

## Lesson 3

To deepen your understanding of the ideas in this lesson, read Chapter One in Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.

### Identity and Place

#### **WHY** teach this material?

##### Rationale

This lesson introduces the theme of identity to students, for whom the question “Who am I?” is especially critical at this point in their adolescent lives. Understanding the concept of identity is not only valuable for students’ own social, moral, and intellectual development, but it is also critical to understanding the choices made by individuals and groups living in Germany during the 1920s and 1930s (as well as during other historical moments). The sharing of “Where I’m From” poems in this lesson also contributes to nurturing a strong classroom community where all students are known.

##### LEARNING GOALS

The purpose of this lesson is to help students:

- Reflect on these **guiding questions** about history and human behavior:
  - *Who am I? What factors shape my identity?*
  - *What does it mean to be “from” a place? How does where we are from influence who we are?*
- Practice these **interdisciplinary skills**:
  - *Expressing ideas through poetry*
  - *Contributing to class discussion*
  - *Expressing ideas through journaling*
- Deepen understanding of this **key term**:
  - *Identity*

(See the main glossary in the unit’s “Introduction” for definitions of these key terms.)

#### **WHAT** is this lesson about?

“Who am I?” is a question all of us ask at some time in our lives. It is an especially critical question for adolescents. As we search for the answer, we begin to define ourselves. How is our identity formed? To what extent are we defined by our talents, tastes, and interests? by our membership in a particular ethnic group? by our social and economic class? by our religion? by the nation in which we live? How do we label and define ourselves and how are we labeled and defined by others? How do our identities inform our values, ideas, and actions? In what ways might we assume different identities in different contexts? How do we manage these multiple identities? Answers to these questions help us understand history, ourselves, and each other.

Many factors shape our answer to the question, “Who am I?” including where we are from. It is particularly appropriate for students in a World Geography course to approach the concept of identity through the lens of place. How does our location shape who we are and what we believe? How does the physical environment impact what we do and how we behave? How does our location relative to other places influence our ideas about difference and our relationships with others?



*A Facing History teacher poses in front of her identity chart.*

As students might suggest by their own reflections, the idea of “place” extends beyond physical geography. Individuals and groups often define themselves as coming from a tradition, a culture, a religion, or a history. And, especially at this time of globalization and migration, students can easily recognize how it is possible, and even likely, that answers to the question, “Where I’m from?” are met with multiple answers. A student can be from a neighborhood in Memphis, while also being from Mexico, while also being from a specific family history. Cultural psychologist Carola Suárez-Orozco writes that many children, especially immigrant youth, “must creatively fuse aspects of two or more cultures—the parental tradition and the new culture or cultures. In so doing, they synthesize an identity that does not require them to choose between cultures but incorporates traits of both cultures.”<sup>1</sup> In the words of Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Today the ideal of wholeness has largely been retired. And cultural multiplicity is no longer seen as the problem but as a solution—a solution that confines identity itself. Double consciousness, once a disorder, is now a cure.

Indeed the only complaint we moderns have is

that Du Bois was too cautious in his accounting. He’d conjured ‘two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.’ Just two Dr. Du Bois? Keep counting.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, when we ask students to answer the question, “Where are you from?” we should encourage them to appreciate the many “places” that have helped shape their identities.

In this lesson, students have the opportunity to share their answer to the question “Where are you from?” with their classmates. Presenting “Where I’m From” poems or identity charts challenges the labeling that can characterize adolescent behavior and helps students see that they come from many of the same “places.” In doing so, this activity has the power to build classroom community. Throughout this unit, students will be engaged in discussions about complicated ethical issues, and they will probably experience moments of disagreement with some of their classmates. Exercises like the sharing of identity charts or “Where I’m From” poems can help students understand where these divergent views might be coming from, and this understanding can foster more respectful listening, deeper dialogue, and better informed judgment—vital skills for citizens in today’s multicultural communities.

### Related reading from

*Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*

“The Bear That Wasn’t,” pp. 2–9

## **HOW** can we help students engage with this material?

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**Duration:** one class period

### Materials

**Handout 1:** “Where I’m From” poem

**Handout 2:** The geography of me

For examples of “Where I’m From” poems, refer to the following websites:

[http://www.studyguide.org/where\\_I\\_m\\_from\\_poem.htm](http://www.studyguide.org/where_I_m_from_poem.htm)

<http://www.swva.net/fred1st/wif.htm>

### Opener

The “Ostracism Case Study” students explored in the previous lesson provides an example of a powerful event that shaped the identities of those involved. For example, Sue changed from being a strong, confident student to a weak student. At the same time, because she had been ostracized from her group of friends, Sue told researchers that she had become more independent and that she was now more likely to stand up for someone who was being picked on.

To segue from the “Ostracism Case Study” to Lesson 3’s work on identity, ask students to write in their journal about an event that they think has changed them—an event that has shaped their identity. You can ask for volunteers to share some of their stories.

