



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2013 Volume II: Immigration and Migration and the Making of a Modern American City

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## **Cityscapes and the American Identity**

Curriculum Unit 13.02.07  
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### **Introduction**

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The "Cityscapes and the American Identity" unit work, born out of the immigration and migration seminar and the guiding questions in my American Studies course, will combine real-world actions with historical research. The guiding questions are: What role do cityscapes play in forming our individual and communal identities? What is our role in shaping and reshaping the ever-changing urban landscape? 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century New York is the main area of study, but also serves as a comparison for understanding New Haven. In New York, it is evident that the value systems and the changing value systems of the various classes and ethnicities are revealed through the landscape. Starting with the Five Points and moving through periods of urban renewal to future visions of the city, we will explore the progression and interconnection of landscapes, values, and people. Some poetry, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, along with the films *West Side Story* and *I am Legend* can help to hone students' close reading skills and help them evaluate landscapes' role in forming cultural identities, personal identities as well as exposing power dynamics. This will all work toward the students' final project that focuses on a part of the New Haven cityscape or a film that tackles the cityscape.

### **Rationale**

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I am currently developing and teaching an American Studies course with a colleague in the History Department. Since the course is comprised entirely of juniors, I will be able to use material from the "Cityscapes and the American Identity" unit with my other English 3 courses (also made up of juniors) as we focus on American Literature. The student body at the Sound School is pretty diverse. We are an aquaculture and agriculture magnet high school with a student body made up of individuals from communities surrounding New Haven as well as New Haven itself. Although the student make-up is diverse, the school is rather small, about 300 students, and offers a supportive, close-knit environment. Because of the aquaculture and agriculture focus, history and English are not always the passion of the student body. The school, in general, attracts active students that like real-world connections to their learning.

The guiding questions for American Studies are: What personal and civic questions do Americans face? How do our changing landscape and civic responsibility define our individual identities? Each quarter of the course is guided by a central concept and essential questions derived from the main themes. The first quarter's central theme is cityscape, the second workers, the third family, and the fourth arts and media.

As we explore the New York cityscape in the pursuit of understanding the changing community, I will infuse poetry, literature, and film. Periodically, I hope to introduce class with a quick poem about the New York landscape. There is a list of some potential poetry at the end of the unit. It will be a quick way to introduce students to voices of various ethnicities and from various time periods and various places in the city. Students can read the poem aloud and to themselves before having a brief discussion about the stylistic choices the author uses to convey his or her particular message about New York. The poetry will be tied to the landscape of New York City and the content of the unit.

Aspects of the New York City landscape will be explored like tenements, parks, businesses, facilities promoting the arts, the UN building, etc. to help us to understand the place, the people, and the time.

## Background

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As I mentioned earlier, we will start with the making of Five Points. The Five Points was originally a pond called "the Collect." "By the end of the eighteenth century, contamination from the tanneries, slaughterhouses, and other industries had transformed the Collect from a lovely landmark into a putrid nuisance."<sup>(1)</sup> A few ideas floated around about how to deal with the site before 1802 when it was settled that it would be filled in with land. Five Points emerged fairly quickly with the name coined in 1829 by the press. A number of factors contributed to the deterioration of the site and the establishment of Five Points. Nevertheless, it became a haven for migrants, immigrants and tenements. Initially, the community was made up of artisans and a large African American population. By the 1830s the neighborhood was attracting Irish and German immigrants. The fact that it was previously a pond and not well drained didn't help in that it made the ground muddy which helped in no small part to the spread of disease. For example, the cholera outbreak of 1832 hit Five Points pretty hard. At this juncture in the unit, I might use excerpts from the film *Gangs of New York*. It will give the students the opportunity to look at and evaluate Scorsese's vision of New York. Students should ask questions about how he chooses to communicate the story of immigration, ethnic identity, and historic formations. And how he specifically uses the landscape of New York City and Five Points to communicate these themes to his film audience.

I would present background information on The Five Points with a PowerPoint presentation. After providing the student with some information on the making of Five Points and its population, I would have them read a chapter from Anbinder's book, "Prologue: 'The Wickedest House on the Wickedest Street That Ever Existed'" This chapter discusses the Bowery of Five Points. It serves as a nice historical introduction to the text, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* which takes place in the Bowery. The portrait of the family in *Maggie* appears to be an Irish family who is definitely plagued by the depravity of the tenements. The tenement is reminiscent of a hell where fighting and drunkenness are any everyday norm and promiscuousness, as the title suggests, can lead to a lady's downfall. Still, the landscape or environment itself is not without blame. A key component to the study of the book will be the environmental factors that contribute to Maggie's downfall.

