

## Real Voices of the 1960's: A Foundation for the New Canon

*Brian Wolf*

### INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

Students schooled today in the New Canon of American literature encounter an array of voices and experiences that are as rich as they are varied in their expression of the ever-more-individual American identity. Diverse stories and characters, as well as settings and conflicts, continually offer students points of entry into mindsets and lives that are utterly different, yet no less American, than their own. A student of American literature's New Canon might find it difficult now to imagine a time, not long ago, in which the only versions of the American experience that were allowed into the canon were those that reflected a society of exclusion and, often, of outright oppression. Whether the exclusion was social or economic, and whether the oppression was political, legal, or racial, the effects on the Canon are indisputable: the voices heard by the majority of American students did not speak of the experiences that had been lived by the very students reading and listening to these "American" voices.

The New Canon of American literature, fueled by a spirit of social equality and of multicultural appreciation, did not evolve in a social vacuum. Indeed, the New Canon exists today as a (thankful and blessed) result of real social upheaval and change that began in the 1960's. Prior to the 1960's, social equality in America was presumed by no one; racism, sexism, and discrimination of every sort were the *modus operandi* for most Americans, regardless of whether they were perpetrators or victims in the system of injustice. As deeply rooted and as deeply scarring as this injustice was, the fabric of this society was not easily torn. In fact, years of ripping, tearing, burning, and shooting would follow before the shroud of American injustice would be shed by most Americans, and the American people would begin to be seen for their truer, and more beautifully diverse, humanity.

If the New Canon of American literature is to survive as a legitimate inclusion of diverse American voices and experiences, then the concession must be made that the New Canon denotes equality and multicultural appreciation more than it necessarily does racial or ethnic harmony. The emergence and survival of the New Canon of American literature has not, does not, and will not entail the disappearance of discrimination, racism, and sexism. It has, does, and will, however, assure a venue that honors all American voices. Lest the New Canon be written off as propaganda, or worse yet, as breezy literary fashion, proponents of the New Canon must always stand ready to allow newcomers to our classrooms and our communities to speak as they enter, and to speak openly, honestly, and at length, of what they must speak. Again, the real voices of the 1960's—the decade in which the possibility of our new, wider, more truly American Canon emerged, offer us today their experience of demanding, at times violently, the right not only to speak of their experiences and perspectives, but also even to *live* them. These real voices provide more than an approximation of "what it must have been like"—a mindset that is limited and presumptuous, though all too frequently assumed by students of any historical era. Indeed, these real voices offer today's students of

America's New Canon with the only possible authentic context for understanding the real social changes that have made such a canon a reality today.

Before the core of literature that reflects the society in which it was created could become truly multicultural, the society had first to become multicultural itself. The difficult and often violent process of American culture becoming truly multicultural in the 1960's was led most vehemently by those individuals and groups of individuals who had been most excluded or oppressed by the pre-multicultural American society. In particular, women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other ethnic minorities, as well even as the American youth, led the protests, crusades, and ways of life that so clearly mark the 1960's as a decade of "movements." Prior to the courage, sacrifices, determination, and ultimate success of these people, the mere idea of a Canon of literature that would reflect their experiences and perspectives would have been absurd if not indeed profane to the pre-multicultural American society.

Whose voices, then, are these so-called "real voices" of the 1960's? The real voices are those belonging to the men and women who effected these changes in society, who opened classrooms and communities to the possibility and the joy of celebrating diversity. These voices may be found in homes and families, on paper and in books, in memories and on film. But, if today's students are to find them, then today's teachers must offer them. These convictions have driven me to design this unit, so that students will have access to some of the voices and experiences that have shaped the New Canon that they have inherited.

The legacy of this decade of movements and multicultural social reality can be seen in nearly all aspects of contemporary American life today, but perhaps nowhere is it as essential, and hopefully realized, as it is in American classrooms. Young students today often take for granted, through little or no fault of their own, the cultural pluralism of the societies in which they live and study. For many, the political and cultural movements of thirty years ago are as distant, removed, and seemingly irrelevant to life in America today, as are those that took place two hundred years ago, or on another continent. Students are entitled, though, to a complete, full, and rich understanding of the movements and experiences that have directly shaped the social reality of their own lives. Students have a right and a need (despite the extent to which they might be unrealized) to acquaint themselves as personally as possible with the forces—the people themselves, who so stridently ushered in our era of multicultural society.

A further lesson that classroom teachers today offer to our students is the experience of the literature itself of this, our multicultural society. I have designed this curriculum unit to precede the study of multicultural literature in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class that I teach. My first objective of this unit is to introduce students to individuals who were directly involved, as private citizens or as public officers, in the social changes of the 1960's, and to acquaint students with their experiences and their perspectives. My second objective of this unit is to guide student reading and understanding of the non-fiction genre of writing through the use of certain documentary film, speeches, letters, and statements of belief of the 1960's. My third objective of this unit is to impart to

students an understanding of the origin and the essentiality of a multicultural approach to the study of literature.

The strategies that will be used to meet the objectives outlined in this unit include the use of documentary film, audio recording and text versions of speeches by John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., U.S. legislation, public letters, addresses and statements of both individuals and organizations, and statements of purpose or belief of prominent social organizations from the 1960's. Throughout this unit, student-centered learning strategies will include discussion, written journal response to/analysis of assigned readings, short article/essay writing, and the construction of a 1960's multicultural scrapbook. The 1960's multicultural scrapbook serves as the culminating project for this unit.

