



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

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## The Eye Behind the Camera; the Voice Behind the Story

Curriculum Unit 96.03.07  
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The high-school guidance counselor leaned forward at her desk, her eyes closely scanning the paper that she held in her hand. “Yes, I see here on your transcript that you’re doing well in your classes—straight A’s—Every bright—” Mrs. Ward peered over the rims of her glasses. “You know, you’re quite a credit to your race. I don’t often see one of you people doing so well—I’m sure your mother’s proud.”

Helen, a slightly built brown-skinned girl in her senior year at William Penn High School, gave an embarrassed smile and nodded. Sitting in the small office before Mrs. Ward’s imposing desk, the girl felt somewhat trapped between her anxiety over the request she’d just made to be allowed to take certain classes, and her desire to be accommodating. Her gaze was hopeful as she looked at the gray haired woman.

“Now Helen,” Mrs. Ward began in a patronizing tone, “I know you’d *like* to take typing and maybe you would enjoy calculus—”, her voice trailed off ending in a sigh. Helen’s eyes quickly averted themselves and became fixed on the older woman’s pale hands lying on the desk.

“But what can I tell you?” Mrs. Ward went on quickly, impatience creeping into her voice. “How can I recommend that you take classes you’ll never use? I have to be honest. It makes sense for you people to study home economics. You’re a *girl* for goodness sakes! And a smart one at that. Its important for you to learn about taking care of a home—you understand—cooking and the like.” There was a pause as the guidance counselor looked away. “I’m sorry. I’m only trying to help you be realistic. You know the kind of jobs you people get. Listen, I didn’t make this world. Its just the way it is.”

Helen walked stiffly through the school corridors as she returned to class. Biting her lip, she blinked back her tears.

Years later, as a college student I thought of this true story that my mother, Helen, had shared with me when I was a child. As I selected my courses for the semester I was well aware of my responsibility to make my choices count. The many experiences my mother spoke of in her stories have made me more appreciative of the opportunities that have come my way. Such is the nature of story. Stories have within them the power to guide, direct, and sustain. The insights one finds in story, though sometimes painful, are often the motivation to overcome obstacles.

Working with middle school students in an arts magnet school for seven years provided me with many opportunities to use storytelling as a teaching tool in my theater classes. In fact, my most successful teaching

experiences involved integrating the arts into the curriculum. Activities such as role-play, movement, creative writing, visual arts and crafts, and of course, storytelling all offered a variety of learning experiences to my students. Teaching various concepts, problem solving skills, and history under the inclusive umbrella of theater and creative dramatics became much more lively and enjoyable when students were actively engaged!

My goal in teaching is to make learning a holistic and interactive experience for both instructor and student. With this in mind I am always looking for creative and innovative methods to involve my students on a variety of levels. I find the strategies described in Thomas Armstrong's book, *Multiple Intellegences in the Classroom* , to be particularly helpful in this area. Based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, Armstrong presents a wealth of ideas and suggestions for applying Gardner's theory to a classroom setting. He includes teaching strategies, examples of lessons and programs, assessment, curriculum development, and suggestions for classroom management, all within the realm of a multiple intelligences philosophy.

My involvement with storytelling has greatly impacted the manner in which I teach. I have found that students of all ages respond enthusiastically to stories and when they feel comfortable they often share wonderful and insightful tales of their own. Storytelling has awakened within me a continuous desire to know more about everything! It has been a window through which I've been able to explore and experience my own African American heritage, as well as the cultures of others, in a unique and exciting way. There is a certain deliberateness involved in telling a story. In the book, *Keepers of the Earth* , N. Scott Momaday's apt description of story is quoted.

"Stories are formedÉThe formation of the story is particular and perceptible. The storyteller proceeds according to a plan, a design, a sense of proportion and orderÉStories are true to human experienceÉtend to support and confirm our perceptions of the world."

(Micheal Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Keepers of the Earth* , p. xvii)

Story permeates the very fabric of our existence. Through it we communicate our deepest joys and fears. We validate our experiences and bring order to our world. In his foreword to William J. Faulkner's distinguished book, *The Days When the Animals Talked* , Spencer G. Shaw eloquently shares his feelings about the power of story.

"They have been the bridge over which listeners and tellers have crossed from the world of reality into realms of imagination and fantasy. Seeking enchantment that would extend their deepest experiences, eager followers of every age have responded, timelessly, to the demanding call of the ageless art of storytelling."

(William J. Faulkner, *In the Days When the Animals Talked* , p.ix)

Each person brings to any given situation a host of pre-conceived ideas, expectations and frames of reference. This personal perspective functions as a kind of filter, through which we receive and project ideas. Our own biases, interests, and goals play an active role in these preconceptions. They determine how a story is or isn't told as well as how it is heard. This personal slant becomes problematic when it influences the way that 'factual' information is presented. Actual events and characters have been grossly distorted and manipulated depending upon the subjective interpretation they've been given.

For example, most traditional accounts of the history of our nation are told from the perspective of the English

colonizers. However, when we take a closer, more objective look, we must acknowledge the role played by the diverse European presence in the colonies. By the mid 1700s only half of the colonists in the thirteen original colonies were of English descent.

