



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Tales from the City

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Some city-dwellers are native born, intimately conversant with the stories of the streets; others are migrants, bringing with them the stories, folklore and folk wisdom of small towns and villages. Both contribute elements which comprise tales from the city. Langston Hughes has given us Simple and Cousin Minnie; Richard Wright has given us Bigger Thomas, as well as his own autobiographical experiences; Gwendolyn Brooks has given us the bean-eaters and other poetic characters. All these creations have things to share about life in the city and about aspects of the Great Migration. The first part of the unit, which is intended for use with 10th grade college classes, will concentrate on the Great Migration of blacks from the Deep South to the North earlier this century. I'd like to concentrate on the lure of the city: what aspects of the city made it a magnet for so many thousands and thousands of people? Conversely, I want to discover what compelled these people to leave the land and the people they were most familiar with. I am also interested in discovering how an urban culture was forged and the effects it had on city-dwellers. The concentration on the Great Migration will allow students to gain an increased awareness of black history, in particular, and of American history, in general. The second section of the unit will center on the core of readings my students will be doing. I will include a variety of genres in the selections I make: prose, nonfiction, poetry, drama, and "human interest" stories. I sought selections which are, by and large, new to me, for I want the unit to reflect the freshness and diversity of life in the city. Some of the readings chosen for inclusion in the unit will be briefly synopsisized in this section. Incorporated into this section will be the formation of comprehension and writing activities. Student writing, modeled on our readings, will not come easily, for it must be preceded by comprehension—literal and higher level—of what is read. Therefore, my first task will be to locate appropriate readings and to devise sensible, meaningful activities which lead as naturally as possible to the development of writing topics. There is joy and there is beauty in the city. While no attempt will be made to exclude the less savory aspects of living in the city, our students can be taught to recognize, internalize, and express this joy and beauty. The Great Migration of blacks from the Deep South to the North began around 1916. Opportunities previously denied black workers were now open to them, for the restrictions of World War I shut down quotas on European immigrants. Blacks were actively recruited by labor agents; there were constant pleas in "The Defender," the leading black newspaper, for blacks to migrate North. Many migrants, when asked why they chose to move, said they wanted to "better their condition." As we shall see, the phrase covered a variety of meanings. All migrants, however, brought with them experiences, aspirations, expectations, and memories, all of which became woven into their adjustment to city life. Upon his arrival in Chicago, Richard Wright recalls the scurrying people, paying attention neither to their surroundings nor to each other. The people he encountered seemed to speak and move differently. ¹ Bettering one's condition, first, revolved around a betterment in

