



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

Introduction

Beginning in about the 1990s, the discipline of History took what has come to be known as “the cultural turn.” Scholars began to see the value of approaching “culture” itself as an object of historical study, tracing and contextualizing the development of various cultural forms and institutions: World’s Fairs, the vaudeville stage, cinema and the broadcast media, jazz, the roadhouse, the motor hotel, amusement or theme parks, or the Internet. Other historians, taking their cue from cultural theorists like Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, began to find recourse in “cultural” sources (films, plays, advertisements) to answer broader historical questions in the realm of politics and society. For example, one cannot fully understand class-based identities and relations in the United States without reckoning with the powerful narratives, myths, and icons of American mobility, from the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches stories of the nineteenth century to the “hoop dreams” of spectacular wealth through sport in the twentieth. The political behavior of social “classes” as “classes,” in other words, is informed not only by the facts on the ground, but also by the stories we tell ourselves about what is possible. Or again, a nation does not travel from Richard Nixon’s “southern strategy” in 1968 to the election of an African American president in 2008 without the important political work that *culture* accomplishes: the ground for Barack Obama was prepared not only by political figures like Jesse Jackson and Colin Powell, but also by culture workers like Diahann Carroll, Aretha Franklin, Harry Belafonte, Spike Lee, Michael Jordan, and Toni Morrison.

“American Culture in the Long Twentieth Century” examined these interpretive threads in the period from the 1890s to the present. After an introductory segment devoted to the broad, theoretical questions – “What is culture?” “Why study it?” – we surveyed the contours of U.S. history across the many decades separating Stephen Crane’s novella of urbanization, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and Phil Klay’s recent short story cycle on the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, *Redeployment*. Along the way we considered a wide array of cultural forms, including fiction, poetry, drama, music, film, photography, the graphic and visual arts, television and radio, advertising, and journalism. Above and beyond a basic historical understanding of the period under investigation, this seminar sought to outfit Fellows with a range of approaches and methods for the task of assessing and assigning historical meaning, and with practical ideas for engaging their own students in the hands-on work of historical interpretation. Topics included the Great African American Migration and the Harlem Renaissance; the culture of the Great Depression; cultures of war and Cold War; the counterculture and the social movements of the 1960s; U.S. popular culture and the Vietnam War; multiculturalism and the “culture wars”; and the culture of insecurity in the wake of 9/11.

We began our investigation with historian Jim Cullen’s survey of cultural materials and interpretive approaches, *Popular Culture in American History*. Other signature readings by U.S. cultural historians included John Kasson’s treatment of Coney Island at the turn of the century, *Amusing the Million*; Michael Denning’s

analysis of progressive and radical culture during the Great Depression, *The Cultural Front* ; Donna Knaff's investigation of visual culture and gender relations during World War II, *Beyond Rosie the Riveter* ; H. Bruce Franklin's interpretation of the nation's perpetual refighting of the Vietnam War in popular culture, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* ; Alice Echols' rendering of the 1960s counterculture through the lens of biography, *Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin* ; and Jeff Chang's account of the emergence of new cultural forms in the context of deindustrialization, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* .

While scholarly readings like these framed our approach and discussion, the real heart of the enterprise was in our collective encounter with the myriad primary sources of U.S. cultural history. Both in assigned readings and in our in-class PowerPoint "archive," we spent a great deal of time developing interpretations of primary materials: paintings by Aaron Douglas or Norman Rockwell; music by Louis Armstrong, Woody Guthrie, The Byrds, or Nina Simone; photographs by Dorothea Lange; dance pieces by Martha Graham or hip hop artist Storyboard P; fiction by Pietro Di Donato or Sandra Cisneros; poetry by Langston Hughes, Erika Vazquez-Aguilar, Allen Ginsberg, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, or Claudia Rankine; films by Albert Maltz, Irving Berlin, or Spike Lee; drama by Lorraine Hansberry; social commentary by Betty Friedan, Tom Hayden, Audre Lorde, or Gloria Anzaldua; as well as more ephemeral forms such as poster art, TV advertisements, Hollywood B-movies, and children's toys. These secondary and primary readings provided a good overview of the major themes and trends in this period in U.S. history, and also gave us many opportunities to examine how *meaning* is made, and how it comes to be both broadly shared and roundly contested in a complex society encompassing over three hundred million people.

The ten Fellows who participated in this seminar teach in a diverse range of New Haven schools, and by level and discipline they spanned grades three to twelve in Humanities, Language Arts, English, Social Studies, Music, Visual Art, and Spanish. They developed ten highly innovative curriculum units, each in its way reflecting the group's ongoing discussion of "culture" as an object of historical inquiry and as a force in American political and social life. Though united in their basic approach to culture and history, and also in their general attention to questions of social justice, the ten units differ quite widely in the array of topics and subject areas they treat. Some center upon a small number of cultural artifacts – or even just one text – to illuminate a period or to examine a broader set of social questions. Others canvass a much wider body of texts or artifacts in order to trace a particular historical phenomenon across time. But as a group, these curriculum units offer superb insight and guidelines when it comes to teaching critical thinking, historical interpretation, and imaginative habits of inquiry, as well as teaching history itself, not as some distant, dead thing, but as the very stuff that the present is made of.

Matthew Frye Jacobson

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