



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2014 Volume II: Exploring Community through Ethnographic Nonfiction, Fiction, and Film

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## Introduction

As a theoretical concept, "community" refers to the forms of solidarity and conflict that shape our identities and give meaning to our lives. The study of community – whether through personal experience, archival sources, or the testimony of others – ultimately involves efforts to describe, analyze, and represent the lives lived in common with others in local and global worlds. Ethnography is the term we give to the practice as well as the product of social description and analysis in a variety of media. Thus, nonfiction, fiction, and film that depict people interacting in groups and as groups can be considered "ethnographic" representations of community.

This seminar explored the lived experience of community through an examination of the various kinds of communities – ranging from those defined by social proximity to those defined by shared political-economic conditions – that are part and parcel of the American experience. We asked, what kinds of community are possible in America? We explored how communities rise and fall in historically specific social contexts. Throughout, we attended closely to the inequalities associated with race, class, gender, and citizenship, recognizing how these identifications constitute lines of division as well as sources of solidarity. We considered the value that Americans place on community itself, and how the pull of individualism exacts a toll on that commitment.

Our primary readings were drawn from nonfiction that partakes of anthropology's fieldwork tradition of participant-observation. On the basis of this work, we developed a framework of interpretation that allowed us to analyze manifestations of community in fiction, film, and drama. Our seminar discussions were wide ranging and took up topics near and dear to Fellows' hearts: the role of public schools, teachers, and students in their home communities; the effects of wealth and income inequality on students' classroom behavior and readiness for higher education; and the need for innovative ways to engage students in the exploration and creation of their own communities in New Haven's neighborhoods and schools.

The curriculum units gathered here present a wide array of strategies and activities for understanding and building community both outside of and within the classroom. Within them the alert reader will find a passionate commitment to pedagogical approaches that honor the diversity of students' life experiences and communities.

Kathryn Dudley

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