The other ‘half’ of the population included Native Americans, Africans, poor Europeans; among whom were Dutch, Spanish, German, French, and Irish settlers. Still, the most wealthy, prosperous and influential group was undoubtedly the English and it is from their view point that most historical accounts of the development of this country have been seen.

In our contemporary world however, this is beginning to change. It is no longer possible to ignore the diverse nature of this country’s population. In fact, there is much concern about how we will adjust to the changing face of America as the numbers of citizens of non European descent continue to grow. It has become one of the pressing challenges of these times, demanding the attention of countless educators, sociologists, historians and the like. All seek to devise a new approach that is more workable within our present ‘multi’ reality. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2050, half of the population within the United States will be made up of Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans. Our idea of majority and minority may fall by the wayside.

With so many kinds of people, so many different languages, customs, religious practices, expectations, and needs, there are bound to be conflicts of interest and misunderstandings. A quick look at the history of the United States reveals that this is nothing new. Conflicts around employment opportunities, land, education, and wages, of course, are part of an old tradition within our country. The Native Americans and English struggled with conflict resolution and were soon joined by African captives. In addition, there were many other settlers of other European lineage. Later the multicultural ranks swelled with the influx of Japanese and Chinese immigrants, and countless others. Ronald Takaki, renown scholar of multicultural studies, make a good point when he states,

“America does not belong to one race or one group—Americans have been constantly redefining their national identity from the moment of first contact on the Virginia shore.”

(Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, p. 17)

The unit, **The Eye Behind the Camera; The Voice Behind the Story, *Images of Slavery-Fact, Fiction, and Myth*** is, in its most general sense, an exploration of the function of story, be it oral, literal, or visual. In this unit we will examine how film has been used as a storyteller, focusing on its treatment of the African American presence in this country, particularly their role during the period of slavery. This unit also emphasizes the collecting, recording, and sharing of family stories, folktales, and other oral histories in an effort to empower students and to ‘counter’ the negative influences of the cinema and the media as well.

Using storytelling in the classroom provides a way of presenting information within a context that is more meaningful to students. Film can be used in much the same way. Like storytelling, film is based on images. Images are the vehicles through which we interpret and understand our world. Through the moving images in film, stories are told.

In our technologically advanced world, film has become perhaps the most frequently used means of communicating story to a mass audience. It exerts a formidable influence over how we define ourselves, our respective histories, and our world. The power of persuasion has found its strongest ally in film. Like written

literature, film is a permanent document. Its ideas are 'frozen' in time. They are meant to stay as they are within their original context.

This element of permanence carries with it much authority and can be very powerful and influential. Once images are imprinted onto film they are in a sense, sealed within a time capsule. The reaction and perception of their audience may change, but the images remain forever the same, testimonies of visions and perceptions of another time. But here we have a valuable learning tool. We have the opportunity to examine and re-examine the Eye behind the camera as many times as we choose and to look closely at someone else's interpretation of an event and of the roles played by the characters involved. These encapsulated versions give us the advantage of being able to explore the technical and artistic methods used to evoke certain reactions and feelings on behalf of the spectator. We will see that the contents of these presentations can be taken neither lightly nor innocently. The eye is deliberate; the images projected are intentional. This 'eye' is the storyteller, seeking to immerse its listener in world of its own creation and to evoke feelings that serve its own goal.

As we consider how story functions within cinematography, it is important to remember that the Hollywood film industry has been deliberate and calculating in its selection of stories and representations to be shown on film. The eyes and voices through which these images have been presented have been Eurocentric in nature, generally seeking to justify the improprieties created by slavery and colonialism. Film executives and directors have consciously and/or unconsciously used this medium as a tool to maintain and impose certain basic beliefs held by the masses. Authors Shohat and Stam ascertain,

"Beliefs about the origins and evolution of nations often crystallize in the form of stories—The cinema, as the world's storyteller *par excellence*, was ideally suited to relay the projected narratives of nations and empires."

(Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p.101)

Film is perhaps the most significant window through which we can examine the collective perceptions and commonly held beliefs projected onto our society at large. It has played a pivotal role in the international community, reflecting the views and interests of those countries wielding the most power. They have collectively supported and reinforced the notion that Europe reigns supreme. The 'expansion' by certain nations such as Britain, France, Germany, and later, the U.S. signaled,

"the colonial domination of indigenous peoples, the scientific and esthetic disciplining of nature—the capitalist appropriation of resources, and the imperialist ordering of the globe—"  
(Shohat & Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, p. 100)

But theirs is not the only story. Takaki refers to Frederick Douglas's account on the role of African Americans serving in the Union army when he states,

"Like these black soldiers, the people in our study have been actors in history, not merely victims of discrimination and exploitation. They are entitled to be viewed as subjects — as men and women with minds, wills and voices." (Ibid., p.14)

Despite the significant multicultural presence in the population, America maintained an identity that was essentially White, Anglo Saxon. This was the accepted and acceptable prototype. It is against this backdrop that the slanted and oftentimes insidious depiction of African Americans before, during, and after the infamous era of slavery, emerged.

