



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume IV: Resistance from Aristotle to Star Wars

Introduction

by Feisal G. Mohamed

Walking down Elm Street during the Intensive Session, I passed by the sign of the First Methodist Church, which was displaying a significant message: “Resistance is Faithful.” This was more than coincidence: it felt as though the hand of Providence was guiding our seminar. Or at least that the call to resist is being felt widely and deeply in our moment. Also fitting was the materiel supporting New Haven’s unhoused—snacks, sleeping bags, tents—scattered about the church steps. Resistance can mean creating little republics of care.

All of this got to the heart of the readings and conversations we had in this seminar, the range of which is so wonderfully represented by these units. Through texts ranging from Plato and Aristotle, to Tacitus and Livy, to Shakespeare and Milton, to CLR James and David Walker, to Red Nation’s manifesto *The Red Deal*, to *Star Wars:Andor* and the Paul Schrader film *First Reformed*, we saw just how multi-faceted and complex resistance can be. Sometimes it can mean open rebellion. At other times it can mean cleaving to the principles of civic virtue neglected by tyrannous leaders. Can it also mean protecting the Earth when government fails to do so, and reversing the Original Sin of political order in the Americas by giving land back to Indigenous peoples?



First Methodist Church, New Haven, 17 July 2026 (photograph by the author)

We begin with units designed for elementary grades. Julián Lopez-Carmona offers an overview of many of the texts central to the seminar, and ably adapts core concepts to the fifth-grade ELA classroom in a unit using as an anchor text Tui T. Sutherland's *Wings of Fire: The Dragonet Prophecy*. For her sixth-grade students, Christina Boone has designed a unit bringing to light an undertaught episode of Native American history and placing it in historical context: the Navajo Long Walk of 1864-66, a mass displacement and forced march of 300-450 miles. Under such conditions, survival itself is a form of resistance. Marc Hillis takes up more recent, and more activist, forms of Native American resistance in his unit for high school. While focused on the American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in 1968, and on the #NoDAPL protests of 2016-17, Hillis also draws his students' attention to longer traditions of Indigenous political action.

Pursuing one of the seminar's core themes, Bill Chenevert and Allison Wollack offer units focused on Black history. Complementing his existing resources for Black History Month is Chenevert's Social Studies unit for middle schoolers studying various forms of resistance visible in the civil-rights era. The unit introduces students to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and to Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" while also adding nuance to a simplistic binary between nonviolence and armed struggle associated with these two leaders, and showing students that Black culture as such is a powerful form of resisting white supremacy. In her unit for high school, Alison Wollack similarly explores complex dynamics of resisting slavery—from marronage, to violent struggle, to survival and maintaining familial bonds—using as an anchor text Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*, in which a character time travels from the 1970s to a plantation in Maryland in the 1800s. Woven into the class's reading of Butler's novel are excerpts from two key anti-slavery

texts of the nineteenth century: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, and *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*.

By so designing her unit, Wollack aims to guide students through a complex longer text from start to finish—a necessary, and vanishing, skill. Michelle Hawkins similarly guides high-school students through an anti-totalitarian classic, George Orwell's *1984*. Her unit also intersperses related texts, such as Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* and Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from the Omelas." And it shows that dystopian literature consistently to reflect upon the ethical and political choices that characters must make when confronting tyranny.

Focused on dynamic within the classroom itself, Magen Parsley notes a paradox: stnts resist education as tyrannical though it is education itself that is a vital tool of resisting tyranny. Recognizing that leading her middle-school students to embrace the latter view must involve allowing their voices to be heard and valued, she offers a unit focused on diary writing, taking inspiration especially from *The Freedom Writers Diary*. Our two art teachers are likewise keenly aware of the political dynamics governing the ways in which creative expression is seen and valued. They offer units showing that resistance in visual culture goes well beyond protest art. Both Jenna Eiker and Stephen Newbold are keenly aware that today's students must be trained as both observers and producers of visual culture, living as they do in a world saturated with images and videos. Training the critical gaze of her sixth-grade students, Eiker shows how images can reinforce power, through close looking at such classic artworks as Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* and Emanuel Leutz's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. These are viewed alongside a broad range of artists whose work challenges censorship and control, such as Ai Weiwei, and who resist exclusionary definitions of "high art," as in the craftivism of Betsy Greer. Newbold introduces his high-school students to the many forms of resistance, from advocacy to community building, and trains them to look beyond content, exploring how art gets produced and where it is displayed. The unit takes several contemporary artists as inspiration—Amy Sherald, Titus Kaphar, Kehinde Wiley, Nick Cave, and Bisa Butler—in its effort to, in Newbold's words, "decolonize ways of seeing, knowing, and being."

Our three final units, all designed for high school students, point to our own moment in suggestive ways. Noting that the steep inequality of our own time has been likened to a new Gilded Age, Ray Paul Marshall wonders if it may also lead to a new Progressive Era. His unit draw our attention to two fascinating episodes in early twentieth-century labor history: the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York City, and the Battle of Blair Mountain in Logan County, West Virginia. In a unit that seeks to deepen students' understanding of modern Iran, Tara McKee leads her students through Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, and also places them in the moment of the Iranian Revolution through propaganda and protest posters and through Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's memoir *Remembering Akbar*. Showing intimate knowledge of the *Star Wars* franchise, and with effective reference to the clarifying work of Robert Paxton, Christopher De Matteo offers his students a careful unpacking of an oft-misused keyword of our moment: fascism. Looking at the history of fascism's rise in Italy and Germany, he meticulously recommends scenes from the *Star Wars* films and *Andor* that illustrate key dynamics of authoritarianism and resistance.

These exceptional educators have created an exceptional cluster of curriculum units. Taken as a whole, they are both thematically linked and also explore the myriad of ways in which humanity resists corrupt rule. They also show that with the right teachers at the helm, the classroom is itself a formidable little republic, a site of learning, and care, and common cause that ripples outward and well beyond school walls.

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