:
  - Framing (The image uses a landscape aspect ratio, which is somewhat unusual for portraiture. The position of the subject creates a strong diagonal divide from the top left of the frame to the bottom right corner.)
The position of the subject (The subject is centered in the frame and faces the photographer, but she has tilted her head to the right, which creates a sense of informality.)

What the subject is wearing (The subject is wearing a T-shirt that reads: “#SchoolsNotPrisons,” referencing a movement to bring attention to issues of mass incarceration, as well as underfunding of schools in California.)

Foreground and background (The image has a fairly shallow depth of field, with the subject directly in front of a wall.)

Lighting (The subject has a bright, gold spotlight on her, which radiates across the wall and casts a shadow.)

- What do you think the photographer is trying to show or explain?
- Do you think there are unintentional messages in this photograph?
- Does anything change when you know a bit more about the photographers and their intentions?

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Photographers and Subject

Our aim in the series was to celebrate our differences. We were aware that to the outside world we had a lot in common: Young, femme, Latina, photographers but despite this fact, we were all aware of the many things that made us different. We captured these differences by giving each subject their own unique color gel and pose. (Mia Bella Chavez)

Mia Bella Chavez: As a kid, I discovered photos from my grandparent’s youth. With these images, I was able to get a taste of a time I wasn’t alive to experience and in this way, understand my grandparents a little bit more. I loved the idea of capturing my family’s intimate moments for ourselves and our descendants to enjoy and began to take photography more seriously. For this reason, much of my photography focuses on portraiture and themes of identity. I have used photography as a way to advocate for social justice by using it as a “matter of fact”: it is hard to deny visual evidence.

Norma Vidal: I grew up in Boyle Heights, graduated from Roosevelt High School, and currently attend the University of California, Irvine. When I first joined the Getty Photography Program I had almost no experience with photography. I just found it interesting, and always thought it was really cool the way photographs could capture so many meanings at once. As I got more involved with photography, I realized that I really liked to take pictures of my community and things that represented my culture because I was very proud of them. My community is majority Latinx including low-income households, and struggles with multiple issues
such as redlining, lack of school funding, the school to prison pipeline, police brutality, and more. All of this has made me who I am today and has really shaped how I view the world and how I wish to spread awareness through my photographs.

**Explore Further**

Project the photograph shown below.


Questions for discussion:

- What do you notice first about this image? (The scene is divided, with a woman in the lower part of the frame and three portraits suspended above her head.)
- What do you think the photograph is communicating about the subject’s identity? (The inclusion of the older portraits suggests they may be meaningful to her; perhaps they depict family or ancestors. In this scenario, the photographer could be alluding to the idea that we are products of our ancestry—including the sacrifices, accomplishments, and decisions of our ancestors that can have lasting effects on us in the present.)
- What compositional and photographic elements do you notice, and why? Include:
  - Framing (The photograph is oriented vertically, with the three portraits within the frame creating a border above the subject.)
  - The position of the subject (The woman’s chest faces frontally, but her head is lowered and tilted downward to the left. Averting her gaze from the viewer mimics the photo of the bride above her.)
  - What is the subject wearing? (We cannot see much of her outfit, apart from the white lace straps of her top or dress. Although mostly unseen, it does seem to be contemporary in its cut and style. This contrasts with the outfits of the subjects in the photos above her. Their wedding clothes suggest that the portraits date to decades earlier. The white lace the subject wears seems to reference the bride or wedding in the photos above her.)
  - Lighting (The subject is brightly lit against a black background, accentuating her silhouette. The simplicity of the lighting and background behind the woman is in contrast to the more atmospheric, stylized background treatments in the portraits above her.)
- How do you read the subject’s expression? (The subject seems serious or contemplative, with downturned, averted eyes, and closed mouth.)
- Does anything change when you learn the title of the photograph? (The title, Self-Portrait with Family Photographs, confirms that the subjects of the older photos are relatives and strengthens the visual links that the subject and photographer created between herself and the portraits above. The subject’s pose is very similar to that of the groom and accentuates some family resemblance between the two.)
• What hypotheses do you draw about the photographer’s background and identity?

Judy Dater

Through self-portraiture, Judy Dater (born 1941) has often explored her relationships, identity, experiences, and observations. This image celebrates the personal significance of a day of the year. She stands beneath her parents’ wedding portraits. Their wedding took place June 21, 1931. She was born exactly ten years later. This photograph was made on that date, too, in 1981. About this image Dater said, “I was looking for a sense of identity in relating myself directly to my parents—who they were, what they did, where they came from, and where I came from. And also how I became my own person.”