### Main Activities

These stories provide an entry point to developing a working definition of “identity.” Because 6th grade social studies classes in Memphis and Shelby County have an introductory unit about identity at the beginning of the year, many students in your class may be familiar with this concept. You can add the term identity to your word wall. Explain that in this class students will be doing some activities that will help them think about the factors that shape their identities.

The first activity asks students to write a “Where I’m From” poem. Students have spent this year thinking about geography themes such as location and place, and this poetic structure helps students link these themes to their personal identities. The handouts included with this lesson provide ideas about how you can help students structure their poems. You can adapt the instructions and template so that it incorporates the themes students have studied in your course. Prior to asking students to write their poems, we strongly recommend showing them an example. Facing History teachers have found it is useful to write their own “Where I’m From” poem and share that with the class as a model. Samples of “Where I’m From” poems can be found on the Internet (refer to the Materials section for links).

One of the purposes of this lesson is not only for students to think more deeply about their own identities, but also to learn about the identities of their classmates. So, the sharing of “Where I’m From” poems is an essential part of this lesson. You can structure the sharing in several ways. Students could read their poems aloud, to the whole class or to small groups. You could also ask students to post their poems on the wall around the room. Then you can give the class a few minutes to tour the room, taking notes on aspects of the poems that strike them. You might ask students to record the following:

- Something you have in common with someone
- Something that surprised you
- Something you admire about what you read
- A question you would like to ask someone

#### **Follow-Through** (in class or at home)

A discussion following the sharing of poems might focus on the relationship between place/geography and identity. Prompts you might ask students to reflect on before beginning a discussion include:

- How does where we are from influence who we are?
- What does it mean to be “from” a place? Is a “place” always a physical location or could it be something else?
- What is the connection between place and belonging? Is it possible to be from more than one place?
- How is identity affected when we move from one place to another? What might stay the same? What might change?

You might also ask students to write a journal entry where they explain what their poem reveals about their identity and what aspects of their identity are not represented in the poem.

#### **Assessment(s)**

Students’ poems and journal entries provide information about how students are making sense of the concept of identity and its relationship to place. Also, students’ comments and questions in the follow-through discussion should reveal an understanding that identity consists of many factors. Draw students’ attention to comments that demonstrate the complexity of identity and the idea that “where we are from” may be more complicated than just a place name on a map.

#### **Extensions:**

Here are two other activities that help students connect geography themes to the concept of personal identity:

1. Ask students to construct a map that tells people something about themselves. You might have copies of world maps, country maps, and city maps available for them to write on. You can also invite students to draw their own maps of their house, their neighborhood, or of their experiences in the world. Spots students might label on their maps include: birthplace, family origins, favorite places, places that represent significant events in their lives.
2. Students can complete the “Geography of Me” chart (handout 2). You can adapt this chart to match the concepts you have been using in your class. For example, you

could have students describe themselves in relation to the landscape, weather, culture, and economy of their geographic location.

Another way for students to describe and share their identities is by making an identity chart. Facing History developed a two-week introductory unit for students in 6th grade social studies classes in Memphis and Shelby County public schools. In this unit, students created identity charts. You might ask students if they remember this exercise from 6th grade. For more information on identity charts, refer to page 8 in the resource book.

## Lesson 3: Handout 1

### “Where I’m From” Poem

**Step 1:** Answering the following questions will prepare you to write your “Where I’m From” poem.

1. Describe where you live. What does it look like? What does it smell like? What does it feel like? (This could be your actual house, or it could be another place that represents where you are from.)
2. What objects or belongings can be found in your home or room (List at least three.)
3. What are the names of people in your “family”? (They could be alive or deceased, they do not need to be blood relations.)
4. List two or three family traditions.
5. What phrases, words, or sayings are important to you or to members of your family?
6. What are some beliefs that represent where you are from?
7. What foods are important to you or your family?
8. List two or three important childhood memories.
9. Describe the weather where you are from.
10. What do people do where you are from?
11. What are your favorite things to do?

**Step 2:** Incorporate your answers to the questions above into your “Where I’m From” poem. Simply add “I’m from” or “From” to the beginning of each line, in the same style as the sample you have been shown.

## Lesson 3: Handout 2

### The geography of me

**Directions for completing this concept map:** In each of the circles, write the appropriate information about yourself by answering the questions under each theme.

#### History

What important events have influenced the community where you are from? What important events have taken place in your lifetime?

#### Language

What languages are spoken in your community? What languages do you speak?

#### Culture and customs

What traditions are practiced in your community? What events and traditions are important to you? What forms of entertainment (music, movies, art, television, dance, etc.) do people in your community enjoy? What forms of entertainment do you enjoy?

#### Resources (economics)

What resources (i.e., skills, expertise, jobs, natural resources, etc.) are available in your community? What resources are available to you? How do you use these resources?

#### Beliefs

What ideas and values are important in your community? What ideas and values are important to you?

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Carola Suárez-Orozco, "Formulating Identity in a Globalized World," *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*, ed. Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and Desiree Baolian Qin-Hilliard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 192.
- <sup>2</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Both Sides Now," *The New York Times Book Review*, May 4, 2003, 31.