ENGAGING GRADES 9-12 WITH SANCTUARY
In this lesson, students will be introduced the work of Sherin Guirguis and Hamra Abbas.

They will be invited to explore issues surrounding identity (specifically self-identity), otherness, and the need for sanctuary from the racial, ethnic, national, and cultural constructs that shape us and the world around us.

Students will also be given the opportunity to consider the role of the art and artists in this conversation in a multicultural world.
Learning Objective

Provide access to multiple perspectives through an exploration of individual sanctuary. Explore the effects that “otherness” has on an individual, a society, and humanity.

Students will unpack otherness through a close analysis of two artists’ works in Sanctuary, which will act as entry points to larger discussions on this complex topic.

Introducing “The Other”

Today, theorists use otherness to explain how members of dominant groups derive a sense of self through defining smaller groups as different or other than them. It is part of what happens when we divide ourselves into social stereotype groups of “us” and “them.”

The philosopher Georg Hegel was the first to use the phrase “the other” in his investigations into what we need to be self-aware. Thinkers including Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan went on to incorporate his ideas in their psychoanalytic theories about the opposing forces at play in our self-consciousness. Feminism, postcolonialism, and identity studies have also borrowed and built on these ideas. Contemporary critics have looked into deconstructing the term the other as an ethnocentric phrase and idea in itself.

Artists and writers sometimes choose to explore otherness in their work as a way to provide opportunities for commentary on reality.

For a deeper insight into this creative technique and its many complexities, watch Ted Talk: The Danger of a Single Story by Novelist Chimamanda Adichie.
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**Opening Activity**

**Identity Game**

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**Identity Game—Instructions**

Each person should receive 10 index cards.

On three cards, write a word that describes you (e.g., male, female, tall, happy, loud, quiet . . . be creative!)

On one card, write a word that describes what sanctuary means to you.

Lay your cards out on a rug with which you feel a connection.

Walk around the room, reading what others wrote on their cards.

When you see a word or phrase that you also identity with, add one of your blank cards to the edge of that rug.

As a group, discuss what you noticed during this exercise.

**Discussion Points**

- Which rugs have the most cards on them?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Can you divide the rugs and their cards into categories?
- Could you rearrange these rugs in this room into Them and Us categories? If so, how?
- Use this experience and what you have learned in the introduction to create a definition of otherness.
- Describe an example of how you have observed otherness in this game.
- Describe an example of how you have observed otherness in your world.
- Describe an example of how you have experienced otherness in your community.
- Compose your definition of otherness.

**Extension to Game**

Stand on a rug to which you feel a connection. Imagine your rug is going to be taken away from under your feet. How would you convince your neighbors to offer you sanctuary on their rug? Consider your possible courses of action depending on an invitation or a decline.
The influences of both Eastern and Western cultures, thought patterns, and traditions are apparent in the work of Sherin Guirguis—a fitting amalgamation for an Egyptian-born artist who was swept up in the Arab diaspora at age 14. “Being a part of a diaspora does mean I’m living on the margins to some degree, and I have to say, I’m more comfortable in that position than ever before,” she notes. “My work stems from that place—it deals directly with the attempt to find a language that describes that state of otherness that follows you wherever you are. I’m always home and I’m never home.”

Her works merge the spare geometry of Minimalism with the elaborate detail and gestural calligraphy of Arabic ornamentation, resulting in vibrant compositions that harmoniously interweave aesthetics and ideas that might seem conceptually at odds.

Guirguis’s design for Sanctuary fills the plane of the rug with lush color, punctuated by stark geometric forms and sprawling rivulets of ink.

Sherin Guirguis
b. 1974, Egypt
Discussion Points

- Describe the colors, shapes, and patterns in this composition. How do they interact with and relate to each other? What do they add to the work? Why did the artist choose them? How do they help you unpack the artist’s intent in this work?

- Does this work of art express an idea or emotion (e.g., optimism)? What do you see that that makes you say that?

- How does this work compare with and relate to other rugs around it? What are some similarities and differences?

- How does the artist’s statement change the way you look at or feel about the work?

- How has the artist explored the personal impact of otherness in this work?

- Can you share a personal experience related to this artist’s message about otherness?

- In your own words, how do you think the artist expresses her idea of sanctuary in this work?

Think about:

What can I understand about the identity of others who appear different from myself?

What can I learn about my own identity through understanding the identities of others?
Hamra Abbas grew up in Kuwait and Pakistan, learning from an early age to recognize and adjust to new customs, languages, and cultures. In recent years she has lived and worked in numerous other countries around the world, honing her adaptability as a traveler and nurturing an inherent appreciation for cultural heritage and differences. Her work showcases her interest in deep-seated traditions—particularly those related to religion—encompassing performance, sculpture, photography, painting, and installation; she often employs a variety of media in sequence on a single piece, effecting stages of mediation that represent the individual and collective filters through which customs and rituals inevitably pass.

For Sanctuary, Abbas created a design based on her 2016 work One Rug, Any Color, which aggregates mass-produced prayer rugs she purchased on Amazon.com. As the title suggests, she discovered a single design—featuring the Kaaba, the cubic structure that represents the most sacred site in Islam—available in a wide variety of colors. The ubiquity of the colorful, Kaaba-emblazoned rug in a global, digital marketplace, and the artist’s presentation of a partial, slightly askew sampling of the rug’s incarnations, highlight the spectrum of perspectives and experiences that exist in relation to religion, devotion, and faith—as Abbas notes, “diversity, variety, and difference within the idea of unity.”

Discussion Points

- What do you notice about this rug?
- Do you believe the work expresses an idea? What?
- Do you find it interesting? Beautiful?
- Make a case for how this artwork expresses its maker’s idea of “diversity, variety, and difference within the idea of unity.”
- Think about the rug’s production process and compare it to the production process of the rugs the artist found on Amazon. What are the differences and similarities? Is one art and the other not? Is one more valuable? More useful? Why? Explain your ideas.
Comparative Study

Discussion Points

Take a moment to compare the works of these artists. Compare the points of view and interpretations of sanctuary in the works.

- As a group, list similarities and differences between these two rugs. Can you break the lists down into the aesthetic and philosophical (how they look vs. what ideas they express)?

- How have they used the elements of art—line, color, shape, and form—to express their ideas?

- How do these artists explore the ideas of finding unity and otherness in their works? Explain your ideas.

- Think again about your definition of otherness. How has it changed, if at all, through this experience?

- At a glance, are there any other rugs in this space that you think might also be exploring the idea of otherness? Which ones? How?

- Take a moment to consider the range of geographical and political backgrounds of the artists who have contributed to Sanctuary. Now, imagine that a group of people doesn’t want you to see this exhibition. They are saying there is nothing to learn from looking at these artists’ works or the idea of sanctuary. Make an argument that there is indeed something to learn.
Review and Extension Materials

Assessment

Did the students initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly, and persuasively using evidence?

Were students able to engage in an academic conversation in which they articulated an understanding of the “other” and the effect it has on art and in reality?

Were students able to explain how the featured artists used specific techniques or images in their work to express and develop an idea or discussion point?

Final Assessment and Take-Away Extension

Can students articulate what otherness means to them?

Are they able to see how artists can use otherness as a device to develop or unpack a central idea?
Extension Project

Ask students to compose a fictional journal entry from the perspective of “the other” that develops a central conflict pertaining to otherness that affects him/her. Students should develop a plot device and move through the stages of the writing process: brainstorming, thesis writing, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing.