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Our Spiritual Strivings: Understanding African American Identities in a Conflicted American Democracy

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Introduction

> The greatest success of the Freedmen's Bureau lay in the planting of the free school among Negroes, and the idea of free elementary education among all classes in the South. It not only called the school-mistresses through the benevolent agencies and built them schoolhouses, but it helped discover and support such apostles of human culture as Edmund Ware, Samuel Armstrong, and Erastus Cravath. The opposition to Negro education in the South was at first bitter, and showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood; for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless, men strive to know. [1]

Opened in the early 1870's, funded by the Freedmen's Bureau, and first known as the Richmond Colored Normal School, Armstrong High School (named after Samuel Armstrong) was the first public school for African American students in Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the Confederacy. Almost 140 years later - and 50 years after Brown versus Board of Education - Armstrong is still an almost exclusively African American School (over 99%). Armstrong serves the East End and parts of the South Side of Richmond, and struggles with many of the issues that high poverty urban public schools across the country face: high failure rates, poor attendance, lack of resources, violence, teen pregnancy and dropping out. Nonetheless, in this challenging context there is a drive among many of the educators and students to pursue knowledge as the pathway to liberation.

I open with this quote from W. E. B. Dubois and these facts about my school because I feel that they are a relevant introduction to the topic of this curriculum unit. The primary purpose of this unit is to create an historical and theoretical framework in the classroom that can be used by the students to understand African American Literature as a potential resolution to the fundamental contradiction between the rhetoric of democratic ideals and the realities of racial injustice. The texts for this unit will include some excerpts from the primary documents of our democratic republic (*the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, The Federalist Papers*), a number of arguments and historical accounts from both black and white perspectives about racial injustice in the 18 th and 19 th century, and a wide variety of early 20 th century African American

writing (both essay prose and poetry) that speaks to this issue. It is also important to me that inasmuch as this unit focuses on themes of injustice, it ultimately resolves in hope. Unfortunately, 140 years after the opening of Armstrong, injustice still pervades the lives of our students. With that in mind, I want this unit to culminate with a student publication project that involves taking action on the issues of injustice in their community.

I will begin this unit plan by laying out a theoretical and historical foundation that is based on the research I have completed on this topic. The ideas outlined in this foundation and the order in which they are presented closely align to the five main objectives and classroom activities that I present in the second part of the unit plan. Finally, I will present a list of relevant resources for students and teachers.

Foundation

I. Three-Fifths of the Man

> It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force. If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind. [2]

Published beginning in October 1787 in New York's *Independent Journal*, *The Federalist Papers* were a series of essays written to convince the voters in the New York Ratification Convention to ratify the Constitution of the United States. Although originally published under the pseudonym "Publius," it is now known that these essays were composed by three of our country's most prominent statesman: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. The excerpt above, taken from the first of the eighty-five papers, expresses not only Hamilton's sense of the grand historic nature of this project - to fail would be to "the general misfortune of mankind" - but also, to a certain extent, its tenuous foundation. This is understandable. Although, as demonstrated throughout *the Federalist Papers*, there was no lack of theoretical rigor or rhetorical prowess in the reasoning behind the Constitution, there was certainly a lack of relevant experience with democratic government. In fact, it was, conversely, the experience of the un-democratic nature of the aristocracy and nobility of Britain and other countries across the world that led these writers to theorize "a more perfect Union." This theoretical model was a response to their direct experiences of oppression, tyranny, intolerance and injustice, and thus held at its core the contrary concepts of equality, liberty, and justice. Although the course of politics over the past 200 years has led us to take these ideas for granted as the prerequisites for legitimate government, at the time they truly represented a radical shift in thoughts about social systems and distribution of power. For us to speak the words *equality*, *liberty* and *justice for all* in conjunction with *America* and *democracy* is common place; for them to put into place an *American democracy* that lived up to the values of *equality*, *liberty* and *justice for all* was a bold experiment.

However, the argument put forth through *the Federalist Papers* was not just the untangling of a theoretical problem, it also represented the negotiation of a political problem. Considering the diverse interests among the states at the time, certain concessions needed to be made to get the Constitution ratified. This creates a

real tension in the text between the theory and the practice; a tension between the egalitarian principles of democracy and the concessions needed for ratification which in certain cases contradicted those principles. A notable example of this - and one that is central for the framework of this unit - involves the treatment in the *Papers* of the issue of slavery in the South. The profound injustice and moral offense that slavery represents seems to have no place in a democracy. And yet the desire to bring Southern states into the union necessitated a compromise. It seems obvious that this issue should merit a significant discussion in the text. Yet of the eighty-five papers, only one addresses the issue of slavery with any depth. In *Paper #54*, titled "The Same Subject Continued with a View to the Ratio of Representation," Madison discusses a plan for representation among the Southern states within the House of Representatives. What is unique, and telling, about this paper is the writing style that Madison employs. Rather than offering up the usual argument / counter argument that typifies much of the text, Madison quickly dissociates his voice. After introducing the question of whether slaves should be counted as property (for purposes of taxation) or persons (for expanded representation) he pulls back and writes from the perspective of his hypothetical "southern brethren." Speaking in that voice he proposes:

