



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2015 Volume I: Teaching Native American Studies

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## Introduction

The eight curriculum units that comprise this volume – the product of a seminar on “American Indian History, 1492 to the Present” – explore varying approaches to the study of Native America. Several examine contemporary Native American literature, using a range of fictional and theatrical accounts. Others probe the limits of current pedagogical approaches to U.S. history and provide ways of incorporating Native American history into the classroom. Generally, they are all animated by a deep sense of concern about the lack of existing curricular materials available for public education. Nearly all attempt to incorporate the voices, texts, and experiences of Native Americans within contemporary American society in their unit, deploying Native voices to fill the long-standing voids and silences that have historically framed curricular approaches to the continent’s Indigenous peoples.

Using a range of secondary scholarly texts, films, documentaries, and fictional accounts, this Institute seminar explored the history of American Indians. Fellows developed broad overviews of the historical development of Indian law, policy, and contemporary affairs. A recurring theme throughout the seminar emerged within each session: namely, the profound dissonance between the experiential nature of Native American life and history and the familiarity of one-dimensional and often simplistic portrayals of Native people in popular culture. Indeed, within nearly each of our readings, Fellows were able to identify popular stereotypes that either emerged from such subjects or, more commonly, obscured the nature of these subjects. For example, the mythology of early New England history with stories of Native peoples welcoming Puritan settlers starkly contrasted with our readings about the Puritan conquest of Connecticut, the Pequot War, and Mystic River Massacre. Similarly, discussions of the post-World War II Federal Indian policy efforts known as Termination placed the presence of the Cold War Hollywood western genre into sharp relief.

Such analyses ultimately brought focused and sustained attention to the narratives of Native people, which Fellows came to see as the most powerful countermeasure for challenging such one-dimensional portraits. Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Chris Eyre’s *Smoke Signals* and *Skins*, Mary Kathryn Nagle’s *Sliver of a Full Moon*, the photography of Horace Poolaw, and the twelve short films made about Great Lakes Indian life and culture, *The Ways*, provided alternative visions of the experiences and challenges of contemporary Native Americans in modern U.S. society. Coupled with visits to the Yale University Art Gallery, Peabody Museum, and Native American Cultural Center, these narratives enriched the seminar and provided what one Fellow termed ‘insider-outsider’ narratives of Indian experiences geared towards fostering greater understanding. Many Fellows attended the Yale Law School performance of Nagle’s *Sliver of a Full Moon*, met with her subsequently, and incorporated aspects of her play about the 2013 reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act into their units.

The diverse classroom settings of these New Haven teachers amplified the need for accessible and approachable ways for introducing Native American Studies to area students. Several units are geared towards elementary-school children. Most are for high-school students. The power of Native voices to de-mystify Indian history and complicate familiar images and understandings became the most commonly utilized methodology developed within this Institute program.

Carol Boynton's "A Year in the Life of an Algonquian Family" aims to give her second-grade classes opportunities to explore the pre-contact histories of the region's Algonquian-speaking Pequot and Quinnipiac nations. Her unit plan traces the seasonal economies of these Northeastern communities and attempts to provide her young students with visions of alternative lifestyles and cultures that pre-dated Euro-American settlement.

James Brochin's "Memoir, Identity and History in the Words of Sherman Alexie" provides high-school students multiple entryways into contemporary Native American film and literature. Using extended selections from several prominent films, his unit assesses Alexie's work in extended dialogue with contemporary representations of Native people. He also provides visual representations of Native peoples drawn from photographic collections, identifying another realm in which Native peoples have been both immortalized but also often frozen in time.

Christine Elmore's "Teaching Young Children about the Cherokee Trail of Tears" explores one of the most chronicled chapters of Indian history within the realm of children's literature and history. Aimed at getting first-graders to recognize the deadly injustices that characterized Cherokee removal, her unit offers multiple approaches to elementary-school pedagogy.

Vancardi Foster's "Now Let Me Tell My Story" explores the ongoing struggles for justice of Native American communities in contemporary America. It uses examples drawn from historical overviews to highlight the inequitable standing between Indian and non-Indian communities, exposing in particular the often arbitrary rulings of the federal government that have had severe environmental, human, and economic consequences for Indian communities.

Jessy Griswold's "A Study of American Indian History" explores the subject from an artistic and social justice perspective. Employing artistic representations produced by American Indian artists, this unit considers commonalities and differences across cultural backgrounds. It offers students visual and artistic entryways into the comparative forms of cultural analysis.

Mark Osenko's "Overcoming the Absence of Native Americans in the History Curriculum" attempts to counteract the ongoing erasure of American Indians from commonplace textbooks in U.S. history. Applying a regional analysis that highlights the diversity and complexity of pre-Columbian Native North America, this unit offers models for integrating Native histories into high-school U.S. history curricula.

Robert Schwartz's "The Surviving and Thriving of Cultures" links Native American struggles for justice with other injustices in U.S. history. Using literary expressions as windows into the larger themes of survival and adaptation, this unit introduces contemporary Native American voices into English and language arts course materials, drawing upon plays, memoirs, and creative works to highlight the ongoing resiliency of Native communities.

Marialuisa Sapienza's "Contemporary Native American Fictional Accounts of Hope and Fear" investigates short stories and autobiography to challenge the absence of Native Americans from contemporary English and

literature pedagogies. Using stories by Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie, this unit probes the multiplicity of meanings and insights found within these complex forms of Native American literary production.

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