In each student's individual scrapbook, he or she will display his or her knowledge of the individuals, groups, and events from the 1960's that have been studied. Items included in the scrapbooks will include newspaper articles written by students about specific individuals or events, personal letters written by students assuming the persona of an individual from the 1960's, postcards depicting events, movements, or slogans from the 1960's, student-generated bumper stickers displaying images or slogans from the 1960's, and any other items or ephemera related to the multiculturalism of the 1960's that students wish to include. Students will also compose a "Multicultural Manifesto" to accompany the scrapbook. In the manifesto, the student will explain his or her beliefs about the importance of preserving a multicultural society and maintaining a multicultural approach to literature. The manifesto will be composed in light of the items that have been included in the scrapbook, as well as class readings and activities.

### **STRATEGY #1: DOCUMENTARY FILM AND AN ERA OF OPPRESSION**

As previously stated, if students are to meet those "real voices" of the 1960's, then we as teachers must introduce our students to them. The use of documentary film, particularly when the film concerns a topic of interest to students, can serve as a highly effective means of engaging student involvement, both cognitively and emotionally, in central subjects of classroom study. A documentary film that focuses on specific individuals who are sharing their own personal, first-hand experience of an event, a decade, or a movement, will involve students more immediately and more fully in the issues at hand than will most other readings, discussions, and activities.

The documentary film that I will use is Spike Lee's *4 Little Girls*. The subject of this film is the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963, and the deaths of four young girls. The film powerfully and adeptly combines home videos and still pictures of the four girls who were killed in the violent bombing, and interviews with their parents and siblings. The film also includes interviews with civil rights leaders, law enforcement agents, and community leaders from that time, who offer their insights, as well as their reactions, to the horrific event. The videos, pictures, and interviews offer students a highly personal cognitive and emotional point of entry into the decade in which a society was so opposed to ethnic and cultural

minorities that some individuals would go so far as to bomb an African American church filled with families, and of course, with children.

The pre-reading focus that I will use prior to the viewing of this film will be a written journal entry. Students will respond in writing to the following questions:

What do you think goes through the mind of a person who commits an act of violence against specific individuals, on the sole basis of their ethnicity? Do you think that such a person has friends or family who think the same way that he does? Does such a person get his ideas, at least in part, from his society?

The purpose of the pre-reading focus is to prepare students for the violent nature of the events dealt with in the film. An additional purpose of the pre-reading focus is to center students' attention on both the act of violence and the perpetrator of the act. If students are to fully understand the culture of exclusion and oppression that pervaded the pre-multicultural society, then they also must understand that certain individuals acted not only as individuals, but also as members of a society that cultivated and reinforced beliefs that were violently oppressive and exclusive.

Viewing the film *4 Little Girls*, and becoming acquainted first with the nature of a non-multicultural society, creates a context in which the student will more fully understand the individual voices of the decade. When students are able to perceive events or people as truly "real," rather than as the so often "half-real" figures of biographies and histories, they are also apt to take more seriously and appreciate more fully the gains made by such people. The siblings and childhood friends of Carole Robertson, Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley offer accounts in their own words of how they have tried to deal with and overcome the deaths of the girls, and they underscore that not only were the perpetrators real individuals, but so also were the people real whose lives were lived as ongoing attempts to overcome, rather than be killed by, the hatred and oppression that took the lives of Carole, Denise, Addie Mae, and Cynthia, and so many others.

Following the viewing of the film, I will use class discussion to allow students to share with one another their reactions to the film. In light of recent events that have taken place in various locations throughout the nation, an open discussion about the nature and effects of violence will allow students to understand not only our current era more fully, but also the era of the 1960's. The realization of the mere occurrence of violence thirty-some years ago will allow students to understand that the violence that they so often witness today did not begin only in this decade. Unfortunately, students today are often quite unaffected by the violence they witness in the newspapers, on television, or in the movies. The film *4 Little Girls* offers us the opportunity, though, to meet the actual people whose lives were torn apart by the bombing. This component, that of the individual people whose lives are destroyed by violence, is so often omitted from the news reports of violence today. The six-second video clip on the news does not convey the utter individuality of the people who suffer at the hands of violence. Again, this film

not only shows at great length such individuals who survived, but also it acquaints us with their most personal thoughts and feelings regarding the losses they have experienced at the hands of a pre-multicultural society.

Sadly, a great number of students in our classes today have also experienced a loss or trauma in their lives at the hands of violence. While the violence they experience might not be the result of the same forces that were in conflict in the 1960's, the experience of violence will most likely forge a stronger connection between the students and the individuals who also experienced violence in the 1960's. So many students seem to feel that they live in a society that does not care at all about the losses, hardships, and sacrifices that define their lives. Certainly, this is an understanding that students will be able to recognize in the lives of the friends and family of the girls who were killed in the Sixteenth Street Church bombing. Hopefully students will also recognize (and I will guide their understanding of this point through class discussion) that the violence that erupts from clashes between people of different ethnic backgrounds results exclusively in loss, and never in gain, for the peoples involved in such clashes. Whether they live in a late 1990's society, in which every ethnicity, including Euro-American, exists as a minority, or whether they lived in the 1960's society, in which every non-middle and upper class Euro-American existed as a minority, the results of violence and oppression are the same. The individuals who experience the violence, as oppressive aggressors or as oppressed victims, also experience exclusively loss, and never gain, as a result of the violence. This fact of oppression and violence, underscored by the very lives that have extolled the price of such violence, is forcefully presented to students in the film *4 Little Girls*. And, the understanding of this aspect of violence and oppression will also offer students a visceral understanding of why the elimination of a pre-multicultural society was undertaken in the 1960's, and why the preservation of a multicultural society is undertaken today.

## **STRATEGY #2: PUBLIC SPEECHES AND THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF SOCIAL REALITIES**

In our society, the election of a new president and the commencement of a new administration often serve as a national "changing of the guard," both in political and ideological terms. What the administration offers, and what the American public perceives, as a national agenda often becomes the framework in which apparent social realities are acknowledged or realized by members of our society. While actual "social realities" are truly realized of course only by those who live them, the elevation of an awareness of these realities to a level of national attention certainly indicates a strong desire to rectify injustices that are exacted by the oppressive social realities of an era. When John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States, many Americans recognized in this man, and in the administration he promised, the possibility of a society that celebrated and protected the freedom of all people, of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, at home and abroad. The possibility of this society replaced what many people had heretofore perceived as the social reality of American society, whose purport had been one of middle and upper-class Euro-American achievement and monopoly. The

election of this new president, and his new administration, however, threatened to replace the old social reality with one that would promise inclusion for the oppressed ethnic and social minorities.

In his inaugural address, President Kennedy spoke of freedom and of the role of freedom in the changing world of the early 1960's. The threat of communism focused the attention of many Americans, including President Kennedy, on personal and national efforts to protect and preserve the freedom of members of our society, as well as members of other societies worldwide. Undoubtedly, the incredible fear of communism and the loss of freedom that it threatened, opened the eyes of many American citizens to many of the social realities that existed in this country and abroad. Just as World War II had led to an increased realization of the degree to which ethnic minorities had participated in national efforts through their service in the armed forces and in domestic war efforts, the Cold War era led to a realization by many Americans that the freedoms that they were willing to fight for abroad had yet to be secured at home.

In his inaugural address, President Kennedy said the following about freedom: "We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom—symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as change" (315). The rhetoric of freedom, though, can often be slippery, particularly when people are accustomed to the injustices that define their lives. The freedom of African Americans, for instance, had been legislated long ago, despite the fact that for the vast majority of African Americans, this freedom was in fact more alleged than it was anything else in the 1960's. Discrimination defined the lives of all ethnic minorities in the 1960's, and society offered direct and overt signs of this discrimination, through refusals of commercial services including merchants and restaurants, forced separate public facilities such as washrooms and public transportation, and government neglect in sub-standard schools and waste management. Society also offered more covert and seemingly indirect signs of discrimination in the monopolization of political and economic forces in society. Clearly, for many Americans, the changes of which President Kennedy spoke included changes within our American society more than changes within a world community threatened by communism.

President Kennedy also made a bold advancement for the rights of all people, both oppressed and fully free, by assigning the authorship of freedom not to man, but to God. Speaking of the powers held by man, including the powers of mass destruction, President Kennedy also spoke of the rights of man, an egalitarian concept that certainly shook the knees of many middle and upper-class Euro-Americans who had become so fast assured of their own rights at the expense of the rights of others. President Kennedy said:

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God. (315)

The concept that the rights of humanity have their true origin not in legislation, power, or circumstance, but rather that they have their origin in the very nature of humanity's members, is essential to understanding the multicultural advances that were made in the decade of the 1960's. In order to control cultural minorities, oppressive factions in many cultures have utilized reins of their oppression that have included claims of "might makes right," "the survival of the fittest," or "the law of the land." What marks the shift in ideology represented by John F. Kennedy's inaugural address is the publicizing of the moral, rather than legislative or circumstantial, aspect of cultural discrimination and oppression. Certainly, many individuals living prior to the 1960's recognized that such ethnic and cultural oppression was morally corrupt, and that it directly contradicted the very nature of humanity, but this understanding had not yet reached a point of critical mass in the ideology of most Americans. And, while John F. Kennedy might not have been the person most responsible for this understanding's having reached critical mass in the 1960's, his election to the office of President, and the era that it initiated, certainly serve as the first watermark in the rising tide of a multicultural society.

I intend to have students first listen to the recording of John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech, and then to read it for fuller comprehension. I will use as a pre-listening and –reading focus the following questions: When President Clinton brings up an issue in a public speech, such as abortion or violence in schools, to what extent does his raising the issue make the issue become a topic of thought or conversation? How much can the President upset or offend people by what he says about an issue? Do people feel good knowing that the President supports *their* position on an issue? My goal with the pre-listening and –reading focus is for students to consider whether or not people are sensitive about their own beliefs. Many students today seem truly disaffected whenever they hear that the President, or most any government or school official for that matter, is speaking on an important issue. Students are not likely to be concerned with what President Clinton thinks or says, but they will be concerned with what they think and say themselves, and certainly they will be concerned with who they think might challenge them, regardless of whether the challenger is their teacher or their President. I want the students to understand that people often react to issues because the issue's crusaders often support or oppose their own beliefs, and the individuals who lead the public crusades about these issues often become emblematic of the issues themselves.