> The true state of the case is that they partake of both these qualities. . . . In being compelled to labor . . . . . the slave may appear to be degraded from the human rank, and classed with those irrational animals which fall under the legal denomination of property . . . In being protected in life and limbs, and punished for violent acts . . . the slave is no less evidently regarded by the law as a member of the society, not as a part of the irrational creation; as a moral person, not as a mere article of property. The federal Constitution, therefore, decides with great propriety on the case of our slaves, when it views them in the mixed character of persons and property. This is in fact their true character. [3]

This line of argument concludes with the declaration that "regards the slave as divested of two fifths of the man." Madsion then ends this paper by bringing his voice back and offering a tentative recommendation of the Southerner's point of view:

> Such is the reasoning which an advocate for the Southern interests might employ on this subject; and although it may appear to be a little strained in some points, yet, on the whole, I must confess that it fully reconciles me to the scale of representation which the convention have established. [4]

Put in the context of *the Federalist Papers*, #54 is atypical and a truly awkward piece of writing. At several levels the central argument is buried. It is surrounded by quotes, spoken in a fictional voice, half-heartedly supported, embedded in paper whose title gives little hint to the controversial nature of the topic, and then not brought up again. All of this suggests that Madison was uncomfortable with the issue.

What is interesting to consider is that the argument was probably not an unfamiliar one to him. In fact there are several examples of similar reasoning on racial differences used among prominent thinkers from the enlightenment. Writing in 1742, David Hume in his essay "Of National Characters" states:

> I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences . . . In JAMAICA indeed they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender

> accomplishments like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly. [5]

In 1764 Immanuel Kant in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* reacts to and expands upon Hume's ideas:

> The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents . . . So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. The religion of fetishes so widespread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird's feather, a cow's horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths. The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings. [6]

Considering this context, Madison's argument can be read as a continuation of this tradition. However, as discussed above, his presentation seems awkward and tentative. This is certainly due to the hypocrisy the slavery argument represented within the context of this treatise on democracy. While both the race argument and the political theory behind the Constitution were products of Enlightenment thought, their direct juxtaposition within *the Federalist Papers* creates an awkward tension. It presents a real problem when Madison, in *Federalist #51*, unequivocally states, "Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit" [7] ; and then three papers later declares that he is "reconciled" to the belief that blacks are but *three-fifths of a man*. That Madison tried to side step the slave issue was understandable considering the political context. Unfortunately, it was not a problem that was going to disappear.

Writing almost fifty years after *the Federalist Paper*s and the ratification of the Constitution, the French social scientist Alexis de Tocqueville in his epic work *Democracy in America* makes some critical observations concerning the issue of slavery in the Southern United States. In certain respects his presentation of this topic is similar to Madison's. For example, like Madison, his reflection on slavery is buried in one chapter subsection of a 700-page book. And, like Madison, when he does address it, he falls back on very similar language that classifies Blacks as "being intermediate between beast and man." [8] However, what makes Tocqueville's argument interesting is his discussion of the problem of slavery in American Democracy and his elaboration on the possible outcomes of this contradiction. Among these he mentions (1) the "danger of a violent conflict," which, he suggests "is a nightmare constantly haunting the American imagination"; [9] (2) the idea of separation or "transporting to the guinea coast at their expense such free Negroes as wished to escape the tyranny weighing down upon them"; [10] or finally (3) miscegenation, that is "to free the negroes and to mingle with them." [11] What is not presented is a solution that involves equality and black enfranchisement into democracy. In fact he clearly states, "I do not think that the white and black races will ever be brought anywhere to live on a footing of equality." [12] Along those lines, Tocqueville concludes his argument with a grim prediction:

> Whatever efforts the Americans of the South make to maintain slavery, they will not forever succeed. Slavery is limited to one point on the globe and attacked by Christianity as unjust and by political economy as fatal; slavery, amid the democratic liberty and enlightenment of our age, is not an institution that can last. Either the slave or the master will put an end to it. In either case

> great misfortunes are to be anticipated. If freedom is refused to the Negroes in the South, in the end they will seize it themselves; if it is granted to them, they will not be slow to abuse it. [13]

American democracy was a radical experiment. Hamilton opened *Federalist #1* with "the important question:" that is, "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice." [14] On paper, the Constitution and its defense in *the Federalist Papers* seems well reasoned enough for us to believe that 'yes, we are capable.' However, hidden within (and behind (and as a uncomfortable footnote to)) the primary texts of American democracy, is the supreme injustice of slavery. It was a contradiction that could not go unaddressed. For the framers of the Constitution to do little more than stand silent on the issue undoubtedly, and significantly, changed the course of American history and world history. And in this respect I think Tocqueville is correct: there were inevitably "great misfortunes" to come. Where Tocqueville's argument fails, in my assessment, is in its lack of hope in regards to the enfranchisement of Blacks into the promise of American democracy. And that failure is rooted in his acceptance of the argument for racial differences.

