



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1992 Volume IV: The National Experience: American Art and Culture

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## Introduction

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This is a unit that would not stay put. By that I do not mean that this volume of curriculum units will jump out of your hand. Rather, the seminar that provided the basis for these materials changed dramatically over time.

"The National Experience" began as a survey of American culture. The seminar was designed to provide teachers with an overview of the arts in America. Because the seminar was conducted in the summer of 1992, the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus' encounter with the New World, we began with a two week survey of the age of exploration. We read both Columbus' journals from the period and the startling narrative provided by Cabeza de Vaca of his experiences among native American tribes from Florida to New Mexico in the decades after Columbus.

And then the focus of the seminar began to shift. The syllabus originally called for a survey of American painting and literature from colonial times to the present. Rather than pursuing this course, however, we shifted the class in the direction of minority art and culture. We concentrated increasingly on minority contributions to American society. Our goal was not a course in minority art and literature per se, but a survey of the relations between minority artists and mainstream traditions. We wanted to understand how artists and writers of African-American and Chicano descent dealt with two factors: the power of their own traditions and the give-and-take between those traditions and mainstream society.

We turned to colonial society to examine the up-by-your-own bootstraps rhetoric of Benjamin Franklin. At the same time we read a sentimental novel from the period, Hannah Foster's "The Coquette," and examined paintings and decorative arts at the Yale Art Gallery. We juxtaposed these materials with Phillis Wheatley's poetry, the first major writing in English by an African-American woman.

Frederick Douglass and Harriet Wilson provided us with two seminal texts of nineteenth century Black experience. Douglass' account of his life as a slave led to a discussion of the role of literacy and reading within a pluralistic society. Wilson's narrative of life in the North by a "free" Black woman demonstrated how complicated freedom is. Her novel criticizes not just Northern whites for their hidden racism, but the very tenets of a liberal society founded on slave labor.

In the twentieth century, we read Toni Morrison's first novel, "The Bluest Eye," and Sandra Cisneros' poetic narrative of life in the barrios, "The House on Mango Street." Both concern themselves with the role of films and television in the shaping of ethnic identity.

The seminar was punctuated by a series of three lectures on African-American art and artists of the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The curriculum units that follow divide into three categories: historical studies, arts and performance units, and multi-cultural surveys. I have arranged the historical studies by chronology and the other two categories by author alphabetically.

### **Historical Surveys**

We begin with Diana Doyle's excellent introduction to Columbus and his first encounters with the Taino Indians. Doyle requires her students to develop sophisticated research skills. Her unit focuses on the ecology and the mythology that surrounds the initial meetings of a native tribe with Columbus. She combines art and literature to give a comprehensive overview of her materials.

We next move to the colonial period, where Kelley O'Rourke has re-examined colonial history from the point of view of African-Americans. O'Rourke surveys the arts, crafts, history and literature of the period, looking at eighteenth century life as it was experienced by non-whites. Her unit provides minority fifth graders with a valuable lesson in their past.

Francis Pierce picks up the story with slavery and the Depression. Using a sequence of Newberry award winning books for middle school children, Pierce achieves two important goals: she helps instill pride among minority children by teaching them about their heritage, and she demonstrates the coping skills that have enabled people in the past to succeed in hard times.

Mary-Alice Howley brings the narrative of Black history into the present. In a multidisciplinary unit, she moves her students through the twentieth century. Howley focuses first on the narrative painting of African-American artist Jacob Lawrence, whose bold forms record the history of the Black migration north in the years between the Wars. Lawrence also records the daily lives of Black people, famous or anonymous. Howley's unit then introduces her students to two engaging books about life during the Civil Rights movement.

### **Arts and Performance Units**

Maryanne Basti has created an interdisciplinary unit for middle school children in art classes. Focusing on the tradition of Black spirituals, Basti explores the history, structure and appeal of spirituals. She then translates these insights into a series of art projects for her students, culminating in an ambitious project to paint murals for her school using themes and images derived from the spirituals.

Josh Perlstein similarly creates an interdisciplinary unit. Perlstein looks at the oral tradition of storytelling in African-American culture. He moves his students from folktales told by slaves to contemporary rap music, pausing along the way to examine literary texts that draw on this oral tradition. Perlstein converts his materials into a series of dramatic and performance exercises for his students, allowing them to become master storytellers and performers in their own right.

Diane Platt returns us to the visual arts. Her unit provides a series of valuable exercises to help urban students visualize their environment. Platt introduces students to the paintings of a wide range of artists who have captured on canvas their vision of the city. Platt's unit helps students not only experience the rich diversity of city life, but to see their own neighborhoods in a new and more appreciative light.

## Multicultural Surveys

Iris Davis has created an excellent unit that uses music as a means of introducing her students to the values, history and culture of three different communities. Working with elementary school children, Davis surveys African, Latino and European traditions of music. She provides her students with a wealth of information about other cultures at the same time as she familiarizes them with the way that different national groups use music to express their feelings.

Mia Edmonds-Duff by contrast looks at art as the key to acquainting students with other cultures. Duff divides her unit into two parts: a general introduction to major figures in the history of Western art, and a specific examination of major artists from the African-American and Puerto Rican communities. Duff helps middle school children come to appreciate their own cultural heritage and that of other students in their classes.

Nicolette Perrault approaches the issues of cultural pluralism through the eyes of women. Perrault focuses on the novels of three women from different ethnic groups: Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye," Denise Chavez's "The Last of the Menu Girls," and Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior." Perrault adds an important interdisciplinary dimension to her unit by also looking at the art of distinguished women artists from each of these traditions.

Cynthia Roberts brings questions of pluralism and cultural difference to her high school students. She focuses on Italian-Americans, Hispanics and the Irish in her unit, looking first at the native country of each of these groups and then at the artists and community leaders that each group has produced in America. Roberts' unit also addresses critical reading, writing and thinking skills.

All of these units, in sum, represent thoughtful and often creative ways of addressing ethnic diversity within modern American society. They each strive to introduce students to unfamiliar aspects of their own past or to the history and tradition of racial or ethnic groups different from their own. They are designed to help students take pride in their past, appreciate the values of other cultures, and better understand the importance of the arts in everyday life.

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