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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2015 Volume II: American Culture in the Long 20th Century

History of a Social Construction: How Racism Created Race in America

Guide for Curriculum Unit 15.02.01
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This unit offers teachers a history of the social construction of race, as well as activities to teach this concept through a number of different lenses. Relying heavily on primary source material, including quotes and images, music and art, laws and other government documents, this unit will expose students to the historical evidence that created and maintained the concept of race. Activities in this unit are experiential, multi-modal, collaborative, and discussion-based.

Beginning with foundational lessons that can be used independent of the greater unit, themes of power and hegemony are explored. Approaching the question of race from a theoretical perspective, the unit begins with students working together to discuss the factors that determine one's race. Is it appearance, ancestry, lived experience, culture, or some combination? The complexity of this issue will provide the necessary backdrop for learning its history. The historical dimension will be explored through four different reference points: the scientific rise and fall of biologically determined racism; the history of Colonial America; the laws, codes, acts, and other legal discourses about race; and finally, the U.S. Census. With this historical background, students will come to understand the basis of this social phenomenon that plays such a huge role in our society and lives. Though contemporary controversies are not included in the unit, this history is ripe for connections to current social realities of racism in our country. Finally, utilizing the musical, literary, and artistic resources in the appendix, it is critical to conclude with how people resist racism through self-expression around themes of race. That is, it is necessary to explore how race – and ethnicity – despite its social construction and its racist history, can still be a source of identity and pride.

(Recommended for History and Social Studies, grades 9-12)

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