Nowhere is this trend more evident than in Hollywood's treatment of slavery. Even during the age of the silent film Blacks were depicted as lazy, stupid, clownish, inefficient and incapable—in a word—inferior. On the flip side however was the implication that Blacks were bestial, savage-like and brutal. So prevalent was this attitude that African Americans were deemed incapable of portraying themselves. Their characters were played by White actors in blackface, a tradition popularized during the minstrel shows.

Incredibly, this trend continued until after the World War I. Up until this time, Black characters were typically played by Whites in American fiction pictures. Gary Null cites this blatant racism,

“In film after film, the same Negro stereotypes appear—the foolish and irresponsible citizen, the grinning bellhop, or flapjack cook, the hymn-singing churchgoer, the song-and-dance man, the devoted servant or contented slave, the barefoot watermelon eater, the corrupt politician, the hardened criminal, and the African savage—two broad categories—the clown and the black brute”

(Gary Null, *Black Hollywood* , p. 8)

For the purpose of this unit we will focus primarily on Hollywood's portrayal of Blacks and Whites during the period of slavery in this country. Filled to the brim with historical inaccuracies, distorted characterizations, and romanticized portrayals of plantation life, films such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), and the infamous *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), directed by D.W. Griffith, were nevertheless received enthusiastically by overwhelmingly White audiences. The film *The Birth of a Nation* is particularly interesting for several reasons: first, in spite, or perhaps *because* of the controversial content of this film, it was the first feature film to be shown in the White House. Second, in this film we see the roles of subservient Negroes (i.e. field-hands) being played by Blacks while White actors in blackface portrayed those characters regarded as more aggressive and threatening. Also, in response to the film's overt support of terrorist groups such as the KKK as well as its encouragement of unwarranted hatred, condescension, and fear directed towards Blacks, the NAACP mobilized, organizing wide spread protest throughout the African American community nationwide. Shortly thereafter, films made by independent Black film makers commonly known as 'race films', made their cinematic debut in an attempt to counteract the negative images of Blacks in American film.

Although the protests and films were somewhat effective, the course for the portrayal of Blacks in American cinema was essentially set. Echoes of the caricatures appearing in *The Birth of a Nation* would continue to be heard

With the dawn of the talking film these echoes became even more insidious and damaging. Now, in addition to being caricatured by blackfaced Whites, Black characters in film were also expected to speak in a slurred, unintelligible approximation of what Whites wanted their audiences to believe was a plantation dialect. Black actors fortunate enough to secure roles in mainstream film now found themselves trapped, both visually *and* verbally, in a portrayal that had little or nothing to do with reality.

Other films that depict the slavery era include *Jezebel* (1938) , *Gone With the Wind* (1939) , *The Little Colonel* (1935) , and *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) . In all of these films we see clear examples of some of our favorite

stereotypes: the devoted, sassy, desexualized mammy; the ignorant and garish maid; the subservient butler who can dance up a storm.

All is set against a majestic and classic picture, complete with a Big House, gallant, upstanding, slave-holding Southern gentleman and delicate, elegantly dressed, assertive Southern belles.

In the face of such powerful myths and fantasies, it is important to be armed with a realistic understanding of the ante-bellum period in our country. For this reason I suggest that students first be shown films that portray the African American experience during slavery in a objective and sympathetic manner. These films are: *Brother Future* (1991) , and parts of the television mini-series, *Roots* (1977). Later in the unit students will view the movie, *You Must Remember This* (1992). While fictitious, the film is based on the study of the history of independent Black film makers and will help students to achieve a better understanding of the plight of the Black film maker. They will also see why it has been crucial for African American film artists to find the means to represent themselves, to have their stories heard, and their self-defined images seen.

Viewing clips from the films; *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Jezebel* (1938), *The Little Colonel* (1935), as well as William Greaves's *That's Black Entertainment* (1989), will certainly increase the student's awareness of the extent to which stereotyped and distorted images of African Americans have been incorporated into mainstream American film. They will also help to clarify how historical events have been manipulated to justify the oppression of one group by another.

Finally, I have included Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) as examples of work produced by independent Black film makers. After students have viewed selected segments of these films there might be a class discussion focusing on the manner in which characters of were portrayed. Do the characters seem realistic? What messages do the films seem to communicate? To what audience are the films directed? Both of these films illustrate the significance and necessity of self definition. Within them we see Black characters treated with dignity and humanity. We can enjoy personalities that display a wide range of emotions and actions. Films such as these offer us hope that African Americans are that much closer to having their voices heard, to see themselves and to be seen through eyes that are affirming and empowering.

## STRATEGIES

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This unit is most suitable for upper middle-school students, grades six through eight. Ideally, **The Eye Behind the Camera; The Voice behind the Story** , *Images of Slavery—Fact, Fiction, and Myth* , would be a most interesting compliment to the study of the colonial period in the United States in a history class. As a social studies unit it might be taught as part of a larger exploration of various cultural and ethnic groups that constitute the diverse nature of our country. The film element of the unit could be applied to an exploration of theater and American cinema. Many of the themes addressed could serve as stimulating prompts for creative and analytical writing.

