



Understanding Immigrant and Migrant Fiction

Curriculum Unit 13.02.08
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My thing is every generation of Americans has to answer what we call the 'Superman Question,' Superman comes, lands in America. He's illegal. He's one of these kids wrapped up in a red bullfighter's cape, and you've got to decide what we're going to do with Superman- Junot Diaz

Section One: Introduction

1.1 Descriptive Overview

This unit is primarily intended for use in the eleven-twelve ELA (English Language Arts) band. The duration is six to eight weeks. Students completing this unit will provide an objective summary of *Drown* by Junot Diaz wherein they analyze how different characters attempt to escape the worlds they come from and shape their identities through experiences and opportunities (Common Core State Standard Reading Literature 11-12.2).

Through reading, discussing, and writing about the short stories "In the Land of the Free" and "The Whipping" (also "The German Refugee" for either more advanced students or students seeking honors credit) students will demonstrate knowledge of nineteenth and early twentieth works of American literature, including how two or more works from roughly the same period treat similar themes and topics (CCSS RL 11-12.9).

Students will also read and analyze a wide variety of informational texts with the aim of delineating and evaluating reasoning in US immigration policies and trends. This will include the application of constitutional principles and legal reasoning especially as they relate to the premises and purposes of, as well as arguments employed by works of public advocacy (CCSS Reading Informational Texts 11-12.8).

Before students tackle texts literary or informational, pre-assessment strategies include evaluating level of mastery especially with regard to content specific vocabulary, US history, and student assumptions surrounding disparate immigration narratives. Shared student writings and a variety of discussions demonstrate and increase background knowledge.

In small groups students work cooperatively to find or create artifacts, primary and secondary sources are permissible, that establish an interactive timeline. Important dates include but are not necessarily limited to:

1790 (residency requirement for naturalization established; the 'Good Moral Character' requirement introduced)

1808 (Congressional ban on the importation of slaves)

1819 (Congress establishes reporting on immigration)

1848 (Mexican-American War ends resulting in acquisition of new territory and people under its jurisdiction)

1849 (California Gold Rush)

1857 (Dred Scott decision)

1860

1868 (14th Amendment)

1882, 1896 (Plessy versus Ferguson)

1898 (Spanish American War)

1924 (Immigration Act and Executive Order granting citizenship to Native Americans)

1929 (yearly immigration quotas made permanent)

1943 (Magnuson Act)

1954 (Brown versus Board of Education Topeka, Kansas)

1959 (Cuban revolution)

1966

1986

2013 to present (Immigration Reform, the Dream Act, etc.)

Through the continued development of their timelines students establish how immigration laws and policies, as well as patterns of immigration, have changed over time. Timeline exercises relate to the fiction pieces they are reading in the unit both explicitly and implicitly.

1.2 Statement of Context

I began teaching nine years ago at the Choir Academy of Harlem. There I was introduced to the works of the playwright August Wilson, specifically the two Pulitzer prize-winning dramas from his Century Cycle, *Fences* (1983) and *The Piano Lesson* (1990). Wilson's works paint a portrait of the African American experience across the twentieth century, obviously the Great Migration factors heavily into the lattice of his narratives.

After a year in Harlem I relocated moving further north, if only the ninety miles from New York City to New Haven. I taught at the Wilbur Cross High School Annex, a credit retrieval program that primarily served African American students and New Haven's rapidly growing Latino population. Despite my having an increase in the number of students from Spanish speaking cultures, I continued to hone my pre-dominantly Afro-centric curriculum. In addition to reading the works of Wilson, my students read Chinua Achebe's modernist masterwork *Things Fall Apart* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* .

I now teach at Metropolitan Business Academy an inter-district magnet high school. We have an increasingly diverse population, according to the most recent reports we have a total student population of 376 students, while we are still predominantly Black and Hispanic, we have a growing number of White and Asian students. Bearing this in mind, coupled with students current studies in eleventh grade which include the *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave* , the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and director Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* , there is an increasing need for greater diversity and a wider variety of voices and experiences.

This unit not only strives to provide equal attention to an increasingly diverse number of groups and their voices but also to increase student awareness of the historical context that influences and shapes literature over time. It is my attempt at broadening curricular diversity and finding new ways of bringing both primary and secondary informational texts and sources into the English classroom to deepen student understanding of literature and the world.

1.3 Migration from CAPT (Connecticut Academic Performance Test) to Smarter Balance and the Common Core

Teaching in a time of transition such as this is not unlike the immigrant experience, with the coming of the Common Core, we are all strangers in a strange land. One of my aims in developing this unit is to overcome any sense of dislocation and disorientation and assimilate into this new cultural landscape of teaching and learning.

