



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

Hollywood and Higher Learning

Curriculum Unit 96.03.12
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This curriculum has been developed for use in high schools as a way to prepare students for college. It is specifically designed for grades 9-12 with a particular focus on 11th graders.

I have picked four films for students to view and analyze, and have developed guidelines and questions for thoughtful viewing. The unit also will present some biographical information about the filmmakers (in particular John Singleton and Spike Lee) and some of the early reviews of their controversial films.

My unit focuses on films that show college life, both fictionally and in documentary form. Since preparing for college is a major focus in my junior level classes I will use this curriculum with my 11th grade English class as part of our “getting ready for college” unit. I explain what an important year 11th grade is for my students, and I stress that it is not too late for them to do the necessary things to get accepted into college. I will use this unit early in the year, from the middle of September until late November. My aim is to use Hollywood as a way to pump my students up about college, especially marginal students who may not visualize themselves going to college at all.

This year I showed *Men at Morehouse*, a documentary about Morehouse College. It talked about preparing young black men to be leaders in their community, and it showed how Spelman (Morehouse’s sister school) prepares its female students to be strong leaders as well. I found, to my surprise, that the students found it incredibly inspiring. I realized by their reaction that they want to be successful; they just do not know how to go about it and do not have the confidence. College, in their minds, is for the other kids—the smart kids, the lucky kids, the rich kids. I want to help change this assumption.

These are my overall objectives for this unit:

1. To introduce high school students to a variety of movies that deal with college and/or college decision making.
2. To develop my students’ critical and analytical viewing skills.
3. To help my students make decisions about college by seeing what is out there and what is available to them.
4. To allow my students to reflect on some of the issues they will encounter in college (such as sexual identity, racial identity, racial conflicts, professor/student relationships, course loads, academically rigorous schedules) so that they can be better prepared.

5. To familiarize students with Spike Lee and John Singleton.

The movies I will show are *School Daze* , *Higher Learning* , *Hoop Dreams* , and *Men at Morehouse* . I chose these movies both for their focus on the college experience and for their diversity of approach. Two are fictional, two are documentaries. All deal, primarily, with issues that face African-American students. Bearing in mind that most movies, like most of Hollywood, are geared toward a white audience, I have designed my unit for students who need to see people they can identify with.

More broadly I am aiming this curriculum at a group of kids who are not encouraged by their homes, their teachers, their schools, or their communities, to go to college and seek “higher learning”. It is not that I do not care about the upper middle-class black and white kids who have concerns and questions about college. I do. But this unit is not really for them. It is for that kid who never in a million years dreamed she would be able to go to college. And, if she does achieve her dream, I want her as prepared as possible, academically and, just as importantly, socially.

Hoop Dreams is a natural springboard for discussion about college decision-making. It is about two young men who are trying to get into college on basketball scholarships. The movie shows them walking on a variety of campuses and being pitched by coaches and admissions personnel. I think these scenes would provide an interesting way to discuss with my students about how to choose a college that is right for them and an excellent way to explore the options (and scholarships) open to them if they decide to pursue college.

I will continue with another documentary, *Men at Morehouse* . Morehouse College is a private, four year men’s liberal arts college located in Atlanta, Georgia. It was established in 1867 and is the alma mater of both Martin Luther King, Jr and Spike Lee. Through viewing and discussion we will explore the goals of Morehouse and the variety and diversity of its student body. I am hopeful that my students’ goals, attitudes, and values will emerge.

The third film I will show is John Singleton’s *Higher Learning* . It addresses a great many social issues that can be discussed in the classroom, including racial identity, sexual identity, and date rape. I have shown this film previously to my 9th grade Critical Thinking and Viewing class and students continue to request this film over all other choices. A writing assignment on the film required them to analyze the title, write a brief summary, analyze the movie’s main point, describe their favorite part and least favorite part, and to answer the question, “When I go to college I hope . . . ”. All my students wrote that they hoped they would not be shot when they went to college. This, obviously, was not the message I wanted them to come away with. I needed to prepare them better, and to this end I have devised a series of questions to go along with the viewing.

