

**JADE
DE MONSERRAT**

**WHAT IS IT
TO BE ONESELF?**

MOBILE FRIENDLY VERSION

**CRACKS IN THE
CURRICULUM**

RESOURCE 5

Cracks in the Curriculum is a workshop series and publishing platform for educators, which aims to bring artists, activists and teachers together to use creativity to address pressing social issues in the classroom.

This edition, *What is it to be Oneself?* aims to hold space for young people within the secondary school classroom to explore their multiple and fluid identities, and to consider the impact that one's gender, race, class, religion, disability, culture and politics has on our sense of self. It supports young people to imagine worlds where everyone can live freely and thrive.

Throughout the world, many people have lived, and continue to live, under oppressive regimes and structures — what bell hooks calls “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy”. Groups of people in power create what is known as hegemony — a culture of so-called common sense that serves their interests and desires. Hegemony “others” people who are defined and labelled as different, and as not fitting in with the dominant group — and this process of “othering” people deepens unequal relationships of power. These systems also influence school curricula — what is taught in schools, and how.

This resource delves into Afrofuturism and digital culture, and uses the process of collage to normalise fluid, exploratory approaches to the formation, deconstruction and re-formation of identities, connecting the past with the future to offer some ways we might imagine liberated futures. *What is it to be Oneself?* emphasises that one's identity shapes and is shaped by collective participation. The exercises in this resource guide students through individual exploration and group work.

What is it to be Oneself? is designed for art teachers working in Key Stage 3 and 4, who can use it to devise a lesson plan, as a guide with which to formulate a longer scheme of work, or for further study to complement an existing syllabus. It can also be adapted for PSHE and IT lessons.

The content for this edition emerges from a series of online workshops with artist Jade de Montserrat, educators, organisers and the Serpentine Education team, which took place during 2023. Jade de Montserrat is an artist whose practice relies on encounters within archives and histories connected to the African diaspora, connection to social justice movements and sustainable world-building.

The resource features questions for critical discussion, a series of creative exercises and a section on practical support. On page 20 is an artwork produced by de Montserrat that brings together a question from Sojourner Truth, a nineteenth-century abolitionist, and the Progress Pride flag, as a way to stress how historical struggles can provide sustenance for contemporary campaigns. This has been designed for you to display as a poster in your classroom.

Please email:

education@serpentinegalleries.org **if you would like to receive a printed version of the resource with A2 poster.**

A reading list for further study is available

at: serpentinegalleries.org/cracks-in-the-curriculum-5-what-is-it-to-be-oneself.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- **How can educational settings find communality and connection and embrace difference?**
- **What is the potential of creative processes to celebrate difference and create a sense of belonging?**
- **How can we overcome static categorisation and encourage fluidity, embrace identity as always in process, cultivate spaces that inspire discovery and the freedom to express oneself?**
- **What are the challenges in exploring one's identity? How can these concerns be transformed into consciousness-raising?**
- **What freedoms emerge and what needs are met through embodying an alternative identity?**

Dr Jade de Montserrat is an artist based in North Yorkshire concerned with challenging structures of care in institutions and with the intersection of gender, race, class and colonialism, often in the context of life in rural communities. She makes artworks (performance, drawing, painting, film, installation, sculpture, print and text) that explore the vulnerability of bodies, the importance of recording and preserving history, and the tactile and sensory qualities of language. She often draws words and fractured images of her body to voice personal experiences of exploitation and violation at the hands of individuals and institutions, in particular those linked with self and cultural production. She uses her work to share passages of text by black writers such as Dionne Brand and bell hooks and material alluding to the violent legacy of colonialism. She believes in art as a direct form of action and agent of change and is committed to drawing as a tool to achieve this as it is cheap(er) and immediate.

Young people in secondary school are at a moment in their lives where they are formulating, questioning and exploring their identities. Many choose to use online spaces to experiment with identities and form relationships with others. Despite the many problems associated with digital spaces, there are also opportunities for community and solidarity, and artificial intelligence, social media and gaming can offer space for free movement between people who might not meet in real life. These spaces can support young people to explore their identity beyond ideas of fixed nationhood, gender binaries, sexual orientation, class or economic demarcation.

In many school cultures and curricula, certain identities are legitimised whilst others are silenced. Around half of LGBTQ+ students experience bullying at school for being themselves. Black and neurodiverse and disabled young people are more likely to be excluded from school, and recent government guidelines have created barriers for young people to talk to teachers about their gender without fear of being outed at home, potentially placing themselves in danger. At the same time, recent government guidelines prohibit teachers using “anti-capitalist” materials in classrooms, raising questions about freedom of speech in schools.

How can we use art-making to safely explore our own identities and create the blueprint for new relationships and worlds premised on compassion, empathy and humanity?