The current and soon to be phased out New Haven Public Schools English Language Arts curriculum for grades eleven and twelve revolves around a number of "significant tasks"; for grade twelve, that to which I am primarily assigned, these are as follows: personal statement/college essay, a poetry project, a literary analysis, and a "showcase portfolio." One thing that will undoubtedly remain the same, at least for the next two years, is the focus on literary analysis in quarters three and four. Supporting the notion that literary analysis is here to stay in twelfth grade English is the Common Core Connecticut State Standards for Reading focus on students abilities to analyze theme(s) implicit and explicit across a variety of texts.

Although the necessity of teaching students how to analyze literature remains, it will not be with the singular purpose of creating experts in the field, but will rather have the broader goal of helping students produce written arguments that either pose solutions to or simply increase their understandings of provocative issues of social significance. Regardless of preconceived notions and opinions students have regarding the complex issues of immigration, migration, and urbanization, their ideas will develop through their study and interactions with both informational and literary works, fiction and nonfiction.

Section Two: General Guide

2.1 Special Issues:

This curriculum unit is designed with older, more mature students in mind, high school seniors specifically. Although most of these students will be young adults, seventeen years of age and older, one must be aware any time she exposes young minds to potentially objectionable material, and as a result it is always wise to have alternative texts on hand.

In his collection of short stories *Drown* Diaz draws on both the patois and the realities of inner-city life. The third story "Aurora" is when it really gets serious. The first two stories deal with cruelty and infidelity, but "Aurora" takes Diaz's brand of social realism to the next level having its narrator deal drugs and abuse his addict girlfriend.

The film *Sugar* has multiple versions with differing MPAA ratings; one is PG-13 and the other is R. According to IMDB (the Internet Movie Database), the PG-13 version contains a "brief shot of a clothed couple having sex," profanity, and "a man takes some pills."

2.2 Aims: Objectives and Goals

What reasons do people have for migrating, emigrating, and immigrating? How have these reasons changed over time? How do the reasons compare and contrast across lines of ethnicity and countries of origin? How are these similarities and differences reflected in migrant and immigrant fiction? Finally, how do primary and secondary informational texts support and refute ideas explored through literature?

Students answer the 'Superman Question.' Additionally students explore such guiding questions as:

What does it mean to be "a person of good moral character"?

Should the "ability to speak, read, write and understand English" be requirements on the path to citizenship?

2.3 Performance Criteria and Assessment

According to Professor Jason Courtmanche of the Connecticut Writing Project, one of the requirements for Early College Experience credits is for the student/candidate to produce thirty pages of revised writing over the course of one academic year; upon completion of this six to eight week unit, honors contract students will produce a published piece of writing (i.e. a piece that has put through the five-step writing process) between six and nine pages in length; students without honors contracts will publish two, three to four page papers. Regardless the scope of student work, the writing will present an argument and will incorporate both narrative and informational/expository techniques.

In addition to these longer published writing pieces, students write one-page response papers twice weekly. These one-pagers will shape in-class discussion and will be used as prewriting for longer pieces of written argument.

Section Three: Unit Description

3.1 Texts and Methods

3.1.1 *Drown*

Diaz's *Drown* acts as the anchor text. Its value goes far beyond its appeal as a "high-interest" text; Diaz is an important figure not only in the literary world, but he is also a major player and activist in the larger conversation surrounding the contemporary issues of immigration and migration.

Diaz's "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie" is included in the third section "Crossings" of the revised edition of the anthology *Imagining America* in an attempt to represent the "proliferation of fiction examining the emotional landscape of America from formerly uncharted perspectives... [enriching] ways we continue to reinvent an America still engaged in the arduous business of fulfilling the unrealized promise of democracy" (Brown and Ling, 1). The editors go on to explain how they are attempting to create a dialogue between contemporary authors and those that preceded them. Students of English often inquire why the curriculum does not include more recent works; this of course is a matter of perspective as I would argue that Wilson and Morrison wrote many of their most beloved works during my lifetime. I am less evasive by not including "How to Date a Browngirl..." as an isolated part of *Imagining America* but rather as an integral part of *Drown*.