Returning for a moment to those arguments, their claim is that Blacks are inherently inferior to whites, comparable, in ways, to beasts. The empirical evidence used to support this claim is the writer's perception of Blacks' lack of learning or culture. Hume states, "No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences." Kant adds a second dimension of evidence by citing what he perceives as the deficiency of the culture they do exhibit: "A bird's feather, a cow's horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths." The implied warrant for this argument is that the humanity of a given racial group is measured by the degree to which they express European standards of high culture. The logical flaws of this argument are multiple, and its moral implications are offensive, especially considering its use as a rationalization for "thrashings," slavery and oppression. It rests on questionable assumptions about race, culture, notions of humanity, justice and justifications for violence. And yet it leads to an important question. If this is part of the rational foundation for the political walls that kept blacks disenfranchised from democracy, in what ways does it suggest a solution to the problem of "the Black Race in the United States" that Tocqueville presents?

II. Spiritual Strivings

Seventy years after Tocqueville, W.E.B. Du Bois opens his collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk* by asking the question that he claims America is afraid to ask to the African American: "How does it feel to be a problem?" [15] His response to this question culminates with a very personal and poignant description of how the tension between America's ideals and America's reality affects the psyche of the African American.

> the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. [16]

What is especially useful here is that by shifting the perspective on the problem from white (Hume, Kant, Madison, Tocqueville) to black (Du Bois), the issue is complicated in ways that help us imagine solutions. Part of this involves the way Du Bois clarifies the oppressive experience of being the subject (person) / object

(property) of racial prejudice. In this, the metaphor of the veil seems particularly appropriate. Was is it the veil between white and black that led many white writers to blindness and silence on the issue? Was it the veil that, when they did see, led them to see only three-fifths of the man? By taking the problem and externalizing it, Du Bois deconstructs the idea of racial difference as being in anyway natural; a veil is something that can be removed. Furthermore, he takes the experience of the white man's gaze and develops it as a potentially empowering African American identity. For the gaze not only imposes a veil; it also *gifts* the African American with "double-consciousness," with "a second-sight in this American world." [17] While being pushed by the gaze from the center surely leads to a loss of social and political power for African Americans, it also allows for a critical liminal perspective on America's injustice that is lost from those who benefit from their central status. We could say that Madison and Tocqueville struggled and failed to theorize a solution to the problem because they lacked that second-sight.

Another important point to make about Du Bois, is that at the heart of his writing is an unwavering commitment to the dream of American democracy. It seems that the long history of injustice against Blacks, and his personal experiences of living behind the veil would have engendered anger towards whites and made him cynical about the American system of government. However, his writing expresses a reverence for American ideals and a hope for racial reconciliation.

> Work, culture, liberty, — all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack. We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes. [18]

One effect of Du Bois' argument is to centralize the importance of Blacks to America. At one level he does this by claiming that African Americans are the clearest examples of the "pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence." Who better understands the experience of resistance to oppression and tyranny upon which our country was founded? He also suggests in the passage above that the realization of the ideals of the American Republic requires an exchange between races. Although he doesn't specifically elaborate on this, he presents the idea that there are important qualities to successful democracy that both black and white "sadly lack." Only an equal exchange between them will allow the races, together, to fulfill the promise of America. Along these lines, he concludes his essay:

> Merely a test of the underlying principles of the great republic is the Negro Problem, and the spiritual striving of the freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity. [19]

For Du Bois the fate of the African American people is critically intertwined with the fate of American democracy. And his analysis of the problem makes both black and white responsible for its resolution. To realize the promise of America is not just a matter of white folks changing the legal barriers to the enfranchisement of Blacks, or about the more difficult task of changing their racial attitudes that create the veil. For Du Bois, it is just as important that Black people step up to take action on their "spiritual strivings"

despite the overwhelming burdens of injustice.

Du Bois, writing in the very beginning of the 20 th century, was a central figure in a broad community of African American intellectuals who were making arguments about Black empowerment at the time. Although these writers were in no way unified in their analysis of the causes of injustice or in their message about how to respond, they did share a common goal of lifting the black race and its issues into the center of public discourse. Consequently, Du Bois' call for African Americans to fulfill their spiritual strivings was echoed by others and led to an explosion of publications. Magazines appeared such as *Opportunity,* edited by sociologist Charles S. Johnson; *Messenger*, by socialists A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen; *Negro World*, by black nationalist Marcus Garvey; and *The Crisis* by Du Bois. In addition, there was a tremendous increase in the number of volumes of poetry, essays, plays, and works of fiction and non-fiction published. Writing in 1921, James Weldon Johnson, in his famous preface to his anthology, *The Book of Negro Poetry* writes,

> The matter of Negro poets and the production of literature by the colored people . . . is a matter which has a direct bearing on the most vital of American problems. A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior. [20]

This brings us back once more to the argument concerning the racial inferiority of Africans. Johnson seems to be directly addressing this argument by affirming its warrant - 'yes, the measure of a people's greatness is related to the quantity and quality of their cultural production' - but then challenging its evidence and claim by offering his anthology of African American poetry. As the African American writers, artists, academics, and musicians took their place and asserted their voice in the public sphere, the argument about Black inferiority slowly crumbled. And Johnson goes further to suggest boldly that not only is the work of the Black artists a legitimate part of American culture, but also that Blacks are responsible for "the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products." [21] Like Du Bois, Johnson sees the cultural production of Blacks not just a part of America, but perhaps as the quintessential expression of America.