In the mid-nineteenth century there were moralistic forces at work that advocated prohibition and the elimination of prostitution as well as environmental reformers. The environmental reformers are of special interest to this unit because they felt that changing the landscape, the environment would change the behaviors of the people. Environmental reformers believed that it was virtually impossible to lead a life of decency when living in squalor. The environment itself was the force making their lives unbearable not the moral fiber of the poor themselves.(2)

Further exploration of New York tenements will be aided by the book, *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob Riis. Jacob Riis was a photojournalist and social reformer. He felt strongly that changing the environment for the better would cut down on the vice in the tenements. As part of his plight to eradicate slums, Riis took pictures of the tenement life and wrote, *How the Other Half Lives*. The photographs document the poor conditions of tenement life in New York City. This was tenement life post Five Points when reforms were already in the works. A sanitary survey in 1864 of New York prompted changes in the tenements such as windows in some of the rooms for ventilation. Some of the living quarters were in the center of the building without windows or ventilation.(3) Riis felt that the poor environmental conditions of the tenements made it virtually impossible for the residents to thrive or be expected to conduct themselves in a civilized manner. Students will look at both Riis' text and images and ask whether the two reinforce the same message or not. A map of the tenements on page 1190 of Homberger's, *The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City's History* shows the preponderance of tenements in New York. The dilapidated housing lined the edges of the city on both the Hudson River side and the East River side. The wealthiest residents lived in the middle on Fifth Avenue and moved up the city to escape the squalor that threatened to bleed into their lives. Map page 100.

In reading *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* and *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* it was evident that class structures and value systems were revealed through the parks of New York. As the American people, moved from a more formal and cultured mode of entertainment to one of the Coney Island variety, the people's values were clearly changing too. This is the type of progression of and interconnection of landscapes, values, and people I hope to delve into through the material I will present in this unit. Central Park was envisioned as a respectable place to enjoy nature as a respite from the hustle and bustle of city life. Frederick Law Olmsted and the Board of Commissioners of Central Park did their best to uphold certain standards of conduct through the rules of the park. First of all, the park was frequented by people in carriages or horses. This population represented a wealthy class that traversed the park to see and be seen. Although this was a small percentage of patrons, the rules and location excluded the poorer people of New York almost entirely. It was envisioned as a park for everyone, but excluded some who found entertainment to be something other than merely enjoying the scenic atmosphere. Some of the rules that Olmsted and the board worked to instill made it virtually forbidden to sit on or walk on the grass or touch the nature. There were no baseball fields for fear of the gambling and raucous behavior. Although there were some modes of entertainment like ice skating and music concerts, the sense of team activities was pretty rare. Central Park reflected a demure sense of amusement while catering to a mostly upper and middle class clientele. (4)

In contrast to Central Park, Coney Island catered to a more working class clientele. The actual landscape of Coney Island in the form of the parks illuminated the changing modes of entertainment and lifestyle among Americans. Mass industrialization and a massive rise in European immigration gave rise to consumers participating in Coney Island. The parks, Steeplechase, Luna, and Dreamland, each worked to outdo one

another and succeeded. Frederic Thompson, one of the founders of Luna Park, was an architect by trade and used this knowledge to assist in the creation of a fantastical amusement park. He merged a multitude of architecture styles to create the illusion of being somewhere else for the customers. Between the amazing structures, the lights and the amusements the park transported its clients out of the humdrum, even arduous lives they lead outside the park to another world of grand entertainment. Not only did the creators utilize the landscape of the architecture to transform the leisure time of the customers, but the use of everyday urban transportation was transformed into something fantastical. The carts of coal mines and the railroads served as inspiration for rides. Hence, the first roller-coasters were invented. Unlike Central Park, Coney Island was alive with the technological advancements of the time. The people were brought together through the amusements themselves and the humor of self deprecating behavior. Between items such as the house of mirrors and rides that invoked physical closeness and thrills people were expressing themselves in very different ways than in Central Park.

