



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2002 Volume I: Survival Stories

Introduction

The curriculum units in this volume grew out of a seminar that focused on American survival narratives, both fictional and non-fictional. The narratives we read together, representing stories of survival from the seventeenth century through the twentieth century, invited us to consider how telling stories becomes part of what it means to survive great hardship. The readings were divided into three sections. In the first section we compared narratives from English settlers held captive by Native American tribes during King Philip's War with an autobiographical account by Olaudah Equiano, an African held as a slave in England and the West Indies. The second section examined American slavery and its literary legacy, both in slave narratives and in the writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Richard Wright and Ishmael Reed. The third section gathered together twentieth-century fiction that responds to war and survival--be it World War I, the Nazi concentration camps in World War II, or the Vietnam war. This final section included work by Ernest Hemingway, Art Spiegelman, Cynthia Ozick, and the poet Simon Ortiz.

Taken together, these readings presented a variety of ways that writers used fiction, poetry and non-fiction genres like autobiography or personal narrative to shape and give meaning to the experience of loss, hardship or discrimination. In many of the early narratives and the nineteenth-century novels, writers used Christian scriptural tradition both to make sense of their experience and to shape the way their story is told. Olaudah Equiano, for example, combines a secular tale of self-improvement--which shares much in common with Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*--with the form of spiritual autobiography or confession. Unlike Franklin, Equiano does become a Christian and so his story of surviving by his wits also becomes a classic spiritual salvation narrative. That tradition--of using the Christian story to shape one's own personal story--is evident in the narratives of Puritan settlers in New England as well as in Stowe's famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. And resistance to the Christian story becomes, for later writers like Wright and Reed, yet another way to speak of survival. In these cases, rejecting the Christian precepts of meekness and faithful suffering allows the writer to imagine a powerful and artistically assertive black male voice.

The twentieth-century narratives might be said to substitute the narrative of art itself for the Christian narrative. Hemingway's stories of World War I and its aftermath in *In Our Time* sometimes seem more like stories of dissolution than stories of survival, but the fact that the war experience can be made into literary art becomes a way of redeeming that experience. Equally, Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* details the ways a woman does not survive the murder of her baby in a Nazi concentration camp, yet finds a kind of remnant of life in the act of writing--in the woman's act of writing letters to her dead daughter. While Art Spiegelman's graphic novels *Maus I* and *Maus II* offer a more traditional survival story with a generally happy ending, following (as Spiegelman himself has said) nineteenth-century narrative conventions, the self-consciousness and irony of his cartoon medium allows him to interrogate the problems raised by those narrative conventions. For Simon

Ortiz, art--or poetry, to be more precise--holds out the possibility of healing the layered wounds of war suffered by Native American Vietnam war veterans. It does so both by giving history back to the Native American people in a kind of cathartic truth-telling, and by using poetry's flexible language to stitch together wounds Ortiz presents as belonging to all Americans.

Against the backdrop of these readings, the members of this seminar explored many other kinds of survival in their own research and writing. The first four units in this volume focus on particular historical moments of difficulty and the life stories of individuals who survived those times. Dina Secchiaroli builds her unit around readings about the Holocaust that blur the line between fiction and non-fiction. In choosing such readings Secchiaroli allows students to exercise their critical faculties and to explore how both truth-telling and imagination can become part of the effort to survive. Virginia Seely also uses different genres to bring students to a personal and humane understanding of history and survival--in this case, the history of slavery and the survival of young people caught within that "peculiar institution." Marlene Kennedy's unit, engaging the history of the Great Depression and Pearl Harbor, relies on fiction (novels and films) to teach children how imagination can not only help young people to survive difficult times but also how it can help us come into closer contact with history. In a unit written for very young students, Jean Sutherland uses a variety of materials, including film, diaries, and biography, to show how young people have survived their culture's discrimination. Her focus on Anne Frank, Ryan White, and Ruby Bridges takes fourth-graders to different places and different moments in history to observe how three exceptional children drew on the resources of family, friends and education in order to make a meaningful life in the face of prejudice. Because students can easily identify with the young narrators and protagonists of the literature these units include, the curricula promise not only to teach reading, writing, and history, but also to encourage students to use their imagination, living into the historical predicaments in which each story is set.

The next three units in the volume take up the idea of cultural survival. Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins, in her "Middle Passage," frames the story of the slave trade with a rich, hands-on exploration of Ghanaian culture prior to slavery and its survival in the lives of slaves and their free descendants in the Americas. Yolanda Trapp focuses on how a person's native language can survive as part of that person's life and self-worth when she or he moves to a new place with a new language. Using beautiful bilingual books--most in Spanish and English--Trapp shows how appreciation and celebration of linguistic diversity can coexist with students' need to learn the language of their new home. Sandra Friday, though she also discusses cultural survival, takes a slightly different tack in her unit. Rather than concentrating on how certain cultural practices can survive dislocation and challenge, her unit shows how new cultural practices--especially in visual art, music and poetry--blossom when individuals and groups are challenged with prejudice, poverty or other kinds of adversity. Friday's materials include poetry by Robert Hayden, Nikki Giovanni and others, Jacob Lawrence's paintings, and rap by the African American philosopher, Cornell West. These materials show how art in its various forms communicates both public and personal history.

The last three units in the volume look at survival with an eye towards the contemporary application of survival lessons taken from literature, film and music. Kevin Inge uses a variety of readings--historical, autobiographical, and fictional--to explore different instances of survival, asking his students to think and write about what helped characters in the stories to cope with the troubles in their lives. Amber Stoltz aims also to give students survival resources they can use in their own lives, appealing to their sense of identity as teenagers by assigning readings, films, songs and creative projects that take up problems most teenagers encounter. The unit allows students to read and write about family difficulties, the issues of peer pressure and sex, the challenges of school, and the question of race. In the last unit of the volume, Geraldine Martin takes survival lessons to the very youngest students using the stories of Faith Ringgold. Through creative puppetry,

art, and writing activities, Martin asks first graders to think about how family, friends, and the escape provided by imagination can help a person to weather difficult times and to accomplish seemingly impossible things.

While these last three units are devoted to analyzing and applying the lessons one can learn from stories of survival, this is not to say that the other units included in the volume do not also offer students ways of translating the stories and history they read about into their own thoughts and actions. Almost every unit in this volume includes at least one activity in which students are invited to make that leap from academic work to personal expression. This is perhaps why survival stories have remained a staple of American writing since those narratives of captivity written by settlers and slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The survival story provides a ready form for transforming private pain into culturally recognizable meaning.

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