III. Poets' Voices

There is a tension in the discussion and critique of African-American literature between reading works through the lens of race, or simply reading them as expressions of the human experience. In "Talking Books" the introduction to the 2004 Norton Anthology of African-American Literature, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay develop this idea: "The social and political uses to which this literature has been put have placed a tremendous burden on these writers, casting an author and her or his works in the role of synecdoche, a part standing for the ethnic whole." [22] In truth, it is hard to make generalizations about the work of African American writers. Their content, thematic focus, literary forms, aesthetic sensibilities, and explicit address of politics span a broad spectrum. To identify a singular African American style or singular African American voice would be impossible. For the purposes of this project, I am interested in assembling a diverse collection of literary work that is unified in the way it resonates with the arguments that have been laid out in sections one and two of this foundation. In certain respects, all work published by African Americans, meet this criteria. Each work is a cultural product that stands as a challenge to the argument of racial prejudice. However, what I am more interested in is writing which in its content is directly political; specifically, I am interested in writing

that explicitly addresses the contradictions between the rhetoric and reality of American democracy. In this section I'd like to discuss several examples to hint at the range of voices even within this thematic subsection of writing.

Jamaican born Claude McKay is often considered one of the first writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and his work embodies the complicated negotiation of the split African-American identity. While some of his poems, such as "The Tropics in New York" and "Flame-Heart," are read as genteel and culturally uplifting nostalgic reflections on his youth in Jamaica, others take the form of sharp indictments of racial injustice and bigotry in America. In his poem "The White House" published in 1922 he writes,

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 Your door is shut against my tightened face, And I am sharp as steel with discontent; But I possess the courage and the grace To bear my anger proudly and unbent. The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet, A chafing savage, down the decent street; And passion rends my vitals as I pass, Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass. Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour, Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw, And find in it the superhuman power To hold me to the letter of your law! Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate Against the potent poison of your hate. [23]
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The speaker of this poem struggles to suppress the violent impulse to attack the system that has spread its "potent poison" and shut the door in his face. There is a sense in which his commitment "to hold to the letter of your law" is extremely fragile. This poem certainly resonates with Tocqueville's suggestion that violent conflict is a "nightmare constantly haunting the American imagination" and with Du Bois' suggestion that "an educated negro" is "a dangerous negro." McKay constructs a powerful image of African-American anger that seems likely to explode at any moment. This tension between passion and restraint is reinforced by his choice of the sonnet, a classic western poetic form that is strictly dictated by a set of rules. McKay, while giving voice to his "savage" impulse to take such violent action, ultimately draws on his pride, courage, grace, and the sonnet form to contain his passions.

Like McKay, Langston Hughes wrote a number of poems that struggled with the contradictions of American democracy. However, in both form and content his resolution of the contradiction was very different. In his poem, "Let America be America Again" he writes,

 Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed— Let it be that great strong land of love Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme That any man be crushed by one above. (It never was America to me.) O, let my land be a land where Liberty Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, But opportunity is real, and life is free, Equality is in the air we breathe. (There's never been equality for me, Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.") *Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?* And who are you that draws your veil across the stars? [24]

It is easy to see the direct influence of Du Bois on Hughes. Not only does Hughes use the imagery of the veil, but the poem speaks in multiple voices that depict "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" and seems to reflect the idea of double-consciousness. And while the poem has some formal elements of regular rhyme and meter, they are not consistent as in McKay's poem. Hughes sets up the regularity of the verse only to break it with the conflicting voices. While this poem suggests the hypocrisy of the American system, it is ultimately a much more optimistic poem than "The White House." Like Du Bois, Hughes wants to believe in

America as the land where "equality is in the air we breathe."

For a final example, I'd like to return to James Weldon Johnson. Certainly one of the most famous examples of poetic verse written on the theme of the African American struggle in democracy is "Lift Every Voice and Sing," also known as the "Negro National Anthem." It begins,

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Lift ev'ry voice and sing, Till earth and heaven ring, Ring with the harmonies of Liberty; Let our rejoicing rise High as the list'ning skies, Let it resound loud as the rolling sea. Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us; Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, Let us march on till victory is won. [25]
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On June 10 th 2008, Armstrong held its 138 th graduation at Richmond's Landmark Theater. Of the 600 plus students who started as freshman in 2004, 216 of them had struggled through to senior year and now, in cap and gown, were ready to receive their diplomas. The ceremony started not with the Star-Spangled Banner, but rather with the principal leading the theater in a group rendition of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." More than McKay or Hughes, Johnson's song, written in 1900, is full of the hope for the realization of the African American place within the republic. There is slight reference to the "dark past," but none of the anger of McKay or complications of the divided voices within Hughes. And this is appropriate for its form as an anthem. It is suppose to be patriotic and optimistic.

As I stood to the side with the other Armstrong faculty and listened to the voices of the graduates as they stood and sang, I thought about the long history of the song and the long history of the school and the struggle for justice that continued. I hope this unit will help some of the students in future graduating classes think in new ways about these histories and this struggle and the promise that the song signifies.

