



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2000 Volume IV: Ethnicity and Dissent in American Literature and Art

Introduction

This volume of nine curriculum units grows out of a seminar devoted to topics of race, ethnicity and gender in American culture. Our goal in the seminar was to compare and evaluate the many traditions of dissent in American literature and the visual arts. Though artists of color have been producing art for centuries, their work often has no home in the public school curriculum. It is tucked away in end-of-the-chapter sections in the standard surveys of American literature; or it is confined to special weeks within the calendar year when we celebrate ethnic and racial histories; or it is taught informally at the instigation of teachers who wish to supplement the curriculum with little official help or guidance.

This volume is designed to help teachers bring art and literature that concerns itself with *difference* directly into the classroom. The nine units within the volume grew from seminar discussions that focused on the art and literature of African-Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos and Native Americans.

What unites the work of virtually all artists of color within the United States is "double consciousness," a notion first articulated by the black writer, critic and educator W.E.B. Du Bois at the turn of the century. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois described the manner in which African-Americans experience their identity in a racialized environment that is frequently hostile. He noted the ways that blacks, and by implication, other peoples of color, see life through a dual filter: both as members of the society at large and as *black* members of that society. Du Bois felt that this capacity of double vision, to see as mainstream society sees, and also to see with the detachment-and the insight-that the mainstream society *lacks*, was both a gift and a burden.

During the seminar, we went back to the literature of colonial America to the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. There we saw Du Bois' terms already at play almost a century before Du Bois was even born. Wheatley's poetry is written from a dual perspective. It presents the language and beliefs of her Enlightenment culture, at the same time as it explores the special dilemmas facing blacks in eighteenth-century Boston. Her poetry is "double-coded." It speaks both to a white reading audience, and, at a covert level not visible to that white audience, it also addresses its black readers, whom it treats as part of an imagined "alternative public sphere." In so doing, Wheatley's poetry sets a pattern for how African-American and other "minority" literatures would operate over the next two centuries.

The question of "double-coding" and "double-consciousness" persists in the writings and artistry of many twentieth century figures we examined in the seminar. Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros, along with artist Carmen Lomas Garza, both portray the lives of working class Mexican Americans with an eye to the roles played by gender and race. Cisneros and Lomas Garza explore the struggles, the contradictions and the violences that define the lives of their characters. They create a utopian vision of what-might-be by re-imagining what has been.

In Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, the spotlight shifts from ethnic traditions to the role of mass culture in shaping the way we see each other (and ourselves). Morrison's scathing novel sets the rhythms of jazz and African-American musical forms against the racial ideologies implicit in Hollywood cinema and such apparently benign texts as "Dick and Jane" readers. Morrison's work is complemented by African American artists like Fred Wilson and Robert Colescott, both of whom question the ways that racial stereotyping pervade virtually all our cultural institutions.

In a different vein, Japanese American writers like Hisaye Yamamoto examine the impact of the Japanese American internment camps during World War II upon the lives of their occupants. Yamamoto explores the ways that communities create scapegoats and diversions-what she terms "legends"-to help them forget or evade their experience of trauma.

Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko, in her remarkable novel *Ceremony*, pursues what it means to be a hybrid, a figure born of two cultures, Native and Euro-American. Silko seeks to renew Native traditions by *altering* them, refitting the old rituals for a changed world.

Finally, we concluded our seminar with filmmaker John Sayles' *Lonestar*, a powerful and visionary film about the ways that race and ethnicity collide-and finally coalesce-in the New World. Sayles' film, like Silko's novel, produces a new American story that replaces the old stories, the old Westerns, that once dominated our imaginations.

***** The Curriculum Units that follow are arranged in alphabetical order by author. They are all strong and provocative pieces, and I urge the reader to consider them for adaptation in your classroom.

1. Val-Jean Belton, in "African-American Art and the Political Dissent During the Harlem Renaissance," focuses on painters and sculptors of the Harlem Renaissance. After providing a general background for her high school students, Belton looks in particular at the paintings of Aaron Douglas, whose canvases and murals combined Cubist motifs with African and African-American subjects.
2. Leslie Fellows takes gender as her central topic. In "Women Writers and Dissent in 20th and 21st Century Literature," Fellows provides her high school English students with a wide-ranging sample of women writers over the past 150 years. Fellows organizes her materials according to three recurring issues: entrapment, anger, and the search for a new identity. Fellows shows how each topic allows the writers she considers to explore and critique the gender codes that society establishes for them.
3. Donna Frederick-Neznek looks at the history of Japanese Americans in her unit, "Our Past Acclaims Our Future, Japanese American Artists Respond to the American Experience: Roger Shimomura, Sansei." Neznek introduces her high school art students to the history of Japanese Americans, and then describes a variety of art-related exercises to help her students visual their own experiences and their relation to the experiences of Japanese Americans. Her unit looks in particular at contemporary Japanese American artist Roger Shimomura, whose work combines traditional Japanese forms with images and figures from contemporary American mass culture.
4. Sandra Friday looks at the Harlem Renaissance as a watershed moment in the history of African-American culture. In "The Harlem Renaissance Births a Black Culture," Friday combines lessons in the literature and art of the Harlem Renaissance with a variety of exercises, from Internet research to mural painting, designed to acquaint her high school students (and their parents) with this central moment in African-American history. Friday's unit integrates English lessons with art instruction.

5. Leigh Highbridge, in "What's in Your Medicine Cabinet? Exploring the Cultural Heritage of Our Personal Belief Systems," transforms her high school drama class into a space for multicultural education. Rather than focusing on a single ethnic tradition, Highbridge asks her theater students instead to explore the ways that they do (and don't) interact with students of other ethnicities. Her goal is to make the students aware of their own predispositions and ways of thinking regarding others.
6. Focusing on the Mexican family, Geraldine Martin introduces her elementary school children to the customs and culture of Mexico. In "Friday and Friends: A Prospectus of the Mexican Family through Children's Literature," Martin combines a wealth of children's stories with her skills as a puppeteer to teach her young students about how children live south of the border.
7. Jon Moscartolo turns to middle school art classes to help his students understand HIV/AIDS and the ways that illness can provoke the same sorts of responses that racial discrimination produces. In "HIV/AIDS and the Healing Community: Self-Portraits Toward Wellness," Moscartolo has his students produce self-portraits that incorporate the lessons they learn from viewing a series of 36 powerful portraits created by Moscartolo of individuals and families from a summer camp for children with HIV/AIDS.
8. Dina Secchiaroli presents an overview of Latino art and culture in the United States in her unit, "Latin Culture Through Art and Literature." She takes her high school literature students on a tour of the various Latino communities in the United States, instructing them in the culture, customs and literature of each group.
9. Jean Sutherland tackles the question of how slave communities *resisted* slavery in "Using Children's Literature to Examine the African-American Resistance to Injustice." Drawing on a variety of children's books, Sutherland introduces her elementary school students to the various ways that slaves fought and resisted the inhumane conditions of plantation slavery.

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