

# FINGERPRINT PORTRAITS

David Anderson

In this sixth-grade unit, I introduced the work of Wendy Red Star and Lordy Rodriguez to students for inspiration in contemplating their own identity as it relates to land, family, and personal interests. They combined writing, drawing, and cartography to create a comprehensive conceptual self-portrait.

## Inspiration from Wendy Red Star

The inspiration for this project came after viewing Wendy Red Star's temporary site-specific monument, *The Soil You See...*, in Washington, DC, from August to September 2023. This work was part of a collective installation in which selected artists created work that challenged the narrative of existing monuments and asked whose stories remain untold.

Red Star's sculpture is a monumental copy of her thumbprint on glass, embedded in granite. The names of

**Students combined writing, drawing, and cartography to create a comprehensive, conceptual self-portrait.**

Apsáalooke chiefs and tribal leaders are written into the design of her thumbprint. This piece explicitly addresses issues of identity and loss of culture for Indigenous tribes, many of whom signed treaties with their thumbprint or an "X" when turning over land to the US government.

I presented Red Star's work to students, and we had healthy discussions focusing on identity as it pertains to

skin (tone and thumbprints), hair, spoken language, and clothing. Students quickly noted that making assumptions based solely on these attributes is easy, yet rarely do they tell the entire story.

## Journal Prompts

To articulate their own unique stories, students answered daily questions in their sketchbooks, such as:

- Do you have any pets?
- What do you worry about the most?
- What is your best memory?
- How would you change the world?
- Do you have a favorite song, poem, or movie line?

The responses provided me with insight into the students I will be teaching for the next few years, and they served as a starting point for the writing that would be included in the framework of their thumbprint.

## Printing and Tracing

Students began by using an ink pad to ink their thumbs and print them on a

small piece of paper. These were photographed and enlarged to 11 x 14" (28 x 36 cm) using a copy machine. Increasing the exposure helped to make the thumbprint lines more refined.

On the enlarged thumbprint paper, students traced over every other line of their thumbprint with a colored marker. They covered the backside of their thumbprint with graphite, taped it to an 18 x 24" (46 x 61 cm) sheet of paper, and retraced the highlighted marker lines, transferring them to the final paper.

## Telling Their Stories

Once all the thumbprint lines had been transferred, students began filling in the spaces between them, using a free-form writing process in which they could write anything to express themselves. If students became stuck, they could reference the list of questions I

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presented at the start of the unit.

Next, students added their facial profile to the work. We practiced drawing faces from a profile viewpoint, but students traced the final drawings from photo projections to create more definition. In a previous rendition of this assignment, the profile of the student's face was drawn over the thumbprint

and painted in watercolor. This layering made it somewhat difficult for the writing to be identified as a thumbprint.

In the current version, the thumbprint stands alone on one side of the paper with the profile on the opposite side. The separation of the thumbprint and profile allows both elements to

be recognized and provided room for other elements to be included in the final work.

### Mapping Their Identities

Mapping was the final drawing component that tied all the elements together. I asked students to reflect on how the land they traverse defines who they are: their neighborhood, routes to school, hiking trails, vacation destinations, ancestral lands, etc. They were allowed to search images on Google Maps and use them as a reference in their drawings. These features were drawn into the composition with consideration to the shapes and contours of their thumbprint and face.

Lordy Rodriguez's abstract drawings of reimagined terrain, locations, and landscapes were great exemplars in guiding students through their map-making. Students used watercolor, colored pencils, and fine-tipped markers to add finishing touches. The project concluded with an artist statement that highlighted their favorite components. The feedback I received from students was that they enjoyed this unit, and it was insightful for me to read and hear about the decisions they made in their artwork. It allowed me to get to know what they're like beyond the classroom. 🙌

David Anderson is a middle-school art teacher at the Gilman School in Baltimore, Maryland. In 2024, he received the NAEA's Middle-Level Art Educator Award. [danderson@gilman.edu](mailto:danderson@gilman.edu); IG: @unfinished\_education

### NATIONAL STANDARD

Responding: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

### RESOURCES

- Wendy Red Star: [wendyredstar.com](http://wendyredstar.com)
- National Mall Project: [monumentlab.com/projects/national-mall-project](http://monumentlab.com/projects/national-mall-project)
- Lordy Rodriguez: [lordyrodriguez.com](http://lordyrodriguez.com)

Arav B. (Artwork from first version of lesson as noted in article.)