Five Objectives and Five Activities

I have identified five primary conceptual objectives for this unit. These objectives relate more or less directly to the arguments I made in the theoretical foundation of this unit plan. In this section, I present each objective, briefly discuss the rationale, and then outline a class activity that is designed to move the student toward an understanding of the objective.

With this in mind, there are several points I would like to make. First, the objectives are broad (sometimes very broad) and the activities are generally focused and narrow. Because of this, it is unlikely that any activity presented here will allow the students full mastery. Rather, I hope that the activities will open some doors and allow some insights, slowly drawing the students into an understanding of the concepts. Second, I have chosen to present the objectives as primarily conceptual rather than skill based. It will be obvious when reviewing these activities that multiple reading, writing and speaking skills are being addressed. For each activity I have included an appendix that outlines the skill-based objectives as articulated by our district standards. Third, although the objectives and the activities presented are purposefully ordered to build on each other, there will be a significant amount of overlap and repetition of objectives at numerous points through the unit.

Finally, these five activities are representative lessons within the unit, not the full scope of the unit. There will be a number of additional activities bridging the gaps and reinforcing the information presented. In fact, I see a logical division in the teaching of this unit between objectives one and two and objectives three, four and five. While the first two objectives are an essential foundation for objectives three, four and five, these two parts also seem to be distinct pieces. Objectives one and two are concerned primarily with establishing the tension between the rhetoric and reality of American democracy in Early America, while the final three are specifically focused on African American writing and cultural production of the early 20th century. Within the scope of my American Literature class I can see the first two objectives covered in the very beginning of the year as a foundational piece for our complete study of literature. Before going into objectives three, four and five, it is conceivable that other units of study could be presented that continued to build on the foundation (e.g. Native American Writing, Slave Narratives, 19th century Women's Writing, etc.).

Objective 1 - The students will understand the core principles and ideals associated with American democracy.

I believe this will be a good place to start our unit. While the students will certainly come in with some understanding of American democracy and its relationship to the principles of liberty, equality and justice; I have learned from experience that their understandings generally lack depth and sophistication. The students entering my classes have been inundated with school, media, and societal narratives supporting an uncritical belief in the American Dream, and thus speak strongly about their beliefs in the principle of equality of opportunity and the unrestricted liberty of individuals to achieve their goals. However, the strength of their arguments begins to falter when faced with questions that contradict or complicate the master narrative. In my estimation what is missing is an appropriate vocabulary and conceptual framework for critique. With this in mind, I would like to create activities in this opening part of the unit that explore the limits and complexity of these ideas and build this critical vocabulary. This will begin with an analysis of some of the primary texts of American democracy (the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Constitution*, and selections from the *Federalist Papers*) and then move into the following activity.

Activity 1 - "With Liberty and Justice for All"

For this activity I have developed an argument of judgment concerning justice that should help students flesh out the core principles of democracy. Basically, an argument of judgment involves presenting a set of definitional criteria for a concept and applying (in small and large group discussion) that definition to scenarios to test the limits of the definition. Often these discussions will lead to persuasive writing assignments that ask the student to apply the definition to class texts (i.e. the theme of a poem, a character's actions in a short story, or the opinion of an essay writer). While the scenarios are complex, they are also written to be relevant to students' experiences. This and the fact that there are no clear right or wrong answers, often make these some of the most engaged and successful classroom discussions I have had.

The premise of this argument of judgment is that students are judges for a series of cases where individuals come in looking for justice. In each situation, the individual believes he or she has been treated unfairly by another individual or in some cases a group or organization. In each case the unfair treatment will test a different set of limits concerning ideas of liberty, equality, or justice. In the final activity, I will have at least ten different cases. I have included two example cases below to give you a better idea of how this activity works.

Example Case 1: Pryor v. Harris. Jacob Pryor, a 23 year-old bagger at Harris Mart, a local grocery store, brings in a case against his boss, Mel Harris. Pryor claims that, although he has worked faithfully for over five years

at the store he has been given only token raises (10 to 25 cents a year), no benefits and no options for advancement. During this time the store has made record profits and Mel Harris has ascended to the ranks of one of the ten richest individuals in the Richmond metro region. In addition, Pryor points out, he started working at Harris Mart at the same time as Michael Weston, a nephew of Harris. While they both started out at the same time, in the same position, Weston has steadily advanced into the position of Southside regional manager. In his defense, Harris argues that although Pryor is a faithful employee who regularly puts in extra hours, he lacks what it takes to be anything more than a bagger. Ultimately, he points out if Harris isn't happy with his pay or position, he should go out and look for something else. *What would be just?*

Example Case 2: Floyd v. Board of Education. Alice Floyd, a junior at Horatio High School, brings in a case against the Richmond Board of Education. She claims that her right to free speech is being violated because she was suspended for wearing a home made t-shirt to school that says, "Horatio High is a Tyranny. Bring the Revolution." She argues that her shirt was designed to raise discussion about the school's strict security and discipline policies. She also points out that it is academically relevant, because it builds on the ideas and themes of the American Revolution that she studied in her US History class. Mark Rodgers, the principal of Horatio, backed by the school board, argues that not only is the statement on the shirt false, but it encourages students to challenge authority and revolt against administration. He says for the sake of maintaining basic order at the school he needs to censor the shirt. *What would be just?*

