



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2023 Volume III: Writing Queer and Trans Lives

Introduction

by Juno Jill Richards, Associate Professor of English

LGBTQ history is often a story told from above, from the pathologizing perspective of a medical expert or the criminalizing framework of the law. To counter these tendencies, our seminar focused on the ways that LGBTQ individuals have narrated their own identity and experiences. This telling focused on a few key episodes in a wider history of sexuality. We followed the cultural efflorescence of the Harlem Renaissance, drawing out the ways that war and migration inflected the lived experience of racial and sexual minority; the midcentury red scare, as a Cold War reckoning with normative family and suburban life; and the political ferment of the 1960s, including the predominance of life narrative for activist-authors like Audre Lorde and Cherrie Moraga. Our consideration ended in the 1980s, with a young adult novel taking place in the Mexico/Texas borderlands, as a way to broach a range of prescient topics, including migration, adolescent masculinity, generational trauma, the prison industrial system, and the wider arc of Reagan-era domestic policy.

Though anchored in a wider consideration of LGBTQ life, these investigations did not hew to a literal sense of self-declared identity, but rather considered the framework of what is considered “normal” across a number of realms, including gender presentation, adolescence, courtship, romantic love, family life, reproduction, and the “good life.” In so doing, the seminar worked to foreground an intersectional analysis, drawing out the ways that experiences of sexual identity are enmeshed in the intricacies of gender, race, class, and nation. For this we turned to a range of popular media forms, including novels, mysteries, memoir, poems, music, and film, to allow for a broader consideration of the ways gender and sexuality shape life narratives.

As the Fellows engaged in these works, they produced a dynamic set of conversations around the difficulties of teaching younger students about minoritized identity, alongside the necessity of representing a diverse and expansive curriculum. For instance, Felicia Fountain’s excellent unit, “American History-LGBTQ Figures and Voices,” takes on the important topic of erasure, allowing students to question the partiality of a given historical narrative. Using a range of primary and secondary sources, this unit offers a more expansive historical landscape, one that demonstrates the ways that that “the LGBTQ community has always been woven into the fabric of the American quilt of history.” Moving from the poetry of Audre Lorde to the civil rights activism of Bayard Rustin, the unit offers a more expansive, intersectional accounting of American history through a series of interactive assignments.

Dan Croteau’s unit, “Black and Queer Lives: Intersecting Identities of the Harlem Renaissance” also turns upon the problem of representation and erasure. “When I arrived in my school,” Croteau writes, “I recognized that the literature we were reading didn’t celebrate the lives of black and brown people.” Noting the continuing work of diversifying this curriculum to highlight people who identify “somewhere outside the lines of straight,

white, cisgender, and male,” the unit expertly outlines the intersections of Black and queer life in the Harlem Renaissance, drawing on a found poetry as a way to bridge the wide-ranging work of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Walter Dean Myers.

Both units are exemplary for the ways that they culminate in a series of multi-tiered classroom assignments, allowing for a pedagogy focused on student engagement and participation.

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