There were plans for urban renewal between 1945 and 1965 in New York City. In a last minute 1946 deal, the United Nations building was destined for New York along the East River. Thus solidifying the role of New York city as THE international city. (5) Although New York had the reputation of a cosmopolitan city, race relations were not quite progressive. There was a lot of racism in New York and the United Nations soon found this out. Although the plans for urban renewal were plans for improvement, the reality was that sometimes new ghettos were created and people were displaced. Thus furthering the plight of certain classes and races of people.

*West Side Story* is an interesting film for this unit because it takes place in the mid 1950s and was filmed in 1960 where Lincoln Center would soon take over. Therefore, the film documents the landscape pre-Lincoln Center and a little during the slum clearance or renewal process. This is the perfect opportunity for students utilize their close reading skills. The film opens with the an aerial view of the lower part of the city and works it's way through the city by highlighting various aspects of the cityscape from above. Finally, the film hits the ground and the lives of the Jets and the Sharks on 67<sup>th</sup> and 68<sup>th</sup> streets between Amsterdam and West End avenues.(6) If possible, it would be awesome to take the students to Lincoln Center after viewing the film, reading, and discussing the issues of it. We could do a little walking tour of the area using the map overlay application for our phones to view a map of the area in 1960 while meandering the center for art. Maybe we could even catch a film or ballet or maybe that is too much.

As I read *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* the complexities of urban renewal in 20<sup>th</sup> century New York are becoming clear. There are a number of forces at work in the undertaking of urban renewal and a whole other force advocating against it and exposing it as a problematic endeavor. Although it is a work in progress, I am thinking the students will examine urban renewal, visions of future cities, the interaction between landscapes and the individual, and their implications for city life. Some of the potential arguments students will be able to construct in the course of the unit relate to the complexities of urban renewal and city structures in general. For example, racial segregation, environmentalism, changing value systems, and class division are all issues that face cities. These are just some of the topics students could build arguments around as a result of our research as well as their individual research.

## Final Project Options

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The central skills I want the unit to focus on are close reading, researching, forming arguments, and writing. In looking at the landscape, writing, and films closely, students will learn about the material while sharpening this skill. For the final project, students will have an option of researching an aspect of the New Haven cityscape in relation to the diverse New Haven community or delving into a film and producing a critical analysis.

At the beginning of the unit, I would like to show the film, *The Hill*. This film would actually be the first activity in the unit. It is a film about the destruction of a neighborhood to build a new school in the Hill part of New Haven. This recent film will hopefully grab the students' attention to the fact that things are happening everyday to the cityscape they live in and they can play an integral part in how these things transpire. Although I intend on focusing on New York City in the unit, I want to encourage students to think about their own projects from the get go. I believe this film will be a great hook.

Another technique to grab the students attention in relation to history being real and being a part of their lives, I will use maps. I think this will really encourage students to think about their environment in New Haven and how they want to make their own mark on it. The Yale collection of Sanborn fire maps of New Haven would be very cool to use with my students. The Sanborn maps are derived from fire insurance companies to provide details of city's buildings. Yale has all of the Connecticut Sanborn maps dating back to 1884 in some cases. By downloading Google Earth on your phone, you can view these maps. This is an exciting tool to use with my students. I hope to do at least a mini walking tour with my students of maybe downtown New Haven. Using a map of New Haven from 1911, let's say, on their phone and walk around New Haven viewing what it used to be versus what it is today. This could serve as a kind of brainstorming exercise for the students to start to think about what aspect of New Haven to select for their final project.

Some of the options for study include but are not limited to the Wooster Square Arch, the waterfront, the I-95 connector, or other feature of the New Haven landscape that interests students. The Wooster Square Arch that is significant to the Italian community's presence in New Haven. The history of this artifact and its relevance to the community could be explored. There is currently an exhibit at the New Haven Museum that I will have to take my students to in the beginning of the year to encourage them to think about New Haven's ever-changing cityscape. The waterfront's story from the oysterman of past to Sound School student of today as well as the other waterfront locations would be of special interest to my students. The displacement of ethnic communities with the building of the I-95 connector is also an interesting tale of the New Haven cityscape's influence on forming the community as we know it.

Students can take on an aspect of the New Haven landscape and build their own project around the landscape's influence on the community, the community's influence on the landscape and how it has helped to form the diverse population as we know it. The future vision of New Haven should also play a role in the selecting of the location and the research. What are the future visions for the city's population and structure? Students could meet with New Haven city planners to aid them in understanding what the city actually sees for its future as well as helping them to form their own visions. It is possible the experience could truly have the students make a mark on the city of New Haven. I would like to see the final project to have a visual component like a Prezi or PowerPoint. The students could meld the visuals of their landscape with music and poetry. As an additional aspect of the project, I would like to see students write their own poem about New Haven from their experience of studying the cityscape. We have read poetry about New York throughout the

unit and the students can exhibit their understanding of place, community, and literary expression through writing their own poetry.