economic status. Migrants were confident they could earn high, decent wages, even if that required learning new skills. At the same time, a series of disastrous economic setbacks in the South encouraged migration. Boll weevils, storms, floods, tightening of credit—all made Southern farming precarious. Thus, the impact of the war on the labor market and the disasters in the South combined to move the Great Migration along. Racial oppression was another contributing factor to the Great Migration. The desire to breathe freer air prompted many blacks to migrate. Physical abuse sent many migrants North: mistreatment by law enforcement officials, lynching, rape, “whitecapping”—whites in nonplantation districts drove blacks from their own lands. Continuous—and increasingly unbearable—discrimination was closely allied to the acts of violence. There is an important distinction between migrations driven by “push and pull” factors. ² “Pull” goes more smoothly, for the city holds attractions. “Push” implies little choice, for the options at home are fewer and fewer. Migrants were pulled and pushed, for the most part, to Detroit, New York, and Chicago. Most work done on the Great Migration centers in Chicago, which became the center for blacks with the waning of the Harlem Renaissance. Upon arriving in the city, the migrant’s two main concerns were shelter and employment. Early on, both needs were easily met. Benevolent societies were able to help some immigrants find lodging. Some people stayed with relatives or with friends from “down home.” Langston Hughes’ “Enter Cousin Minnie” presents a picture of how difficult this might be. Lack of space in a kitchenette dwelling literally might force you to push away a friend whom you’d like to take in. Because, by custom and by law, housing was segregated, blacks had few options regarding housing; most gravitated to the South Side, Chicago’s Black Belt, just as a migrant in New York would head to Harlem. The South Side had been established by the “Old Settlers” who came to Chicago before the Great Migration; it was in many ways a true community. It also afforded blacks the opportunity to interact with other blacks while avoiding wary white eyes. With the passage of time and the increasing number of migrants, the Black Belt spread farther and farther south. Living quarters were at a premium; community values began to break down. Much later, high rise housing projects were viewed as the solution to the housing problem. In truth, these buildings were ill-thought-out, ill-planned, and in many cases, dangerous. The earlier sense of community was replaced by a sense of isolation, hopelessness, and fear. Gangs had free reign of these buildings, their “turf.” Gwendolyn Brooks wrote “The Blackstone Rangers,” a poem about a notorious project gang. I will use this poem with “We Real Cool.” Together they highlight the aimlessness and futility of ghetto life. By 1916-1917, racial tension was being stirred up. The entrance of blacks into the workplace exacerbated the tension, as did the return of black soldiers from World War I, for this meant further competition for employment and housing. Rumors began circulating in the spring of 1919 that whites were planning an anti-black campaign more violent than previous riots. The skirmishes went on for two and one half months, three of the bloodiest occurring in June. A rumor then began to circulate that an all-out attack to drive blacks out of Chicago was to take place on July 4. July 4 came and went; there were no incidents. ³ Three weeks later, however, a black teenager was murdered, and two weeks of rioting ensued. The Great Migration was listed as the cause by many as to why race relations in Chicago were at a nadir. The number of blacks who decided to leave the city—either to return to the South or move on to the other Northern cities—was outstripped by the number of migrants who continued to arrive, gazing at the immense steel structures and hurried human movement. Tension did exist between the migrants and the black middle class, or Old Settlers. The middle class had much to gain in terms of political clout as the size of the community increased, but feared that its image would suffer because of the migrants’ lack of familiarity with city ways. The Old Settlers, it should be remembered, were either from the Upper South or had been born in the North, while the migrants were coming from the poverty-stricken, backward Deep South. Steps had to be taken to preserve the middle class image as much as possible. The behavior exhibited in Langston Hughes’ “Self-Protection” would have horrified the Old Settlers. Cousin Minnie, mistreated by her boyfriend, mistreats him right back with a beer bottle to the head, then blithely continues her New Year’s celebration. She has learned to protect and look out for herself, perhaps in ways which the middle class frowns on but which help her fort her sense of self-esteem.

The Old Settlers, often in conjunction with the Urban League and the “Defender,” often issued rules of behavior and hints about decorum which it hoped migrants would follow so as not to be an embarrassment to the race. It was felt that instruction in proper behavior would serve to preserve and protect respectability.

(figure available in print form)

Chicago’s black middle class saw little redeeming value in southern black folk culture, especially a folk culture rooted in the Deep South. These strictures and admonitions placed a burden on the newcomers who were, after all, in a place strange to them. The rules listed below were designed to help the migrants adjust—to industrial work, urban life, northern racial patterns, and behavior which would enhance the image of blacks to the larger white community. Class tensions were exacerbated in black Chicago as hostility toward things southern increased. More often than not, the list of “dos” and “don’ts” were printed in the “Defender.” A sampling is listed below:

- Don’t use vile language in public places.
- Don’t act discourteously to other people in public places.
- Don’t allow yourself to be drawn into street brawls.
- Don’t use liberty as a license to do as you please.
- Don’t take the part of law breakers, be they men, women, or children.
- Don’t make yourself a public nuisance.
- Don’t encourage gamblers, disreputable women or men to ply their business any time or place.
- Don’t congregate in crowds on the streets to the disadvantage of others passing along.
- Don’t live in unsanitary houses, or sleep in rooms without proper ventilation.
- Don’t violate city ordinances, relative to health conditions.
- Don’t allow children to beg on the streets.
- Don’t allow boys to steal from or assault peddlers.

