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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2012 Volume IV: Narratives of Citizenship and Race since Emancipation

Introduction

by Jonathan Holloway, Professor of History, African American Studies and American Studies

What does it mean to be American? Simple keywords and key documents spring to mind most immediately: freedom and independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Thinking of these words and documents allows us to tell a certain story about a people who came from different and distant shores eventually to form "a perfect union" so that they could enjoy the fruits of their labor. In telling this story, however, we need to recognize that it is just that: a story, and one that is particular to only some people in the United States.

In "Narratives of Citizenship and Race Since Emancipation," eleven teachers came together to think about these same keywords and documents, but in a way that told a different story (or, more accurately, different stories) about this country. The result of our wide-ranging discussions was, I believe, a richer and more inspiring answer to the introductory question: "what does it mean to be American?"

We began our discussion thinking about freedom, recognizing that it is an empty gesture without a careful examination of its deep connection to its very denial. Considering the role of slavery and then emancipation (and how freedom was simultaneously a moment of celebration and a source of deep political, cultural, social, economic, and epidemiological anxiety) in the construction of an American identity set us on a path of discovery. While we were on this journey we thought about the ways in which racial policing (uplift in the late 19th century, the incarceration industry in the late 20th century), migration, art, economic radicalism, civil rights legalism, racial radicalism, popular culture, feminism, transnational identity, public policy, sexuality, and putative post-racial identity all played roles in the formation of the modern narrative of American citizenship.

Because we were always addressing contested topics that speak to the heart of who we claim to be as American citizens, we never had an "easy" conversation. It was a special gift, then, that all of the seminar participants actively engaged in our collective dialogue. They brought the full range of their experiences to the seminar table and, in so doing, made every meeting a profound learning opportunity. The teachers' curriculum units reflect the diversity of their perspectives, pedagogical styles, and the students in their classrooms.

In answering that organizing question – what does it mean to be American? – Sarah Boyd and Jeff Weathers addressed civic responsibility, hoping to inspire in their students a deeper engagement with this country's founding documents while also helping them find their own paths toward embracing the full rights and responsibilities that citizenship confers. Louise Krasnow and Barbara Prillaman looked at the construction of racial difference as it was delineated in law and social science from emancipation through World War II, pointing out the viciousness and absurdities expressed in the search to find racial difference in order to deny citizens the very rights conferred upon them by their birthright. Matt Kelly and Barsine Bernally took a

refreshingly different approach to thinking about citizenship and belonging by exploring Mexican American and Diné citizens' experiences, forcing us to consider what, precisely, is the language of citizenship. Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins and Tauheedah Wren asked their students to take an expansive view of citizenship and birthright by exploring the pathways that various ethnic and national groups pursued in striding toward full citizenship in the United States, pointing out how the students and their families were part of this larger cultural and civic tapestry. In terms of self-reflection, Joy Beatty and Sydney Coffin crafted some of the more contemporary units on citizenship, expecting their students to think about how normative values of family and gender are mediated through popular culture and poetry. Finally, Kasey Kennedy crafted a unit that was both historically informed and presentist, illuminating for her students the contestations over "belonging" and "citizenship" even when one is in one's own neighborhood, at home perhaps, but never fully at home.

Whether you teach third graders or graduating seniors, there is something in this volume for you. While the curriculum units you will find here vary greatly, they all reflect the teachers' desires to help our youngest citizens learn their histories, cultures, and languages – their keywords, if you will – so that they can continue the fight to make this nation a more perfect union.

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