This unit has been designed to be covered in five weeks. I have included a weekly schedule indicating a variety of activities that could be conducted with students. Essentially, it is only a guideline, as I realize that it may not be possible or desirable to complete all of the activities suggested. I would encourage that teachers be flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of their students.

In addition to the class sessions, I recommend the scheduling of two in-house field trips where students will be able to view the suggested feature length films, *Brother Future* and *Just Remember This*, in their entirety. Both films are under two hours long. Care should be taken with the selection of film clippings shown to younger students.. As teachers prepare to teach this unit I strongly recommend that they view all film suggestions prior to showing them to their classes.

The material presented in this unit is based on historical trends and events within the development of our nation and, as such, would be beneficial to most student populations.

## ***SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES***

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The following outline serves as a perspective guide to the sequencing of activities to be incorporated into this unit.

### **WEEK 1** Preparing the class for the Unit

-Explore the value of journal keeping with the class. Examples such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* may prove valuable. I have had great success when I've shared entries from journals I kept as a youngster. Time should be set aside each day for journal writing. Explain to students that they will be required to maintain a journal for the purpose of this unit. Although they should not have to share their personal responses, I recommend that some writings be assigned with the intent of sharing them in class. This should prove very enlightening and validating of the students' feelings.

-Introduce the first group of vocabulary words using a variety of techniques that provide students with an opportunity to experience the words and concepts in a variety of ways. These activities might include: semantic webbing, thematic mobiles, tableaus, collages, posters, exemplary skits, and poetry.

-Discuss students' attitudes about issues such as diversity, stereotypes, and prejudice. Contact, Project Directors, **A World of Difference** at the nearest **Anti-Defamation League** for a wealth of information regarding teacher training and curriculum resources.

-Create a class chart that indicates the cultural, religious, geographical, ethnic, and social backgrounds of students in the class in an effort to note similarities and differences. Students might enjoy selecting the categories for this activity.

-Present and conduct activities with related vocabulary.

### **WEEK 2** Introduce film as a tool for gathering information and communicating story.

-Show the film, *Brother Future*, to provide a collective frame of reference and to introduce the period of slavery. Segments from the television series, *Roots* may also be used for this purpose.

-Discuss with students the origins of slavery in this country; how it developed, its social, political, and historical implications, and its impact on attitudes towards race in our society.

-Present and conduct activities with related vocabulary.

**WEEK 3** Acquire a more extensive and accurate understanding of how chattel slavery impacted individuals and institutions in this country through the reading of folktales, biographical accounts and personal narratives

-Discuss the function of folktales and stories within a given community.

-Select class readings from William Faulkner's *In the Days When the Animals Talked* , Belinda Hurmence's *Before Freedom* , and Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* and *Many Thousand Gone* . In these stories one finds accounts of life during slavery told from the perspective of the slave. Many of these stories are testimony to the power of hope, humanity, and determination to sustain the human spirit, even in the face of despair.

-Present and compare the African story, "Talk" and the African American story, "The Talkin' Cooter". (Both stories are summarized in the Sample Lesson Plan.)

-Present and conduct activities with related vocabulary.

**WEEK 4** Select films will be used to illustrate how stereotyped and distorted images of certain groups can affect not only how they are viewed and treated by others, but also how they view themselves.

-Students will view the film, *Just Remember This* . As students discuss the film, you may want to consider some of the following questions suggested by Public Media Video in their informational pamphlet about the film.

Why does Ella open the trunk? Do you think she is doing the right thing?



When Uncle Buddy sees the trunk, he doesn't even want to have where he can see it, so it is stashed away in the garage. Why?

Why do you think Uncle Buddy doesn't tell anyone about his past experience as a film maker?

Why does Uncle Buddy give up his career in the entertainment industry?

How would you feel if what happened to Uncle Buddy and Ella DuChamps happened to you?

Why does Ella have a problem with passing the ball to Cindy? What makes her decide to change her ways?

-To give students clear examples of common stereotypes of African Americans during the slave era, show clippings from the following films. Students will find some of these scenes quite interesting since they also appear in *Just Remember This*. The films are: *That's Black Entertainment*, *Jezebel*, *The Little Colonel*, *The Littlest Rebel* and *The Birth of a Nation*. Perhaps students could list and categorize the various stereotypes that appear in these movies.

### **WEEK 5** Experience the significance of telling the story that is your own.

-This final week of the unit should be devoted to collecting, sharing, and recording of personal and family stories, including tales told within the family setting. Ella, through opening her Uncle Buddy's chest, discovered a treasure of stories and film images. Explain to students that very likely, if they search, they will also find a treasure of stories within their own families. Some will be painful while others will be inspiring, funny, and healing. All are treasures.

-Show clippings from the films, *Hollywood Shuffle* and *Daughters of the Dust* to give students an example of films made by independent Black film makers. Discuss how people of color are portrayed in these movies. Ask students to describe how the scenes make them feel about the characters. How does the film maker seem to feel about the characters? It might be interesting to show clippings first, without informing your students that they were both made by independent Black film makers, and then to show them again after students understand the perspective from which they were created.—I recommend that there be a culminating activity upon completing this unit.

