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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2011 Volume IV: The Big Easy: Literary New Orleans and Intangible Heritage

Introduction

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The curriculum units that emerge from "The Big Easy" reflect the intellectual, cultural, and pedagogical diversity of the teachers who wrote them. Their unity of spirit, however, comes from a common sense of purpose. Expressed differently by each teacher, that purpose is to heighten his or her students' awareness of the special character, history, beauty, imperfection, fragility, and promise of the place where they live by comparing it to one that they can for the most part only imagine – New Orleans, Louisiana, "NOLA," as it continues to live in memory, struggle in reality, and flourish in the imagination. Not every curriculum unit that follows here makes particular reference to NOLA, but none could have been conceived in the same way without awareness of it. It is one of those cities, as Andrei Codrescu puts it in *New Orleans, Mon Amour* (2006), where the official language is dreams. But dreams, we discovered, are spoken in many languages and in a variety of places. In addition to New Orleans itself, the places that come to special life in the following units include Tulsa, Oklahoma; Chicago, Illinois; Richmond, Virginia; Mexico City, the Diné Nation; and various loci in the Bay Area, California. In our work together, we did not insist on an official language, the same for every multilingual locale, just so long as each of us could speak in dreams.

The seminar derived its materials and approach from the premise that the allure of a strange place will highlight the magical as well as the nitty-gritty qualities of a familiar one. Representing the past of the Crescent City and re-envisioning its future, imaginative literature and popular culture have traditionally generated the idea of "New Orleans" in the minds of readers, listeners, and viewers world-wide, and, now more than ever, it is being generated by the city in turn. The terminology we used in the seminar – including "deep time," "map of desire," "map of memory," and above all "intangible heritage" – originated in this tragic but inspiring fact of our recent and not-so-recent history. Post-Katrina writing about New Orleans coincides with the global initiative of the Cultural Division of UNESCO on "Intangible Heritage," which identifies "world heritage sites" – places and practices so important that they belong not solely to the people who live there but to all "all humankind." According to the Web site of the Cultural Division of UNESCO, intangible heritage includes "oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts." Prior to listing works of Intangible Heritage as worthy of special preservation, the Cultural Division of UNESCO further stipulates that they must meet four general criteria. They must be 1) traditional, contemporary, and living at the same time; 2) inclusive; 3) representative; 4) community-based. New Orleans is famous for producing these and other related cultural phenomena in abundance, and literary works have just as famously taken them up as objects of representation, especially today, in light of the city's obvious vulnerability and its equally obvious tenacity. While it often is true, we decided, that people don't know what they have until they come face to face with losing it, we also concluded that such a fate is not inevitable. Appreciation is not simply

a gift, but a skill that can be well learned when it is well taught, especially when the tangible objects of appreciation only mark a landscape inhabited by more elusive ones.

Thus "The Big Easy: Literary New Orleans" explored the intangible sources of creative inspiration that writers and other artists find in NOLA, including its cultural mystique, its colonial history, its troubled assimilation into Anglo-North America, its tortured racial politics, its natural and built environment, its spirit-world practices, its raucous festive life, its eccentric characters, its food, its music, its predisposition to catastrophe, and its capacity for re-invention and survival. Our readings and viewings included novels, from John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* to Josh Neufeld's graphic novel *A.D* (2009), the poetry of Brenda Marie Osbey, and a special unit on Teaching The Levees*: A Curriculum for Democratic Dialogue and Civic Engagement* (Teachers College of Columbia University and the Rockefeller Foundation). We documented Mardi Gras Indian processions as well as debutante balls, and shared artifacts from beads to a well-used "voodoo" doll (deactivated).

The first four units concentrate explicitly on New Orleans literary history, material culture, and performance. Patrizia Mauti's "*La Francophonie,* beyond the Hexagon," designed for AP French Language, grades 11-12, at Avondale High School (Georgia) explores the works of the francophone poets known as "Les Cenelles" ("The Hollyberries"). The writers in this group, emerging from the educated ranks of Louisiana's "Free People of Color," joined forces under the direction of Armand Lanusse to publish the first anthology of poetry by African American poets, *Les Cennelles* (1845). Mauti has planned her assignments from this historic volume to include the oral recitation of the poems, which treat themes of love and daily life in a context that subtly evokes the troubled society of the authors. The language of the poems is accessible, direct, and affecting. The voices of the poets are haunting and elusive, however, providing a crux for nuanced interpretative performance as well as confidence-building explication. Costume-designer Barbara Wesselman's "Feathers and Beads: Exploring Culture through the Mardi Gras Indians" is created for performing arts students at Northwest School of the Arts (North Carolina). She targets students in Costume Design and Apparel Design/Development with shout outs to Math (measuring the fabric, counting the beads, paying the bills), U.S. History, and Civics. The Mardi Gras Indians – African Americans who identify themselves with Native Americans and parade through the back streets of NOLA in heart-stoppingly beautiful hand-sewn suits – speak a language of costume all their own. Wesselman translates that language into terms that students literate in fabric and thread can understand, with the metaphor of weaving descriptive of cultural expressions of all kinds.

