



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1989 Volume I: American Communities, 1880-1980

Double Minority: The Haitians in America

Curriculum Unit 89.01.08
by Bernette A. Mosley-Dozier

Teachers of foreign languages and high school guidance counsellors often hear students say, “Why take French—nobody speaks it”, or “French isn’t spoken in America except in school, so why should I learn it?” This all too common attitude is the outgrowth of a philosophy that education need only be practical and not enriching. It is also indicative of a growing provincialism among today’s youth.

We, in America, cannot afford to become too isolated from other cultures, or too insulated in our own neighborhoods. True progress into the twenty-first century will require understanding of the languages, cultures and problems of a variety of other peoples.

The goal of this unit is to foster understanding of a small, but significant portion of our population; a people whose language, culture and politics have made them victims on two shores. It is important that students understand and be able to analyze the plight of these latest refugees because America’s treatment of the most downtrodden is a reflection of current American values and ideals. It is for our students, the future policy makers of the country, to determine what America will mean in the future of the world.

Historical Overview

Haiti first came to European notice when Christopher Columbus established a base there in 1492. From this strategic position he led and sent expeditions to explore the mainland of South America. The island, located near Cuba in the Caribbean Sea, had originally been named Haiti by the Arawak Indians, but Columbus renamed it Hispaniola.

The French and English set up pirate bases on the small island of Tortuga, located in the bay at the western end of Hispaniola. By 1625, Tortuga had become legendary as a haven for Caribbean pirates. The purpose of the island changed when Louis XIV of France gave Tortuga and western Hispaniola to the French West Indies Company. Settlers turned from piracy to plantations and named their portion of the island, Saint Domingue. The plantations of sugar cane and coffee were very profitable.

The French settlers of Hispaniola were left alone as turmoil mounted in eighteenth century France. When the Revolution began in 1789, the island settlers were encouraged to become part of the new government. The

Revolutionary government abolished slavery in the colonies, yet would not recognize the political rights of the mulatto representatives to be included in the governmental process. Haitian mulattoes had historically been a separate class, considered distinct both from their white fathers and their black mothers. Neither of the parent groups had ever truly accepted or trusted the growing offspring mulatto group, even though some mulattoes were wealthy property owners. Some even owned slaves themselves.

Following the example set by the new homeland government, the white settlers refused to acknowledge the mulatto right to participate in the colonial government. The incensed mulattoes, led by Vincente Ogé, rebelled and were crushed by the whites, but the spirit of revolution persisted. The black former slaves were now willing to join the mulattoes in rebellion. This did not last very long, due to historical differences, and the two groups eventually separated. Distrust ran high. Blacks began to hate whites intensely, and to mistrust the mulattoes, whose loyalties, they felt, were suspect. (We will recall that from time to time, mulattoes had assimilated into mainstream French society; Josephine de Beauharnais, wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexandre Dumas, author of *The Three Musketeers*, and Jeanne Duval, mistress of the poet Baudelaire, were a few well known mulattoes.)

After the two rebellious groups separated, the blacks became ascendant, largely because of their advantage in numbers and their strength from hard, physical labor. The frightened mulattoes joined with the few remaining whites to stage a counter revolution. The counter attack failed leaving the black leaders in complete control. The revolution belonged to the largest, most oppressed group, under the leadership of François Toussaint-L’ouverture, Henri Christophe and Michel Dessalines.

Napoleon Bonaparte, First Consul of France, attempted to stem the tide of the colonial rebellion by sending his brother-in-law with 70 ships and 25,000 men to the island. The result was the surrender and eventual death in a French prison, of Toussaint-L’ouverture. The revolution did not end there. The French finally gave up Hispaniola due to problems with Napoleon’s European war effort. (We will recall that it was at this time that Napoleon sold Louisiana to the new United States, under the leadership of Thomas Jefferson.)

