

Making: Photographic Re-Imagining of the Familial Portrait

This lesson plan is part of the [Connecting through Time: Intergenerational & Family Storytelling](#) toolkit

Students will ultimately re-imagine an archival photo either from their family, community, or within history. They will use the work of Willow Naomi Curry and Tiffany Smith's Project [The Fourth Ward Photo Parlour](#) and Lebohng Kganye's [Ke Lefa Laka: Her Story](#), as mentor artists to see how re-photography is a way to connect to the past. They will read their personal photograph through a set of visual literacy exercises and assess how they want to depict themselves in their recreations. Once they are finished with their project, they might extend the process to their home space and find ways of understanding the role of historical studio photography in their own community and within their personal identities.

Continuity of the Past and Present: Family Photography and Identity

1. Students will look at Willow Naomi Curry and Tiffany Smith's Project [The Fourth Ward Photo Parlour](#) as a mentor artist for the project. It is a modern day recreation of the [Teal Portrait Studio](#), a Black-owned business in Houston's Fourth Ward, one of the first Freedom Towns in the U.S. Begin by watching the [Artist Talk with Willow Naomi Curry and Tiffany Smith](#) video.

Willow and Tiffany created the photo parlour to provide the same service as the Teal Portrait Studio, by creating and gifting representations of the community members with images that emphasize beauty, dignity, and empowerment. Their project emphasizes the Fourth Ward as a living community of historical significance that is of value because of the people who live there. In recent history, the community organized to register Fourth Ward as a historic place, when the city's urban renewal project threatened its

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GRADE LEVEL

middle-high school

TIME REQUIRED

4-5 sessions

MATERIALS NEEDED

camera, copy of an archival photograph, copy of a personal photograph, elements from the archival photograph (based on student's needs), light source

KEY IMAGES

[Image Bank](#)

[Artist Talk with Willow Naomi Curry and Tiffany Smith](#)

[Artist Talk with Karen Miranda Rivadeneira](#)

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

photoville.com/edu

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survival. The Fourth Ward also faces the effects of gentrification.

Teal Portrait Studio, established in the Fourth Ward in 1919 by Elnora and Arthur C. Teal, operated for over 40 years, with Elnora as the main photographer.



'The studio was best known for its excellent portraits, in which the beauty and dignity of the sitter were emphasized. The polished elegance of the Teals' work was prized by their predominantly black clients.' —Texas State Historical Association

Suggested discussion questions (choose the ones that feel most resonant for your students)



- Willow and Tiffany were interested in the Teal Studio, in many ways because Elnora was considered the better photographer in this husband/wife studio duo. What is the cultural significance of her role in the studio?
- What did the Teals provide for the community between 1919 and 1960? What other historic events were happening during this time period?
- The photographs in the Fourth Ward Parlour are intended to live in the families' homes, rather than on a gallery wall. Why do you think this is important for the artists?
- What does it mean to have an aesthetic history? By discovering the Teal Studio, how are Willow and Tiffany creating a missing link between the past and present?
- In this project, how are people in the community connecting with the past by engaging with the pop-up studio?
- What do you feel like the Fourth Ward Parlour images draw inspiration from?
- What are some visual cues that show the continuity from historical times to present day?
- What are the similarities and differences of old and new photographs?
- Why do you think the artists place candid, older studio portraits, and archival family photographs next to each other as a means to empower the sitter?
- What is the role of archival, familial, or community photographs in your life? Why do you think it



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is important to look at them?

- How does looking at an old photograph activate your imagination?

Reading Our Archival Photographs



Students will bring in formal studio portraits, everyday images, or historical photographs of their family and community that they would like to re-photograph and re-interpret. Next, they will engage in an exercise to do a basic observational and interpretation of their own images:

1. Pick one person in the photograph.



2. Make a list of 20-30 things that you notice about this person.

3. What are some of the characteristics of this person? What do you think their job is? How are they relating to the other people in the photograph? How were they feeling that day? What do their facial features tell you?

4. Where is the photographer in relationship to the people in the photograph?

5. Why do you think they are taking this portrait? If they could narrate something with a dialogue or a journal entry, what do you think they would say?



6. Does your photograph have a visual language, aesthetic history, or details that you relate to?

Re-Photography: Embodying, Empowering and Reshaping Your Community's Portraiture and Past



1. As a group of students, engage in the act of Re-Photography. Students will try to recreate a scene from a family or historical archive and create a new photograph. They will experiment with meaning, lighting, aesthetics and cultural symbols within the photograph.

Essential Questions



- Do you want to re-interpret/change the story that has been inherited by your culture/community? What new questions do you have about your heritage?
- How can photography help you connect with the past?

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2. Introduce the work of [Lebohang Kganye](#) and her quote:

'My reconnection with my mother became a visual manipulation of 'her-our' histories. I began inserting myself into her pictorial narrative by emulating these snaps of her from my family album. I would dress in the exact clothes that she was wearing in these 30-year-old photographs and mimic the same poses. This was my way of marrying the two memories (mine and of my mother).... She is me, I am her, and there remains in this commonality so much difference and distance in space and time. I realized that I was scared that I was beginning to forget what my mother looked like, what she sounded like, and her defining gestures.' —Lebohang Kganye

- How does Kganye respond to her mother's archival photograph?
- What does she do to insert herself into her mother's photograph?
- Why do you think Lebohang Kganye wants to wear her mother's clothes and repeat her gestures?
- Why is this connection important?