I intend to have students complete an exercise with Kennedy's inaugural speech that involves the rights of humanity. I will give students a list of rights that many young people in the United States possess today. For each right, I will ask the students to designate whether this right comes from themselves, their parents, their teachers/schools, the law of the land, the President of the United States, the Constitution, or from human morality/God/transcendent power/the universe, etc. Students will then make a list of the rights that they receive from each of these groups. Students will answer several questions about these rights, including whether or not they think all people do or do not, or should or should not, possess these same rights. Finally, students will be asked to cross 5 or 6 rights off their list. Students will then compose a one-page story describing the life of a person with the only those rights remaining that had not been crossed out. I will use as a

closure exercise a class story-sharing session and discussion of whether or not the stories describe the real lives of people.

The next public speech that I will use to convey the increasing acknowledgement of social realities that took place in the 1960's will be Martin Luther King, Jr., "The March on Washington Address." This speech, perhaps as much as any single document possibly can, conveys the social realities of oppression and paradox that so defined the lives of millions of Americans during this decade. The paradox rested on the following two facts: first, American citizens were clearly and legally endowed with certain rights, and, second, a great many American citizens were effectively barred from exercising the very rights they held as "their own." King said, "We must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination" (308). While King clearly spoke of the experiences of his own ethnicity in a Euro-American-dominated society, the fact, indeed the social reality of the time, was that any non-Euro-American lived with possession of rights that he was not allowed to use.

King uses the metaphor of a "check" or a "promissory note" that was given to Americans when the both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were written (308). The promissory note was "a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (308). King goes on to say that "America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned" (308). It is certainly worth noting that when King refers to the promissory note, he does not refer to plural promissory notes, or to particular pieces of legislation that had been passed by Congress to respond to particular issues that arose at different times in our nation's history. King refers not to the Emancipation Proclamation as the promissory note, but to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as the promissory note. In so doing, King clearly underscores one social reality of the 1960's—namely, that all citizens of our nation are heir to the same inalienable rights, despite the struggles of members of our own ethnic group, despite the status quo, despite the de facto segregation, despite bogus legislation, and despite short term gains and losses in the quest to freely exercise rights.

Painfully and personally aware of the turbulent and difficult realities that he and his followers faced, King admonished against further oppression while also cautioning against the use of violence. He said, "There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his rights" (308). He also said, "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline" (308). King understood not only the reality of his own oppression, but he also clearly understood the counter social reality of the forces of oppression, as well as the explosive and violent nature that such forces so often entail. The pre-multicultural social reality that King perceived was one in which the forces of oppression and discrimination were not only rampant, but also deeply entrenched. Perhaps King's true visionary nature can best be seen in his realization, as well, of the extent to which dignity and purpose are inherently embedded within the human person. King recognized that as long as one group of people



was not free to possess and exercise their inherent dignity, humanity itself was not free. He said, “Many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom” (308).

Before having students listen to and read this speech, I will use the following journal response question as a pre-listening and –reading focus: If you were to have your own “dream” for our society, what would it be? What would you want our society to be that it is not today? What do you really wish our society valued that it does not seem to value today? Do you think that our society will ever reach the point where it values these things? After listening to and reading the speech, students will answer a series of reading questions to ensure their understanding of the material. I will lead a class discussion concerning the speech itself and their own journal entries. The students will write a newspaper article reporting on the speech itself, the response it generated, and effects it might have on the cause of civil rights in general at this time (the 1960’s). These articles will ultimately be included in the 1960’s scrapbook.

I will follow the consideration of Martin Luther King’s “March on Washington Address” with Robert F. Kennedy’s brief speech, “On the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.” I will follow this sequence in part to provide students with a more complete understanding of the life, the work, and ultimately, the assassination of one of the decade’s most influential men. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., was a pivotal event not only in the violent and tragic loss of one of the greatest civil rights leader, but also in that it marked, and did so vehemently, the fact that some Americans would go to any length to preserve the pre-multicultural society that individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr. had worked so hard to overcome. An assassination such as this one is obviously a severe loss in and of itself, but an assassination of such a prominent figure who had done so much to lead the 1960’s society towards multiculturalism also threatened to turn back much of the progress that had been made. While the assassination would in no way cause followers of King, and other civil rights leaders, to bow down to such violence or to back away from their cause, the assassination certainly fomented among many people the outlook that an approach of peacefully and non-violently demanding basic human rights as citizens of this country would no longer be possible.

In his speech, Robert F. Kennedy addresses this issue. Kennedy was certainly aware that the reaction to the news of the assassination would be severe. Kennedy was acutely aware of the tremendous loss that the entire nation suffered with this one violent act. He said of King: “Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort” (347). As is the case with all violent crimes, people would naturally demand justice for the assassination, and Kennedy likely realized that a great number of people were likely to seek justice on their own terms, with the means offered to them by their own lives. It would have been unrealistic to expect that followers or supporters of King would have resisted acts of reciprocal violence, and certainly such acts were not unheard of.

