



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2001 Volume IV: Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary Art and Literature

Introduction

This volume contains eleven curriculum units on the topic of “Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary American Art and Literature.” The Units were written as part of a seminar that examined literature, film and painting produced by artists of color in the United States over the past several decades.

Our goal in the seminar was twofold: to acquaint ourselves with writers and artists from a variety of different ethnic and racial traditions, and to consider the relations between film and writing. Though artists of color have been producing art for centuries, their work often has no home in the public school curriculum. It tends to appear either as an addition at the end of a chapter or textbook, or it is taught informally at the instigation of teachers who have conducted their own research with little official help or guidance.

This volume is designed to help teachers integrate art, literature and film into their classroom curriculum. It addresses questions of *difference* : what sorts of issues engage artists of color, how do they express their concerns, how do they attempt to relate their work to that of the “mainstream” culture?

We focused on two theoretical concepts of particular importance in discussing the history of race and ethnicity. The first is “hegemony,” the way that the beliefs and values of the mainstream culture come to be accepted by those outside the mainstream. And the second is the notion of the “borderlands,” a boundary place where peoples of different cultures interact with and affect each other. The model of the “borderlands” replaces an earlier, and now outdated, model of cultural interaction in terms of a center and periphery.

The seminar was organized in topical fashion. The first two sessions served as introductions. We looked at the opening scenes from African American film director John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* in order to understand how films are constructed and how to analyze the film’s narrative, editing and imagery. We also considered the themes of race, crime and patriarchy that concern Singleton. In a related vein, we looked briefly at the history of twentieth century art, focusing on several major movements and artists, all central to the work of contemporary artists of color.

In the weeks that followed, we considered topics like: “The Myth of the West” and “Growing Up Ethnic.” The Westerns we studied ranged from classic films like John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* to modern updates like John Sayle’s *Lone Star* . Each film mythologizes the Old West, and each includes a classroom scene where issues of citizenship and education are discussed. In a parallel vein, we also looked at short stories by classic and contemporary Latino/a writers, comparing the ways they understood the metaphor of the “borderlands” with the approaches we had examined previously in our viewing of Western films.

Under the rubric of “Growing Up Ethnic,” we examined films and fiction from Latino, Asian American and

Native American artists. We focused on films about the experience of growing up in an ethnic context (*Snow Falling on Cedars*) and, on films that derived from prior novels (*Smoke Signals* , adapted from Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fights in Heaven*). We also compared Toni Morrison's monumental novel, *Beloved* , with the film adaptation directed by Jonathan Demme. And we spent a week discussing two films by Spike Lee, the most prolific and perhaps the most important of a new general of African American film makers (*Do the Right Thing* and *Bamboozled*).

The Curriculum Units that follow are arranged in alphabetic order by author. They are all strong and provocative pieces, and they range through a variety of issues: film, family, fashion, tragedy, children's literature, art and graffiti. They provide any teacher interested in questions of race and ethnicity with a rich set of curricular materials.

Val-Jean Belton considers the question of graffiti in her unit on "Racism, Gender, Ethnicity, and Aesthetics in the Art of Graffiti." Belton teaches art at Hillhouse High School and has designed her unit for students in advanced drawing and painting classes. The unit includes both an historical overview of graffiti artists and a rich set of hands-on exercises that teach her students how to pursue and their own graffiti projects. Belton also addresses the work of artist Jean-Michael Basquiat, who, before his untimely death, was the leading African American practitioner of graffiti-influenced art.

Elsa Calderón integrates literature, film and painting in her ambitious Curriculum Unit, "Using Art, Film and Literature to Explore Hispanic Identity." Designed for high school Spanish students, the Unit focuses on the three heritages that define Spanish speaking culture, especially in the New World: Spanish/European, African, and Native American. Calderón examines how each artist explores the layered or "buried" heritages that link all Spanish-speaking groups together.

Judith Dixon has created a Unit for her East Rock Magnet School (fifth grade) students, "Utilizing Art, Literature and Film to Teach African American History." Rather than attempt to tell the whole story of African Americans in the United States, Dixon selects instead two key moments for study: the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century, and the Civil Rights era in the twentieth century. Dixon uses art and literature to bring African American history to life. Her Unit introduces the students to the story quilts of artists Faith Ringgold and to the paintings of Jacob Lawrence, in particular, his series on Harriet Tubman and on the Great Migration. The class will also read Ruby Bridge's *Through My Eyes* .

Sandra Friday puts a new twist on an old story. Her Units, "High School Students Research, Read and Write Children's Literature," rethinks the idea of introducing high school students to children's literature by having *them* study the literature in order to teach it *themselves* to younger children. Friday's Wilbur Cross Annex students will engage in an extensive and challenging (but enjoyable) set of exercises. They will research the benefits of adults reading to children, they will explore children's books available at the New Haven public library, and they will read stories of their own making to younger students in local grade schools. At the same time, they will work on their own skills of writing, organization and class presentation. The Unit focuses on children's stories that deal with issues of *difference* , whether racial, gender, etc.

