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The Surviving and Thriving of Cultures: Foundational Study of American Indian History for Literature

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by Robert M. Schwartz

Introduction

Survival is a tremendously broad human topic. History teaches us that it is a concept most people have experienced in their lives – the need to survive: finding shelter, food and protection for ourselves and families. Students from a young age are taught a foundational basis of human survival as example of, really, how to avoid having to do the same. We teach history so that we do not repeat the mistakes of those who have come before us; and, while we often repeat them anyway, the point is so that we and posterity may thrive. The difference between surviving and thriving is, while less common a theme, an important one to note when preparing students for an increasingly global society – one where they have full access through online media to knowledge and digital experiences of others' lives and stories.

Because of this, it has become increasingly important for American students to discover the original survivors of this continent – the Native people. Through a foundational study of American Indian experience and developing an understanding of what it means to be forced to survive, and to succeed in it through many generations, the modern student may be able to discover how to not only survive, but thrive in their own lives.

The following curricular unit utilizes foundational study of American Indian history – from migration to the North American continent and early atrocities of European settlers, to modern legal battles for sovereignty of tribal nations and civil rights – in order to enhance instruction in the reading intervention classroom (usable in a Read 180 classroom), and for the study of comparative American literature, in this instance for high school juniors.

Through the study of Native America and the experience of American Indians, one's perspective on the human condition cannot help but be shaken, or at least jolted upright. Through in-depth research on this topic, it is near impossible not to come away affected by the gravity of this history; as a human being, not to take it personally. American slavery is an atrocity of which most of us can draw a clear mental schema; yet, less so in the forefront of our minds is the experience of the American Indian – as atrocious as that of the slave – and with it the disbelief that human beings can and did treat each other this way. Through basic academic inclusion and media, we are brought up to trust; to see the resilience and spirit of a people who have been massacred, nearly decimated, yet survived and thrive today, without giving their history the appropriate time

or context in our curricula. This is why study of Native America is so effective, nay, important for English classrooms – everything about the Native experience incites emotion: passion, frustration and even anger, pride, inspiration. These themes are prevalent in both the study of Native peoples and in literature alike. And so it is that this curricular unit is the result of experience and research – a sliver of the academic, historical canon that documents the American Indian experience – and is chronicled here for inclusion in the reading intervention classroom and in the study of American literature.

Rationale and Background Information

The average American high school student, and particularly urban student, struggles with every stress of an evolving, global landscape, and many continue to struggle after the school day is over. Many have issues with poverty, obesity, child-care, adverse family situations, and so many unique circumstances that myriad research has been conducted on just that. Not every inner-city student struggles this way, but the statistics confirm that it is a prevalent enough problem to note.

When they enter an English classroom, there is an opportunity: self-actualization, catharsis, and healthy doses of perspective are not uncommon for any student when they come upon compelling literature. In an inner-city English classroom, this can be particularly powerful.

Therefore, choosing effective themes and topics to teach and learn in this type of classroom is imperative. There exists a foundational American culture that is all-too familiar with struggle, persecution, adverse and even horrific circumstances, yet so many high school students are unfamiliar with their history. American Indians have a rich, tragic, artistic, adverse, profound history, the study of which is essential for an English classroom that promotes self-actualization and perspective; that promotes a holistic view of American history for the purposes of literary study in order to steward globally-minded high school graduates. This curricular unit aims to foster that inclusion in the reading intervention classroom (Read 180, a highly structured program designed by the Scholastic company and used to bring struggling readers up to their grade-level reading skill), and Junior English classroom through interpretation and analysis of American Indian texts, plays, books, culture and history.

In every English classroom, different types of instruction are necessary - from foundational literary theory to examples in literature and nonfiction, to more authentic activities and experience. This curricular unit aims to enhance these approaches to student learning by developing an understanding, or at least an awareness, through a foundational study of American Indian history; then, further that understanding through analysis of example texts. The greatest advantage of learning something so visceral as the experience of Native peoples is that students can synthesize their learning with authentic activities - such as museum trips, film and art related activities, and writing.

Read 180 is a reading intervention course designed to encourage improvement in reading skills through studies of fundamentals, and students often use non-fiction texts. Read 180 students learn about “Survivors” in their first unit – encompassing stories of Latin America, the American west, and of urban gangland violence. But this unit does not include the first American survivors – the American Indians. In addition to being a foundational aspect of American history and culture, the stories of American Indian survival is high interest, deeming it advantageous in a class with learners who are struggling with their skills, and often interest, in

reading. This unit may apply to any reading intervention classroom.