In many ways, Kennedy’s short speech draws on several veins that were feeding the abandonment of the pre-multicultural society in the 1960’s. I intend to use this speech to

raise issues with students about the sometimes violent nature of social change, the possible reactions to such violent change, and the various postures that one can assume in response to such violence. Students today are accustomed to violence, and they are often disaffected even by reports of murder. Students also might be apt to think, as many people obviously do, that violence is but one of many justifiable responses to attacks on their own lives or interests. Kennedy speaks of compassion, of understanding, and of love, and while students might be reluctant to consider these emotions appropriate responses to an act such as an assassination, I intend to guide their consideration of the issues by suggesting to them that these emotions might be difficult “responses” to make to such an act, but that a disposition that is built upon these emotions will offer them greater power to deal with such a tragedy when it does occur. Without question, such a disposition possesses an obvious link to the multicultural society, and by extension, to a multicultural classroom. A multicultural society can not be built on reactionary impulses; it must be built on a foundation of compassion, of understanding, and of justice.

The final two speeches that I will use to convey the acknowledgement of social realities in the 1960’s will be “The Great Society Speech” and “Howard University Address” by President Lyndon Johnson. “The Great Society Speech” conveys many of the seminal ideas of a multicultural society that emerged as part of the increasing understanding of the realities of equality and inequality, and of justice and injustice, in the 1960’s. The Great Society that Johnson envisioned and invited Americans to aspire to, was one that “rests on abundance and liberty for all ... [and] demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time.” I intend to commence study of this speech by posing the following short response questions to students: Do we live in a Great Society now? If yes, then what makes our society great? If no, then what would make our society great? I anticipate that most students’ responses to this question will not convey much understanding of any of the progress that Johnson made during his administration concerning the Great Society, but my purpose in posing the question is to introduce to students the idea that people can change society. I want students to understand, after listening to and reading this speech, that the changes that Johnson and his administration and supporters were able to achieve involved real and actual changes. I want them to understand that people’s lives were actually changed by the programs he introduced, and that these changes included better living conditions, better employment, better health care, better promise of maintaining basic human rights, and better opportunity for leisure and enjoyment of life.

While studying “The Great Society Speech,” I intend to guide students’ attention to several of the specific issues that are raised in the speech, and to emphasize that these were issues that were raised because they were real issues that affected people’s lives. Students today are inundated (as we all are) with rhetoric and campaigning to such an extent that they seem to think categorically of any political statement or speech as having been designed to get votes or to obscure an issue, rather than to effect real change in the lives of people. Johnson’s “Howard University Address” also strongly supports the premise that the issues addressed were real issues. When I introduce this speech, I will direct students’ attention to the fact that while this speech specifically addresses the plight endured by African Americans, most non-Euro Americans also experienced a great

many of the same difficulties. While Johnson is able to use powerful metaphors for social conditions for African Americans as he speaks, he also conveys that the issues faced by African Americans are real, rather than contrived or obscured for the sole purposes of campaign or propaganda. Johnson address the difficulties faced by many African Americans during the 1960's in terms the paradox of their "legal" possession of certain rights and their de facto dispossession of those very same rights. The social reality that Johnson illuminates is that African Americans (and this applies to other non-Euro Americans, as well) had continuously been denied even the most basic rights to vote, to work, and to care for themselves and their families in the mode and manner of freedom fashioned by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Johnson said: "It is not enough to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates" (340).

At this point in the unit, I intend to shift the focus of concern somewhat by asking students to consider our classrooms at school for a time. I intend to ask them whether or not a classroom that teaches stories, novels, and plays about characters and lives that are *not* akin to their own, can fully and successfully impart to them the ability to walk through the gates of school and out into society. In other words, will students be prepared to enter society if they have only ever read stories and novels about characters whose lives reinforce a *single* cultural identity—in fact, the single cultural identity of a pre-multicultural, pro-Euro American culture? Furthermore, will studying the lives and perspectives of cultures that are equally American as their own, yet nonetheless different, increase their ability to preserve their own cultural identity? Will such a course of study also impart to them an understanding of how to respect the differences of a culture that might seem quite different from their own? Will their lives be simpler if they are able to use their understanding of the multicultural reality of our society to cope with the cultural differences that really do exist in our society? These issues will be deep for students, but I intend to maintain their focus throughout the consideration of these questions on the ease and benefit for their own lives that an understanding of multiculturalism will bring. Ultimately, as well, the questions will come down to whether or not students should want or expect to have a right to read stories and novels about characters with whom they can identify, and whether or not students will want these decisions imposed upon them by someone whose cultural identification will most likely differ from their own. At this point in the unit, I will also have students compose a written statement, likely in the form of a journal entry, in which they consider what aspects of their culture—including ethnic, family, school, national culture, they value most.

### **STRATEGY #3: U.S. LEGISLATION AND THE DEMAND FOR CIVIL RIGHTS**

I have realized on numerous occasions that students are often quite intrigued by what they perceive as "their rights." Perhaps this is the result of our society's having held entitlement as a valid currency in human affairs, and perhaps this is simply an indication of the value that young people place on what they perceive as the limited privileges offered to people of their station in life. Whatever the case might be, students are quick

to cite something as their “right,” and they are equally quick to inform others when they have done something that they had “no right” to do. Not surprisingly, students can be acutely aware of limits and boundaries of their rights and the rights of others.