Responding to our Archival Images through Re-Photography

Students will brainstorm and plan out different ways that they can respond to their archival photograph to prepare for making their 'Re-Photography' image.

- **Juxtaposition:** Students will place a copy of a image of themselves next to their archival image. Using mapping and writing, they can see themselves in relation to their archival image. Examples can be a figure in history, their ancestors, or members of their community.
 - Circle the elements of the photograph that you connect with and those which contrast with your life
 - What do you have in common? What is different?
 - Write your comments and observations on the copies of the photographs. Feel free to be as expressive as you like.
- **Reshaping Your Portrait:** Students will decide what aspects of their archival image they would like to embody by listing visual elements that they would like to borrow.
 - What are the environments, clothing style, and colors like within your photograph?
 - When you create a 'Re-photography' image and look at your archival image are there elements that you would like to change or even subvert?
 - Would you like to change any roles within the sitters? Gender, profession, or age?
 - Would you like to add textiles or other contemporary aspects?

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- • Working with Details and the Environment: Students can get inspired by the environments and details within their archival photographs. They can choose to highlight various aspects of the image or add their own details. How do changes in the environment and its details create new significance in a re-photographed portrait?
 - What are the objects from your archival photograph? Would you like to find something similar for your 'Re-Photography' image?
 - Are their objects from your contemporary life or family that you would like to include?
 - How can you create a set for your sitter by thinking about the placements of objects and furniture?
 - What can you mix and match (cultures, time periods, imagined places/elements)?
- • Non-Verbal Clues: Students should look at how non-verbal clues exemplify the traits of the people in their archival photograph and 'Re-photography' images.
 - What might we know about the people in the photograph based on these visual elements?
 - What are we learning from their clothes, belongings and body language?
 - How are they fashioning themselves?
 - Does the material culture of the archival photograph inform us about what type of community this was?
 - Are there elements of your 'Re-Photography' image that you hope to share with future generations?

○ **Facilitation Note:** For these elements, educators can refer to [Elnora Teal's](#) and [Tiffany Smith's](#) representations and design within their photographs. Both of these artists construct a visual language in their work. Elnora had luxurious items on her sets and chose to emphasize the beauty and dignity of her sitter in a time when Black Americans were fighting for basic rights. Smith is creating continuity between the past and present by creating sets that could inspire similar feelings as photographs made by Elnora.

- • Pride/Representation/Empowerment: Thinking of the Fourth Ward Parlour and Tiffany Smith's artwork, students will decide if there are specific elements that they would like to bring into the photograph to empower themselves in their photograph. In many of her projects, Tiffany Smith brings the high back wicker throne chair into her portrait sets. This object has the ability to empower a sitter and is frequently seen in vernacular photographs of Black and Brown communities.
 - → What elements would you like to bring into your photograph that will make you feel empowered?
 - Would you bring members of your community or friends?
 - Would it take the form of clothes, furniture, decorations, lighting, or makeup?

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- Gesture: Take a notice of the gestures of the person in the archival image.
 - Do you want to emulate the sitter in the archival photograph or subvert the gesture that is being expressed?
 - How will you position your body?



- Lighting: What lighting situation would you like to use for your portrait? Assess where the light source is in your room.
 - Is it window light, a lightbulb, or sunlight? Place the sitter by the light source.
 - What direction is the light coming from?
 - What type of mood do you want in your photograph?
 - Move the light source or the sitter until you have the mood that you feel like sets the tone for your photograph.



Reflection

What was it like to embody people from your community/ancestors through re-photography and studio portraiture? How did it feel? How did you construct or make your photograph? What elements did you add or take away and why?

Extension Activities

Photographing at Home with Family and Friends



1. Tips for engaging your sitter:

- Take time to talk with your sitter without the camera.
- Explain to the sitter what you will be doing and why it's important to you.
- Help them find elements that they would like to add to their photographs.
- What are some other ways you can give agency to family and friends that you are photographing?



2. Have your sitter pick an archival photograph that they would like to respond to. Ask them similar questions that you asked yourself.



- What would you like to...
 - Wear, gesture, change in the photograph?
 - What objects would you like to add or take away?

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3. Collaborate with your sitter. Spend time talking with them as artist Tiffany Smith does.

- What elements of the archival photograph are they interested in?
- What story would they like to tell about their past, present, and future?
- Use the strategies of 'Re-Photography' to help you collaborate and connect with people in your community

4. Allow your sitters to explore themselves as an older family member photographing younger ones, and as a younger family member taking a portrait of an older member. What are the possibilities? What do these dynamics reflect back? How can this exercise be a tool for repairing or strengthening relationships?

Research a Photo Studio

Students can research studio photography in their locale and other areas around the world. What are some historical photographs that are taken where they are from? What are the current geographical and political issues in the area? What's missing in the archive? Do you see yourself in these studio pictures? Is there an archive in another region that you relate to more strongly? Where is that archive?

STUDENT EXAMPLES:



Archival Photograph with Re-interpreted Artwork.

Title: **no.1**

Artist: **A'ssia Rai**

Caption: I drew a self portrait keeping in mind gestures I've seen in myself, my family and culture, doing so helped me to try and grasp a way of being not relayed through words by my elders.