



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2021 Volume I: U. S. Social Movements through Biography

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## Introduction

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The history of social movements has an almost magnetic attraction for YNI National Fellows – and for their students as well. Even before the resurgence of social protests in recent years, social movements offered teachers a chance to show students how individual actions could lead to societal change. They offered, also, a chance to put students in touch with acts of remarkable courage, speeches of remarkable power, and writings whose insights still resonate today. Most importantly, social movements have played a central role in American history, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; to put it simply, U.S. history cannot be taught without introducing students to the struggle to abolish slavery, to provide suffrage and equal rights for women, and to ensure that the Constitution’s promise of civil rights is available to all citizens.

This seminar “U.S. Social Movements through Biography” brought together a talented and deeply committed group of teachers from across the country to study social movements in general, and to prepare their individual curriculum units. Our common readings, organized around the interests of seminar participants, were framed by some general readings on how to best understand and teach the relationship between individual experiences and a broader history. We also read Sam Wineburg’s influential (and humorously entitled) recent book, *Why Study History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)*, which made a persuasive case for inquiry-based learning that emphasized learning to ask and answer key historical questions rather than simply memorizing names and dates.

Our general seminar readings began with a few samples from the outpouring of scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement. For instance, Jaqueline Dowd Hall’s important article on “The Long Civil Rights Movement” demonstrated through powerful example the ways in which historians’ decisions about periodization (when to begin and end their stories) relate to interpretation. The life of Bayard Rustin, a central figure in the Civil Rights Movement, but one who often stayed in the background, offered an opportunity to consider individual lives in the context of a broader movement. We then moved back in time to look at the rise of labor unions on a national scale in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; these episodes revealed some of the prerequisites to successful mobilization. With these important movements – and important concepts – worked out, the seminar then examined a suite of late 20<sup>th</sup> -century social movements, including “second-wave” feminism, the American Indian Movement, and the “gay rights” struggles for LGBTQ rights.

Not surprisingly, the curriculum units for this seminar centered, by and large, around the social movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – and especially around the African-American freedom struggle. Stephen Straus followed the charge of this seminar quite directly in his curriculum unit centered on John Lewis’s well-regarded graphic version of his biography, *March*. A remarkable figure in the 1960s student movement, Lewis’s death in 2020 made Straus’s examination of his life all the more poignant and meaningful. Straus also incorporated readings

on the Civil Rights Movement in Richmond, Virginia so his students could understand how their own city both reflected and contributed to national events. Carol Boynton (a veteran YNI hand serving as seminar co-Coordinator) took on the challenge of teaching complex historical concepts and events to her kindergarten students. Her fortunate students will learn Hall's point about periodization through studying the life of Rosa Parks, whose refusal to move to the back of the bus was a crystallizing moment in the Montgomery (Alabama) bus boycott. Karen Mullins moved further back in time to use the lives of two remarkable artists, the writer James Weldon Johnson and the sculptor Augusta Savage to illustrate crucial aspects of the so-called Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s.

Not all of the National Fellows worked in the field of Civil Rights. Alex de Arana prepared a thoughtful and wide-ranging unit on the labor battles of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. After illustrating the logic behind the rise of national-scale labor unions using famous battles in the steel industry, de Arana also brings the battles back home by relating the events of the Philadelphia transit strike – over some of the same rail lines that his students use to get around the city. Jolene Smith prepared an insightful curriculum unit about the rise of the American Indian Movement in the late 1960s, showing how it managed to pull together Native Americans from across the United States to agitate for changes to policies at the federal level. And Sean Means (a first-time seminar co-Coordinator) drew on his own experiences to teach his students about Barack Obama's successful presidential campaign in 2008, introducing students to the complexities of electoral politics on the ground.

It was a particular pleasure to work not just with Social Studies/History teachers but also their colleagues in English Language Arts. Alca Usan's curriculum unit on Langston Hughes drew on our seminar discussions of his work, themselves based on some of the incomparable holdings of Yale's Beinecke Library. She combined appreciation for Hughes's artistry and his ability to shed light on African-American experiences with a methodological commitment to teach students the virtues of close readings. Tara Waugh designed an adventurous and compelling curriculum unit that combined analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* with a study of culturally oriented movements like the Riot Grrrrls in the punk rock scene of the 1990s.

Two of the National Fellows faced the challenge of providing significant history lessons to their English-language learners. Cristina Mejia worked on the core concerns of the seminar, exploring the lives of six Latinx activists from a variety of walks of life – but all committed activists. Her unit demonstrates the power of biography as a way of inspiring students to action. Kariann Flynn worked in an earlier period, using her curriculum unit to teach students how historical events are memorialized. Focusing on the Battle of Gettysburg, she compared Lincoln's memorable (and oft-assigned) address at the battlefield with a competing account by Frederick Douglass – and with everyday accounts of the war's meaning from soldiers who fought there.

As any historian would remind us, our seminar discussions reflected our own times – the unusual moment of Summer 2021. Wrapping up our work together just as the delta mutation pulled us back into measures to combat the Coronavirus, we were also shaped by the battles over teaching history visible in state legislatures, and the ongoing racial reckoning in the United States as a whole. Meeting virtually, we built as much of a community as possible and found meaning in our collective and individual work.

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