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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2024 Volume II: A History of Black People as Readers: A Genealogy of Critical Literacy

Self-Evident and Self-Contradictory: Black Readings of the Declaration of Independence

Guide for Curriculum Unit 24.02.08, published September 2024

by Matthew Schaffer

In this unit, designed for a Grade 10 Civics curriculum, students will analyze the Declaration of Independence through the lens of Black thinkers and intellectuals. Starting with an analysis of the influences to the drafting and writing of the Declaration, students will analyze how Black people living in America were influenced by and reacted to the United States' war against Great Britain. Moving across time periods, students will consider how Black thinkers used the rhetoric of the Declaration across time periods, focusing on abolitionism, the Civil Rights movement, and contemporary fights for justice and equality. Intertwined throughout the course of the unit are critical observations on Black literacy, and how both free and enslaved people learned to read and used reading as a tool for liberation. Students will read thinkers like Lemuel Haynes, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Tracy K. Smith, to understand the Black reading and interpretation of this foundational document of American government.

(Developed for Civics, grade 10; recommended for Civics/U.S. Government and U.S. History, grades 8-12)

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