



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2009 Volume II: American Voices: Listening to Fiction, Poetry, and Prose

Introduction

by Langdon L. Hammer, Professor of English and of American Studies

The election of Barack Obama as our first African-American president signified some considerable success for the goals of the Second Reconstruction just as the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877 signified the abandonment of the First Reconstruction. The goal of this seminar was to understand the interactions between legal institutions (both national and state) and popular movements (both among whites and blacks) that led to failure and the effective re-enslavement of African-Americans in the first instance and success (in the sense of the end of legally enforced segregation and the empowerment of African-Americans in the political process) in the second instance. We repeatedly asked ourselves, what were the differences that led to failure of the First Reconstruction and success, such as it has been, in the Second? Our primary focus was on the African-American Civil Rights Movement — a focus reflected in the curriculum units prepared by Kyle Beckham, Marlene Cabiness, Mary Ann Caruso, Artnelson Concordia, Lynn Pleveich, and Adam Kubey.

We also more briefly explored three other contexts: the modern claims for equal rights of women, gays and lesbians, and Hispanic and Asian ethnic minorities. In two of these contexts — women and gays/lesbians — the claims followed the same pattern of the Second Reconstruction: that is, reliance on the courts in enunciating constitutional rights and political mobilization through popular protest movements. In the third context — the status of Hispanic and Asian minorities — there has been, relatively speaking, much less reform-minded effort directed at courts or popular protests. Our consideration of these three contexts helped us distill lessons about the general effectiveness for advancing minority rights of the strategy laid down in the civil rights struggles by and on behalf of African-Americans. The curriculum units prepared by Joseph Corsetti on the rights of gays and lesbians, by Deborah Fetzer on the campaign for women's suffrage, and by Meredith Tilp on Hispanic identity reflected this aspect of our seminar.

The ambitious agenda for our seminar sessions inevitably meant that we skimmed only over the surface of extraordinarily complex events in attempting to distill comparative lessons from different historical eras regarding different minority groups. The curriculum units prepared by the seminar Fellows gave much more detailed attention to specific topics related to the broad themes that we discussed together.

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