The following is a list of suggestions to help you create a safe(r), more inclusive class environment, and draws on the **Critical Practices for Social Justice Education**

toolkit: learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/critical-practices-for-social-justice-education.

Take time to familiarise yourself with the suggestions below and consider whether this material is suitable for your students.

Begin with this short visualisation exercise from Lukasz Konieczka. Imagine you are taking a walk in a park and you see a beautiful couple, who seem very much in love. Take a minute to really picture the couple in detail. What do they look like? Did you imagine a heterosexual couple? How do your experiences and biases shape how you see the world?

Create a classroom contract by inviting students to share values and behaviours to guide the sessions. For guidance, see: facinghistory.org/resource-library/contracting.

Invite student feedback with an emotional temperature check at the beginning and end of the session. You could try thumbs up, thumbs in the middle, or thumbs down, for example.

Take care to avoid stereotypes and be prepared to challenge them. Introduce and discuss the concept carefully with students.

If students choose not to disclose sensitive information, their choice should be honoured.

Offer opportunities for students to share responses in different modes: some may feel safer writing, others might prefer to share verbally. Consider inviting students to share responses anonymously. Make sure to thank students for sharing their feelings or identities with you.

Should students choose to share sensitive information, try not to emphasise what might otherwise be called their “bravery,” which can suggest that people who choose not to share are not being brave. De-emphasising bravery can also lessen the fear of opening such conversations.

The drawing by Jade de Montserrat — made specially for this resource, and featured on page 20 — combines the title of former enslaved abolitionist Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech “Ain’t I a Woman” with the colours of the Progress Pride flag. The artist placed the two images together as a deliberate provocation, a way of asking how freedom fighters in the past can inform and serve contemporary struggles.

Truth was born into slavery and escaped from it. She describes her traumatic experiences in her speech while advocating for equality for all women. The Progress Pride flag was created by non-binary artist Daniel Quasar in 2018, it features blue, pink and white to represent the trans flag and black and brown stripes to portray LGBTQ+ communities of colour. The flag calls for a more inclusive society.

Use the poster to talk about freedom to love, live and express according to one's authentic self.

- **Who is free to be themselves today?**
- **What does a world where everyone is safe to be themselves look and feel like?**
- **How do we get there?**

Print out and display the poster in your classroom. Or email education@serpentinegalleries.org for an A2 printed version.

Consider how classroom display materials legitimise some identities and silence others.

Reflect as a group.

Download the science fiction text “Exhibit B, Be Is For Brilliant” by Alexis Pauline Gumbs available at: serpentinegalleries.org/cracks-in-the-curriculum-5-what-is-it-to-be-oneself, **or see the letter in full on pages 21 to 24. Please note, the letter contains one mention of sexual abuse.**

Invite students to find a comfortable position — with heads on desks, in comfy chairs or lying on the floor. This exercise encourages students to relax and observe their breathing. Spend five minutes in this guided meditation.

Slowly read the text out loud. Encourage students to write down on paper specific words and phrases they’re drawn to, and to draw or scribble whatever comes to mind. Ask them to read the text to each other in pairs, or as a group. Repeat the readings two or three times. Which words intrigue you? Which help you imagine a world based on compassion, empathy and humanity?

Ask students to select a phrase or sentence that speaks to possibility and hope. Rearrange or rewrite the phrase. Take a piece of paper and begin to sketch out the words, trying to fill the page.

Invite everyone to piece together their chosen phrases into a collage, creating a collective poem in a continuous line, a scroll, a score or a grid. Ask each person to read out their own phrase. Begin by whispering, and gradually erupt into a choral crescendo. Repeat. Encourage everyone to read the poem aloud together.

Take your collective poem outside into a public space such as the playground or local park. Invite everyone to draw their phrase on the ground using chalk or charcoal, creating a temporary interruption of everyday life.

This exercise invites students to explore and remake their identities by creating an avatar. “Avatar” originates from a Sanskrit word meaning “descent,” and in English originally meant the descent of a divine incarnation. The word now refers to the digital embodiment a person creates for themselves.

Begin by sharing experiences of creating personas online. What makes a good avatar? Why do we create them?

Reflect together on identity. What makes us who we are? Is identity fixed, for ourselves or for others? How well do we really know ourselves?

Ask students to generate their avatar using collage. This technique helps us explore otherwise hidden views or ideals of ourselves.

Collect imagery from magazines, books and ephemera. Varied natural non-human life forms like plants, sea life or rocks from National Geographic or gardening magazines are a good place to start. Combine with imagery of the human form, to disrupt our ideas of beauty. Cut up or colour photocopy your chosen material.

Encourage students to use the printed materials to create avatars composed of multiple life forms. For inspiration, consider Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's textured game worlds and the avatars she creates within them, and Wangechi Mutu's collaged hybrid figures. Think through the following questions beforehand. When ready, read these out loud and share your thoughts to open up the conversation.

