



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume IV: Recent American Poetry: Expanding the Canon

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a new emphasis on racial and ethnic identity in the United States, replacing to some degree the earlier ideal of “assimilation” within a “melting pot.” We increasingly understand ourselves as a multi-ethnic and multi-racial community. This change has been reflected in recent attempts to redefine the “tradition” of American literature, and in this seminar we explored some of the implications of such attempts. We used as primary text the second volume of the new *Heath Anthology of American Literature* as we investigated the racial and ethnic diversity of recent American poetry. We began with examples of late nineteenth-century Native American, African-American, and Spanish-American songs and poetry, turned then to the Anglo-American poets of the first part of this century who have achieved major recognition, then to poets of the “Harlem Renaissance,” and then to a more widely ranging consideration of recent poetry. Prominent in our reading and discussions were Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, and Gwendolyn Brooks, and also such later poets as Robert Hayden, Mari Evans, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Jay Wright, Ishmael Reed, Michael Harper, Bernice Zamora, Simon Ortiz, Janice Mirikitani, Wendy Rose, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Carolyn Forché, Joy Harjo, Garrett Hongo, Tato Laviera, Jodith Ortiz Cofer, Gary Soto, Lorna Dee Cervantes, and Cathy Song. Individual Fellows read further in these poets and others as they prepared their curriculum units.

The curriculum units, of course, respond to a variety of teaching needs and opportunities. Some are centered upon a selected aspect of the multi-ethnic and multi-racial situation that we are exploring. Linn Bayne has focused on recent Native American poets. Silvia Ducach has focused on Spanish-American and Nuyorican poets. Cynthia Roberts, Joyce Patton, and Pearl Mitchell have focussed primarily on African-American poets. In each case, however, the project is adapted to different themes and somewhat different classroom objectives. Other units have adopted yet broader approaches. Francis J. Degnan offers a variety of ways to introduce poetry into the elementary classroom. Lorna Dils, after a rather different introduction to poetry for the middle-school grades, leads into examples of Native American, African-American, and Hispanic writing. Geraldine Martin incorporates multi-ethnic material into her unit on the use of puppetry to introduce poetry at the first-grade level. Mia Edmonds-Duff relates African-American and other poetry to the teaching of dance and drama. And Maggie Roberts provides a way of keeping poetry before the students in a middle-school class on Shakespeare and dramatic form. It’s a striking array of enthusiastic and thoughtful proposals, which should lead toward some excellent teaching by these Fellows and their readers.

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