As the introductory reading for the seminar, Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, the non-fiction novel about an Arab-American contractor and his family caught up the paranoid aftermath to Katrina, provided an intellectual and emotional touchstone for all our subsequent discussions. As the world he knows turns upside-down, Abdulrahman Zeitoun re-discovers his city, the Crescent City, as a microcosm of the United States, but he re-discovers it as map of the cruelly unfamiliar superimposed on the neighborhoods he knew like the back of his hand. In this critical but ultimately inspirational spirit, Stephanie M. Schaudel' s interdisciplinary "New Orleans: Human Gifts, Human Lessons," which is designed for Social Studies and Earth Science (9-12, Oceana High School), asks her students the question that Katrina starkly posed to all of us: What is "Natural" about "Natural Disasters"? In "Strange Fruit: An Exploration of Imagery and Socio-Politics of Post-Katrina New Orleans," Amanda Davis-Holloway is making a civics lesson out of this humanitarian crisis and its aftermath for her classes in English for students with special needs in Richmond (Armstrong High School).

Although "The Big Easy" focused on New Orleans as an example, the concept of "Intangible Heritage" is portable, and the methods of identifying and interpreting it can be applied to other places and peoples – around the world and close to home. Using NOLA as a point of departure, we worked with the idea of two

maps: "Flat and Pop-Up." The first is the (2-D) physical map of the place – its geography, its environment, its urban or exurban plan, its historic development, and its current spatial reality. The second map is the intangible one that authors and readers create and carry in their heads and in their hearts – conjuring up the memorial associations, the special locales, the secret landmarks, and the unique behaviors that make a place "traditional, contemporary, and living at the same time." This is the map of dreams, which "pops up" the past into the imaginative future of a place. It can be a map of nightmarish fear (well-grounded as well as paranoid), but it also can be a map of hope, and sometimes both at the same time.

Exemplary of the seminar's comparative methodology, Andrew Martinek's "Intangible Space and the Map of Desire in the Gage Park Neighborhood" (Chicago) builds a unit of 9th grade AP Human Geography into an intercity dialogue between Gage Park and the Desire section of NOLA. Teaming with a partner at George Washington Carver High School in New Orleans, which, like Gage Park, remains a traditional public high school increasingly isolated in a rising tide of charter schools, Martinek has literally mapped out walks and ethnographic tours for his students, who will share their findings with their collaborators in NOLA, who will reciprocate with "pop-ups" of the Desire neighborhood (about which suffice it say that the streetcar service there ended in 1950). Connected by Skype and speaking to one another (and potentially to any other GoogleMap-user) via cartographic postings and ethnographic reportage, the students will discover the magic of both the streets they imagine and the streets they walk every day. Similarly, Matthew Kelly's grade 11-12 Spanish and AP Spanish unit at Independence High School, "The Scene of the Crime, Mexico City: Performing History in the Language Classroom," invites the students to imagine the sites of two massacres, perpetrated centuries apart, as an urban palimpsest of cultural history. Kelly also plans to get his students on their feet by scripting scenarios of the historical events and acting them out in Spanish, echoing Mauti's strategies in AP French. Jeffry Weathers (Westmoor High School, 11-12th grade Film as Literature) pushes off from NOLA to find the wonderful and the strange in a neighborhood that is satirized in song for its culture-less monochrome. He proposes to look inside "the little boxes, on a hill side" and see what is really inside today.

Molly Myers, in "Mind the Gap: Planting the Seeds of Cultural Awareness" (Lindblom

Math and Science Academy, 9th-grade Human Geography), has envisioned a different kind of ethnographic project for her students in Chicago. She will introduce her students to the ethnic neighborhoods that define a complex map of human difference in the city and traverse the South Side where she teaches, but she will do so by leading them to a self-reflexivity about their own subject positions and identities. Barbara Prillaman (Conrad Schools of Science, 6th-grade Social Studies/Geography/English) will bring her students to a deeper understanding of the homes they have left behind to migrate to the United States by taking them along with her on a remembered journey of her Peace Corps years in South America. Hers is a project of preservation, but not of a physical environment. Rather, what is to be preserved is the hearts of her students, many if not most of whom will never return to the country of their births. Similarly, Mika Cade (Emery Unified District (9th-grade English/Social Studies) stresses cultural heritage and resiliency in her unit "Performing Resilience: The Study of Culture and the African Diaspora through Literature and Dance." Her medium of choice is embodied memory, using the methods of dance history and performance studies to ask her students where they are coming from – as evidenced by the dances they are dancing, live and on celebrity YouTube videos. She uses Ishmael's Reed's evocation Jes Grew from *Mumbo Jumbo* as a touchstone.

Two final units summarize the methods and approach of "The Big Easy," one in the urban palimpsest of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the other in the "deep time" of the Diné Nation. Shanedra Nowell has created "The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot and its Legacy: Experiencing Place as Text" for her 9th-grade Human Geography class at Edison Preparatory High School. Dividing her subject into the analytic rubrics of Pretext, Plaintext, Intertext, Subtext,

and Context, she tells the long -suppressed story of the 1921 massacre known as the "race riot." She will walk her students through the past that is missing and assumed dead and the past that is still present through the searing photographs, memorial plaques, and memoirs of that historically defining but not ultimately definitive event. Finally, Marilyn Dempsey, in "The Intangible Heritage of the Diné," takes her students (and all of us who hear her speak and read her curriculum unit are her students) through the deepest investigation of all: sharing with her Diné students everything that she can tell them about their intangible heritage, so that they will sustain it by passing it on to their children, she is generously willing to share with the rest of us all of this inspiring heritage that is proper for us to hear.

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