In 1804, Dessalines became emperor of the newly renamed Haiti. He remained dictator until his assassination in 1806. His successors, Alexandre Petion in the south, and Henri Christophe in the north, struggled for control of the island. Each man considered himself an eternal dictator. Christophe had himself declared emperor and Petion was named president for life. In 1818 Petion died, followed two years later by Christophe’s suicide.

Haiti’s political history from 1820 until 1915 was one of internal turmoil and external warfare. The Spanish side of the island was briefly united with the French side. After twenty-two years the Spanish side established their independence and called themselves Santo Domingo. The two island neighbors continued to harass each other into the twentieth century.

The Haitian government needed to borrow heavily from foreign sources, especially the United States. As their agricultural and manufacturing productivity sank lower, they found themselves unable to repay loans. As the government struggled with overbearing egos and financial distress, they feared an invasion from their former father land. To prevent such happening Haitian president Boyer agreed to pay the descendants of French colonists for the land they had lost during the Revolution. Succumbing to such pressure was seriously improvident of President Boyer. The Haitian government was forced to default on a loan made through the National Bank of Haiti, a subsidiary of the National City Bank of New York. The American bank demanded payment and asked the United States military to aid in collection of the debt. In 1915 the U.S. Marines landed in Port Au Prince, under the aegis of the Monroe Doctrine of 1820. Haiti was in turmoil due to financial stress as well as the recent assassination of their dictator, Guillaume Sam.

American advisors were able to stabilize the economy and to write a Haitian constitution, but they also imposed a strict caste system based on skin color and economics. Through puppet mulatto government, the United States was able to successfully control Haiti. This situation lasted for nineteen years, until the Americans departed in 1934. The socio-economic and political conditions began to worsen from that time on.

In 1941 Dumarsais Estimé became the first totally black man elected president since just before the U.S. occupation. He attempted social reforms, even trying to unionize the factories. He was unsuccessful. Racism was at the heart of his failures. He, a black man with the concern about the plight of the common blacks, was defeated by a country which had come to respect only mulatto leadership. He made many enemies because of the pervasive bigotry.

In 1949 the university students staged a rebellion demanding economic and political reforms. The government was forced to capitulate. Paul Magloire was elected president. He instituted an oppressive military rule. When he resigned in 1956, he was replaced by a physician, Dr. FranCois Duvalier, affectionately known as Papa Doc. Duvalier had held a position in the government of D. Estimé. He, too, established an oppressive military regime complete with secret police, which held sway over the country until his son was deposed in 1986. During the Duvalier years, of both father and son, there was a mass exodus of skilled and non-skilled workers seeking political and economic asylum in other countries. The primary geographic goal of the emigrants was the United States, although many went to other Caribbean islands. They were especially drawn to the United States territories and protectorates.

With so many of the better educated citizens leaving, the economy, education and mental and physical health of the tiny island nation began to deteriorate rapidly. They were ripe for exploitation by ambitious and sometimes unscrupulous businessmen. One scheme involved paid blood donations. For \$3.00 and a can of juice, desperately poor Haitians would donate a pint of blood, which sold in the U.S. for \$125.00 a liter. This program was very profitable for the American whose idea it was. The business was very strong until the current AIDS epidemic which originally targeted Haitians as a high risk group of people. Panic made Haitian blood donors undesirable.

The reasons for mass migration, as I have said, have been two fold; economic and political oppression. The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service attempts to dichotomize the two reasons, but they are really inextricably linked in that country. They are two symptoms of the same fatal disease. Many who were poor were also at the mercy of the ruling class and their military control forces. Those who criticized the Duvaliers were denied property, liberty, and even life, thereby impoverishing their families. Even a simple desire to seek economic opportunity outside the island was construed as treasonable activity, punishable by indefinite incarceration.