As you can see, students will explore many issues presented in the readings and films. There will be many opportunities to write and record poems, personal narratives and responses, stories, skits and the like can be organized and compiled into a final presentation. If activities in the visual arts emerge from this unit, they should also be displayed.

## **VIEWING OF FILMS**

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**Objective** As a class, students will view a variety of selected films and film cuttings with the following goals in mind:

- To identify and confront bias and stereotypes as they pertain to cultural/ethnic misrepresentation in film.
- To make the connection between the motives ,objectives, and understanding of the ‘storyteller’ and the ways in which this determines how the story is told and how it is intended to be heard.
- To vicariously ‘live through’ the cross cultural encounters of others.
- To determine the qualities attached to characters presented in film.
- To identify and explore the issues brought up in the film.
- To express and share feelings and reactions towards the films treatment and presentation of characters and story.
- To identify with the emotions and perspectives of different characters, thereby developing the ability to empathize with others.

## **FILM SUGGESTIONS**

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The films listed below are only suggestions. As you consider teaching this unit you may encounter other films that are just as compelling and enlightening. I would only urge you to keep the unit objectives in mind in the event that other films are selected to be used. The two films listed below should be seen in their entirety. They are both part of the **Wonder Works** series for children and families and have been aired on PBS. The video taped copies are released by **Public Media Video** and can be rented at Best Videos in Hamden, Connecticut.

### **1-BROTHER FUTURE, 1991, 116 mins.**

T.J., a slick urban youth , neglects his schoolwork and makes money through scams and Rip-offs. One day, while fleeing the police, T.J. find his world turned upside down after he gets knocked unconscious and wakes up to find that he has been transported back through time to 1822 Charleston, SC, where he is taken captive as a slave. Is T.J. up to the challenge that is required for him to get home again?

### **2-YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS, 1992, 102 mins.**

Ella, a budding young basketball star, makes an amazing discovery! In the late '40s, her beloved great-uncle

Buddy, now a barber, was one of Hollywood's first black film directors! Her uncle is devastated with her discovery. Why? And why has he kept silent all these years? Ella must uncover the truth if she is to unearth a rich cultural legacy and help her uncle make peace with his past.

The following films will be viewed in short clips:

Roots The Little Colonel That's Black Entertainment Jezebel

Birth of a Nation Hollywood Shuffle Daughters of the Dust

## ***RELATED VOCABULARY :***

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### *Group 1*

ANCESTOR	BELIEF	CULTURE
DISCRIMINATION	DIVERSITY	ETHNIC
GENERALIZATION	HERITAGE	IMMIGRANT
LABEL	PREJUDIC	RACE
RACISM	STEREOTYPE	TRADITION
EMPATHY	PRECONCEPTION	MULTICULTURAL

### *Group 2*

SLAVERY	CODE LAWS	SLAVE LAWS
HOUSE SLAVE	INDENTURED SERVANT	OVERSEER
PLANTATION	BREAK-IN	FIELD HAND
ABOLITIONIST	JUNETEENTH	FUGITIVE SLAVE ACT
RECONSTRUCTION	AUCTION	SLAVER
FREE STATE	FREEDMEN	SPIRITUAL
CODE LANGUAGE	UNDERGROUND RAILROAD	RACE FILM

### *Group 3*

FOLKLORE	FOLKTALE	ORAL TRADITION
NARRATIVE	COMPARE	CONTRAST
CRITIQUE	TRICKSTER	COOTER
DIRECTOR	PRODUCER	SPECTATOR

## **TIPS FOR TEACHING**

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This is intended to be an integrated unit, utilizing a variety of learning styles and methods of evaluation. The emphasis is on active learning and teaching, utilizing the many intelligences of the students and teacher. The following activities are adaptations of those presented by Thomas G. Gunning in his text, *Creating Reading Instruction for All Children*. For a more detailed and thorough description, refer to the text on the pages indicated.

### **Preparation for reading assignments and viewing films , (p. 351)**

- Before reading or viewing suggested literature and films, students should receive some guidance to build background essential for understanding the material to be covered.
- To insure better comprehension students may be given questions to consider as they look at the films and complete reading assignments. They might also make predictions which they will evaluate as they explore the material in the unit.
- Constructing a cumulative plot outline or story map could help keep track of main events. If the story involves a long journey, the character's progress might be charted on a map.
- Evoking personal responses from the students as they are presented with the material in this unit is very important. Response should precede analysis and general discussion.