Since I will already have addressed the issue of rights with the students while they will have been studying Kennedy’s inaugural speech, the students will have a recent and sound prior knowledge upon which to base their reading of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I intend to guide their reading of the Act by using a short answer question assignment that will initially require comprehension and summary of the primary points covered by the act. Once students have mastered such an understanding of the act, I will give students written scenarios in which a question exists as to whether or not a person’s civil rights have indeed been violated. Such scenarios will include employment situations, commercial activities, including merchants and restaurants, and also scenarios involving governmental institutions or agencies concerning law enforcement, voting, or criminal justice. My intent is for students to apply their knowledge of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to specific situations that they can identify with. A second intent is that students should realize that, in fact, such laws do exist. I doubt very seriously that any of the students will have had occasion to peruse this act before, though most will doubtlessly have encountered the issue of discrimination at some point in their lives. Indeed, high school students will have a ready understanding of discrimination simply in terms of age, as most of my students report having experienced age discrimination on some occasion in their lives.

A final point regarding the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that I would like for students to understand concerns the potential for abuse that such a statute offers. It is essential for students to understand that people can, and often do, evoke this act as well as other legal statutes in situations to which they genuinely do not apply. In the scenarios that I offer students, I will include several which might seem to involve discrimination, but which in fact might not. By their very nature, children often possess a keen sense of justice, and they closely guard and monitor the situations or processes that they perceive as unfolding “fairly” or “unfairly.” I anticipate that students’ responses to this section of the unit will be positive, as it should offer students an attainable and mature understanding of issues concerning discrimination.

#### **STRATEGY #4: LETTERS, APPEALS AND THE INCREASING SOCIAL AWARENESS**

The evolution of our society from the pre-multicultural days of the early 1960’s to the multicultural society we know today could never have occurred were it not for the individual citizens of this country who abandoned a well known, yet limited and old-fashioned, view of humanity, in exchange for the more genuine and accurate one that so many adopted in the 1960’s. The views held by the majority of the people in the world’s greatest nation do not simply change overnight. Despite what might be perceived as the mob mentality of the backlash to many civil rights demonstrations in the 1960’s, the fact remains that much of the anti-multicultural sentiment was less fickle than it was deeply

entrenched in the souls of many Americans. People were no more easily changed in the 1960's than they have been at any other time in this nation, and despite the now obvious flaws that characterized the thoughts of many people who opposed pro-civil rights demonstrations and legislation, the fact remains that for many people the idea of civil rights was initially a "hard sell."

For this reason, a tremendous amount of credit ought to be given to those people who contributed to the actual changing of minds and sentiments during the 1960's, particularly in terms of rights, discrimination, and human liberty. Naturally, people looked to the leaders of this country in order to gauge the popularity of their own ideas in relation to beliefs and ideas held by others. Whether they were supported or opposed, the leaders were carefully watched, their words carefully attended to, and their moves closely followed. Often, the captive audience included supporters and certain opposition, but regardless of the pre-sentiments of the audience members, high profile individuals carried with them a great power to sway, in both directions, the support of the public that was so essential to the emergence of our multicultural society.

In particular, individuals such as John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others that have also been mentioned, deserve much credit for delivering (and even in fact for offering) the basic and sound understanding of the issues concerning civil rights that the American public in turn might as easily have rejected as accepted. In this section of the unit, I intend to introduce Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," and John F. Kennedy's "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights." The social awareness of issues concerning civil rights, and also the appropriate means for acquiring, protecting, and strengthening civil rights, relied largely on such pivotal central figures offering a public explanation of why, how, and to what extent such rights can be secured and protected. I particularly want students to realize that during the earliest phases of its inception, our multicultural society might just as easily have developed into something other than what it did. While the ultimate responsibility and credit for this society's emergence and survival rests on its members, these prominent individuals played pivotal roles as well.

I will include in this section of the unit, excerpts from King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Before students read the excerpts, I will ask them to write out five points that they predict King will make in this letter. Then, after reading the excerpts and answering comprehension study questions, I will ask students to review the lists that they had written. For those items that they predicted would be included, I will ask them to explain why they thought ahead of time that these particular items would in fact be included in the letter. For those items that they predicted would be included but were not, I will ask them to explain how the tone of the letter would have been different if they had in fact been included. I also intend to develop an activity that will engage students in dialogue with one another about the causes and effects of both violent and non-violent demonstrations. Ultimately, I will devise a class discussion activity that will allow to students to criticize or defend one another's views and statements about violent and non-violent demonstrations.

The next appeal that I will include will be John F. Kennedy's "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights." I intend to present this piece to students as a statement of belief that was written specifically for the American public about issues concerning civil rights. As a pre-reading focus, I will give students a list of qualities that might or might not be present in an address that a prominent figure is making to the general public. For each quality, students will indicate whether or not they would expect that quality to be present. For example, one quality might be that "the speech will be concerned with facts than opinions," or "the intent of the speech is to inform rather than persuade." I will also alert students to specific traits of this address that cause it to differ from the other pieces they will have read. Once students are prepared to read the piece, in terms of its context and tone, I will continue with reading comprehension and summary questions. The culminating response to this piece will be in the form of an article-format evaluation of the effectiveness of this address. Students might begin with a lead such as: "President Kennedy addressed the nation last night concerning civil rights, and public response to the address seems to have been..." Students will later include this article in their 1960's scrapbook.