Across the hallway from Read 180, many American high school juniors study American Literature. This curricular unit will focus on the study of the “American Dream,” utilizing the text *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry – the study of African-American struggle in mid-20th century Chicago. For these purposes, students will conduct a comparative analysis of the classic play with a modern American Indian play, *Sliver of a Full Moon* by Mary Katherine Nagle. This contemporary story of the legal battle of modern tribes to attain sovereign jurisdiction over perpetrators of violent crimes against women, will contribute to further synthesis of what it means to thrive as opposed to simply surviving when experiencing struggle and strife.

For both the freshmen reading seminar and the junior American Dream concept, the unit will begin with a study of American Indian history and culture, and its impact on the America we know today. It will then foray into the respective texts of each class for which the unit will be used.

The explicit inclusion of the study of Native America as a foundation for literature is too infrequent in its incidences. Too many high school students become familiar with the history of a nation, while an entire portion of that history is excluded. *The Surviving and Thriving of Cultures: Foundational American Indian Study for Literature* is intended to provide educators with a basis to include this as part of literary study, so that they may paint a more complete picture for their students of the social, cultural, and political history of this nation.

Objectives

Through study in this curricular unit, students will be able to accomplish several learning objectives, none mutually inclusive or exclusive. Students will be able to discern the difference between surviving and thriving. Students will be able to utilize non-fiction text in order to enhance understanding of main idea, supporting details, summary and story elements. Students will be able to compare play format literature in order to synthesize theme. Students will develop an appreciation for American Indian history as a foundation for the history of our country. Students will analyze the paradox of modern American “freedom” and historic persecution of peoples, particularly that of American Indians. Students will analyze in-depth what aspect of the human condition involves what is known as surviving. Students will do the same for the concept of thriving, going through examples in popular culture and assigned literature. Students will be able to question - why? Why is it that humans feel they can tell each other what to do?

Surviving and Thriving: Foundational Overview of American Indian History

For both the reading intervention and American literature aspects of this curricular unit, a historical backdrop is needed. Students should begin this study with some important background information on the American Indian experience. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of books written on the subject. It can be and is taught as a stand-alone class at many finer institutions of learning. For these purposes, the following background study focuses on experiences where struggle and survival have been apparent and necessary, and evolves into the many historical and modern instances where individuals and groups thrived to catapult

the civil and sovereign rights of American Indians to where they are today. The historical experience of American Indians has been one of notable strife – without which the latter-mentioned examples of thriving would lack appropriate context. The following is a study of that struggle for these purposes, and usable in any and all of its parts for both the reading intervention and American literature aspects of this curricular unit.

Early Survivors and Colonization

The classic land bridge lesson is accurate. History dating back about 15,000 years shows us that nomads migrated to the North American continent from Eurasia (a land bridge surfacing after the melting of the ice caps) and are the ancestors of modern American Indians. They mostly hunted until many larger beasts were killed off, creating the need for farming and gathering that led to a renaissance of sorts in population of the Natives, primarily subsisting in much of what is now modern day America on crops such as beans, squash and corn, as well as a dependency on fishing. ¹

Fast forward to European colonization, and disaster strikes an otherwise well-balanced life on this continent. The settlers, driven by what they believed could be considered an early religious manifest destiny, invaded the North American continent and inflicted centuries of misery upon the Natives. Much of the literature involved in this curricular unit is an example of the modern result of said misery. Colonists introduced disease and alcohol to a people who had never encountered either. Lacking the centuries of experience the Europeans had to acclimate to both extraordinary health hazards, the American Indian population suffered cataclysmic loss. One particular tribe, the Nez Perce, saw particular devastation due to smallpox. Historian Charles Wilkinson, in his book *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* , describes their experience:

Although warfare with whites played a role, the germs were far and away the dominant cause in chopping the Nez Perce population from an estimated 6,000 in 1805 (after the first two waves of smallpox had already hit) to 1,500 in 1885. ²

