



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2017 Volume II: Literature, Life-Writing, and Identity

Introduction

by Jill Campbell, Professor of English

The tumultuous times in which our seminar on “Literature, Life-Writing, and Identity” met in the summer of 2017 gave a special sense of urgency to our work together. In the context of newly aggressive threats to vulnerable groups, from migrants and undocumented individuals to poor folks without health insurance to men “driving while black” to queer and transgender people—not to mention the growing dissonance between clear, even catastrophic evidence of climate change and the brazen refusal to address it—discussion of novels, poetry, and life-writing might seem frivolous. Instead, the heightened sense of uncertainty and peril of these times seemed to strengthen the fervency of our shared conviction of our work’s importance. Although we did not often dwell on political developments in our seminar meetings, we shared an understanding that any resources our teaching can offer young people to strengthen their pride, courage, and resilience and to support their capacities to reflect, to think critically, and to feel agency in shaping their own lives, are more desperately needed than ever.

The philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson offered us one set of terms with which to formulate our understanding of the vital human stakes of the expressive and interpretive arts. From her book *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, we gleaned ways to describe the damage done to identity by cultural stories that demean individuals perceived first as members of a devalued group. In our shared readings for the seminar, we traced the consequences of such cultural stories again and again—whether in Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, in which the “creature” turns to violence in the face of repeated rejections; or in Gene Luen Yang’s 2006 graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, in which the protagonist directs the bigotry he encounters against both himself and others; or in Claudia Rankine’s 2014 work, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, in which the speaker confronts a barrage of racial projections and misprisions so relentless that the lyric “I” cannot be sustained. These literary renderings from science fiction, fantasy, and poetry all resonated strongly with what we know well from daily life, from the news, and from the struggles of our students to sustain a sense of self.

We found ourselves often remarking on the fundamental human need to be attended to—to be seen and heard, as individual selves—as well as the deep human needs for imagination and beauty. More specifically, we drew on the concept of “counter-stories” developed by Lindemann Nelson and others—a strategy of resistance that allows identities to be narratively “repaired”—as a flexible model to describe the resource provided by creative personal expression. We jokingly developed an imaginary hashtag, “#HumanitiesSaveLives,” that conveyed the improbable nature of our conviction in a time when schools and universities as well as government and the media question the value of Humanistic pursuits. Perhaps such a hashtag does, or should, exist, to spread the word through social media’s wide-reaching channels. In the context of our seminar, however, part of the joke of the hashtag was that we didn’t need one, given the special intimacy of our daily gatherings. We fully savored that experience of immediacy, in which we spoke

honestly and listened intently to each other. We left our intensive two weeks together with a renewed respect for the vital importance and power of the act of listening.

At the same time, each member of the seminar also developed and carefully crafted a curriculum unit informed by these concerns to use in his or her own classroom, and thanks to the extraordinary reach of the internet, these original curriculum plans, along with thoughtful accounts of their rationale and aims, are available here to teachers around the world. The units range from projects for lower-grade students in the elementary art classroom, to reading and writing projects for middle-school students, to curriculum for high-school students in Sociology, English, and History of the Americas.

Two of the curriculum units developed for the seminar draw on the power of visual art-making as well as the language arts as means for creating and conveying a strong and dynamic sense of identity. Affirming young people's natural creativity, Robert Graham has designed a unit in which the activities of scribbling, collecting, and curating offer methods for young children's rich exploration of their sense of self. For her older students, all of them English learners and many of them recent arrivals in the U.S. after harrowing journeys, Sara Stillman combines language-learning opportunities with "art-based research." Following discussion of both words and images in a graphic memoir of a refugee's journey, students will create narrative mobiles about their own journeys—works of art that lend weight, balance, and motion to chosen memories, with embedded audio-recording of their narratives in their own voices.

Marissa King's unit, designed for the fifth-grade classroom, draws directly on Lindemann Nelson's ideas to strategize ways to shore up identity for students who face unchosen changes in their lives. "Fiercely optimistic" about young people's potential for resilience, King uses carefully selected reading and writing assignments to remind students of the depth of their inner resources, and to insure that their identities are sustained by many strands rather than being narrowly defined. Toni Aliskowitz's unit provides her fourth- and fifth-grade students with ways to think and talk about the great variety of human abilities and "dis"-abilities. Employing both fictional and nonfictional works, the unit introduces students to people whose complex individual identities cannot be reduced to the physical or mental disabilities that onlookers might see first.

Joyce Tsinijinnie's and Priscilla Black's units are both designed to increase their students' knowledge of Diné (Navajo) language, culture, and disciplines as essential sources of identity and resources for living. Tsinijinnie's unit for third graders concentrates on the practice of self-introduction, so important in Diné culture. In a carefully-planned sequence of lessons, the unit not only provides her students with a practical skill but also develops their language abilities, knowledge of their clans, and understanding of the origins of the clans, to place each student in the web of identity that is their rich inheritance. Black's unit, for sixth-grade students, emphasizes the Diné value of balance as a guiding principle. Entering the unit through *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel that incorporates a different culture's ancient stories in a contemporary context, Black's students will come to appreciate what their own people's sacred stories, traditions, and literary works offer them alongside other aspects of their identities.

Patrice Henry's unit for junior-high students seeks to help them distinguish the questions "Where am I *from*?" and "Who *am* I?" and to explore the relationships between those questions. In an innovative pairing of literary and historical materials, the unit focuses first on August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*, which stages a debate about the simultaneous burden and richness of family history, and then on a complex episode from Tulsa history, which encompasses both the achievements of Black Oklahomans and their violent persecution: the prosperity and self-sufficiency of the Greenwood District and the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921. Capitalizing on the interest of "real life" stories for young people, Jennifer Vermillion's unit for high-school sophomores artfully

assembles a variety of non-fiction texts and journaling activities with which students examine several key aspects of adolescent identity: names, speech, and the experience of “teenage” life.

All of the units designed by seminar members seek at once to strengthen students’ understanding and acceptance of their own identities and to heighten their openness and empathy towards others. Robert Schwartz’s unit particularly emphasizes this double aim, boldly presenting his high-school freshmen with the great variety of life-stories and kinds of identities that surround us. His unit works to counter the monotony and exclusive bias of the “master narratives” of dominant culture by plunging students into a sequence of “multicultural, multimedia” texts that feature protagonists with very different stories to tell. Tharish Harris’s unit for high-school freshmen also foregrounds the double aim of “finding me, knowing you,” as her students move through topics ranging from hair and food to more abstract bases for defining identity such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, with an eclectic mix of reading and writing assignments clustered around each.

Eduardo Valladares’s IB Histories of the Americas curriculum takes a broader hemispheric and historical view, combining required units on the Civil Rights movement and on foreign policy in the Americas in order to foster critical inquiry about the connections between power relations among countries and within them. His unit also prompts students to rethink how we habitually define “American” in implicitly U.S.-centered terms. Designed for a high-school course in Sociology, Barbara Prillaman’s unit addresses the central place of gender and sexuality in defining personal identity; it introduces students to the complex interplay between “given, chosen, and imposed” in the social construction of gender. Recognizing that gender and sexuality are highly personal and sensitive subjects, Prillaman opens her unit with a module devoted to active listening skills—in order that, as she says, students may “be more involved in what their peers are trying to convey.” This aim of sensitive attention to individual expression is central both to the work we undertook together as a seminar, and to the aims of all the units that seminar members have developed with such care.

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