



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1992 Volume III: Reading and Writing the City

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## Introduction

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The nature and function of the city—the most complex form of human settlement—are perennially compelling topics, perhaps never more so than for the students and teachers of contemporary urban America. The history of urban form, from the earliest stockades, enclosures, and fortifications to the walled outline of traditional European cities, tells us that cities have always defined themselves in relation to a frontier and occupied the cutting edge of the civilizing process. As several of the units devoted to contemporary New Haven in this volume suggest, the very magnitude and urgency of our current problems tell us that the city remains at the frontier of a new American society, confronting the challenge of a future in the process of being born.

The connection of the first indications of literacy and numeracy with early urban life tells us also that it is the city—with its relative security, its divisions of labor, and its specialization of functions—that first nurtures the life of the mind and gives rise to human creativity. In the encyclopedic range of human achievements that it brings together, the city is perhaps itself the highest expression of that creativity.

The units gathered in this volume were written in conjunction with an interdisciplinary seminar called “Reading and Writing the City,” in which Institute Fellows discussed a wide range of historical, sociological, architectural, and literary materials on the life of cities from the ancient world to the present. While touching on issues in history, planning, architecture, politics, behavioral patterns, and imagining of urban life, the seminar also focussed on issues of cross-curricular writing and disciplinary perspective—on the different methods, concerns, and challenges that come to the fore in different intellectual frames and frameworks.

It is therefore to be hoped that the units gathered here will suggest to readers something of the range and diversity of topics that can be generated through study of the city in the classroom. Lorna Dils, for example, offers here a unit devoted to the urban cultures of Italy, Mexico, and West Central Africa at the very point in time, about 1500, that these cultures were first coming into contact, largely as a result of the development of urban trade in Europe; though very thoughtfully adapted to the needs of students, the unit finally leads all of us to question our assumptions about cultural perspective and historical periodization in the classroom.

The several units on New Haven all exploit the rich academic, cultural, and informational resources available in this city, while adapting them, in each case, to a unique perspective and purpose. Francis J. Degnan, in a unit on colonial and early industrial New Haven, finds new ways of connecting aspects of material culture with early attitudes and values of risk-taking, enterprise, and determination. Margaret Clancy includes the colonial period in a unit that very usefully introduces students to the major phases of urban history while inculcating a variety of academic skills. In a unit devoted to the history of African-Americans in New Haven, Jean Sutherland

has developed a rich variety of topics and materials that will give students access to this important source of understanding and inspiration.

A number of units are targeted especially to the reading and writing skills of more advanced students. In a suggestive set of writing exercises focussed on the theme of neighborhood, Gene Gandelman identifies a number of useful ways in which students may be encouraged to reflect on the challenges of citizenship while enhancing literacy skills. In a unit that combines journalism with the study of urban culture, Deborah Hare integrates writing with both the reading of prose models and an investigation of fascinating aspects of contemporary New Haven. The unit by Laura Spoerri adapts reading and writing exercises on the city to an extensive, process-oriented writing course that is meant to free students from anxiety and enable them to discover the wonder of self-expression. Finally, while a number of the units touch on the issues of foreign immigration and the twentieth-century migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North, William Coden introduces students and teachers to the interdisciplinary opportunities of this topic, combining historical study of the migration with readings in fiction, non-fiction prose, and poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and of post-1940 Chicago.

Above all, readers will find here ample evidence of the skill, dedication, and conscience of New Haven's public school teachers. The city, as I said at the outset, is a controversial and sometimes painful topic; as such, it poses a particularly difficult challenge for public school teachers. In my view, the units in this volume represent a wonderful balance, in which Institute Fellows have upheld in the most admirable way both their obligation to honesty and objectivity and their moral responsibility to the needs of the children in their charge.

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