Three quarters of the population wiped out in 80 years, and that being only one tribe. Modern scholars generally estimate the loss of population in the continental United States from before the epidemics hit until the 20th century to be over 95% - almost total devastation. Alcohol further exacerbated this process. Newly introduced by early settlers to the Native population, it would become what Wilkinson describes as “wholly ruinous,” and remains a rampant problem today. ³

But disease and alcohol were not the only factors in the massacring of the Native people – the settlers themselves inflicted countless atrocities that echo into the present. Scalping is commonly misperceived as a practice originating with American Indians, when in reality it was introduced by the English, who offered rewards for Native scalps. A proclamation made by a ranking soldier in 1755 stated of Native peoples, who were thought as animals and enemies and encouraged to be hunted and wiped out:

For every scalp of a male Indian brought in as evidence of their being killed as aforesaid, forty pounds. For every scalp of such female Indian or male Indian under the age of twelve years that shall be killed and brought in as evidence of their being killed as aforesaid, twenty pounds. ⁴

Treatment of Natives in a New Nation: Removal, Allotment and Termination

Once the United States settlers attained their freedom in the revolutionary war, the government treatment of Natives did not improve. The government has since signed and broken over 400 treaties with the Native people; Indians were solicited for support in the War of 1812, and then afterward systematically removed from

their homelands to “Indian Territory” in far less hospitable places. ⁵ Most notably, through the Indian Removal Act of 1830, great tribes of the southeast – the Cherokee, Choctaw, Muskogee, Seminole, and Chickasaw tribes – known as the Five Civilized Tribes (defined as “civilized” by their willingness to model colonial culture) were systematically removed. This was facilitated by President Andrew Jackson and is commonly referred to as the Trail of Tears. The removal would continue through the 1900’s based on U.S. government interests in oil, wildlife, minerals, land or any desire of the government for what was originally owned or operated or regulated by Natives. Tribes were removed again and again, their allotments of land becoming smaller and smaller. Later in the 19th century, government oppression of Native peoples would continue with the General Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act, by which Indian land was taken and appropriated or “allotted” to tribal members. The remaining reservation land was then offered up for procurement by non-Natives. Assimilation from tribal customs to American culture was again cited as a justification by the government; however a clear result was the taking of Native lands. ⁶

The Policy of Termination, another aimed at assimilation, proposed that tribes and reservations be literally terminated and all American Indians become citizens of the United States. Enacted by House Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1953, the policy set out to completely strip the tribal nations of their sovereignty, thereby, it was rationalized, lessening the government expenditure on Indian services. As Wilkinson states: “Termination offered full and final relief from the centuries-old weariness with the refusals of Indians to abandon their political and cultural identity.” ⁷ It was a policy enacted to quickly and finally eliminate American Indian culture, and thereby also eliminate the need for the US government to recognize tribes as sovereign nations and provide services for their continuance. Vine Deloria Jr. compares it to the historic wars waged against Native Americans, Termination simply being the most recent and even more egregious in its bureaucracy. The result was “disastrous” Deloria describes, and carried with it a “deprivation of services” mirroring atrocities of the past, simply in a new form: urgent assimilation. “Federal medical services” were denied to “various tribes, resulting in tremendous increase in disease.” ⁸

The need for survival has plagued American Indians, but also created a need to thrive.

A Thriving People: Reorganization, Self-Determination and the Modern Era

Centuries of horrendous atrocities befell American Indians since the European conquests and colonization of the continent, but while this created the dire need for survival, the resilient and resourceful Native peoples have throughout this history, and ever more effectively in modern times, thrived and succeeded, won back lands and saw Acts reversed. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act saw some lands restored and/or allotted, and an opportunity for self-governance of reservations. This was a “bright spot” as Deloria describes, in an otherwise still very bleak political landscape. Throughout the 20th century, American Indians continued to struggle for sovereignty, and rights to their lands and resources. ⁹

The Self-Determination Policy slowly began to overtake and replace the Termination Policy, whereby American Indians in the 1960’s voiced a new demand for control over their own destiny. And while the policy wasn’t made official in the 1970’s, Wilkinson outlines Robert Yellowtail of the Crow Tribe of Montana speaking of Self-Determination to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs as early as 1919. Mr. Yellowtail stated:

Mr. Chairman, it is peculiar and strange to me [that] . . . you have not upon your statute books nor in your archives of law, so far as I know, one law that permits us to think free, act free, expand free, and decide free without first having to go and ask a total stranger that you call the Secretary of the Interior; in all humbleness and humiliation, “how about this, Mr. Secretary, can I have permission to do this”? and “Can I have permission

to do that"? etc. . . . ¹⁰

Mr. Yellowtail's statements encapsulate the ethos of the American Indian experience in the 20th century: an uphill battle in the American court system, in Washington, D.C., and throughout the US to get back land and resources and pride that was taken from them in the preceding centuries. There were victories and setbacks. It is a valuable lesson to students in perseverance in human resiliency and spirit.

