Culminating Lesson: Race, Respectability & Resilience: African Americans in the Mid-West

To be Used with Newberry Library Digital Collections for the Classroom

Essential Questions

How have African Americans been shaped by the experience of living in the Midwest?

How have African Americans shaped the Midwestern experience?

How have the values of race, respectability and resilience shaped the African American experience in the Midwest?

How have African Americans’ understandings of race, respectability and resilience helped to shape the Midwest?

Culminating Activity / Assessment

Students will critically analyze the documents provided and answer the document-based question (DBQ): How did the values of race, respectability and resilience both shape and inform the experiences of African Americans in the Midwest?

Content Goals

- To help students to think about the interplay and exchange between race and place in the American cultural experience.

Historical Thinking Goals

- To help students think critically about the sources historians use
- To help students think creatively about how to explore alternative source material
- Differentiate between historical facts and historical interpretations
- Challenge arguments of historical inevitability
- Analyze cause and effect relationships and issues of historical causality—including the importance of the individuals as a historical actor with personal agency

Literacy Goals

- To get students to interact critically with primary sources
- Have students read scholarly materials with clarity and understanding
**Connection to Today**

- To think about how the experience of African Americans has shaped and been shaped by the Midwestern experience.

**Historical Problems**

- In the history of African Americans the primary focus has been on the experiences of African American communities in the south and on the east and west coasts. As such, we have ignored (and to some extent rendered inauthentic) the experience of African Americans in the Midwest.
- The resulting effect is an unbalanced analysis of “the” African American experience, as well as an un- nuanced treatment of the Midwest.

**Unit Plan**

**DAY 1: Lesson Hook:**

Have students review the case of Michael Brown. (You could either assign this investigation for homework, you could choose an article for the class to read together, or you could refer to the Wikipedia Page on the “Shooting of Michael Brown.”)

Next read the article entitled “[Respectability Politics Won’t Save the Lives of Black Americans](https)” or any similar article about Respectability Politics and the contemporary African American experience.

**Ask students the following questions:**

* Why do you think that journalists covering the police brutality against African American youths are so inclined to mention that they were “honor roll students,” planned to attend college and came from “good families?”

* Review the definition of Respectability Politics and discuss how that tendency was invoked in this case (or perhaps other cases).

* You might assign students to look for counter claims in the media that attempt to indicate that Michael Brown lacked respectability and was therefore not an innocent victim of police brutality.

* How did notions about race and resilience play out in the case of Michael Brown’s shooting?

  * In what ways did beliefs about race and racial stereotypes play a role in this case?
  * In what ways have notions about African American “resilience” contributed to a justification for their abuse—such as, a false perception that they have a greater capacity for difficulties, abuse, or roughness and are adept at (and therefore well-suited for) handling abuse?
This conversation is a preliminary one that will help students consider some of the ideas that will be presented in the documents. Don't be concerned about the precision of these ideas/values at this point. The conversation is merely meant to activate some of the ideas that will be presented. You might want to revisit this case/conversation after students have completed the DBQ in order to have a more in-depth conversation about the real-world consequences of how these ideas might currently be playing out in contemporary American life.

**DAY 2: PREPARATION/GUIDED PRACTICE**

*Read the Introduction with the class and review the document-based question to check for their understanding. Please note: the question already includes the categories of analysis. Therefore this DBQ makes an excellent introduction to DBQs in general. Help students to understand what analytical categories are and how to marshal evidence to build a case for each of the three categories. Most of the documents will fit under more than one category, so help students to identify the categories each document might support as you review them. Emphasize the goal of providing even and equal coverage of each category and explain that students will need to make personal value judgments regarding where and how to use each document.

* Have students review the first few documents in pairs. You could either ask them to write the answers to the guiding questions, that accompany the document, or review them verbally.

* Next have students share their observations with the class.

* Once students have solidified their analysis of the document, ask them to complete the document analysis sheet for the first document. You might want to model how to do so for the first document.

**Day 3-4 INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE**

* Support students in completing a document analysis sheet for each document. Depending on their current skill level, they can either continue to work in pairs or as a large group. Support them until you feel that they are capable of analyzing documents on their own. You may either assign a few documents for homework and then analyze their conclusions with the general class, or you can have students work individually in class and then compare their conclusions to their partner's. Either way, continue to work on the process of document analysis until students have reviewed all of the documents.

**DAY 5-6: ORGANIZATION & WRITING**

* Have students write out their three-pronged thesis—to include race, respectability and resilience—and list which documents they will use as evidence under each analytical
category. If your class time is limited, students can complete this assignment for homework. Once their organizational structure is in place, ask students to write a rough draft of their essay. They should answer the following question:

**How were the experiences of African Americans in the Midwest shaped by race, respectability and resilience?**

*Finish final draft for homework.*

**DAY 7: REFLECTION**

* Wrap up the discussion. What does all of this mean? Why is it important? What will you take away from this work?

**Possible Additional Resources:**