Through class discussion these cases should bring up a number of issues related to the core democratic principles. For example, case one leads us to ask questions such as: Should there be some degree of economic equality in our country? Are there adequate measures to ensure equality of opportunity in the workplace? Is nepotism antithetical to our notions of equality and justice? Does Harris's argument about Pryor's freedom to get another job justify possible discrimination? Case two leads to questions such as: What are the reasonable limits of free speech? Are there different standards for free speech for adults and juveniles? In both cases, there would be opportunity for introducing new twists (e.g. Harris is white, Pryor is black), levels of evidence (information about security policies at the school), and supplemental materials to help students (laws concerning discrimination in the workplace or speech within schools).

Objective 2 - The student will understand the tension between the egalitarian principles of American democracy and the racial injustices that existed in early America.

Now that the students have put some work into expanding their definitions of the core democratic principles, the next objective involves applying this framework to early America to draw out the specific contradictions represented by Slavery and racial injustice. As I outlined in the foundation of this unit plan, in early America there was a persistent yet hidden (or veiled) subtext of racism that pervaded the writing on democracy and was used to justify the institution of slavery. Unlike the primary texts of democracy, these subtexts are rarely brought into the classroom or studied in depth. While any high school American history or literature textbook would certainly address the issues of slavery and racial injustice, they are often treated as secondary sidebars and footnotes to the primary narrative. This treatment has the effect of marginalizing their importance to the American experience. Instead of being read as foundational and persistent problems of America, they are passed off as minor setbacks that were overcome in our common trajectory toward American democracy. The point of this activity would be to unveil these subtexts of racism, analyze and critique their rhetorical structure, and then contrast them with the principles of democracy. I would like to develop this idea by juxtaposing and then categorizing both texts and images that illuminate this contradiction.

Activity 2 - Juxtaposition: Democratic Ideal and Harsh Reality

For this activity, students will work individually and in groups to analyze a variety of short texts and images from the 18th and 19th century. The texts and images will include works that build the idea of America as principled democracy as well as works that expose the contradictions. The students will be guided to base their analysis of each work on five main questions: (1) Author: What point of view does this work represent? (2) Claim: What is the claim this work is making? (3) Evidence: What evidence does it use to support its claim? (4) Pattern: In what ways is this work similar or different from other works we are examining? (5) Significance: Why is this important? The lesson will build these analytical skills of comparison and contrast first through whole-class activities and then with small group and independent work. The activity will conclude with students creating artwork that uses juxtaposition of text and imaged to make a point about the contradictions of American democracy. Below I have outlined the steps of the lesson.

Step 1 - Establishing a Spectrum of Democratic Principles. To begin this activity, the class will engage in a discussion to establish a spectrum related to the core democratic principles. On one end would be the ideals of democracy, liberty, equality and justice; on the opposite end would be tyranny, slavery, inequality, and injustice. This spectrum is obviously a simplification (there can be equality without liberty, or democracy without justice), however, it will serve as a starting point for the analysis of works and may be revised to reflect more complexity later.

Step 2 - Analyzing Texts. Next, as a class we would begin to analyze texts using the five analysis questions (see above) and then placing them on the spectrum according to the degree to which they resonate with the ideas at either end. The texts would include a wide variety of selections from 18th and 19th century America that represented a span of viewpoints. They might include excerpts from the *Declaration of Independence*, the *Constitution*, the *Federalist Papers*, Patrick Henry's *Speech to the Virginia Convention* as well as excerpts from *Federalist #54*, texts of slavery laws, fugitive slave posters, and selections from slave narratives. For the sake of exposing the students to a wide variety of pieces, the texts would be short excerpts (no more than a paragraph or two). This step would start with a whole class analysis of several works and then move to independent small group and individual work.

Step 3 - Analyzing Images. A similar process would take place with images. A point would be made to show students how images, like texts, have authors, make claims, use evidence, reflect patterns and have significance. As such, they can be analyzed along very similar lines. Possibilities for images would include 18th and 19th century paintings, illustrations and photographs that depicted both patriotic images as well as images of slavery. There would be an emphasis on having students make connections between images and texts.

Step 4 - Creating a Poster. To conclude this lesson, students will work either individually, or in groups to create a poster that uses the texts and images introduced through the lesson and the technique of juxtaposition to illuminate the contradictions of American democracy. For example the poster could juxtapose an image of Patrick Henry's Speech at the Virginia Convention with statistics of lynching in the southern states. In addition to creating the poster, the students would also be required to write an artist statement that discussed the original sources and explained the idea behind the work.

Objective 3 - The student will understand how African American writers of the early twentieth century discussed the tensions in American democracy as a basis for constructing both individual and collective African American identities.