Throughout the course of American history, Native lands have been annexed by the US government and tribal rights taken. This, as should be explained to students, is where the Indian "Reservation" comes into play. Students should develop an understanding that American Indians have been pushed from their native lands and onto what are called reservations – a designated area of land on which American Indian tribes manage and inhabit based upon placement by the federal government (the US Bureau of Indian Affairs). These reservations have historically been, as mentioned, designated by the federal government and not by the tribes themselves, or the states in which they are located. Therefore, there have been struggles throughout American history regarding which rights the Natives maintain as sovereign people, and which are managed by the federal government of the United States. The rights in question vary from very complex, right down to basic human rights – how and whom to worship, which rituals are allowed and which are not, and where and which type of wild fauna can be hunted and harvested. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has been responsible for many of the persecutions that the European "founders" of the continent sought to secede from. They "sought to 'Christianize' [native] students" by putting them in schools of their own design. They persecuted religious ceremonies, and formed industries that became the reservations' soul employer. They even sought to control the trade of natural resources. ¹¹

In the 1960's and 70's, the "Salmon Wars" of the American northwest carried a deep affect for the significance of relations between the Natives of this country and those who came after them. What came to a head was centuries of oppression, modernized in a battle that had the guise of politics and/or bureaucracy. "Most tribal powers are territorially based within reservations, but Indians can sometimes claim off-reservation rights," writes Wilkinson. At the forefront was a man named Billy Frank, Jr., who embodied the rebellious spirit of both the oppressed Indian, and the hippy movement that was going on simultaneously. Frank and others in the struggle were assaulted, arrested or worse while fighting for "rights" to fish the waters their people had for centuries, continuing a history of oppression that began with the settlement of the North American continent by Europe. Frank is an example of both a setback and a victory, as his efforts shine through in history as a fight against injustice. ¹²

The movement from Termination to restoration and Self-Determination did not come easily or quickly - but now was a time where determined American Indian delegates to Washington, D.C. had a chance to shine and thrive. In fact, if we say that historically American Indians were faced with many instances where they had no choice but to survive, the following individuals and groups, it could be said, had no choice but to thrive. A foremost example is Ada Deer - a leader of the Menominee tribe of Wisconsin, who was instrumental in seeing her tribe's restoration. In the early 1970's, many who were determined to achieve restoration were spurned on Capitol Hill. Wilkinson describes Ada Deer's effectiveness in the face of adversity:

Gary Orfield, Harvard political scientist and noted civil rights expert, observed [of Deer], "I have spent a lot of time around Capitol Hill. One of the most remarkable lobbying campaigns I have ever seen was the campaign for Menominee restoration. Nobody was safe from Ada Deer and her supporters. Members of Congress just gave up." Deer's finely tuned sense for the ways of

Congress and her shrewd use of experts led her to build a solid record on many fronts: history, demographics, business, law, health, education, and economics. Armed also with her trademark optimism and persistence, which, in Orfield's formulation, just made people "give up," Deer made her case by going to, over, or around, as the case need be, the key players on the Hill, in the White House, and in the Department of the Interior, wherever she could make headway. ¹³

When relaying to students the nature of someone who thrives, Deer is a foremost example regardless of demographic. When studying American Indian history, the heroes are as pertinent as any suffering, and indeed more so. Battles continue to wage for Indian rights. Oppressive policy has been built up over centuries, but is being unraveled thread by thread by powerful advocates like Ada Deer.