3.1.2 *Sugar*

My acquisition and subsequent reading of selected shorts from Junot Diaz's collection *Drown* have me thinking about the film *Sugar* by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck from 2008. Opening Day in and of itself does not constitute an educational rationale; however, it is both a sports film, i.e. potentially a high interest text, and a contemporary tale of immigration. The story traverses cultural as well as geographic boundaries. The film's protagonist Miguel "Sugar" Santos moves from the Dominican Republic to America's heartland to the Big Apple. One often envisions New York City, and more specifically the 'once upon a time' of Ellis Island, as the gateway to the American Dream. *Sugar* upends the fairytale by having Miguel's first American experiences, as a minor league baseball player, in rural Iowa. It is only after seeing several of his fellow players struggle with the pressures of dislocation and commoditization that he abandons his dream of playing in the Majors and seeks both security and anonymity in the big city.

The narrative of *Sugar* reinforces themes and gives a visual representation of many of the ideas explored by Diaz: the poverty of the Dominican Republic, the disruptive/destructive influence this has on the traditional nuclear family uprooting patriarchs and other family members in search of better lives for both themselves and those they leave behind, and ultimately migration in addition to the initial flight from the homeland.

3.1.3 from *Imagining America: A Multicultural from Imagining Anthology of American Fiction*

Imagining America edited by Wesley Brown and Amy Ling is deftly divided into four discrete sections: Arriving, Belonging, Crossings, and Remembering. Of the nine stories in the "Arriving" section I have settled on the co-opting of three, two for general mass consumption and the third for an optional extra-credit/Honors assignment. The two I will use with all students are Sui Sin Far's "In the Land of the Free" (1900) and Marita

Bonner's "The Whipping" (1939) not to be confused with the Robert Hayden poem of the same name.

"In the Land of the Free" has a relatively straightforward narrative structure, although its occasional use of Middle English pronouns may come as something of a shock. The American Dream is subverted by the convergence of the good intentions of the wife of a Chinese merchant and the cold and mechanical trappings of bureaucracy. The merchant's wife leaves San Francisco for China to give birth to their son. Her return to the United States is delayed when she becomes involved in caring for elderly family members. When she is finally able to return, her infant son is detained. What is at first reported to be overnight becomes a five-month ordeal. The ordeal negatively affects the parents psychologically, physically, and financially, ultimately leaving scars that may diminish over time but will undoubtedly never disappear completely.

"The Whipping" is a brutal glimpse into the confluence of the Great Migration and the Great Depression. It deals with similar themes of family and separation but is much darker in tone than "In a Free Land."

Nicholosa Mohr's "The English Lesson" is decidedly the most upbeat of the immigrant fictions I have encountered thus far, and somewhat ironically for this reason I have chosen to exclude it. Although it does touch on the bittersweet longings of a young Puerto Rican girl in an arranged marriage to an older member of the merchant class, it is free of the abject horrors of the parent/child separations and the recurring grey dullness of institutions that house the dispossessed, first the mission where "The Little One" (see Little Kim, from "In the Land of the Free") is sent and the later where Elizabeth lives out her days in the wake of the tragic death of little Benny, "The Whipping". Bernard Malamud's "The German Refugee" will be used as an inclusion for students interested in receiving either Honors or extra credit.

One thing I notice about Brown and Ling's inclusion of "The English Lesson", or rather its placement, seems odd, while it is true that it is an arrival story, it comes from the later part of the twentieth century, and as previously noted it is much more optimistic in tone, arguably to the point of romance. This certainly raises questions concerning change over time and the importance of lesson sequence. I had at first considered simply presenting the works of fiction in chronological order; however, I find myself as a reader increasingly drawn to the works of Diaz and wanting to use his writing as the hook on which to hang larger social questions.

The timeline exercise is ongoing and done for each of the texts. Students work on timelines that aid and build upon their understandings of the situations presented by the works so that they approach each one more clearly. Students are encouraged to make good use of the Prezi timeline template for this purpose.

In the end, once students have created these different timelines of migration and settlement for each text and examined the different narratives presented, they will map all of them out over time and deepen their understanding of change over time. Students will also think about how these histories/stories intersect in terms of the kinds of laws affecting different groups of people, such as the 1924 Immigration and Naturalization Act, and develop ideas relating to such themes as racial segregation and social dislocation as expressed by different authors.

3.1.4 Reading Informational Texts

According to Lucy Calkins et al. by twelfth grade NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) recommends that student readings consist of 30 percent literary texts and 70 percent informational. I do not interpret this to mean that teachers of English are expected to all but abandon their child literature; however, the authors are unwavering in their assertion that all students should "receive focused ELA instruction in nonfiction

reading" (20).

