



Introduction

In American history the term “community” has often evoked those qualities at once most distinctive and elusive in our culture. The first white European settlers in North America agreed that a shared vision of their New World communal experiment was required for its success, but American experience inspired such diversity of social organization and values that the Founding Fathers felt compelled to minimize the divisive potential of factionalism. American Indians, African Americans, and immigrants from around the globe would also struggle to define a place for themselves within the American community without losing the precious sense of their own unique heritage.

In this seminar we tried to approach the question of community in a manner not unlike that of so many who have come before us, by problematizing” the whole question of what it means to speak of an American community. At the same time, the seminar Fellows set out to design curriculum units based on their own visions of actual communities, whether defined by neighborhood, religion, language, music, or shared values. Many of the units are concerned with the city of New Haven, and in our discussions (and our tour of the city), we came to a much greater appreciation of the sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting character to this urban New England community. Although, again like so many Americans before us, we did not resolve the great question of what constitutes American community, we did achieve a greatly heightened respect for the builders and sustainers of our own communities of choice. And in a summer which saw a terrible storm dismember some of the physical structure of our neighborhoods, we were able to experience firsthand the resilient human center of our communities, and to pursue ways of communicating that understanding to our students.

James T. Fisher

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