Another thriving example in modern day Native America is Vine Deloria, Jr. His book *Custer Died for your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, is referenced throughout this curricular unit. He is described by Wilkinson as an educated man from an educated family. If anyone in the modern movement for tribal sovereignty can be compared to Martin Luther King, Jr., it is Deloria, Wilkinson asserts. He found the place for the Native peoples' movement in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, proclaiming "that the tribes just had to be more aggressive. The government was so terrified by civil rights that if we just threatened to act, we could prevail." Deloria had many achievements in the movement, most notably his book. *Custer* is well-written and insightful, intense and unforgiving. According to Wilkinson, "For whites, it humanized Indians. . . For Indians, *Custer* inspired empowerment and pride." ¹⁴ Deloria's manifesto fueled the movement to end Termination and restore tribal sovereignty. It is a shining example of the power of words to inspire change – how fitting a theme for an English classroom. Continuing the theme of words inspiring change, in modern day, another success and example of thriving is explored in *Sliver of a Full Moon*, the play both aspects of this curricular unit will be utilizing. In the play we are told the dramatic story of the re-authorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 2013. In 1978, the *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* case took the rights of tribes to have jurisdiction in prosecuting non-Natives. ¹⁵ The result of this was a horrendous misfire of jurisdiction and responsibility that saw non-Natives perpetuating violent crimes against women they knew they would not be prosecuted for, because of the mess revolving around issues of jurisdiction. Surviving this real life nightmare, these brave survivors told their stories as part of a campaign to have Native women included in VAWA. They succeeded. However, the law still does not include rape or murder, or most tribes in Alaska. The battle still wages.

After spending time exploring American Indian history, it is only the limit of the imagination for the educator to formatively assess understanding – quizzes, group work, discussion, analysis, and the activities outlined below are all a powerful step in allowing the knowledge of this history to change our perspectives and inspire at very least the desire for more knowledge. Beyond that, we can only hope that knowledge of the past can prevent us from making the same mistakes again.

The Reading Intervention Classroom: Strategies and Activities

The complex study of cultures is nothing that should be overlooked because of issues with reading skills. In fact, coinciding with the appropriate philosophy that students will rise to the level to which they are challenged, more complex cultural study within a reading intervention classroom can provide challenge, pique

interest, and possibly account for effective improvement of reading skills. As part of the Read 180 curriculum, struggling readers are asked to delve into the world of “Survivors.” Students read about a musician in Columbia who sings about loss and struggle in his home country, a young female surfer who loses her arm to a shark attack yet perseveres despite her injury to become a champion, and an organization in California that provides employment for former gang members. This unit is part of the Read 180 curriculum and is used nationwide. However, this section of this curricular unit can be used with any foundational reading study or intervention. In fact, it is the foundational nature of the study that aligns so well with inclusion of Native America – the foundational culture of our continent. We consider ourselves the “First World” – a country where we do not deal with the problems and struggles the survivors of the “Third World” endure. Columbia, for example, is a country where much of the population merely survives – doing so in much tumult and turmoil. This provides students with an incomplete sense of what happens in their own country – forcing them to endure unaware, in many cases, of the struggles faced by American Indians historically and continually. The inclusion of American Indian study to enhance the skills of struggling readers, in this regard, aligns quite well. Really, there are many Native American stories that could align perfectly with a unit on survivors. This reading intervention section of this curricular unit begins with a foundational overview (above) of the history of American Indian experience including struggles; then, the students delve into short fiction by the ubiquitous Native author Sherman Alexie; finally, students take a look at the enduring struggle of tribal nations to maintain sovereign jurisdiction over prosecution of sexual and violent assaults on Native women by non-Natives. *Sliver of a Full Moon*, written by playwright, attorney and member of the Cherokee Nation, Mary Kathryn Nagle, is a poignant, thought-provoking play that encapsulates the modern triumph of sovereign American tribes, and their struggle to this day to fight for rights other Americans take for granted.

Activities

Students will begin with the aforementioned overview of American Indian history and discuss survival. This is a good opportunity for journal entries and class discussion. In the reading intervention classroom, this is an important time to also include the elements of focus for reading comprehension. For this purpose, the students will focus on main idea, supporting details, and summarizing.