As might be expected, such a campaign was least successful with younger migrants, who were caught up in the urban flash and excitement. Dance halls, rent parties, the latest fashions were their preoccupations and their release. In Hughes’ “Roots and Trees,” the difficulties of this forced assimilation are illustrated, as is the need for old roots. Richard Wright stated a lesson he had learned: “I knew that I could never really leave the South, for my feelings had already been formed by the South, for there had been slowly instilled into my personality and consciousness, black though I was, the culture of the South.” In addition to the readings

mentioned in the narrative, further readings and authors will include: Lisa Chedekel (New Haven). Lisa's human interest stories, which appear in the "Register," will bring the realities, joys, and frustrations of living in New Haven closer to home. Her articles are always well-written and provide a forum for discussion. Gwendolyn Brooks (Chicago). "a song in the front yard" speaks to the discontent of a young girl who has led a restricted life. She wants desperately to take part in the wildness and happiness she can see from her front yard. "Beverly Hill, Chicago" details a car trip through one of Chicago's better neighborhoods. Differences in houses, customs, and surroundings are noted. The riders once again realize that they don't have enough. Cyrus Colter (Chicago), "The Beach Umbrella." Elijah seeks respite from work and family cares each Saturday by going to the lakeshore beach. He sometimes made contact with other people but, more often than not, his attempts failed. He became fascinated by the variety of beach umbrellas, to the point where he knew he must have one. He faces the humiliation of asking his son for a loan, and purchases the umbrella. The umbrella seems to turn his luck; a small group gathers and a party takes place: drinking, mild flirtations. The party continues all day until, to Elijah's chagrin, the participants decide they must leave. The realization hits him that he won't be able to repay his son. He wanders the beach, hoping to sell the umbrella; there are no takers. The only solution he sees to his money problems is to take on a job in a steel mill, something he has done before and hated. The respite at the beach and the joy of the colorful beach umbrella are over. Langston Hughes (Harlem). Hughes was a firm believer in the value of humor. His creation, Jesse B. Semple, or "Simple," shared in that belief. Simple was a man who wondered and laughed at the problems of black folks, white folks, just folks—including himself. "Blue Evening" finds Simple down in the dumps. The woman he loves has left him. An impromptu and joyless party takes place. The loneliness a person can feel, even when surrounded by others, is vividly illustrated. "Empty Room" is a musing on the impersonality of city life and city death and the horror of a lack of mourning. Richard Wright (Memphis). Two excerpts from the early part of *Black Boy* illustrate Richard's toughening-up process which will come into play with his move to Chicago. "Hunger" (or "The Streets of Memphis") details how he learned to stand up for himself, at the insistence of his mother. "Kitten" is a cruel tale in which Richard deliberately sets out to annoy his father, while proclaiming his innocence. The incident ends in a grisly manner. Lesson Plan One—"Enter Cousin Minnie" What problems present themselves to Simple with the arrival of Cousin Minnie? What is Minnie's biggest character flaw? How does Minnie go about getting exactly what she wants from Simple? What else might she have done? Write a brief sketch of a relative or friend, highlighting the most important features of his/her personality. Lesson Plan Two—"a song in the front yard" What is the narrator's complaint? What does she wish would happen? What prevents this? Is she likely to achieve her goal? Why? Why not? What are some alternative plans? Write a dialogue between the girl and her mother, in which each states her case. Try to have them come to a resolution. Lesson Plan Three—a guide book The class will be divided into working groups (4-5 members in each). Their task is to come up with a real, honest guide book to New Haven. Some areas to be covered would be education, recreation, shopping, dining, safety tips, room for improvement. Students are certain to have topics they'll wish to add. Notes

1. James R. Grossman, "Land of Hope." Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 116-17.
2. Nicholas Lemann, "The Promised Land." New York: Vintage Books, 1991, pp. 70-71.
3. Grossman, pp. 17880.

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Colter, Cyrus. "The Beach Umbrella." Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1972. Short stories.

Grossman, James R. "Land of Hope." Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991. A detailed study/account of Chicago, the Great Migration—and the changes wrought on blacks and whites.

Hughes, Langston. "The Best of Simple." New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

———. "Simple Stakes a Claim." New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1957.

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Lemann, Nicholas. "The Promised Land." New York: Vintage Books, 1991. A personalized account of the Great Migration. Through interviews, Lemann followed the fortunes and misfortunes of some migrants from Clarksdale, Mississippi to Chicago. Incredibly interesting reading.

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