The last film in the unit is Spike Lee’s *School Daze* . This is because it is the most controversial. This film explores topics such as skin color, hazing, and apartheid. The movie is set at a black college in the south during Homecoming weekend. A DJ in Atlanta called the movie “*West Side Story* with an apartheid twist.”

The movie contains a scene between the locals, the townies, who confront the college boys at a local Kentucky Fried Chicken. The townies, who envy the college kids say to them “You’re still niggers, even with a

college education.” Toni Cade Bambara writes that “there is a vulnerability to the moment. What is at stake for the entire community that refuses to wake up is sounded here.” (Bambara, 54) This is a sensitive issue for many of my students because they are the townies who have felt disenfranchised from the Yale community. Spike Lee is at his best when he makes his viewers uncomfortable, but because of this a sense of cohesion and unity is needed within the group to have any really valuable and honest discussions. By showing his movie last the needed cohesion in the class, hopefully, will have been built.

Students will begin this unit by talking in a large group about college. We will brainstorm together about what college is like, why some people go, and some do not, what happens there, what some of the differences between schools are and what places have they heard about. Unfortunately, there is a certain stigma attached to low-level students who try to better themselves through school. They are often considered suckers who are trying to “act white”. I realize this is a controversial statement but it needs to be addressed so that the kids who are afraid of being labeled sucker can have their dreams. Because of this problem we will then work in smaller groups so that they can be honest and a lot less intimidated.

In these small groups students will, while working with copies of *Petersen’s Guide to Colleges and Universities*, talk about the college selection process. Students will fill out a questionnaire that asks the following questions:

1. Why do you want to go to college?
2. Do you want to be in the city or in the country?
3. Do you want a coed or an all female/all male college?
4. Do you want to go to a big school or a small school?
5. What things do you need to do to be better prepared?

Students will then be required to write their personal statement for college. In the beginning I will ask them to use the outline below. From this base they can develop a more creative and powerful piece of writing. For example, if in their autobiography a certain section—an early childhood memory, perhaps—best explains who they are now and some of the lessons they have learned in life, we will work together to develop just that section. But for most students a clear autobiographical outline seems to work best.

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Early childhood memories (both good and bad)
3. Family life
4. High school experiences (both good and bad)
5. Extracurricular activities
6. Outside interests, hobbies, work experience
7. Greatest accomplishment
8. Future goals and ambitions

Men at Morehouse was produced by Georgia Public TV. This video gives an historical background on the college as well as its current goals. It shows a variety of students who currently attend Morehouse. Some are scholarship students, some are not.

The most powerful thing about this video is its emphasis on showing the commitment Morehouse College has to turning young boys into men, gentlemen, with values and self-esteem. The values Morehouse stress above all others are unity, brotherhood, and pride. Students are taught responsibility and self-respect and to care for themselves as well as others. Morehouse believes they are making future leaders who will go back into their communities to help others. Morehouse has a reputation for greatness. It is a well deserved one and one that the school is anxious to keep.

Last year's students were very inspired by this documentary and had some of the following things to say:

"Morehouse wants their students to succeed in life. They explain that it is time to grow up. They are not children anymore."

"Morehouse is a school that inspires the students academically and spiritually. It teaches the students respect for themselves, their families and for society. It seems like it is more than a school. It is a home."

"The most interesting thing to me about the documentary was when they told the students they were 'captains of their soul.'

"I found the whole documentary interesting. I especially liked the way Morehouse taught people how to respect females."

"If I were president of a college, I would teach them the same things Morehouse tries to teach—never give up no matter what, don't turn to drugs. When you think your self-esteem is going down think things out and bring yourself back up. Always look at a person as a person, not a color. Always remember we all come from the same place."

"I like how they paired the men from Morehouse with a female from their sister-school."

"I enjoyed Hakeem's speech the most. He had a rough life but this school changed him a lot. He became a man by attending Morehouse."

"I remember trying to join the boy scouts and they told me I couldn't join because I wasn't catholic. You can't help growing up thinking something is amiss."