Here students explore the Library of Congress collections on immigration and migration and interactive resources produced by *The New York Times*. The creation, revision, and presentation of timelines will deepen student understanding of the texts specifically addressed by this unit, starting with Diaz's *Drown* read, written about, and discussed during Hispanic Heritage Month, mid-September to mid-October, and will greatly contribute to their understanding and analyses of Great Migration literature leading up to and during February, Black History Month. New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre's 2013-2014 schedule includes a production of Wilson's *Fences*. And although the teaching of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is not discussed here specifically, *Drown* makes an excellent companion piece with its themes, its handling of mature subject matter, and its nontraditional narrative structure.

Students read and analyze a wide range of primary and secondary sources. Examples include:

"Mapping America: Every City Block"

"Review of Immigration Problems: Foreign Students"

"Undocumented Students Take Education Underground"

USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) online resources (includes its "Naturalization Fact Sheet", "Policy Manual", and "Naturalization Self Test")

3.1.5 Independent Reading, Book Clubs, and Writing Workshop

In *Pathways to the Common Core* teachers are urged to increase student opportunities for "eyes-on-print reading (not talking about books, not writing about books)" (Calkins 18). One way to accomplish this is through the somewhat oxymoronic concept of structured independent reading; this is to say while the whole class is engaged in the study of an anchor text that individuals and small groups are working with "just right texts," literature that they can individually read with a high degree of accuracy, comprehension, and fluency. The oxymoronic nature of this is the presence of a prescribed list of acceptable texts for independent reading. For example, while the whole class reads the anchor text of *Drown*, students must also read one or more of the following:

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Workman Publishing, 1991.

In the Time of Butterflies.

Hijuelos, Oscar. *Dark Dude*.

Thomas, Piri. *Down These Mean Streets*. New York: Vintage, 1997.

3.2 Details: Sample Lesson Plans:

3.2.1 Cooperative Learning and the Creation of Immigration and Migration Timelines

Objectives: SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To)...

1. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g. visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem (CCSS RI 7).
2. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation (CCSS W 8).

Opener:

Whole class discusses what drives or motivates people to move or in extreme cases abandon their native lands? Additionally, what long term effects might this have on family structure and ultimately individuals?

Direct Instruction:

- A. Introduction of Important Dates in US Immigration and Migration History
- B. Brief Discussion of Primary and Secondary Sources
- C. Presentation of the Prezi Timeline Template

Class Work:

- A. Small groups divide labor in researching key dates in US Immigration and Migration History. Groups reconvene and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of primary and secondary sources representing significant periods, laws, and patterns.
- B. Using examples of both primary (i.e. images of Jacob Riis's photographs, Jacob Lawrence's *Migration Series* , etc.) and secondary source materials groups create Prezis using the timeline template.
- C. Groups present findings. Groups are responsible for both the timelines they have created and evaluating timelines created by others.

Homework:

- A. Write a reflection on working cooperatively. Be sure to incorporate how the experience reinforced prior knowledge, changed your understanding of historical events, and relates to literature you have encountered in previous classes.
- B. Revise your assessment of the work of groups other than your own. How might you change your group's timeline based on the work of others? Be mindful that your timeline is a living document that you will refer back to and alter as you encounter both works of immigrant and migrant fiction, as well as examples of informational/expository writing etc.

Materials:

Access to computers with internet connection.

3.2.2 Establishing Major Themes and Patterns of Immigration and Migration Fiction in Diaz's *Drown*

Objectives: SWBAT...

1. 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 (CCSS RL 1).
2. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g. the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact (CCSS RL 3).
3. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant sufficient evidence (CCSS W 1).

Opener (approximately ten minutes) :

According to *The American Heritage College Dictionary* , empathy is defined as "the identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives." Bearing this in mind, choose from one of the following writing assignments:

- A. Write about an experience, regardless how seemingly insignificant, when you personally benefitted from the empathy of another.
- B. Recount and analyze a scene from a narrative (a work whose main purpose is to tell a story) that demonstrates one character's ability or inability to empathize with another. What were the results and outcomes based on one's ability to adopt other perspectives and points of view?

Mini Lesson: Theme and Tone

A theme is a universal (widely recognized) idea that is explored in a work of art or literature. Sometimes the distinction is made between theme and motif by the claim that theme is expressed as a complete statement or idea, while motif represents a single word or fragmentary phrase.

Example: In his drama *The Crucible* playwright Arthur Miller explores the theme of hypocrisy (saying one thing while doing another) in theocracy (community controlled by the church or religious authority).

Tone is attitude of the writer or narrator towards her subject or audience usually conveyed through her word choice.

Example: The tone of Jarrell's poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" is one of futility and despair. This is in evidence by his likening the titular soldier/airman to a replaceable part of a machine and the dehumanizing effect of his closing line, "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose."