Students might be asked what they know about American Indians. What have they been taught in their academic experience? What comes to mind on the subject? Brief journal entries are a popular part of the reading intervention classroom, as are think-pair-share activities for class discussion. Once students have done their think-pair-share is a good time for the overview of American Indian history, culminating in the examples of modern thriving American Indians, adding at this point Sherman Alexie, whose short story *This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona* is apt for use in both introducing the “Survivors” unit, and beginning activities surrounding the skills of finding main idea and supporting details, and summarization. Students should read the story (Appendix A-1) – it can also be read aloud by the teacher or one or several students (common in a reading intervention classroom is reading aloud – it is important for struggling readers to make a visual and also audio connection to the text). The story focuses on two American Indian boys traveling far off their reservation to collect the remains of one, Victor’s, father who recently was found deceased in Phoenix, Arizona. It is a story of companionship and certain aspects of the American Indian experience: poverty, disenfranchisement, surviving and thriving, strength of human spirit; and is rich for practice in the aforementioned skills. Further activities may include time to find main idea and supporting details and sharing out, work-shopping these notes, and using them to construct an effective summary of the text. “One of his dreams came true for just a second, just enough to make it real,” writes Alexie in his story. ¹⁶ Alexie’s singular voice makes American Indian culture accessible to all, and is particularly apt for students who struggle in reading, as it is relatable (even if you are not American Indian), readable and engaging.

Once the students have a foundational understanding of American Indian history, they will foray into a more modern legal study. Keeping with the important feature of high-interest subject matter, students will be given a lesson surrounding the text of Mary Kathryn Nagle's *Sliver of a Full Moon*. This play, centered on the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and its reauthorization in 2013, focuses on the Native American women and their supporters who fought to include said women in the Act. The play is poignant, highly engaging, and very complex. In this regard, the story will be told in a more simple, straightforward way in order for struggling 9th grade readers to conceptually align it with their study of survivors. A threefold advantage of study through this curricular unit is apparent here: reading skills, an understanding of Native struggle, and a socio-emotional appreciation for citizens they may not usually think about, in this case tribal women who are victims of sexual and violent crimes, and the perpetrators of these crimes who are not held to tribal jurisdictional prosecution.

Students will be able to relate because it is a human story. The advantage of using Native American study to enhance their "Survivors" unit includes the aforementioned, but also will help encourage these young learners to begin asking why:

Why has there been so much persecution in human history?

Why has it taken so long for some people to attain justice?

Students can watch any or all of the play online (Appendix A-2). It may be advisable to give the context and show them excerpts, especially the emotional ending when VAWA is passed in congress (the junior American literature class outlined below will be required to read or view the entire play). Many freshmen, in their regular English classes (recall that this is an intervention classroom and more than likely will be taught as a supplement to their regular freshmen English class), will be studying themes such as social justice and human nature, so they can make a connection to those themes while practicing summary skills – there are more complex supporting details in the play. It will be a challenge for them and they may need to be helped to support their understanding – as aforementioned, challenge is imperative for growth. Once developed, students can take this understanding and juxtapose it with other stories – in the case of Read 180 the "Survivors" stories – working right from the foundation with challenging concepts but relatable themes.

At this point, it will be valuable for students to compose a piece of writing – either an extensive journal entry or mini-essay – on their developing understanding of the difference between surviving and thriving. Can they think of any examples from *This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*? From *Sliver of a Full Moon*? After they have done this, it can be revealed to students that Alexie's short story was made into a feature film entitled *Smoke Signals* (Appendix A-3). This film is more extensive and detailed than the short story, and therefore acts as a strong assessment of main idea, supporting details and summary skills if students are asked to write a detailed summary of the film. It is also a fun, poignant, engaging film and can serve as reward for hard work well done in the students' learning up to this point.

Read 180 is a very structured curriculum, so it is recommended that these activities are utilized in the Read 180 room of the more experienced educator who is aware of time constraints – it is the educator's prerogative which activities to include or not include to supplement the "Survivors" unit. In a general reading intervention classroom, or really any reading or English classroom, these activities can act as a stand-alone unit for foundational understanding of Native America and reading comprehension skills.

The Modern American Indian Play and the Study of the American Dream: Strategies and Activities for High School Juniors

American studies is a pervading theme chosen for high school upperclassmen. Many students study the American dream and the many aspects of those which have been fulfilled, corrupted or otherwise by the course of actual American history. This latter concept, the corruption or depravation of the American dream, is a favorite of contemporary American writers, as is the battle to right said corruption. In her classic American play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry illustrates this attempt to correct this corruption. To enhance the study of this play, students will take a foundational look at the original American citizens who struggle to do the same, American Indians, through both the historical context and comparative analysis of the play *Sliver of a Full Moon*.