If time permits, I will also include Newton Minow's "Address to the Broadcasting Industry" in order to emphasize for students the manner in which technology and media enabled such influential people to deliver their messages to various and remote locations throughout the nation. This point will also provide a further counterpoint for understanding today's multicultural society, and the apparent links between the increased capabilities of public communication and the protection and security of social justice.

#### **STRATEGY #5: STATEMENTS OF PURPOSE AND BELIEF AND THE PUBLIC ORGANIZATION OF PRIVATE CITIZENS**

The successful creation of a truly multicultural society was certainly dependent upon its members securing for themselves and one another the rights that are inherently shared by all of humanity, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, etc. So also, the preservation of the multicultural society has depended on the continued protection of these rights for those individuals who only recently had been allowed to fully enjoy their rights. For many, one of the most effective means of ensuring the protection of rights has been to enunciate clearly and fully both the rights themselves and the principles upon which the rights are based. Consequently, in the 1960's and even today, many individuals have coalesced into groups, and together have produced statements of purpose and belief that offer an encapsulation of many of the principles upon which the attainment and protection of civil rights has rested (and continues to rest today).

I will include the following three statements of purpose or belief as examples of the prolific articulation of rights that occurred in the 1960's: The National Organization for Women, "Statement of Purpose," the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, "Statement of Purpose," and the Students for a Democratic Society, "The Port Huron Statement." For each document, students will answer basic comprehension and summary questions. For The National Organization for Women's "Statement of Purpose," I will redirect the focus back to the civil rights upon which a multicultural society such as ours

depends. Students will answer a series of opinion questions that point to the manner in which a society might easily ignore the rights of one group while attending to the rights of another. For example, many women felt excluded from the arena of exercising basic human rights in much the same way that many other Americans did. Similarly, even today, society often tends to focus on one particular group of people at the apparent expense of the rights of another group. I intend to use this tendency of society, and the correction of this tendency that is offered in NOW's statement of purpose, to underscore for students the necessity of maintaining a constant vigil in order to ensure that the rights of one group are not ignored while the rights of another are pursued. Many students today are amazed by even the idea of many different forms of discrimination that have existed and continue to exist, including gender discrimination. Sometimes they are amazed because the possibility of such discrimination had not entered their minds, and sometimes they are amazed because they can not realistically imagine a time in which such discrimination was commonplace. Regardless, NOW's statement of purpose will provide students with an opportunity to consider the protection and security of civil rights that some might mistakenly have believed to be free from threat.

I intend to present the final two statements as the culminating documents of this unit. Perhaps more than any of the other documents included in this unit, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee "Statement of Purpose," and the manifesto of the Students for a Democratic Society written by Tom Hayden, "The Port Huron Statement," offer students tangible examples of statements of belief concerning the multicultural society we live in. The SNCC's "Statement of Purpose" addresses human aspects of the inherent tensions that exist in the building and the sustaining of a multicultural society. For example, the statement says, "Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear, love transforms hate" and, "Love is the central motif of nonviolence" (307). It will be essential for students to understand that basic premises such as these are the foundation upon which a multicultural society rests. Actions and decisions are never without consequence, and nor are they without foundation. Actions rooted in a foundation such as the one offered by SNCC will promote and protect a multicultural society; actions rooted in a foundation contrary to the one such as the SNCC will preclude the very existence of a multicultural society. This statement of Purpose concludes with the following:

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities. (307)

Finally, "The Port Huron Statement" will model for students the manner in which one can evaluate the strengths, dangers, paradoxes, and hopes that permeate an era. If students are to truly understand the individuals who shaped both the 1960's and the very society in which they lived, then students must also recognize that those people were often critical of parts of the society in which they lived, while they also sought ardently to maintain an honest and fair assessment of the strengths and hopes that continued to emerge despite the presence of oppressive institutions and individuals. As students prepare to compose their own manifestos about our current era and the importance of studying literature from a multicultural perspective, they must understand that in order

for their manifestos to actually change minds and change aspects of reality, (and they hopefully will know by this point that this is a true possibility), then they must fairly consider not only the weaknesses of our era but also the tremendous promises of era that have been heretofore unseen. Hopefully, students will realize that this very undertaking will itself be an act of supporting, or in some cases of helping the creation of, our own multicultural society. With this realization, students also will learn that they are participants—active participants, in our shared multicultural society. Hopefully, after the completion of this unit, this will be a participation that they welcome and celebrate in their lives.

### **ACTIVITY 1: THE RIGHTS OF HUMANITY**

**ACTIVITY OBJECTIVE:** This activity will ask students to consider the rights that they possess as members of humanity, where these rights come from, and whether or not they are free and able to exercise these rights.

**PART I: DIRECTIONS:** For each right listed below, write in the space provided whether the right comes to you from yourself, your parents, your teacher, your school, the government (including law enforcement), or from some other power (for example, your religion, God, from being a human, etc.).

1. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to drive
2. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to eat lunch at Taco Bell on a school day
3. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to talk on the telephone
4. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to stay out until midnight on the weekends
5. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to shop for clothes at any store you want to
6. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to ask for an extension on a homework project
7. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to wear whatever you want to school
8. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to leave class to go to the restroom or to use the telephone
9. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to speak your mind
10. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to choose your own friends
11. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to get a job
12. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to go to college
13. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to read whatever books and magazines you want to read
14. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to use the internet as you want to
15. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to not study for a test
16. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to receive allowance from your parents
17. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to buy food at a reasonable cost
18. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to go to the doctor when you are ill
19. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to ride the city bus and rail system
20. \_\_\_\_\_ the right to display political statements, such as bumper stickers, signs, and t-shirts.