An alternative to the city project is a film project. We will be watching some films throughout the unit. I have already mentioned *Gangs of New York* and *West Side Story*. Another film that is interesting to use is *I am Legend*. This dystopic view of the future taps into the fears of Americans. Many Science-Fiction/Horror films do exactly that. Therefore, students can start to think about the future of the city, the fears about the city, and the role of the landscape in all of this. The landscape is pretty desolate and destroyed in *I am Legend* for example. Students will read the film closely and we will practice as a group. This will bring the unit to the point of the future city as well as offer a practice ground for the students choosing to do a film for a final project. Some possible film choices for the student film project could be *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Blade Runner*, *Planet of the Apes*, etc. I would not even limit them to Science Fiction, but it is a good theme to start with.

## Lesson Plans

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### Lesson Plan 1

Objectives: Generate interest in the unit through bringing the material to a personal level by focusing on New Haven. Engage in a prewriting activity to prompt thinking about the unit in general.

Individual Practice: Students will respond to the following questions as a Do Now type activity at the beginning of class.

What role do cityscapes play in forming our individual and communal identities? What is our role in shaping and reshaping the ever-changing urban landscape?

Once students have completed the response they will share out in small groups before reporting to the full class.

Group Practice: Students will view the film *The Hill*. Hopefully this will prompt thought about their city and the changes that have occurred in their own lifetime. How is the landscape changing everyday and how do they play a role in it? (This will lesson will obviously take more than one class period.)

### Lesson Plan 2

Objectives: Provide background information on the Five Points through a PowerPoint and lecture. Generate questions about the background information to prompt further discussion.

Background: I will tell students that we will be generating questions on the Five Points PowerPoint during and after the presentation. Students will be required to create literal, interpretive, and "Big Idea" questions. I will attach a handout outlining the what each type of question is. I will share a PowerPoint with the students providing background information on the Five Points.

Group Practice: Once the presentation is over, students will finish coming up with questions. Students will be encouraged to write their questions on the board. Each student should copy the board questions down for their own future reference.

Homework: Students will respond to one literal, one interpretive and one "big idea" question.

\*The next day we will share out and discuss the responses.

### **Lesson Plan 3**

Objective: Students will exhibit an understanding of the Five Points history and develop their thinking around Five Points through a discussion of their responses to the questions generated yesterday. Students will be introduced to the next text, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* .

Group Practice: There will be a student lead discussion of the material from the night before.

Background: The next book, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, is a novel that takes place in the Bowery. Before we read the text, we will read an excerpt from Tyler Anbinder's book *The Five Points* . The chapter is called "The Wickedest House on the Wickedest Street that Ever Existed" and it is about the Bowery. It is just to give you a flavor for the time and place.

Individual Practice/Homework: Read the Anbinder chapter.

### **Lesson Plan 4**

Objectives: Engage in a close reading of poetry by Whitman, Scutti, and Doty. Identify and explain the significance of literary devices used to form the poetry. Draw connections between the poetry of the same author, Whitman while making conclusions about the differences between the poetry of similar titles.

Poems: Walt Whitman "Mannahatta" and "Broadway"

Susan Scutti "Manhattan"

Mark Doty "Broadway"

(All of the poems are attached below)

Background: The Whitman poetry was written in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century while the Scutti and Doty poems were written in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Obviously I have paired them in order to explore the similarities and differences in a few poems about New York containing similar titles. Whitman is a renowned author that wrote a lot about the New York he knew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote poetry and prose. As we read the poetry please take note of each poet's style and content. Attempt to take note of Whitman as a writer as we will be reading two of his poems. Then draw connections between the more contemporary view of New York versus the 19<sup>th</sup> century vision which we have spent some time studying.

Model: Read "Broadway" by Walt Whitman out loud. Reread the poem while annotating on the board, overhead, elmo, whatever. Underlining repetitions in diction, syntax, sounds, etc. Taking notes on one of the margins about the meaning of the text while on the other margin, asking questions, delving into the meaning, exploring the paradoxes, etc.