- Who are you?
- What do you want to be?
- Which histories, cultures or interests do you hold?
- What will you conceal or reveal?
- What will you exaggerate?
- How will you grow and change?
- What parts of your identity do you want to hold onto, and what do you want to let go of?
- How can you create feelings of fluidity or multiplicity?

Reflect together on the concept of an avatar, from its original Hindu meaning through to its use in gaming and other digital realms.

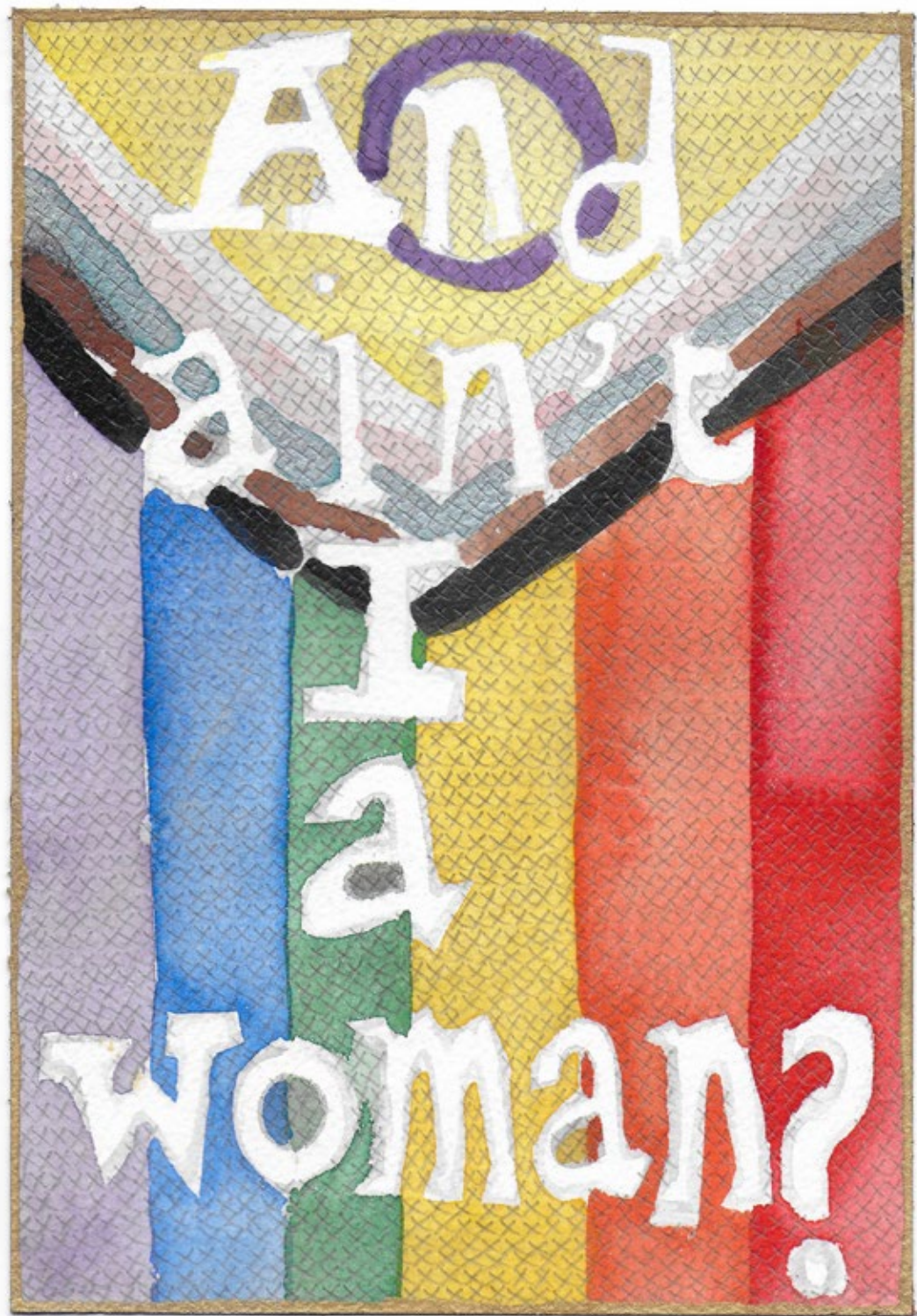
- **What does your collaged avatar reveal about yourself?**
- **What kinds of freedom emerge through embodying an avatar?**
- **How is your self-image impacted by digital platforms or online games?**

‘Collage is a way to draw together a multitude of material such as papers, found objects, speech and text found in our daily lives. It can encompass cutting, ripping, sticking, editing and redacting. The process of layering and remixing mirrors our fluctuating, ever-evolving identities, allowing us to experience them as both fragmented and unified. By working with found material we can explore our questions, feelings and thoughts when words don’t come easily. Collage enables us to time travel, to collect archival material and place it alongside contemporary imagery. It can also be a metaphor for repair and healing. I am particularly interested in combining material which incorporates elements of Black history and culture alongside material from the present day to point to imagined futures. We might refer to collages made by artists such as Hannah Höch, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellen Gallagher, Mohini Chandra and Lorna Simpson.