How had this oppression come about? Both Duvaliers had begun their terms of office with a freshness and hope that invigorated the down trodden populace. This hope was short lived. It wasn't long before power corrupted the good intentions of first FranCois, then Jean-Claude. They felt compelled to transform the military into a personal police force. A group of waterfront thugs was incorporated into the militia and christened the Tonton Macoute (boogie man). These "hit men" carried out the secret orders of the Duvaliers. Not even close relatives of the "President for Life" could escape their machinations. Denise Duvalier, daughter of Papa Doc, and her husband, a high ranking military official, were forced to leave the country when they ran afoul of her brother, Jean-Claude. His attitudes and policies so resembled his father's that he became known as "Baby Doc".

Haitian politics became increasingly oppressive throughout the 1970's and 1980's, after the death of Papa

Doc, in 1971. Jean-Claude antagonized the populace even more than his father had, until, in 1986, he and his family were forced to flee the island and seek political asylum in France. The ensuing struggle for power was bloody and confusing. A military junta, formed by former Duvalier supporters, assumed governmental control. They were actively supported by the United States. Eliot Abrams, assistant secretary of state for international affairs, was sent to Haiti as an advisor to upgrade their internal security. The people chose the Tonton Macoute as a target of their revenge; an apt symbol of nearly thirty years of a hated, dictatorial dynasty. The people craved free, public elections, yet the U.S. advisors, reflecting Reagan policy, did not support this idea. They desired a stable government over the essential American ideal of democracy.

It appears that the Haitians are no longer the docile, compliant people of the past 180 years. They have caught the spirit of 1804 again and are not content to be used by their own, or foreign governments. They know that they have political power in the use of strikes and by simply not holding so tenaciously to the life they have. They are now willing to take risks in order to make progress. They are ready for liberty.

The political history of Haiti has been superficially a struggle between factions working for personal aggrandizement and not for the good of the country. The people have been the ultimate victims of this travesty. Most of the elected presidents soon established regimes of terror and dictatorship. Their drives for personal security caused them to limit their energies on behalf of education economic improvement, health care and foreign relations. Instead, they sought out “courtiers” similar to the worst of European aristocracy, to legislate and execute their slightest whims.

The advisors themselves often used their positions for personal enrichment. One of Jean-Claude’s leading advisors held an interest in every profitable venture on the island. In the U.S. this would be a breach of ethics; in Haiti it is acceptable and expected.

Such a government—where people subsist and the government has no longterm philosophical goal—cannot be a comfortable place to live. The common person soon feels frustrated by the utter powerlessness of his situation. That frustration leads to emigration or revolution. Haiti has been the perpetrator and victim of both.

HAITIANS IN AMERICA

The Problems Persist Here

The first port of call for most Haitians has been Miami, Florida. For others, it has been territories and protectorates of the U.S. Some have been rejected by all possible havens and for countless others, their first and last voyage has ended in the icy depths of the Caribbean Sea. Since 1971, about 10,000 or more Haitians have sought refuge in America. They have neither been well received, nor easily understood. They have been imprisoned, exploited and neglected by the American government. In 1981, President Reagan ordered that the Coast Guard interdict (stop and search) all Haitian vessels travelling in the waters between Haiti and the U.S. Coast Guard captains were empowered to interview and determine the justice of the individuals’ pleas for asylum. They were further empowered to return any suspicious claimants to Haiti, to their certain punishment, and possible deaths. This led to great furor by Americans in sympathy with Haitian problems.

Haitians have routinely been detained in abandoned military camps or rounded up and jailed, awaiting possible deportation. Efforts on their behalf have been consistent but not terribly effective. Throughout the

Reagan years, Haitian immigrants were the victims of a cruel and almost vindictive, federal policy.

When they have either been granted asylum or have been allowed to slip into the mainstream of America, the social and economic picture has often been bleak. Those still in camps or prisons have been subject to severe depression and suicide attempts. These people left oppression, filth and poverty only to find themselves in similar conditions on American soil. The golden land of opportunity has held little opportunity for these people from Haiti. Jobs have not been easy to find for the poorly educated, poorly skilled with no command of the country's dominant language.