Students will explore where things went wrong with American Indian policy - *why* the government historically has felt as if it has the right to displace them from their homeland, again and again, and still to this day not treat them with the respect to which sovereign nations have the right. *Why* do people think it is okay to class a certain type of people and cast them into dispersion?

Therefore, for this particular group of students, four aspects will be utilized: the anchor/core text, the American Indian comparative text, the historical overview and, where applicable, personal, relatable experience.

Activities

This aspect of the unit can be started similarly to the freshmen – by prompting students with thought provoking questions about what they know of Native America, what they’ve been taught in school, what they know from movies, what they believe to be the current state of the American Indian experience. High school juniors are often at a point in their lives when they are asking the “big” questions – most specifically, what is my role as a person? Citizen? American? Member of this world? To that end, the American Dream is spotlighted, the foundation for which has classically been gleaned in previous literature courses where students study social justice and human struggle; as well as in history and social studies classes. However, to my knowledge, the study of American Indian struggle and survival is not a foundational subject for further American study, at least not in a significant enough way. The juniors will begin, then, with a specific foundational study of such. This particular aspect of the unit focuses on the American Dream, and therefore students will be challenged to face that concept as it relates to *every* American – particularly the indigenous people which they don’t frequently contemplate. Therefore students will, after journal entry and class discussion surrounding the aforementioned prompts activating any background knowledge, dig deeper into analysis of the historical overview. Students should think about the difference between surviving and thriving, and analyze that with regard to what American Indians have been through – both atrocities and resiliency – in order to fully develop an understanding of the constraints of the American Dream.

They will pair the study of Native America with the text *A Raisin in the Sun*, therefore introductory activities should also include a conversation about civil rights. Here, activities such as a free-write or group work activating prior knowledge about civil rights is appropriate. Students can be asked to share what they know of the civil rights we currently have and share. What are current issues surrounding civil rights? Has it always been this way? How much do they know about the history of civil rights regarding American Indians? This prompt can be before, during or after the historical context is taught.

A Raisin in the Sun is named for and introduced by a famous poem by Langston Hughes entitled *A Dream Deferred* , which includes the lines:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

. . . Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? ¹⁷

Students can consider the lines of this poem when reading or viewing both plays. What does Hughes mean when he asks if a dream deferred “explodes”? What is the American Dream? Students can at this time be prompted to compose a mini-essay on what they believe the American Dream means, analyzing how they believe an American Indian would respond to that question – in the 1800’s? Today? At this time it is appropriate to begin the study of their Native American play, *Sliver of a Full Moon* by aforementioned playwright Mary Kathryn Nagle. The play is rich enough to be used from a foundational reading skills classroom to this junior level literature course. The play performance is also available on YouTube (Appendix A-2). Students will delve into the aforementioned plot points (see historical overview section) and important historical context in *Sliver* . In fact, students could and should view performances of both plays (see Appendix A-4 for *A Raisin in the Sun*). The textual analysis can be of the full play manuscripts or of highlights in the text to supplement viewing.

Further comparing the two plays, students can analyze the same “why” questions as are highlighted in the reading intervention section:

Why has there been so much persecution in human history?

Why has it taken so long for some people to attain justice?

To form a deeper understanding for junior American Literature students, the questioning should continue:

Why have people throughout history believed they’ve had the right to persecute and harm others in this way?

Why is it still happening?

Students should be encouraged to ask these questions during this unit, and apply them to current events and their own lives. In this way, the applications are virtually endless – vis-a-vis the inclusion with any non-fiction article, modern or historic. Students will compose a comparative analysis essay concerning the themes of surviving versus thriving as interpreted in both texts.

Conclusion

Deloria asserts in *Custer Died for Your Sins* that the original reason behind the early settlers feeling they had the right to decimate a population was fueled by a belief that their conquest was a task handed down to them by God, as believed in Christian churches.¹⁸ Through both aspects of this curricular unit, students should explore very deeply why they believe humans of history treated each other in this way. It is an aspect of the study of American Indians. Furthermore, the aforementioned survivors and those who thrived alike are an important case study into the human condition and what might be accomplished in a lifetime. Students on the verge of self-discovery might take this into consideration when delving into the study of English Language Arts, and heading out on the voyage of their own lives.