### **Suggested writing Activities , (p. 446)**

#### Academic **Newspapers**

Essay Photo essays/captions

Business/economic **General communication**

Seeking information Announcements

Ordering a product newsletters

Civic/personal development

letters **Creative**

Letter to the editor Story, poem, verse

Seeking information Play/script

Everyday/practical **Personal**

lists, notices Diary, Journal

Social **Writing to learn**

Letters Comparison of characters, places,  
events, issues, processes

Journal of observation

Critiquing a story, play, movie, or TV program

-The KWL Plus (Know, Want to Know, and Learn) is a technique designed to help students build and organize background knowledge as well as seek out and reflect on key elements as they encounter it in class material. (p. 304-306)

-To incorporate the KWL plus technique it would be helpful to design a chart that includes the following information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Topic: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

What we know \_\_\_\_\_

**What we want to know** \_\_\_\_\_

**What we learned** \_\_\_\_\_

**What we still have to learn** \_\_\_\_\_

-Some of the steps involved in KWL Plus are: Brainstorming, categorizing, predicting, and questioning,

## **SAMPLE LESSON I**

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**OBJECTIVES** Viewing the PBS family movie, *Brother Future*, will give students a common frame of reference as they begin their inquiry into the particulars surrounding slavery and the Southland at that time. Students will be aware that this cinematic account of slavery is told in a gentler, more sympathetic voice than those heard in most other films. After viewing *Brother Future* and shorter segments of other films such as the Television Series, *Roots*, the class should be well equipped to recognize and identify many of the inaccuracies and stereotypes so often depicted in other films dealing with the same historical/social period.

**NOTES** This film is an excellent point of entry for students in this age group. For one thing, it starts off with the familiar: scenes from school, T.J.'s nonchalant attitudes towards education, the urban environment, and of course, the hip-hop music. The sudden transition into slavery hits a nerve, perhaps a primordial fear that it could really happen; a person could wake up from their sleep and find themselves trappedÉa prisoner of slavery. The audience empathizes with T.J.'s plight, personalizing his experiences and the lessons that he learns through his encounter with slavery. Our perception of slavery becomes more focused and detailed as we become acquainted with real-life individuals, complete with feelings: hope, love, anger, fear, and compassion. We begin to see the people who lived during this time, whose efforts, dreams and struggles paved the path upon which we walk, even now.

The film, *Brother Future* is really the launching pad of this unit. The following activities are but a small sampling of the possible areas that students may want to look into. Granted, exploring the ante-bellum South is a big undertaking. It would not be possible to cover it in its full extent in a unit such as this. With this in mind, my suggestion is that you follow the responses of your students. They will let you know where their interests are.

***ACTIVITIES Depending on the teacher's judgment, some of these activities may be presented or after viewing the film, Brother Future.***

1) Within the film we encounter the personage of Denmark Vessey, a South Carolina slave who planned one of the largest and elaborate uprising on record. His plans were thwarted when he was betrayed by another slave. This brief description barely scratches the surface of this remarkable man.

There was a wealth of outstanding personalities who lived during this period. Many have been obscured in historical accounts. Many are heroes unsung. For the purpose of letting their stories be heard students will choose a person to investigate and to later personify while being interviewed by classmates. Who they decide to research is left to the student's discretion, however it must be a person relevant to the slavery period in this country. In the event that they can find no one they wish to study, they might create a composite character based on the information they have collected during this activity.

2) Many of the themes and issues in the film *Brother Future* pertain to slavery and contemporary times, as well. With this in mind, students will:

- a. Identify themes, values, trends, issues, and concerns that appear within the film.
- b. Compare and contrast their present and past significance.
- c-In small groups write and present skits or simulations that illustrate their understanding of a particular theme.
- d. Create posters or collages that express their responses to various issues. These may be done in cooperative groups, and can focus on the period of slavery and as well as contemporary concerns.

The following list includes themes that I identified:

Contemporary/Urban	<b><i>Slavery Period</i></b>
street-life survival skills	education
dealing with the law	role of music
peer pressure	code language
ethical behavior (stealing etc.)	social hierarchy
clothing	morality

respect for teachers and elders religion  
friendship plantation politics  
education historical/cultural ties  
respect for self and others reading and writing skills  
slang talk selflessness

Examining the institution of slavery within a social and political context will provide students with information necessary to better understand the perspectives offered in many film portrayals of this era. With this in mind, I have prepared a brief narrative describing some of the more significant events that precipitated the large-scale importation of African captives into this country.

## **IMAGES OF SLAVERY, BASED ON FACT**

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During the month of August, in the year 1619, a Dutch ship carrying twenty 'Negars' landed in Jamestown, Virginia. These Africans had been stolen from their homes by slave traders who then traded them for food and other supplies. A year later the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock. These newly arrived Africans were made indentured servants. As such they were obligated to serve the planters or farmers who had traded for them for a given length of time, usually seven years. There were also Native American and White indentured servants

The role of the indentured servant in the early establishment of the colonies is very important as "the production and improvement of these properties depended on these workers." (Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror*, p. 54)

During the seventeenth century, the great majority of the colonists were servants. While most came from England, many other came from Germany and Ireland. All were considered 'outcasts' in their societies. Not all White settlers came to the 'New World' voluntarily.

"English poor laws for the correction and punishment of rogues and idle people were enforced in Ireland, and this led to the wholesale kidnapping of young Irish women and men to supply the labor needs of the colonies." (Ibid.)