The majority of the Haitians speak a patois of French, African dialect, Arawak and a little Spanish. This is Creole, a recognized dialect having no written dictionary or grammatical structure. They don't speak erudite French Haiti's official language, since most of the people are too poor to afford the time to attend the free public schools. Of course, English was not heard except from tourists, so was not learned. Consequently, the only jobs available to Haitian immigrants have been the lowest paying, least desirable jobs. Many have had to turn to migrant farm labor for subsistence wages. As farm workers, they have been exploited cruelly by the recruiters who promise them high wages and deliver little in return. The high wages only come if the worker can pick a specified high yield per day; if he doesn't have competition from other work crews in the same field; and if he can, somehow, avoid all the expenses the company charges him. The laborers are charged for transportation to the fields, for food, shelter and miscellaneous extras. The men and women aren't paid if they can't pick because of weather conditions. The company organizer can often keep workers in virtual slavery through debt to the commissary or threat of job termination. The growers, as well as the company owners, encourage use of Haitian labor. These non-English speakers with no political voice are unaware of labor rights, due process procedures or redress of grievances. They know nothing of minimum wage, worker's compensation or social security. Those who are illegal aliens can't complain for fear of governmental reprisals. Nor can they apply for assistance if laid off or fired. Language is a serious barrier to assimilation and adjustment.

The Haitian community has survived by helping each other. The more acclimated Haitians help newcomers with shelter, clothing and sometimes jobs. The U.S. government has not been supportive to Haitians. Whereas Cuban and Southeast Asian boat people received a welcome and government and community aid, Haitian boat people have received disdain and prejudice. Other refugees have had American sponsors or governmental agencies to house them, Haitians have lived in packing crates, refugee camps or crowded two and three families in a one family apartment. 1980 statistics showed that only about 6% of the Haitian population was legally employed and received the minimum wage. The other 94% get far less than the national minimum. Fear of deportation or loss of job keeps an economic blackmail, an extortion and exploitation situation cycle alive. For the poor and oppressed Haitian, there has been little difference between the horrors of Haiti and the horrors of the United States.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

I Academic Objectives:

A. Students will become acquainted with the facts about the following Haitian history

1. Discovery and colonization

2. The Haitian Revolution

3. Political and economic development since 1804

B.. Students will demonstrate knowledge of the immigration crisis of Haitians in the United States

C. Students will be able to discuss Haitian art, language and society.

D. Students will be able to simulate aspects of Haitian culture.

II Affective Objectives

A. Students will be able to plan, implement and summarize a research project

B. Students will be part of group decision making and group goal attainment

C. Students will become aware of the needs of immigrants and other culturally different Americans

D. Students will accomplish a task individually from inception to completion.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

This unit will invite use of field trips to museum exhibits, when possible, and to communities, when permissible. Film strips, movies, novels, speakers and learning centers are also interesting ways to present the material. Students enjoy the concrete learning experience, so the more role playing and hands on activities the teacher can offer, the better.

This unit is geared for grades 7-8 with possible alterations to fit 6-12. It can be as sophisticated or as simple as class needs dictate. I would strongly suggest having the students do some independent research for short compositions and/or physical projects.

SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

Cultural Days:

Objective *Students will be able to sing a song in French and be able to translate it into English.*

Materials *Tape of the song or songs to be learned. This may be teacher made, professional or copied from the accompanying tape; lyrics, instrument.*

Procedures *Each student will receive a copy of the day's or week's song. This is a long term series, so students can either make or decorate music folders. If this plan is part of a social studies class, other songs from other countries and cultures will be taught. If this unit is part of a French class or exploring language class, other French songs will be taught.*

Go over the history and phoneticization of the song. The children will repeat the words several times. Everyone will listen to the tape a few times until the tune is familiar. They will next sing with the accompanying instrument.