Class Work:

A. Whole class reads "Ysrael" (approximately twenty minutes).

B. Students individually review the text and create a series of leveled questions, including examples of both opening and text-dependent.

C. In small groups students share their questions and respond verbally and in writing to the following:

1. How is "Ysrael" an example of immigrant and migrant fiction?

2. Describe life in the Dominican Republic (DR) as presented in Diaz's narrative.

3. What evidence is there that conditions in the DR pressures individuals to leave the island in search of a better life? Who does this affect most directly? In what ways does it impact families?

4. Reflecting on your responses to question three, how is this similar to or different from other cultures? Draw on your knowledge of history, literature, and other texts you have either read or viewed.

Homework:

Select from the following (honors contract students are to complete both assignments):

A. Revise your notes from today's cooperative activity and compose a response of one or more pages in length. Be sure to include an analysis of either theme or tone for which you cite text evidence in support.

B. Analyze a major theme explored in "Ysrael." Extend your thinking by demonstrating the connection between this idea and its inclusion in another work of literature or its relevance to contemporary society. Your analysis should be no less than four paragraphs in length.

Materials:

Class copies of Diaz's *Drown* ; only the selection "Ysrael," pp. 3-20, is required for Day One.

3.2.3 Imagery Depicting Gender Roles and Development of Themes in Diaz's *Drown*, "Fiesta 1980"

Objectives: SWBAT...

1. Analyze themes across literary texts.

Opener: Students respond in writing to one of the following:

A. The term machismo is defined as a strong sense of masculinity usually entailing aggressiveness, the domination of women, virility, and physical courage. Write a brief narrative that either supports or subverts the idea that "machismo" is a desirable cultural trait.

B. Conversely matriarchy is a social system in which the mother is the head of the family, or a community or society governed by women. Construct a narrative or argument around the concept of matriarchy.

C. Review option A. Use the information contained therein to construct an argument in which you analyze ideas regarding machismo and empathy in Diaz's "Ysrael." Cite text evidence in support of your ideas.

Mini Lesson:

Imagery, Connotation, and Denotation

Class Work:

A. Whole class reads "Fiesta 1980" (approximately twenty minutes).

B. In small groups discuss and record ideas explored in "Fiesta 1980." In addition to developing your own ideas as to what Diaz's text is saying both explicitly and implicitly, consider the following:

1. How do Diaz's characters struggle to adapt to a new way of life?
2. Assimilation is the process whereby a minority group gradually adopts the customs and attitudes of the majority. Acculturation is the modification of the culture of a group or individual as a result of contact with a different culture. How are these ideas explored in the text?
3. How does Diaz build on ideas presented in "Ysrael" in "Fiesta 1980"? What new ideas are presented? How are characters developed across texts?

Materials:

Class copies of Diaz's *Drown* ; only the selection "Fiesta, 1980," pp. 23-43 is required for Day Two.

3.2.4 Themes of Authority and Separation in "In the Land of the Free" and Marita Bonner's "The Whipping"

Objectives: SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To)...

1. Analyze various themes across works of short immigrant and migrant fiction.

Opener: Select one of the following:

- A. Write about a time you experienced anxiety due to separation from a family member or other individual of personal significance.
- B. Write about a time you acted irrationally due to circumstances that were beyond your control.
- C. Bureaucracy is defined as an administrative system in which the need or inclination to follow complex procedures impedes effective action. Write a narrative that demonstrates this idea.

Mini Lesson: Review of *Theme*

Class Work:

A. Whole class reads "In the Land of the Free" (approximately ten minutes).

B. In small groups students discuss themes and other ideas presented in the story. Groups reflect on ongoing timeline projects to establish connections between author's purpose, setting, and issues of immigration. Additionally, groups formulate leveled questions regarding the text. Share.

C. Whole class reads "The Whipping" (approximately ten minutes).

Homework:

Students use notes and conversations from cooperative work to draft a compare and contrast essay on the two works. What were the major similarities and differences in the experiences of these distinct groups of immigrants and migrants?

Materials:

Class copies of the short stories "In the Land of Free" and "The Whipping," pp. 4-20 from *Imagining America*.

Appendix: Additional Resources and Articles

Alvarez, Julia. "An American Childhood in the Dominican Republic," *American Scholar*, Vol. 56 Issue 1 (1987): 71.

Riofrio, John. "Situating Latin American Masculinity: Immigration, Empathy and Emasculation in Junot Diaz's *Drown*," *ATENEA*, Vol. XXVIII Number 1 (2008): 23-36.

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