View Judy Dater photographs in the collection: https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/26308/judy-dater-american-born-1941/

Exercise: Discussing and Mapping Identity

Now it’s time to open up class dialogue to the larger question of identity. With the whole group, solicit a list and examples with the question: What do you feel are significant things to know about your own background and identity? What is the nature of each of these aspects? Are some things labels that others put on you? Are some of these fixed while others evolve over time? Is how you see yourself different from how you think the world sees you? Do any of them depend on context?

Using the group’s list of aspects of identity, let’s take some time to explore our own individual identities. Show the identity chart graphic organizer. [See Resources section]. Pass out blank charts, and have students fill them in. You may wish to let students know that their identity charts are not going to be directly shared out, so that they feel freer to complete them.

Practice: Turning Maps into Self-Portraiture

With the graphic organizers complete, students put together the artistic idea of self-portraiture with their present understanding of their own identities. In this exercise, help students keep in mind that identity can change over time, and that there may
be aspects they are not ready to show or share. A photographic self-portrait captures identity at a particular moment in time.

Start by showing the Unshuttered 2.0 Selfie challenge video [See Resources section.] Ask students to brainstorm, referring to their maps, how to “show” (rather than tell about) their own identities in self-portraiture. Have them compose self-portraits.

If time allows, this can be a good point to call out photography and narrative skills. In the earlier exploration of self-portraiture, we discussed elements such as framing, foreground, background, scale, proportion, lighting, a subject’s position and expression, and symbolic objects. The related photography skills videos listed under Resources can also serve as refreshers. Ask how they will apply these skills and understandings in their own practice.

Encourage students to continue their practice at their homes and in their neighborhoods. Assigning the self-portraiture exercise as homework, if possible, affords students time to work on the assignment and the opportunity to use contexts from their daily lives.

Reflect

Reflection can take place in the group setting or individually. Ideally, have students share one to three self-portraits with their peers. They can each choose to speak about their intention with the photographs, or not. Having their peers provide positive feedback is key to this exercise. However, sharing can be a vulnerable moment for students. Use your best judgment about whether a group reflection is appropriate, and enlist the support of your students to create a safe space.

Questions for discussion:

- What is the first thing you notice about the photograph?
- What are the photographers explaining, or perhaps, disguising, about their identity?
- What did you discover about yourself, and about others, in the course of the project?
- What was challenging, and why?
- What are you most proud of, and why?
- What would you do differently next time?
As an alternative exercise to the discussion above, individual reflection can be useful with the same framework of questions.

**Assessment & Reflection**

- Observe the group’s discussion of the lesson. Assess contributions to the discussion. Did students pose thoughtful questions? Did they respond to questions with reasons and evidence? Did they listen to different points of view? Did they clarify and challenge ideas and conclusions when appropriate? Did they synthesize evidence and ideas?
- Collect the identity charts to check for understanding and completeness, and to assess students’ understanding of factors that shape identity.
- In the Reflection section, assess student feedback for clarity and thoughtfulness.
- Encourage students to share their self-portraits on the Unshuttered platform. Find additional opportunities for them to display their images, as well as photographs by others that they choose to collect.

**Thank You…**

...for your commitment to using photography to inspire youth to create social change in their communities. Please adapt and improve upon this lesson plan to meet the needs and age range of your group. We are grateful for educators like you who listen, learn alongside their students, and inspire action.

**Resources**

Starburst Chart Identity Map [See page 14]

Venn Diagram Identity Map [See page 15]

Related Photography Skill Videos:

Selfies: [https://youtu.be/iEch64CrZts](https://youtu.be/iEch64CrZts)

Eye-Level Perspective: [https://youtu.be/Xg4kA4Wd39g](https://youtu.be/Xg4kA4Wd39g)
Rule of Thirds: https://youtu.be/qMkyzwDrKcE
Close-Up: https://youtu.be/f5Pm1_2ONI8
Extreme Close-Up: https://youtu.be/AJzeJcWE8kQ
Natural Light: https://youtu.be/IqK0JAtAKt8
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Identity Chart

Begin by writing your name in the circle. At the tip of each arrow pointing outward from the circle, write words or phrases that describe what you consider to be key aspects of your identity. On the end of each arrow that points inward, write the labels or phrases others might use to describe you. Since others may view you in ways you agree with, there may be overlapping ideas between the arrows pointing inward and outward. Or, if there are views you disagree with, they may vary widely. Feel free to add more arrows in either direction.
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Identity Diagram

Intersectionality acknowledges that the identity markers of an individual inform each other; they do not exist independently. In an effort to represent the layers and complexity of your identity, consider all the aspects of yourself that intersect; for example (but not limited to): gender, race, (dis)abilities, ethnicity, nationality, religion, age, and physical or mental health. Label each of the five circles below and add as much personal detail as you are comfortable with. Consider the placement of each identity marker and what features may exist in the overlap between circles.