I am constantly gathering texts through reading, listening and conversations, and my own imagination. I then chop and slice the texts, devising them to be both ambiguous, enigmatic and poetic, and also clear, direct and factual.

The accumulation of textual inspiration is feverish and obsessive. Annotation is an integral part of my reading process and in creating these text works, combining my notes and other writers' words. The Dadaists and, later, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin, would similarly combine and collage texts, and their "cut-up method" influenced the gender-fluid pop icon David Bowie in the creation of songs.'

Jade de Montserrat



And

ain't

I

a

woman?

Letter from Alandrix, age twelve,
sent via skytablet during dream upload,
third cycle of the facing moon,
receipt unknown.

Ancestor Alexis,

I've heard about you. I've even read some of your writing. Everyone says I have an old soul, and I'm really interested in what it was like back when you lived. It seems like people were afraid a lot. Maybe every day? It's hard to imagine, but it seems that way from the writing. I have to remember that no one knew that things would get better, and that even people who were working to make it happen had to live with oppression every day. I read your writing and the writing of your other comrades from that time and I feel grateful. It seems like maybe you knew about us. It feels like you loved us already. Thank you for being brave.

I'm twelve and last year I did a project for our community about your time, the time of silence-breaking. I made a poster and everything and an interactive dance. A friend of mine did one on the second abbreviated ice age instigated by oil on fire, but I thought writing about the time of silence-breaking would be harder. The ice continents were in

your imaginations, the limits of your memory melted, you spoke about the hard things and you could see your own voices. It must feel almost like a force of nature when you live. I'm 12 and you would have thought of me as part of your family, even though now we do family differently; we have chosen family now, so maybe we would just be comrades if you lived here in this generation. Who knows? But I think that if you met me, you would feel like we have some things in common. I'm a poet and I use interactive dance so maybe you would choose me as family. I know I would choose you. You could have been at my wow kapow ritual that happened recently. In our community, 12 is an important accountability age. We named this ritual for how it feels in our bodies around now. Wow kapow. I think you used to call it the pituitary gland.

We are here five generations after you and a lot has happened. A lot of the things that used to exist when you were 12 and even when you were 28 don't exist anymore. People broke a lot of things other than silence during your lifetime. And people learned how to grow new things and in new ways. Now we are very good at growing. I'm growing a lot right now and everyone is supportive of growing time, which includes daydreams, deep breaths, and quiet walks. No one is impatient while anyone else is growing. It seems like people are growing all the time in different ways.

It was great to learn about you and a time when whole communities decided to grow past silence. It is hard to read about the fact that sexual abuse, what we would now call the deepest violation of someone else's growing, used to happen all the time. It is hard to imagine what it felt like for people to walk around with all that hurt from harming and being harmed. But I can tell from the writing that people were afraid so much. History was so close. But the amazing thing is how people spoke and wrote and danced anyway. Imagine being afraid to speak.

Anyway. I wanted to say thank you. Now in the 5th generation since the time of the silence breaking we are called hope holders and healers. There are still people doing a lot of healing, but it seems like generation after generation people got less and less afraid. People took those writings and started to recite them and then another generation hummed their melodies and then another generation clicked their rhythms and then another generation just walked them with their feet and now we just breathe it, what you were saying before about how love is the most powerful thing. About how everything and everyone is sacred.

I read a really old story where the character believed that time travel was dangerous because if you change one thing in the past the whole future changes and then you might never get born. I am still here writing this though so I think it's okay to tell you that everything works out. That it's okay. And it's not easy all the time, not even here, because so much has been broken, besides silence, but it is possible, it does feel possible. My friends and I feel possible all the time. So when you get afraid to speak, remember that you all were part of us all learning how to just do it. And most... take it for granted. Except poets like me. I remember you. I feel it. Wow. Kapow.

love,
alandrix

Letter from: 'Exhibit B: Be is for Brilliant' in
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edited by adrienne maree brown
and Walidah Imarisha.

FURTHER SUPPORT

- **Mermaids UK** - mermaidsuk.org.uk/about-us/
- **Black Girl Gamers** - theblackgirlgamers.com/about
- **ADHD Foundation** - adhd.foundation.org.uk
- **Stonewall Getting Started toolkit** - stonewall.org.uk/system/files/secondary_gstk_eng_singles-ap2_-_final_edited_-_march_2022.pdf
- **Voices that Shake! Shake the System Guidebook** - voicesthatshake.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/SHAKE-GUIDEBOOK-lo-res.pdf

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