Though oftentimes demeaning and difficult, the slave-like condition of the indentured servant held a glimmer of hope for there was the future promise of freedom, as well as the lure of prosperity and the possibility of improving their status in a new society.

Still, for many servants, life in the colonies became unbearable. Some opted to escape, only to be severely punished upon recapture. Blacks were especially disadvantaged. Unlike the Native Americans, they were unfamiliar with the surrounding countryside. Unlike the European indentured servants, their dark skin made them easy to find once they had escaped. In addition, their unfamiliarity with the language as well as the terms of indentured servitude meant that they could not read their English contracts. The English soon learned that it was easy to take advantage of their African servants. While an insubordinate White might have his service extended for several years, his Black counterpart often saw his term of service extended, requiring him to labor for 'life'.

Whatever meager 'promise' the terms of indentured servitude might have held, for Black servants, this 'promise' soon faded.

“Some estate inventories showed that African laborers were more *valuable* than English Indentured servants, indicating that the former had a longer period of bound service.” (Ibid., p. 56)

Long before slavery became institutionalized Black workers were being singled out and degraded. Sentenced to life-long service, they were regarded as property. They were in fact, slaves. And from the planter’s point of view, life-long servitude was certainly more cost efficient than the limited service of an indentured servant.

By 1650, the Black population in the colonies was still relatively small, numbering about three hundred, but as the century came to a close that number began to increase dramatically. In 1661 the Virginia Assembly passed a new law which legalized the use of Africans as slaves. This law said that a child born to a Black slave woman was to be a slave permanently. It made no difference if the child’s father was White or Native American. Several years later in 1705, a law in Virginia designated non-Christian servants imported into this country to be slaves, and as such, be bought and sold. Similar laws were passed in other colonies. By this time the majority of laborers brought to this country were African captives. It quickly became clear to merchants in both the North and South that there was a handsome profit to be made importing and selling Africans as slaves. The Institution of Slavery was off to a running start.

One can observe some elements of the short and long term repercussions inherent to this infamous turn of events in American history in the ambivalence expressed by Thomas Jefferson, who was himself an elite planter and owner of some 267 slaves.

“The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards a slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worse passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manner and morals undepraved by such circumstances.” ( *Notes on the State of Virginia* , Thomas Jefferson, pp. 155, quoted by Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror* , p. 70)

Jefferson’s observation of the daunting effect that the institution of slavery had on all involved was undeniably true. The justifications, rationalizations, and class designations that were employed to defend slavery created an insidious manifestation of racism and classism that remains with us today. Although slavery has long been abolished, many of the stereotypes, negative attributes as well as political obstacles used to insure the survival of that institution, survive. They have determined the nature of the stories told about African Americans in literature, visual depiction, film and all aspects of the media. These same attitudes have been responsible for the structuring of institutions that have historically denied African Americans access to the resources needed to tell their stories and have them heard.

For further information about slavery in the United States consult the following resources:

- \* Gerald Early, Editor. *Lure and Loathing*
- \* Ellwood Parry, *The Images of the Indian and the Black Man in American Art*
- \* Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror*
- \* Caroly Kott Washburne, *A Multicultural Portrait of Colonial Life*



- \* Harris, Middleton. *The Black Book*
- \* Lerrone Bennett, JR., *Before the Mayflower*
- \* Ella Shohat / Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*
- \* Bell Irvin Wiley, *Southern Negroes* , 1861-1865

To attain a more poignant and personal view of how slavery was experienced by Americans, White and Black alike, I strongly recommend that selections from the following material be included in further activities. Most of the stories and personal accounts are suitable for student reading. I have indicated some that I feel would work especially well in this unit.

- \* Belinda Hermence, *Before Freedom, 48 Histories of Former North and South Carolina Slaves*
- \* William J. Faulkner, *The Days When the Animals Talked* , *Black American Folktales and How They Came To Be*
- \* Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly*
- \* Virginia Hamilton, *Many Thousand Gone* , *African Americans From Slavery to Freedom*

## ***SAMPLE LESSON II***

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***OBJECTIVES*** After students are told the African and African American versions of the same story, students will identify and compare the voice of the teller, their intended audience, as well as their intent. Since one of the stories has been adapted to meet the needs of African Americans during the period of slavery, students and teacher will both have an opportunity to assess their prior knowledge on this topic.

***NOTES*** The two folktales suggested below are good examples of how stories change and evolve, depending on the person doing the telling. The way in which the teller responds to different environments, and circumstances will affect their perspective and the story will be changed accordingly. We can see that that the needs and intentions of the teller of “Talk” and that of “The Talkin’ Cooter” are each unique from the other.

'Talk', as told within the African oral tradition, function as a means of teaching youngsters behavior decorum within the community. Adults might also use it among themselves as a source of entertainment or to illustrate and emphasize a point. "The Talkin' Cooter", on the other hand, would have been shared among the slaves to sustain their dreams of freedom. By celebrating Jim's success they bolstered their own hopes to one day be free and warded off the despondence and bitterness that threatened to conquer their spirit.

