



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1978 Volume II: 20th Century Afro-American Culture

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## Introduction

The Afro-American culture of the twentieth century stimulated a seminar of New Haven teachers to offer a rewarding diversity in points of view, varied positions characterized always by the disposition to blend historical and literary approaches. Such diversity was understandable since it reflected, in part at least, a wide range of existing attitudes toward one of the most controversial topics of our time—how to interpret and to assess the cultural achievement of blacks in America. A sense of difference came, too, from the responsible reactions of the teachers to their differing instructional situations, which might be a class in a regular high school, or in a specialized secondary school, or in a middle school, all possessing students who were black and white in varying proportions with staggering differences in competence in basic skills in reading and writing. Among so many reasons and opportunities for highly individualistic approaches to a modern black civilization in America, there was one area of agreement that served as an inspiration for all of the teachers: the importance of their endeavor. What sustained their commitment to a common purpose was not so much my influence as the seminar director but the fresh memory of the face of New Haven as it exists now in the city's public schools.

Though the teachers' projects as presented appeared to be widely varied, they fell, in fact, into several common patterns revealing much about the shared preoccupations of the members of the seminar. Many projects compared cultures: black and white literary traditions, historical accounts of the experiences of blacks and Italians in New Haven, examples of the disruptive assertion of black rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A number of the projects considered origins—of the black migration from the South and of the black ghetto in the northern city; of the first black cultural movement to gain national attention since the Abolitionist crusade, the Harlem Renaissance; and of a popular tradition in black fiction emerging in the late nineteenth century. Some of the studies sought to point up qualities in Afro-American achievement that were distinctly black, always, however, with a concern for a debt to a host American culture. And so one pattern intersected another, making for a lively exchange of information and opinion.

After the reading, the discussion, the writing, the revision, and the rewriting were over, all teachers agreed that what they had completed was only a beginning, and they spoke freely of commitments to new seminars and to new projects in the near future. Their achievement and their attitudes offer a basis for satisfaction and hope—in the teachers themselves as they grew in knowledge and learned to apply newly-acquired skills; for Yale and the city of New Haven, as they profited from a small demonstration of a successful experience in learning; and for all Americans who have faith still in the future of the city.

Charles T. Davis

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