With this objective, the unit shifts to a focus on early twentieth century African American Writing. Although

there was certainly important work by African Americans produced prior to this time, the turn of the century was marked by a sharp increase in the variety, quality and sheer volume of literary and artistic production. And while it would be wrong to try to distinguish a singular African American literary or artistic voice from this period, there seem to be some common elements that make this group of writing a coherent body of work to study. Specifically, for the purposes of this unit, I want the students to see how several important figures in the turn of the century African American intellectual community addressed the tension between American ideals and the harsh realities of racial injustice. I want them to see that the work of these authors led to various beliefs about how the African American people should situate themselves both individually and collectively within the political cultural landscape of America. I believe exploring these ideas will be important for my students not only as a basis for studying the poetry and creative prose of the period, but also as a basis for tracking some of the major movements in African American thought throughout the twentieth century.

Activity 3 - African / American Identities

For this activity, the students will read, analyze, compare and contrast selections form the work of four prominent African American intellectuals from the time: Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and James Weldon Johnson. I want the students to focus on the connections between the writers as well as the points at which their perspectives diverge. I have set up a series of five guiding questions that will help them compare and contrast the writers along these lines: (1) What is the writer's view on the history of slavery and its effect on African Americans? (2) What is the writer's opinion of the American democratic ideals? (3) How does the writer define what it means for an individual to be African American? (4) How does writer propose the African American community move forward? (5) What is the writer's opinion of white Americans and their role in Black enfranchisement? Beyond just reading and analysis, I also want this lesson to lead the students to personal reflection on these questions. For this reason, the lesson will begin and end with personal writing about this topic. Below is an outline of the steps of this lesson.

Step 1 - Personal Reflection. The first step in this lesson is to have the students enter the topic from a personal level by completing some informal writing on the guiding questions and engaging in a classroom discussion.

Step 2 - Background Information on Writers. Before beginning work on the primary texts of this lesson, we will research background information on the period and the writers. I will provide some of this information through packet readings. I will then have the students brainstorm additional questions about the authors and answer them with internet and library research.

Step 3 - Reading and Analyzing Works. In class we will work through each of the following readings (or selections from these readings) using the guiding questions set up for this lesson.

Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery, Chapter 1, A Slave among Slaves.*

W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk, Chapter 1, Of Our Spiritual Strivings*

Marcus Garvey, *The Future as I See It*

James Weldon Johnson, *Preface to the Book of American Negro Poetry*

These readings are of varying degrees of difficulty. The more difficult works will be supported by short vocabulary lessons, reading guides and comprehension checks.

Step 4 - Personal Essay. To conclude the lesson students will construct a formal essay that addresses the

guiding questions of the unit. The students will be able to draw on the initial writing they completed on this topic at the beginning of the lesson, as well as on the work of the writers that we read. This essay will go through at least two full drafts.

Objective 4 - The student will understand the explosion of African American poetry in the early twentieth century as, in part, an artistic and political response to the tension between American ideals and racial injustice.

This next objective moves on to examine the poetic production of four African American poets from the turn and the beginning of the twentieth century (James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes). Essentially, I want the students to see how the work of these poets reflect the various ideas about African American identity expressed by the writers in the previous lesson. For this reason the poems we read will focus directly on the issues of African American identity and its relationship to the principles of democracy. Beyond just the content of the poetry, I also want to explore this collection of writing historically by examining the forms and modes of literary production each writer used to break into the public discourse. This was a time when the quantity and variety of publications was growing quickly. I feel it is important for students to see the publication of work as an act of speech that has impact on the social political world. I will try to accomplish this goal with a lesson that moves from research on the period and authors, to reading and analysis of poetry, and concludes with student creative responses to the poems.

Activity 4 - Reading Poems / Writing Poems

There are two major goals of this activity. First, I want the students to read, analyze and appreciate the writing of these poets. I want them to analyze the poems first for their formal aesthetic qualities and use of poetic devices, and then use this analysis to draw conclusions about the poem's social political content. Along these lines, we will use the same core questions from objective three to understand the poet's perspective on the issue of Black identity in America. The second goal of this activity is to get the students to write their own poems on this topic using similar styles and forms. The poems the students create during this lesson will possibly be revised, shared, and edited for publication. The steps laid out below will be repeated for each poet studied.

Step 1 - Background Information on Poet. We will open our study of each poet with a brief biography that outlines the experiences that may have influenced his poems. There may be supplemental activities that ask students to do further research about the poets.

Step 2 - Reading Poetry. Students will work individually and in small groups to read a small collection of a poet's work (2-5 poems) and analyze them according to the questions laid out in objective three. The following is a list of the poets and poems that may be covered in this activity.

James Weldon Johnson: "Lift Every Voice and Sing," "Brothers," "O Black and Unknown Bards"

Paul Laurence Dunbar: "Sympathy," "We Wear the Mask," "Ode to Ethiopia," "Philosophy," "The Colored Soldiers"

Langston Hughes: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "I, Too," "Let America be America Again" "Harlem" "Letter to the Academy," "Democracy"

Claude McKay: "If We Must Die," "The White House," "America," "To the White Fiends"

Step 3 - Writing Poetry. After learning about each poet and reading each poet's collection of poems, the students will write one poem in the style of that writer. They will be encouraged to use the formal poetic techniques of the poet and to address relevant thematic content. Some of these poetic responses will go through additional drafts and be used for the class publication.

