

Blue Like Me: The Art of Siona Benjamin



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Synopsis

Country of Origin: United States

Release Year: 2015

Director: Hal Rifkin

Runtime: 110 minutes

Language: English

Themes: Identity, Intersectionality, Religion, Feminism, Tikkun Olam

Meet Siona Benjamin, recipient of a Fulbright scholarship for a project about Indian-Jewish narratives. Born in Mumbai to a Jewish family, Benjamin synthesizes her Jewish roots in relation to the narratives of her neighbours of Hindu, Catholic, Muslim and Zoroastrian faiths in India. Taking inspiration from disparate sources, she produces something wholly original and utterly mesmerizing. *Blue Like Me* is a visually stunning portrait of this Indian-Jewish artist. Filmmaker Hal Rifkin captures her transfixing artwork, resplendent with jaw-dropping imagery painted in a riot of colour.

Curriculum Links:

Blue Like Me can be used as part of the Social Studies curriculum from Grades 5-8 and as part of the Media Literacy component of the English curriculum from Grades 5-8.

Ways Into The Text: Identity and Intersectionality

Blue Like Me offers teachers a springboard to explore issues of identity and intersectionality. What exactly does intersectionality mean and how does it apply to the issues raised in the film? A useful definition of intersectionality provided by OISE can be found here:

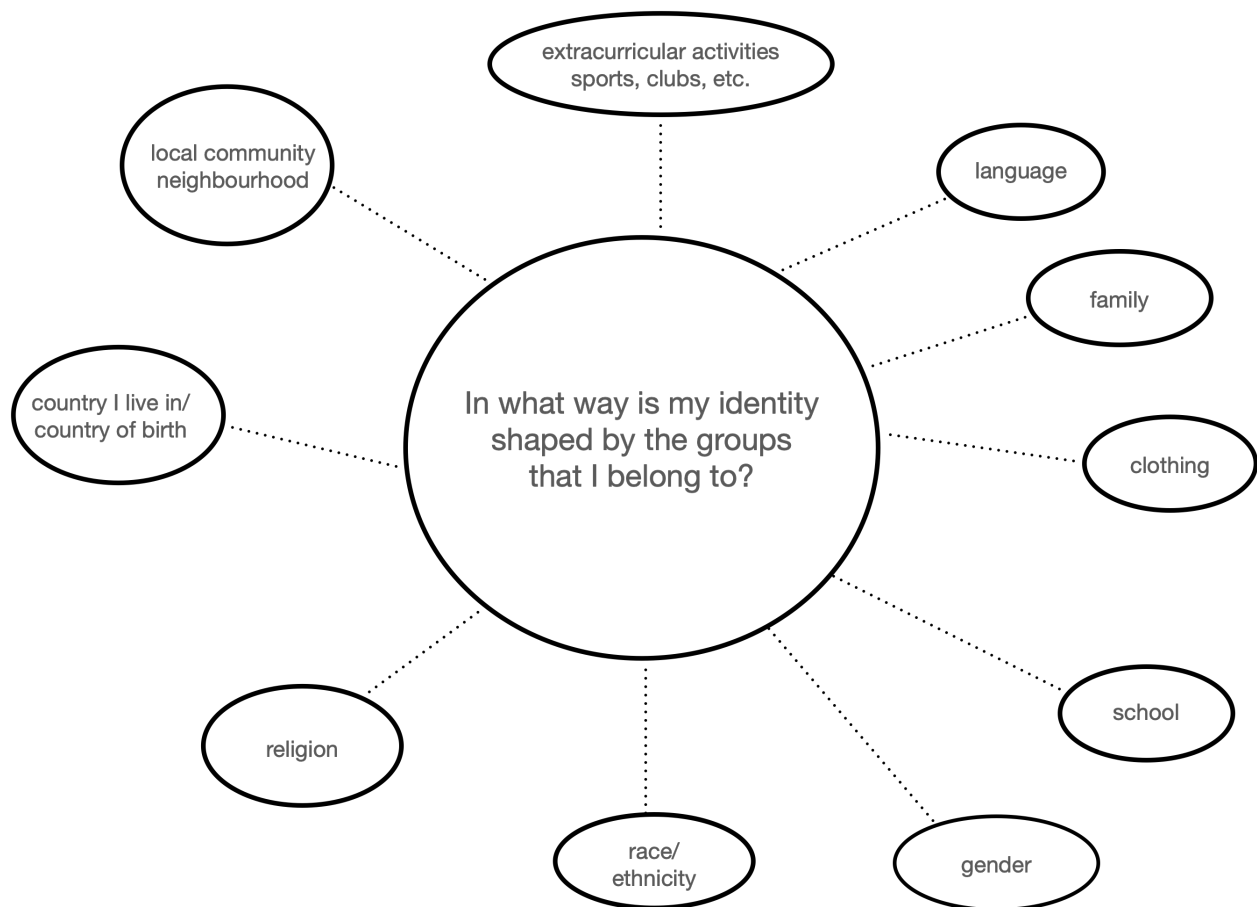
Intersectionality is the study of how various forms of oppression, discrimination, domination and other social processes intersect and influence each other. For example, students in schools can belong to more than one marginalized group. A student may identify as being culturally different from his or her classmates, belong to a different socio-economic group, and may also identify as gay. This student's experience would be different than someone who is of a similar cultural and socio-economic group as the majority of the class, but who also identifies as gay. Though these two students have an identity in common, their experiences in and around the classroom would likely be quite different because of their unique outlooks, as well as their unique social and cultural circumstances. They may not benefit from the same types of supports and would likely need educators and administration in schools to support and nurture their needs differently. An intersectional education lens takes various social, historical and political processes into consideration in order to best understand how to support the wide range of experiences of diverse students. (source: <https://wordpress.oise.utoronto.ca/diversityinteaching/intersectionality-resources/>)

