



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1985 Volume V: Odysseys: Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century African-American History Through Personal Narrative

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## Introduction

This volume is small, as was the seminar that produced it. But the themes and questions addressed here are large and difficult ones: the character and consequences of slavery, the forms of resistance mounted against it, the place of African-American culture in that resistance, the forces behind emancipation, and the meaning of this struggle for contemporary Americans. These are issues that historians have been pondering for over a century, but it is only within the last two decades—that is to say, since the civil rights movement—that historians (among others) have begun to explore these questions with an eye toward the experience of those who, in effect, lived them day by day.

In that spirit this seminar began as a general inquiry into nineteenth-century American social history, an investigation oriented around some of the personal narratives left to us from that period. Owing to the size of the group, however, and to the happy convergence of interests among its members, we quickly focused our attention on the rich tradition of black narrative in America. From the slave testimony through the oral history to the autobiographical novel, we explored the themes enumerated above. But more than that, we studied the choices of narrative, figurative, and expressive form each author made, for in the aesthetics and politics of those decisions we found additional insights into African-American social and cultural history. An occasional foray into the narratives of other social groups likewise helped to throw that history into relief.

Given the compelling nature of the subject and the intimate character of our group, it is not altogether surprising, I suppose, that our discussions should have been so rewarding. Yet I believe that they would never have been as intriguing and illuminating as they were had it not been for the commitment, candor, and curiosity that the participants brought to the task. That spirit can be found in the curriculum units themselves, where the authors experiment with a variety of approaches and materials, from photographs to poems, plays, and rap songs. But for myself, I will long remember the intensity of our conversations in the cool basement rooms of Harkness Hall. If I can carry some of that feeling into my own teaching, I will consider myself most fortunate. The group was small, as I noted, but the rewards were ample. I hope the reader of this volume will see it the same way.

Jean-Christophe Agnew

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