"The Talkin' Cooter", like many African American tales of this period, is a dreamer's tale. It served as a wish-fulfilling fantasy where the lowly slave, in this case the least empowered of all, being but a child, challenges the master and won. In actuality slaves rarely had any bargaining power and were almost never given their freedom.

## WARM-UP ACTIVITIES

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The following activities engage students in exploring how a teller's intent or motive can affect the manner in which they relate a story. Students will also play with the ever-changing and evolving nature of the oral tale and will better understand that what the teller says may not necessarily be what the listener *hears* .

1) Operator (sometimes called *Telephone* )

2) Who Broke the Vase?

-Sitting in a circle, students are asked in turn, if they broke Mama's favorite vase. They always deny that it was their fault and go on to place the blame on the student sitting beside them, describing how *they* broke the vase in great detail. When that person is asked whether the story is true, they, of course, deny it and then blame the person sitting beside *them* . Fortunately, Mama has a forgiving nature and the game concludes with her announcing that the broken vase was only one of several cheap reproductions that she keeps stored in the closet!

## STORIES

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I encourage teachers to tell, rather than read the following folktales. The images are clear and the sequence of events is simple. Read through the stories several times in advance, constructing a web or map in order to become more familiar and comfortable with them. and construct a web or map of them to assist you in the telling. Since students will be asked to compare and contrast different aspects of these stories, both should be presented in one sitting. For more suggestions on storytelling tips and techniques refer to bibliography.

1) "Talk", a West African folktale

An African hunter encounters a human skull in the bush. When it 'speaks' to him he rushes back to his village, telling everyone of what he has seen. The king requests that the hunter

show him the skull and the hunter enthusiastically obliges. This time, however, the skull will not speak and the hunter learns a hard lesson. (See Roger D. Abrahams, *African Folktales* , p. 1)

2) “The Talkin’ Cooter”, an African-American folktale

Jim, a slave boy who dreams of freedom, enjoys a stroke of luck when he befriends a talking, playing, and singing cooter mud-turtle who indirectly helps Jim to realize his dream. (See Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly* , p. 151)

## **ACTIVITIES**

1) Compare and contrast the following:

- \* The teller of each story,
- \* Their intent or reason for telling the story
- \* The audience for which the tale is intended.

2) Explore the following questions:

- \* How did the original story, “Talk”, change?
- \* In what ways are the stories different?
- \* In what ways are they the same?
- \* Why do you think they changed?
- \* Why might we share these stories now?
- \* Who would we share them with?

3) ‘The Letter’

A month or so has passed since Jim was awarded his freedom. He is trying to make a life for himself within his new status of ‘freed-man’ Jim decides that it is time to write his former owner. He has so much to tell him. Using the first person, students will write a letter to Jim’s former owner as if they themselves were Jim. They should include;

- \* A description of Jim’s current living quarters
- \* Whether or not he is living in a ‘free’ state
- \* The kind of work available to him,
- \* How he is treated by other Blacks and Whites.

They should explain the circumstances under which the letter was written;

- \* Was Jim was able to write it himself ? If so, explain how he learned to read and write.
- \* Did he get someone else to write it for him?

-Finally, have students include any comments or words of advice that Jim would like to share with the slave owner about the institution of slavery, the kind of life slaves were forced to lead, prospects of freedom, or even the hope that soon there would be no more slaves and no more slave owners.

**NOTE Activities 1 and 2 can be approached in a variety of ways. I recommend that teachers use several strategies with their students to ensure a more interactive and end engaging lesson. These include: cooperative learning groups, class brainstorming, Venn diagrams, webbing, and semantic mapping. Students can be encouraged to respond personally through writing activities, art work, and dramatizations.**

'The Letter' activity is particularly significant because it will provide a base for both teacher and student to assess their collective prior knowledge regarding the period of slavery.

KWL Plus would be an ideal technique to apply here. As it will stimulate a sense of inquiry among the students and create a genuine interest in the material to be presented.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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We would do well to remember that, while the widespread misrepresentation of Blacks and other groups, as well, in American film is a *very* serious matter, it should not be taken *seriously*. As Manthia Diawaras suggests in her book, *Black American Cinema*, these stereotypes *cannot* represent African Americans, Native Americans, or any other minority group. They must be regarded as representatives of White prejudice towards other groups. They reflect an *attitude*, vile though it may be, and not a reality. With each effort to reclaim our images and share our stories, these distorted reflections will continue to crack, until they finally shatter.

My hope is that the films and activities presented in the unit will leave young people better equipped with the skills necessary to look beyond the glittery facade of Hollywood and the slick, fast-paced packaging of television and understand the difference between what is fact, what is fiction, and what is reality.

This unit, *The Eye Behind the Camera; the Voice Behind the Story* is both a call and a response. It is a response to the misguided, deliberate, and systematic misrepresentation of minority groups within this country.. The process of excluding and marginalizing different groups has been a powerful means of denying them their rightful place in society. It is also a call to discover, and then redefine our stories, our cultural legacies, our images. It is a call for us to let *our* voice *be* the voice behind our story and *our* eyes the eyes behind a camera which projects images that are objective, honest, and humane.

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