Appendix A: Student and Teacher Resources

1. *This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona* is available in Sherman Alexie's short story collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.
2. *Sliver of a Full Moon* performance available on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAlTvkaFj3A>
3. *Smoke Signals* is available to stream on Netflix, and is also available on DVD:
http://www.amazon.com/Smoke-Signals-Adam-Beach/dp/B004YCKJX8/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1437966498&sr=8-2&keywords=smoke+signals&pebp=1437966510173&perid=08WNF22TRTS9Y0M4G9YY
4. *A Raisin in the Sun* film version is available on DVD:
http://www.amazon.com/Raisin-Sun-Sidney-Poitier/dp/B00003L9CK/ref=sr_1_2?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1438023390&sr=1-2&keywords=a+raisin+in+the+sun

Appendix B: Implementing Common Core State Standards

Reading Intervention/Read 180 Section

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Students will be spending much of their time focusing on fundamental concepts such as main idea and supporting details, however the texts they will be using by Alexie and Nagle provide opportunity to delve deeper into complex and poignant themes - making inferences will certainly be part of the summary practice and journal reactions composed by students in this curricular unit. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2: Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

The primary focus of this aspect of the curricular unit is to locate and identify main idea and supporting details in a text, as well as composing an effective summary.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

For each American Indian-focused texts in this aspect of the curricular unit, students will have the opportunity to both read the text and view the stories visually - in a play performance of *Sliver of a Full Moon* and the film version of *This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*, entitled *Smoke Signals*. In a global landscape of increasingly multi-media presence, it is important for students to be able to discern details differing from text to screen, and the significance of both.

American Literature/American Dream Section

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5: 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.

In both dramatic plays featured in this curricular unit, serious themes are dealt with, while at the same time the playwrights incorporate comic relief, warm human interaction, solidarity and redemption. The stripping of human civil rights is an atrocity, however, in order to fully synthesize oppression, we must meet the humans involved. This is why these stories are so important to teach. Looking at the choices of the authors of these texts allow us to humanize the stories we know from history.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

Similar to the reading intervention aspect of the unit, the juniors studying the American Dream will also have opportunity to both read and view versions of each play. Seeing different interpretations is a good way to further synthesize the themes when composing their comparative analyses.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7: 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.

Students will be exploring the difference between surviving and thriving through the experience of American Indians throughout American history and comparing them to the struggles and triumphs of a black family in 1950's Chicago. They will be viewing and reading plays that highlight both, and using that study to address the issue of oppression and civil rights.

Bibliography

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* . New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. Collection of short stories by the ubiquitous American Indian Author that features the short story *This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona* , the basis for the film *Smoke Signals* .

Blackhawk, Ned. *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* . Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

2006. Exploring through instances of violence the history of Native Americans, with an introduction that stresses the gap in academia of such a study. Helped put the latter emphasis into perspective for this curricular unit.

Deloria Jr., Vine. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* . New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969. Intensive and certainly intense, Deloria's deftly researched and punchy manifesto on Native American history and the need for change and awareness.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun* . New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Hansberry's classic American drama about the Younger family, a working class African-American family in 1950's Chicago struggling with disenfranchisement and longing for the American Dream.

Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* . New York: Penguin Books, 2001. Includes early histories of American Indians.

Wilkinson, Charles. *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* . New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005. A vast and legal history of American Indian struggles and battles through the modern day to restore sovereignty.

Notes

1. Taylor, Alan. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* . New York: Penguin Books, 2001.
2. Wilkinson, Charles. *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* . New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005. p. 30.
3. , 33.
4. Deloria, Jr., Vine. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1969. p. 6
5. , 28, 41.
6. Wilkinson, Charles. *Blood Struggle* , 15
7. , 58.
8. Deloria, Jr., Vine. *Custer Died for Your Sins* , p. 54
9. , 48.
10. Wilkinson, Charles. *Blood Struggle* , p. 189-190
11. , 9.
12. , 152.
13. , 187-188.
14. , 107-108.
15. From the Criminal Resource Manual of the United States Attorney's Office:
<http://www.justice.gov/usam/criminal-resource-manual-687-tribal-court-jurisdiction>
16. Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* . New York: HarperPerennial, 1994, p. 71
17. Hughes, Langston. *A Dream Deferred* . Full text can be found online: <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/dream-deferred/>
18. Deloria Jr., Vine. *Custer Died for Your Sins* , p. 30.

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