Objective 5 - The student will understand their freedom to publish as a form of opposition to injustice and a way of establishing an empowered political identity.

When teaching content related to social justice, I believe it is extremely important for students to go beyond analysis of injustice and use their new understandings and skills to take action on the world around them. Often, the failure to take action when teaching about injustice leads to apathy and despair. I believe creating a publication for the classroom and community is an especially relevant concluding activity for this unit because it fulfills the call of writers such as Du Bois and Johnson who challenged African Americans to step up and have their voices heard in the American cultural discourse. Although we are reading these writers 100 years later, their ideas are no less relevant, and their call to action is no less urgent.

Activity 5 - Student Publication

For many years I have worked on curriculum for creating student publications. For this unit I would like to work with the students to publish the writings they have completed on democracy and justice throughout the unit. These writings would include their personal essays and their poetry. Upon completion, this publication would be released to the school and community with the hope of raising public awareness and dialogue. There are many forms a classroom publication can take. Some are very simple and can be accomplished in a single class period; others are more ambitious endeavors that can take up weeks of in-class and after-school time. No matter what the form, having students work published and distributed is powerful. There are many sources online that provide models and templates for classroom publications.

Resources

Below are some the books, articles, writers and resources that have been or, I believe, might be helpful in developing this unit.

Bibliography for Teachers

Andrews, William, Francis Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. *The Oxford Companion to*

African American Literature. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. This is an

excellent resource for the study of African American Literature. It provides concise

and scholarly biographical and historical information.

Bontemps, Arna. *American Negro Poetry*. New York: Noonday Press, 1974. An

important anthology of African American Poetry by one of the most important figures

of the Harlem Renaissance.

De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America.* Edited by J.P. Mayer. Translated by George Lawrence. New York: Harper and Row, 1988. For the sake of this unit the primary focus would be on Volume 1, Chapter 10.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *Souls of Black Folk.* New York: Signet Classic, 1995.

Gates, Henry Louis, and Nellie Y. McKay. *The Norton Anthology of African American* Literature. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004. This is a great resource not only for its extensive collection of African American Literature, but also for its insightful editorial commentary. Especially important to the theoretical development of this unit was the introductory essay "Talking Books."

Madison, James, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers.* New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Student Resources

"The Constitution of the United States," in Madison, James, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers.* New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

"The Declaration of Independence," in *Literature: The American Experience*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005.

Gates, Henry Louis, and Nellie Y. McKay. *The Norton Anthology of African American* Literature. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004. All of the essays and poems by Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay that will be used through the course of this unit can be found in this volume.

Henry, Patrick. "Speech at the Virginia Convention" in *Literature: The American* Experience. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005.

Appendices

Appendix A: Virginia Standards of Learning for Activity 1

11.1 The student will make informative and persuasive presentations. Support and defend ideas in public forums.

11.4 The student will read and analyze a variety of informational materials. Use information from texts to clarify or refine understanding of academic concepts.

Appendix B: Virginia Standards of Learning for Activity 2

11.1 The student will make informative and persuasive presentations. Support and defend ideas in public forums.

11.3 The student will read and analyze relationships among American literature, history, and culture.

11.7 The student will write in a variety of forms, with an emphasis on persuasion.

Appendix C: Virginia Standards of Learning for Activity 3

11.3 The student will read and analyze relationships among American literature, history, and culture.

11.7 The student will write in a variety of forms, with an emphasis on persuasion.

11.8 The student will edit writing for correct grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and paragraphing.

11.10 The student will analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and organize information from a

variety of sources to produce a research product.

Appendix D: Virginia Standards of Learning for Activity 4

11.1 The student will make informative and persuasive presentations.

11.3 The student will read and analyze relationships among American literature, history, and culture.

11.4 The student will read and analyze a variety of informational materials.

11.5 The student will read and critique a variety of poetry.

11.7 The student will write in a variety of forms, with an emphasis on persuasion.

11.10 The student will analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and organize information from a

variety of sources to produce a research product.

Appendix E: Virginia Standards of Learning for Activity 5

11.1 The student will make informative and persuasive presentations.

11.7 The student will write in a variety of forms, with an emphasis on persuasion.

11.8 The student will edit writing for correct grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, and paragraphing.

11.9The student will write, revise, and edit personal, professional, and informational

correspondence to a standard acceptable in the workplace and higher education.

Notes

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1. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 71

2. Hamilton, The *Federalist Papers*, 87

3. Madison, *The Federalist Papers,* 332

4. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, 335

5. quoted in Gates and McKay "Talking Books" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* xl.

6. quoted in Gates and McKay "Talking Books" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* xl.

7. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, 322

8. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 341-342

9. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 358

10. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 359

11. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 360

12. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 356

13. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* 363)

14. Hamilton, *The Federalist Papers*, 87

15. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 43

16. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45

17. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45

18. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 52

19. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 52-3

20. Johnson, from Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* 883

21. Johnson, from Preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* 883

22. Gates and McKay "Talking Books" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, xliii.

23. McKay, "The White House" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* 1009

24. Hughes, "Let America be America Again" in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*.

25. Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,* 794.

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