PART II: On a separate sheet of paper, make 6 headings for Self, Parents, Teacher, School, Government, and Other Power, and list under each heading the rights that come from each source.

PART III: CREATIVE WRITING: Look back at your original list. From that list, randomly choose 7 of the rights to place an “X” next to. Imagine the life of someone who possesses all of the rights on the list *EXCEPT* for the seven you have crossed out. Create a descriptive story that shows what you imagine this person’s life to be like. Consider what this person can do with his or life, considering the rights that he or she does or does not possess.

PART IV: CLOSURE QUESTION: Is such a life as the one you have described possible? Has there ever been a time in this country’s history (including now) when such a life was common?

## **ACTIVITY 2: THE 1960’s SCRAPBOOK**

ACTIVITY OBJECTIVE: This activity will ask students to create a scrapbook of 1960’s materials, including newspaper articles, journal or diary entries, personal letters, artwork, movie stubs, cultural ephemera, or anything else related to the 1960’s that they would like to include. All written items will be written by the students themselves. Illustrations and artwork may come from other sources, but must be included and arranged by each student.

DIRECTIONS: For this assignment, you will create a scrapbook from the 1960’s. You will include in this scrapbook all articles, journal and diary entries, and letters that you have composed during our 1960’s unit. In addition to these items, you will also include additional items of your own creation. You might include:

- 1) Artwork that reflects ideas or events from the 1960’s. Think about the changes in culture. Think about the cultures that came into contact with one another. Think about artwork that expresses a point of view of protest, or even rebellion.
- 2) Bumper Stickers. Create several bumper stickers with slogans that you think would have been a hit in the 1960’s. Remember that bumper stickers have often been a way for people to express their opinions, whether they are humorous, indicting, praising, or just to-the-point. Think about the various causes, movements, leaders, and events that you have learned about from the 1960’s.
- 3) Movie Stubs/Ticket Stubs/Concert Stubs. Take a trip to the library, or your history text, or even the internet, and find out what some of the concerts, movies, and other huge cultural events might have been. Create your own ticket stub, or program leaflet for the events.
- 4) Cultural Ephemera. What other odds and ends of culture can you include? Was there a hit TV show from the 1960’s that is a favorite of yours in reruns today? What were

people doing for fun? What were the popular foods, or places to go? Can you create campaign buttons, or posters, or baseball pennants, or other sports memorabilia? Where were the Olympics? Who were the heroes? You can be especially creative with these items!

5) Postcards. What famous, infamous, or noteworthy place would you have sent a postcard from? The March on Washington? A trip to Congress? A demonstration for the rights of women, the rights of African Americans, the rights of students? What would you say at the time? What would you have seen on your visit? What is the picture on the postcard?

Your 1960's scrapbook must be at least 10 pages long, and it must contain at least one item from each of the above categories (although you will most likely have several items from each of these categories). Your scrapbook must be composed creatively and with the appropriate degree of professionalism. You will be graded on quality, content, and creativity.

### **ACTIVITY 3: THE MULTICULTURAL MANIFESTO**

**ACTIVITY OBJECTIVE:** This activity will require students to compose a written statement of their own personal beliefs about our multicultural society and the importance of studying literature from a multicultural approach.

**DIRECTIONS:** Recall the statements of purpose and belief that you have read, as well as the speeches that you have read and heard. Consider the fact that each one is a manifesto of a particular idea or belief, that is—that each statement or speech explains the speaker's beliefs about a very specific topic, and does so thoroughly, offering explanation and example where needed. For this assignment, you will compose a manifesto of your own beliefs about the following questions:

What is the value of living in a society that is truly multicultural? And, Why is it important to study literature from a multicultural perspective? In other words, why is it important to read stories, novels, poems, and plays that reflect the experiences of all Americans, including yourself, and your friends and acquaintances, who might very well have cultural backgrounds and experiences that are different than your own?

Your manifesto will be a minimum of 2 pages in length. Be certain that you explain YOUR beliefs, not the teacher's, or even your friends', about the questions above. Your emphasis should be on explaining yourself as thoroughly and completely as possible, so that even a total stranger could pick up your manifesto, read it, and say to himself or herself, "Yes, I know exactly how this person thinks and feels about our multicultural society and multicultural literature."

You will be evaluated on content, organization, grammar, and originality (this is YOUR manifesto...with YOUR original and unique perspective).

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- Hayden, Tom, and Students for a Democratic Society. "The Port Huron Statement." *America Through the Eyes of Its People: Primary Sources in American History*. New York: Longman, 1997. 334-345. Considers briefly the oppression and racial injustices on America, and calls for improvements in the conditions of humanity, an excellent statement of belief.
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## STUDENTS' ANNOTATED READING LIST

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## **CLASSROOM MATERIALS REQUIRED FOR TEACHING THIS UNIT**

- television and VCR
- movie, *4 Little Girls* (available at video rental stores, libraries, and resource centers)
- sample scrapbook items, including postcards, articles, bumper stickers, and cultural ephemera
- audio recordings of speeches (available in most libraries; various on-line resources are available, as well)
- classroom copies of selected readings