Spike Lee

School Daze is set at a black college (Mission College) during homecoming weekend. It takes a serious and comic look at black colleges and the students who go there. It is also a musical. "Spike Lee, to make a wake up call to the Black community chooses an enshrined genre of the dominant cinema, musical comedy, whose conventions were not designed to address an embattled community's concerns." (Bambara, 49)

It is this originality that, for me, is so striking about Lee's films. What better way to send a message than through the "genre of the dominant cinema?" Howard Baker Jr, however, writing in *Black American Cinema* feels that "it is not that Lee's films are devastatingly original, telling us things we do not know. What is striking about his work is that it is, in fact, so thoroughly grounded in what we all know, but refuse to acknowledge,

Speak, regret, or change.” (Baker, 167)

School Daze has many controversial topics that we refuse to acknowledge, including apartheid and concepts of beauty within the Black community. The issue of color is introduced early in the film with a huge dance sequence reminiscent of a 1940’s big band dance number called “Good and Bad Hair”. This conflict is between the Wannabees who have straightened their hair and wear blue contact lenses and the Jigaboos who are darker skinned and working class. Ernest Dickerson, Director of Photography for *School Daze* said that “we were determined to make a film which would allow Black folks to see themselves up on the screen and really feel proud; proud about who they are and how they look. And since the film is about beauty—how there are different types of beauty, not just the Western standard—we knew that we had to make all the Black folks in the film look good. The Wannabees are pursuing a Eurocentric form of beauty to the point that they deny all that is Afrocentric. Even though both forms of beauty are valid, the film says don’t turn your back on what’s really you.” (Lee and Jones, 23)

The anti-apartheid theme is portrayed by Dap (Laurence Fishburne) who wants Mission College to divest their interests in South Africa. He is urging the students to take action, march, disrupt classes and stage sit ins.

Even though *School Daze* is a musical, “it is not good news on campus that *Daze* is singing and dancing about. More is at stake at Mission than whether Grady (Bill Nunn) makes a touchdown. A wake up call occurs when the chairperson of the board of trustees advises the president of the college to squash the student-led divest-now campaign because the people who finance the college will not tolerate being told where they may or may not invest their money. The chairperson laments, ‘Why won’t our people support our institutions?’” (Bambara, 49)

Howard A. Baker, Jr. continues this lament in his essay “Spike Lee and the Commerce of Culture”. “The upfront intentionality of *School Daze* has to do with Black institution-building in America. The opening visuals of slave ships, coffles, one-roomed Southern shanties lead into a photographic catalogue of Black leaders, intellectuals, and earnestly scrubbed Black students and workers. Lee is concerned in his third film with the Black bourgeois imitation of White fraternal and sororal conformity—the mindless subjugation of the body and soul to initiatory brutality in the name of ‘brotherhood’ or ‘sisterhood’. Such conformity is patently obvious and abundantly parodied in *School Daze*. The film also makes it clear that the fraternity mentality in all of its imitative idiocy is emblematic of the Black college tradition as a whole, a tradition that finds Black presidents and members of boards of trustees terrified of offending their White overlords and benefactors.” (Diawara, 167)

These three issues—apartheid, skin color, and the role (mission) of black colleges—are excellent topics of discussion for Black students considering college.

Spike Lee’s success with this film “helped create a climate of receptivity for Black filmmakers in Hollywood.” (Bambara, 51) One of the people he helped pave the way for was John Singleton.

“In 1991 the black movie boom continued to expand with the release of twelve films directed by African Americans, along with over twenty other productions that starred or had significant roles for black actors. This boom has materialized out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions that African Americans continue to endure in the nation’s decaying urban centers.” (Guerrero, 158-59)

John Singleton’s first movie *Boyz n The Hood* tried to explore this anger and frustration. Ironically it opened

amidst controversy and violence. “On the night of the film’s release violence spread across the nation’s theatres in an explosion of gang-related fights and shootings that left two people dead and more than thirty wounded. Director Singleton was quick to defend his vision and in a series of press conferences and interviews put the controversy into perspective. He noted that he didn’t create the conditions under which people shoot each other. And keeping *Boyz* theme in mind, he further points out that this kind of violence happens because there’s a whole generation of people who are disenfranchised.” (Guerrero, 183).