Teachers can also refer to the following video that explains the concept of intersectionality: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2lyYjE>

Siona Benjamin is an Indian-born, Jewish artist living in the United States. Her ethnicity and her religion distinguish her as a minority in America, both as a person of colour and through her religion. Even with Judaism, Siona is a minority in that she belongs to a very small population of South Asian Jews while the dominant Jewish population in

North America is of Ashkenazi (white, European) descent. In her own words, Siona says that she “wasn’t Indian enough for Indians, and not Jewish enough European Jews.” Understanding how someone like Siona lives at the intersection of various forms of discrimination allows students to grasp the concept of intersectionality.

Before watching the film, teachers should have students reflect on what shapes their identities by filling out the chart below and answering the following questions:



Guided Questions to Consider:

- How are our identities shaped by society?
- Do the way we identify ourselves change over time? If so, how?
- How do different parts of our identities combine to make us who we are? Provide specific examples.
- Do the ways we present our identities change depending on where we are or who we are with? Provide specific examples.
- What are the privileges and challenges of belonging to different groups?

There are many websites that offer teachers useful tools for teaching intersectionality. Listed below are some:

Learning for Justice

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/summer-2016/teaching-at-the-intersections>

Social Justice Toolbox

<https://www.socialjusticetoolbox.com/activity/identity-signs-2/>

Facing History and Ourselves

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/identity-charts>

Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion

<https://ccdi.ca/media/1588/toolkit-2-exploring-my-power-and-privilege.pdf>

University of Southern California

<https://msw.usc.edu/mswusc-blog/diversity-workshop-guide-to-discussing-identity-power-and-privilege/>

Every Learner Everywhere

<https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/promoting-equity-in-the-classroom-with-intersectional-pedagogy/>

University of Michigan

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/wp-content/uploads/sites/853/2021/12/The-Five-Minute-Poem.pdf>

Theme: Stereotypes

Blue Like Me can be used to introduce students to the concept of stereotypes. For example, Siona Benjamin recounts how a student once asked her if she rode a camel to school because she was from India. Her response was to incorporate that image into one of her paintings, gently mocking that assumption.

What exactly is a stereotype and how does it differ from prejudice and discrimination? One useful set of definitions comes from the Kids Help Phone site:

A stereotype is an assumption

A stereotype means assuming that a group of people who share some characteristics also share certain attributes. In other words, when someone assumes something about you because of one part of your identity. Stereotypes are often:

- negatively impactful
- overly simplistic
- dangerous
- unfair

Prejudice is a belief

Prejudice is when someone has a belief (usually negative) about a person or group based on a stereotype. The belief is usually based on a person's membership (or assumed membership) in a certain group. Prejudice also divides people based on stereotypes. Examples include:

- **Ableism:** negative attitudes based on physical and/or mental abilities.
- **Cissexism:** negative attitudes toward people who don't identify with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Homophobia:** negative attitudes toward members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.
- **Racism:** negative attitudes based on race, ethnicity and/or culture.
- **Sexism:** negative attitudes based on gender identity, gender expression and/or sex assigned at birth.
- **Xenophobia:** negative attitudes based on national origin/country.

Discrimination is an action

Discrimination is when someone acts on their prejudiced beliefs. It can also be systemic, like the policies and practices put in place to assimilate First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Examples of discrimination include:

- a manager promoting a cisgender employee over a transgender employee whose performance is stronger
- a racialized youth being monitored without cause while shopping in a store
- a health-care provider refusing to treat/diagnose a patient who is part of a particular racial/ethnic group

Source: Kids Help Phone Canada (<https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/understanding-stereotypes-prejudice-and-discrimination>)

There are many different ways that we tend to stereotype. Listed below are some of the most common:

Political
Religious
National/Cultural
Age
(Dis)ability
Social/Class
Sexuality
Race and Ethnicity
Gender

What are some of the stereotypes that can be attributed to each of the above categories (e.g. Old people aren't good with technology, Americans are loud and rude, etc.)

Focus Questions:

- What are stereotypes and how do they influence our first impression of people?
- Where do stereotypes come from? (e.g. media, literature)
- What are some of the reasons our first impressions of people may be wrong?
- Can you think of a time that you made a snap judgement of someone that turned out to be wrong?
- How do stereotypes lead to prejudice and bullying?