Group Practice: Read the other poems out loud. Have students read them to themselves annotating as they read on their own. Discuss their initial reaction to the pieces.

Individual Practice: Select two of the poems to write about. Try to pick at least one Whitman, but not required. Explore the form and content of each poem as they relate to landscape? What is the poem saying? How is it said? What is significant about the stylistic choices the author makes to the overall meaning of the poem? What do you learn about the author's vision of New York?

Once students have written their responses, they can pair share or table share their writing verbatim.

Vocabulary

Rhetoric

Scheme

Trope

Five Points

Tammany

Tenements

Muckraker

Progressivism

Urban Renewal

Dystopia

## Questioning

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Generating questions is key in the understanding of literature of non-fiction. There are three types of questions listed below. Also listed, are the types of answers that are expected.

Literal Questions: factual and address key issues; the answers are found directly in the text; the answers lead to an accurate and complete summary of the text.

Interpretive Questions: inferential; motive of author or character; answers found by following patterns and seeing relationships among parts of the text; good answers lead to an identification of the significant patterns.

Big Idea Questions: connecting; link text to prior knowledge, other texts, or experiences; answers are found by testing the ideas of a text against readers' schema; good answers lead to an appreciation of the text and further discussion.



## Poetry

Miguel Pinero "Bodega Sold Dreams"

Walt Whitman "Mannahatta" and "Broadway"

Susan Scutti "Manhattan"

Mark Doty "Broadway"

Victor Hernandez Cruz "The Lower East Side of Manhattan"

Hart Crane "To Brooklyn Bridge"

Langston Hughes "Harlem" and "Night Funeral in Harlem"

Claude McKay "The Tropics of New York"

## District Standards

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Common Core Standards

RIT 1.

Keys and Details

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

## Annotated Bibliography

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Anbinder, Tyler. *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*. New York: Free Press, 2001.

This text traces the life of Five Points in 19<sup>th</sup> Century New York City. In part it serves to give a more realistic view of the notorious slum that has been portrayed fictitiously in historical writing and the movie, *Gangs of New York*, while paying credence to the problem it was.

Boyer, Paul. *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*. MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

Crane, Stephen. *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and other Short Fiction*. New York: Bantam Dell a Division of Random House LLC, 2006.

*Gangs of New York*. Directed by Martin Scorsese. 2002. USA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, Inc. DVD

Homberger, Eric. *The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City's History*. New York: Swanston Publishing Limited, 1994.

A book of maps of New York City with brief history written throughout serves as another visual way to understand the changes in New York throughout history.

*I am Legend*. Directed by Francis Lawrence. 2007. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2008. DVD.

Kasson, John F. *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1978.

Coney Island is memorialized in this book. It tells of the shifting values in American working and middle class life versus the more elite mentality of the upper classes that were more likely to frequent Central Park. The parks themselves are delved into with depth to reveal what entertainment was to working and middle class America.

"Poets.org." *The Academy of American Poets* . 2013. <http://www.poets.org/state.php/varState/NY>

Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1971.

This book of writing and photographs documents tenement life in 19<sup>th</sup> century New York. The writing is not completely objective and enlightened and the photographs are not exactly without artistic influence, but the book cannot be missed in this unit.

Rosenzweig, Roy and Blackmar, Elizabeth. *The Park and The People: A History of Central Park* . New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998.

Schmidt, Elizabeth. *Poems of New York*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

*The Hill* . Directed by Lisa Molomot. 2013. New Haven: Lisa Molomot and Jacob Bricca, 2013. DVD.

*West Side Story*. Directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Roberts. 1961. Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment LLC, 2003. DVD.

Zipp, Samuel. *Manhattan Projects: Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

It traces the urban renewal process in mid-twentieth century Manhattan. From the U.N. to Lincoln Center the book discusses the multifaceted challenges and rewards of urban renewal at this time.

## Notes

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1. Anbinder, Tyler. *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum*. (New York: Free Press, 2001), 14

2. Boyer, Paul. *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* . (MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 179-185

3. Homberger, Eric. *The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City's History*. ( New York: Swanston Publishing Limited, 1994), 110

4. Rosenzweig, Roy and Blackmar, Elizabeth. *The Park and The People: A History of Central Park* . (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 211-339

5. Zipp, Samuel. *Manhattan Projects: Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York*. ( New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 38-39

6. Zipp, Samuel. *Manhattan Projects: Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York*. ( New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 158

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