



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2022 Volume II: The Long Fight for a Free Caribbean, 1700s-1959

Introduction

by Anne Eller

In *The Long Fight for a Free Caribbean, 1700s-1959*, we engaged with Caribbean history during and after slavery, connecting them to similar histories in Latin America and the United States. As a foundation for the seminar, we analyzed the depths of plantation slavery in the region, the epicenter of sugar production for hundreds of years. Critically, we focused also on scholarship about the African Diaspora in the Caribbean, which examines questions about politics, religion, and culture with new specificity. A textbook, Laurent Dubois' and Richard Turits' *Freedom Roots: Histories from the Caribbean* (UNC, 2019), offered a foundation for the flurry of names and dates.

The curricula that Fellows developed from our discussions hold this foundational assumption to be true: that trans-Atlantic slavery served as the foundation of capitalism and infiltrated every element of life, from diet, to literature, to popular culture to global politics, in the Caribbean, the United States, and also across the Atlantic. In the shadow of this tremendous legacy of exploitation, we analyzed how the path away from slavery was difficult, and how abolition arrived differently to islands across the Caribbean. But every moment, resistance emerges as a central theme. Through the questions raised by the history of nineteenth-century Caribbean life – food security, the fight for meaningful political power, and the meaning of independence – the Fellows developed curricula that move beyond the caricature of Caribbean history as “paradise” and speak to struggles against racism and the long history of liberation contests that continue in the present day.

The fruits of our discussion and readings were the following curricula:

Carol Boynton constructs a participatory, lively, and vivid kindergarten curriculum unit that brings Caribbean folktales to the classroom and invites the students to participate in their narration. The curriculum unit offers portraits of a collection of picaresque characters, including Anansi and Mami Wata, who are well known in West Africa and the Caribbean and who have tales of adventure. The activities are crafted to include many open-ended questions aimed at sparking creativity and developing higher-order thinking skills. Finally, the curriculum unit also includes some call-and-response storytelling methods that invoke rich traditions and encourage the vocal participation of the students. It is supplemented with an extensive bibliography.

Felicia Fountain brings United States' history into the framework of a longer legacy of enslavement in the Americas, beginning in the seventeenth-century Caribbean. As she establishes, English and Spanish colonization experiments in the Caribbean both predated and influenced the development of plantation slavery in North America. In a curriculum unit designed for middle school Social Studies, Fountain invites teachers and students to pursue the question of voice, truth, and interconnected histories through the narratives of those who were enslaved. She highlights the mediated autobiography of Esteban Montejo,

recorded when he described his experiences and escape from Cuban slavery in an interview in his later years, as a unique window into both the oppression and liberation struggles of plantation slavery in the Americas.

James Osborne crafts a detailed and rigorous comparative analysis of enslavement and liberation struggles in Saint-Domingue (after independence, Haiti) and Cuba for high school Social Studies students. Osborne presents a deeply interconnected tale of exploitation in the French and Spanish colonies. At the center of his curriculum unit is the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), a massive and heroic struggle that brought together enslaved strategists from Central and West Africa and others in a pitched and multi-sided fight for liberation from slavery (and soon, from France). As slavery ended in Haiti, however, it only expanded in the neighboring island, as Osborne details. Cuba's independence and anti-slavery struggles were even more prolonged. By considering the development of, and resistance to, slavery in Haiti and Cuba, students are invited to consider interconnecting histories throughout the hemisphere.

Nancy Bonilla tackles the question of "racial innocence" in discussions of slavery and identity in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Grounded in the text *The Skin I'm In*, by Sharon G. Flake, as well as a collection of historical images, the middle-school English Language Arts curriculum unit will challenge a denial of the history of slavery in both islands. The injustice of Puerto Rico's colonial status, with all of the inequalities that that implies, has sometimes edged out discussions of racism and the history of slavery within the island itself. Similarly, anti-Haitian prejudice in the Dominican Republic often compounds racism within the territory while denying a domestic history of slavery. As the curriculum unit establishes, however, identifying colorism and discussing these histories constitute an important anti-racist praxis.

Sean Griffin presents teachers and students with the opportunity to consider heroism and inspiration through the prism of the imagination of the artist Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000). In a curriculum unit designed for middle school English Language Arts- but appropriate also for more advanced students and also for Social Studies courses- students will engage with the tremendous importance of the popular memory of revolutionary hero Toussaint Louverture, one of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, in African American politics and culture. In his artwork, Lawrence drew on liberation struggles of past and present. Through journaling, an art exhibit walk, and other activities, students will creatively engage with the revolutionary legacy of Haiti, the artwork of Lawrence and other artists of the Harlem Renaissance, and also with influential people in their own lives.

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