Jon Moscartolo uses a combination of film and painting in his Unit, "Expressions of Anti-Racism through Painting: The Puerto Rican community from *West Side Story* to Connecticut." Moscartolo begins his wide-ranging Unit by showing his eighth and ninth grade students the film version of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* . He then introduces them to a history of painting from Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism. The students develop their own graffiti wall and learn to express in non-figurative, visual terms the emotions related to issues first noted in *West Side Story* . They learn about the history of Puerto Ricans in the United

States at the same time as they produce art expressive of their own experience.

Dianna Otto teaches Honors and Advanced Placement English to Hill Regional High School seminars. Her Curriculum Units, “The Tragic Genre from Classical to Contemporary: *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*,” supplements the canonical focus of twelfth grade English by looking at Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*, a novel that rewrites *Lear* as if it were a drama set in contemporary Iowa. Smiley’s text raises a variety of questions about tragedy as a genre, asking its readers to recognize both its similarities to and its differences from Shakespeare’s play. Students will work not only with the two texts that anchor the Unit, but with films that use the conventions of the tragic genre. They will analyze the tragic structure of these materials, at the same time as they consider issues of gender and patriarchy, themes central to Shakespeare’s play and Smiley’s novel.

Angelo Pompano turns to video documentaries to introduce his East Rock Magnet School students to the history of prejudice and the ways it has been overcome in their local communities. Pompano’s Curriculum Unit, “Through Their Eyes: Video Taping Oral History,” divides into two parts. The first part looks at concepts and definitions of race and ethnicity. It provides the students with the conceptual skills necessary to understand racial matters, at the same time as it introduces them to the practice of oral histories. The second part of the Unit then converts each student into an oral history video maker. Students make videos of their grandparents (or other adults) while conducting interviews with them about their lives and experiences.

Abie L. Qui-ones-Benítez seeks to familiarize her students at Fair Haven Middle School with the rich cultural heritage of Puerto Rico. Her Unit, “I Have a Border in My Mind: The Puerto Rican’s Art and Culture as Factors for Self-Esteem,” uses a large range of multidisciplinary materials to help students learn about themselves and their neighbors. The goal of the Unit is not only to teach students the importance of ethnic differences, but to help them explore and value their own individual histories. Qui-ones-Benítez’s students will produce “heritage boxes” that allow them to display objects that represent the traditions and values of their cultural world. They will also create art projects and literary works that help them delve into their identities, discovering how their ethnic heritage intersects with those of *their* friends.

Joan Rapczynski converts a high school United States history class into a forum for exploring the history of Native Americans. In her Curriculum Unit, “Native American Culture in Crisis,” Rapczynski concentrates on the complex history of “Indian and American government interactions.” Though she paints a broad picture of Native/non-Native interactions, Rapczynski focuses on a series of themes that highlight Indian-white encounters. She looks first at the long, sad history of Indians in the United States, focusing on Plains Indian cultures in the second half of the nineteenth century. She then turns to the question of assimilation, noting the legal means by which the government worked to eradicate Indian languages and culture. Rapczynski enriches her Unit by taking a multidisciplinary look at literature, art and film produced by and about Native Americans, including the writings of Leslie Marmon Silko, the poetry of James Welch, and the film, *Dances With Wolves*. The unit concludes with an examination of the American Indian Reform Movement, a contemporary coalition of Native Americans working for justice and equality.

Dina Secchiaroli uses American literature and film to help her Sound School juniors and seniors understand the history of the American West. Secchiaroli’s Curriculum Unit, “Debunking the Myth of the American West,” uses a wide range of materials, from films to art to literature, to explore not only the West as it has been mythologized in popular culture, but the West as it was actually experienced by those who lived and died there. Her goal in the Unit is to sort out history from mythology. Secchiaroli’s Unit acquaints her students with the diverse cultures, peoples and conflicts that together constitute Western history. She shows how the

American West was mythologized by Hollywood and mass media and provides her students with the intellectual tools for sorting out fact from fiction.

Toni Tyler takes a very unusual approach to questions of gender and difference. She turns to clothing and fashion in her Curriculum Unit, “A Trip Through Fashion History as Art and Film.” Tyler teaches family and consumer science at Hillhouse High School. Working with a hands-on approach, she introduces her students to the history of fashion in Europe and America over the past five hundred years. She teaches them the ways that clothing design enforces class and gender codes. The Unit also provides each student with an opportunity to design and then produce her or his own outfit based upon an historical style that the student then updates. Students learn about how to make clothes and how to analyze the social meanings of the clothes they construct.

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