Richard Schickel from *Time* summed up this dilemma well. “It is difficult to be a young black filmmaker like John Singleton. His race tends to impose racism on him as a subject. His youth and his status as a generational spokesman oblige him to assume a particular attitude. His audience meanwhile, makes, or seems to make, contradictory demands on him—for violently dramatic confrontations on one hand; for hopeful, or at least not entirely bleak, conclusions on the other.” (Schickel, 71)

Singleton continues to explore racial violence in his 1994 film *Higher Learning*. This film, like *School Daze*, is based on a college campus. “The institution is named Columbus University after the dead white European Male whose ‘discovery’ of America led to genocide” (Ebert, 42). It focuses on the freshman year of three main characters. One, Malik (Omar Epps) learns whether he is running track for himself or for “the white man”. A young female student (Kristy Swanson) who is date raped, explores her sexual identity by having sex with a man and with a woman. Remi (Michael Rapaport) a young man from Idaho, scared of keeping up academically and a bit of a loser socially, finds respite and a safe haven with a group of white supremacists who call him their “Aryan brother”.

Laurence Fishburne plays a Political Science professor who is trying hard to teach his students and prepare them for the world outside the campus. He is particularly tough on Malik who has graduated from high school but does not know how to write a paper or think clearly. Malik thought he could skate through college by running track and blowing off his classes but Fishburne wants him to have an education when Malik the power of an education by saying “ if you don’t have the information you can’t seize the power.”

In a movie review for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, Roger Ebert writes that “Singleton’s film is interesting for a lot of reasons. Like Spike Lee’s *School Daze*, Singleton’s *Higher Learning* is idealistic in a way that seems refreshingly dated: He believes the campus should allow students from different races and places to get to know one another, instead of compartmenting them into rigid self-righteousness. At a time when some believe only blacks should teach black studies and the ideas of dead white European males should hardly be taught at all, this is almost radical. He sees with a clear eye and a strong will, and is not persuaded by fashionable ideologies. His movies are thought-provoking because he uses familiar kinds of characters and then asks hard questions about them.” These hard questions are important for students to ponder and write about.

LESSON PLAN 1

Students will view the documentary *Men at Morehouse* and write an essay on the following questions:

(To obtain a copy of the video call Channel 13 in New York City at 1-800-828-4727. The cost is 24.95 + \$5.00 for shipping and handling. Additional information on Morehouse College can be obtained by calling them directly at 1-800-851-1254.)

1. Describe Morehouse College. Who goes there? What type of curriculum does it have?
2. What values does Morehouse try to instill in its students? Support your answer with examples from the video.
3. What was the most interesting thing to you about the documentary?
4. If you were president of a college what values and/or courses would you try to teach?
5. What are your plans for after high school?

LESSON PLAN 2

Students will view *School Daze* and answer the following questions:

1. Compare and contrast the two main characters, Dap and Julian
2. Who were the Gamma Rays?
3. What is hazing?
4. What does the NAACP stand for?
5. What is apartheid?
6. Why does Dap almost get expelled from school over South Africa?
7. What is the conflict between the Wannabees and the Jigaboos?
8. What is the conflict at Kentucky Fried Chicken, between the students at Mission college and the local townies about?
9. Why does Spike Lee call his production company "Forty acres and a mule?"
10. What does Spike Lee mean when he tells his viewers at the end of the movie to "WAKE UP"?

LESSON PLAN 3

Students will view the movie *Higher Learning* and answer the following questions:

1. Who was your favorite character? Why?
2. What kind of professor does Phipps (Laurence Fishburne) seem to be like? Do you think he is a good teacher or bad teacher? What is he trying to teach Malik (Omar Epps)?
3. What does the title *Higher Learning* mean?
4. What things other than school subjects did the students learn there?
5. How is sexual identity explored in this film?
6. How is racial identity explored in this film?
7. What is meant by white supremacy?
8. Who is the source of white supremacist thoughts and beliefs?
9. What caused Remi to turn to a racist group?
10. Columbus University was a big, co-ed school. Is this the kind of college you want to go to? Explain.
11. Who directed this movie?
12. What other famous movie did he direct?
13. What is date rape?
14. Explain “no means no”!
15. Explain the following line from the movie: “If you don’t have the information you can’t seize the power.”
16. The movie ends with the word “UNLEARN.” Why did the director end the movie this way? What is he trying to say?

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