Evaluation *Performance of the song successfully.*

Historical Days

Objectives *Students will understand the difficulties in starting a new government and in starting a new life in a new country.*

Materials *Background information on the Haitian Revolution Background on life in Haiti from 1804 until 1980. Background information on the problems of Haitian immigration to the United States.*

Procedures *Divide the class into two or more groups. About one half the class will be the Haitians of 1790. This group will further divide into the blacks, mulattoes and whites. They will caucus and strategize to devise a revolution. They will look at all the issues of the day. Stress that this is not a re-enactment of the actual events, but rather, a chance to make the decisions for themselves.*

The other half of the class will be Haitians of the 1980's. They will group together as those who emigrate and those who stay. They will plan what they will face as emigrants and compare it to what they face by staying in Haiti. The students are again cautioned to plan as a real situation, and not to consider this a reenactment.

Evaluation *Each group will report on the problems they encountered, the solutions and the process by which they arrived at their final report. Possible follow up activities would include research reports on characters from the actual events, correspondence with a pen pal in Haiti, or getting information from the World Health Organization, Amnesty International or the Red Cross, about the actual conditions of the country to compare and contrast to conditions for Haitians in this country.*

Learning Centers:

Objective *Students will discover what effect religious practices have had on the expectations of the people of Haiti.*

Students will create a typical Haitian meal and be able to compare it to the typical American meal.

Students will analyze American attitudes toward immigrants, especially Haitians

Materials Center I Film strips, tapes, pictures of festivals, background information on voodoo Catholicism and Protestantism in Haiti.

Center II Real or simulated food, calorie charts, nutrition charts, weight and nutrition charts and information.

Center III United States Immigration figures, Articles listed in the bibliography concerning U.S. immigration policies; more recent magazine articles. Questionnaires and teacher made answer board.

Procedures Students will be divided into three groups. Each group will be given 15-45 minutes at each center. If the centers are very sophisticate, the teacher may decide to spend three days rather than one, on this activity.

Each group will travel from center to center as a group.

Evaluation Students will come together as a whole class to discuss each group's reactions, as well as perception of information.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Encyclopedias

"Haiti", Collier's Encyclopedia, 1963, Vol. 9, pgs. 167172.

"Haiti", Funk and Wagnall's Encyclopedia, 1984, Vol 12, pgs. 333-340.

Signed Magazine Articles

1. Brady, Edward J., "When May Refugees Stay?" *America*, Vol. 145, October 1981, pgs. 256-257.
2. Johnson, J.W., "Bound for Atlanta" *Black Enterprise* , Vol. 14, April 4, 1984, pg 23.
3. Lehmann, Paul. "The Haitian Struggle for Human Rights" *Christian Century* , Vol. 97, October 8, 1980, pg 941.
4. Peerman, Dean, "Haitian Refugees: Calamity Compounded". *Christian Century* , Vol. 98, November 18, 1981, pg 1180.
5. Walsh, Msgr Bryan O., " The Flight from Haiti; An American Response", *America* Vol 145, November 28,1981, pg 335.

Unsigned Magazine Articles

1. "Elusive Dreams in Exile" *Time*, Vol 127, February 17, 1986, pg 43.
2. "Fairness for Haitians", *America* , Vol. 150, March 3, 1984, pgs 142-143.
3. "Haitian Sets Self Afire in Protest of Nation's Strife" *Jet* , Vol. 72, #26, pg 4.
4. "Haitians Walk the Plank", *America* , Vol. 145, October 1981, pg. 210.
5. "Haiti's Good Samaritan", *Ebony* , Vol. 44, November 1988, pg. 64.

STUDENT RESOURCES

The following is a list of novels which may be of interest to students and to teachers, concerning the Haitian Revolution.

Eitzen, Ruth, *Ti Jacques, A Story of Haiti*, N.Y.: Crowell, 1972.

Henry, George Alfred, *A Roving Commission Through the Black Insurrection at Haiti*. N.Y. : C. Scribner's Sons, 1904.

Newcomb, Covell, *Black Fire, the Story of Henri Christoph*. N.Y.: Lonman's, Green & Co., 1940.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>