There are numerous resources online that teachers can access to explore the idea of stereotypes further. Listed below are some:

Education World

https://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/03/lp294-01.shtml

Equality and Human Rights Commission

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/secondary-education-resources/lesson-plan-ideas/lesson-5-prejudice-and-stereotypes>

Overcoming Obstacles

<https://www.overcomingobstacles.org/uploads/images/blog/uploads/2019/02/Avoiding-Stereotypes-MS.pdf>

PBS

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/how-students-experience-and-cope-with-racist-stereotypes>

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b602e3a8ab722cbfa307afa/t/5c4eef0342bfc120279b078a/1548676873246/22391_RESPECTME_REDCARD_V4.pdf

AFS-USA

<https://www.afsusa.org/educators/lesson-plans/generalization-vs-stereotypes/>

NewseumED

<https://newseumed.org/tools/lesson-plan/stereotypes-identifying-one-form-bias>

Religion and Identity in *Blue Like Me*

While Jews are a minority within the global community, the Bene Israel are a minority within the Jewish world. Within India, the Bene Israel is the largest Jewish community, but there are also two smaller groups of Jewish of Indians, the Cochin and Baghdadi Jews. Judaism, like any other religion, is not a monolithic group. Jews hailing from different geographic regions have different customs and practices. Many people identify as being ethnically or culturally Jewish, but don't celebrate Jewish holidays or engage with any religious customs and traditions. *Blue Like Me* offers teachers an opportunity to introduce students to the rich tapestry of Jewish life around the world. It also provides students with points of connection with other religions. Listed below are some questions/activities that be used to explore this aspect of the film.

- Siona Benjamin talks about the contradiction between an abstract idea of God and a God or gods that are represented through religious iconography. What does she mean by this? How do different religions represent God?
- Jewish communities in the diaspora commonly adopt local practices and customs. Jews of India have come to adopt customs with Hindu origins. For example, the tradition of having a henna party before getting married is a tradition derived from Hindus. How does geography impact on religion? In what ways has Judaism borrowed from other religions? How have other religions borrowed from Judaism? Provide specific examples.
- Jews of India have also adopted traditional Indian cooking into their own recipes. Can you think of any foods that have been traditionally associated with Jews that have become popular in North America or elsewhere in the world?
- Some of the music in the film contains Hebrew words, but the instruments and composition are more reflective of Indian music. In what ways does music influence our identities?
- Research the three different groups of Jews in India. What are the origins of each? Why have the majority of Indian Jews emigrated to other countries, particularly Israel?

Theme: Tikkun Olam

The concept of making the world a better place, known in Hebrew as tikkun olam, is fundamental to the work of Siona Benjamin. One of the ways her art is able to do this is by blurring boundaries between “us” and “them”. As Benjamin says, “who is us and who is them? Sometimes they become us and us becomes them.” In other words, the world is not made of dichotomies such as good and evil, and drawing connections between disparate cultures and religions through her art helps to facilitate greater understanding between groups. For example, rather than highlighting the differences between religions, Benjamin seeks to “blur the boundaries of different religions so you cannot make out where my characters are from. They can be Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Christian or they could be one of each or they could be all of the above.” By emphasizing points of commonality between religious, cultural and political views, Benjamin’s art seeks to foster understanding on a level that appeals to our wider sense of humanity.

- Choose one of Benjamin’s paintings (not one of the ones shown in the film; there are many images that students can access online) and discuss how she draws from multiple cultural and religious sources to create something unique.
- How can art be serviced to advance tikkun olam? What other artists have tried to use their art to art to promote positive change in the world?
- How does Benjamin use humour in her paintings to gently mock our assumptions and stereotypes? (For example, drawing herself riding on a camel in response to a question about growing up in India). Why can humour be an important tool in nurturing understanding?

Theme: Feminism

Central to Benjamin’s work is making women heroes of their own stories. Rather than adhering to traditional stereotypes of damsels in distress or passive objects of desire, she recasts figures as feminist warriors.

- The character of Lilith features prominently in Benjamin’s art. Who was Lilith and why would Benjamin choose to use her over someone like Eve in recasting the creation story?
- How does Benjamin employ pop art differently than artists like Lichtenstein to recast women in a more dynamic way?
- Choose one of Benjamin’s paintings and discuss how it challenges accepted versions of femininity (e.g. traditional looking woman wearing a mini skirt).

General Questions/Activities

- Benjamin depicts herself using the colour blue. What colour would you use to depict yourself? Why?
- Benjamin uses different types of Indian media in her art work, including Persian miniature frames, Bollywood films and Indian comic books. What forms of media would you draw on to represent yourself? Why?
- What are some of the other art forms that Benjamin incorporates into her work? How does she blur the boundaries between so called “high art” and pop art? What is the effect on the viewer?
- The film begins with close-ups of different individual faces. Why do you think the director chose to start this way?
- The film combines animation with live action. What parts of the film are depicted in live action and what parts are animated? Why do you think that the director chose to animate the sections that he did, particularly the section about the terrorist attack in 2008?
- Benjamin was educated in Catholic and Zoroastrian schools. What is Zoroastrianism and what are its central beliefs?

References

(All sources cited are from May, 2022)

OISE

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https://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/03/lp294-01.shtml

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