President’s Message

There are so many highlights of our upcoming 48th Northeast Regional Conference on the Social Studies that I am bound to miss a few. Our conference chairs, Tony Roy, Val McVey, and Jennifer Otte, along with many members of CCSS, have been hard at work planning a compelling, memorable, and inspirational series of learning and networking experiences for NERC attendees.

We are honored to be joined by Larry Paska, Executive Director of the National Council for the Social Studies, who will deliver our opening keynote, as well as Bob Bain from the Big History Project. Both of these influential individuals in the world of social studies education will highlight issues, trends, and opportunities related to our conference theme, “The Power of Place.” For our Saturday panel discussion, “Current Issues in Journalism,” we will be joined by Pulitzer Prize winning journalists who will offer timely and intriguing insights into our current political and cultural landscape.

We also are offering two exceptional, highly interactive pre-conference programs. The Mark Twain House and Museum and the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center will host one of our all-day sessions, Working with Primary Sources, that focuses on teaching history through literature. Our other pre-conference offering, New Approaches with the C3, is designed by a group of fellow educators for teachers looking to create instructional materials and approaches that emphasize inquiry and engagement.

Let’s start with the obvious. Dave Bosso has made a powerful case for attending NERC - April 12-14 in Hartford. It seems almost trite to say it at this point but events from Parkland, to the Potomac to Pyongyang have reinforced, once again, why social studies has an incredibly important place in the preparation of tomorrow’s citizens. **NERC: It’s close, it’s current, it’s critical, and it’s in Connecticut.** Register and plan to attend.

This issue is designed to broadcast some of the high points planned for the conference – you can find that information on pages 3 to 5. To that practical information we have added some timely information on several issues. Inside you can find articles on approaches to teaching about slavery (*raising questions you might not have considered*), teaching about “fake news”, and nativism and integration. We also have an article about a recent development in Poland, where the legislature and president have passed a law restricting discussion of any role Poland’s might have played in the Nazi Holocaust. It’s hard enough to deal with the issue of “fake news”; now we may have to confront “fake history”. These days, no nation can afford to be too smug. See page 10.

But not all the articles in this issue are about those tough issues. We have a fascinating report on the origins of the song Kumbaya. And in the department of pure whimsy, we have a report from Maine that will give you pause. You don’t think

(continued on page 2)
President’s Message - continued

There are a number of special events, including an awards reception for CCSS and the New England History Teachers Association. Join us Friday night as we recognize, honor, and celebrate fellow educators who embody educational excellence. Other enjoyable activities include live music and trivia at local establishments, a Hartford Wolfpack game, the UConn Dodd Center’s Human Rights Institute Gallery Reception, and tours at area museums and historical sites.

The slate of workshop offerings is extensive and exciting. Take some time to look at the wide variety of concurrent sessions and clinics that are being offered. You will be amazed by the possibilities and ideas that you can take back to your classrooms, schools, and beyond.

Special thanks to our major sponsors, Central Connecticut State University, the Big History Project, the American Museum of Tort Law, and Social Studies School Service. We will also be joined by over thirty vendors, including publishers, non-profit organizations, and museums. You can find the full list on our Sponsors and Vendors on our website, ctsocialstudies.org.

Editor's Note - continued

punctuation matters? Think again. The Oxford Comma is the source of a lawsuit that led to a five-million-dollar settlement. (We all know what the Oxford Comma is, right?) Read about it on page 11.

So, read on and enjoy! And if you have not already done so, register for NERC. We look forward to seeing you in Hartford.

Tim    thomas.weinland@uconn.edu
Dan    danielcoughlin@charter.net

Join CCSS . . .

And be eligible for reduced rates for the NERC Conference

See Membership Form on page 14
48th ANNUAL NORTHEAST REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE SOCIAL STUDIES

SESSION SCHEDULE

Thursday, April 12th

All-day (8:45-3:30): Pre-Conference Workshops (sold separately)

Working with Primary Sources - Mark Twain House and Museum/Harriet Beecher Stowe Center

New Approaches with the C3 - Connecticut Council for the Social Studies (Location: Old State House)

4:00-6:00 pm: Connecticut Council for the Social Studies Opening Reception

Friday, April 13th

7:30-8:45 am: Registration | Breakfast | Exhibits
8:45-9:45 am: Opening Keynote: Larry Paska, National Council for the Social Studies
9:45-10:00 am: Break | Exhibits
10:00-11:00 am: Concurrent Sessions
11:05-12:05 pm: Concurrent Sessions 2
12:05-12:20 pm: Break | Exhibits
12:20-1:20 pm: Luncheon Keynote: Bob Bain, Big History Project
1:20-1:35 pm: Break | Exhibits
1:35-2:35 pm: Concurrent Sessions 3
2:40-3:40 pm: Informed Action Sessions
4:00-6:00 pm: CCSS/NEHTA Reception and Awards

Saturday, April 14th

7:30-8:30 am: Registration | Breakfast | Exhibits
8:30-10:30 am: Concurrent Clinics
10:30-10:45 am: Break | Exhibits
10:45-11:45 am: Panel Discussion: Journalism in the Age of Fake News
11:45-12:00 pm: Break | Exhibits
12:00-1:00 pm: Lunch | Exhibits
1:00-2:00 pm: Concurrent Sessions 4
2:10-3:10 pm: Concurrent Sessions 5
3:10 pm: Close
CONNECTICUT COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES PRESENTS:

INFORMED ACTION SESSIONS*

AS1: #CTINQUIRY12 Unconference

Come explore the wonders of inquiry and social studies in an unstructured way. Attendees are encouraged to pose discussion groups and run sessions based on their own interests. In the process, we ask that you contribute your thoughts, discoveries and Ah-Ha moments with the hashtag #CTINQUIRYK12.

*CCSS will ensure a facilitator for each of the following suggested Unconference focus topics (subject to change).

AS2: Social Studies Public Affairs Committee

Are you concerned with the state of social studies education? Do you have ideas on how to address this issue? Are you interested in learning about how you can help make an impact on social studies education? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, come join our discussion and planning session to take informed action.

AS3: New and Aspiring Teachers Round Table

If you are a new or aspiring teacher interested in learning the ropes of social studies education or have some experience or advice to share for new teachers, this session is for you. As the old adage goes, “you don’t know what you don’t know.” This focus group will help shed some light on the profession and provide an opportunity for intergenerational networking.

AS4: Teaching Controversial Topics

How can teachers cut through the noise of an evermore sensationalized society? Furthermore, it is clear that there are some topics that are too taboo for the social studies classroom, but what is the line between controversial and taboo? How can we responsibly teach controversial issues while balancing the needs of the students and the expectations of the school community?

AS5: Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch Tour

In this session, we practice what we preach by visiting America’s first permanent triumphal arch in Bushnell Park. We will depart on the Dash Shuttle (accessible from the Hotel Parking Garage) at 2:45. Be prepared to walk 3 minutes to the arch. Climbing to the top of the arch is optional but encouraged.
Special Events

Join us for a wonderful stay in Hartford! There is plenty to do and see outside of conference sessions, so bring your friends and family. For more information, hover and click on the sampling of activities below.

Thursday, 4/12

6 PM “DRINKING ABOUT MUSEUMS” MONTHLY EVENT - LOCATION TBD

7:30 PM LIVE MUSIC AT BLACK EYED SALLY’S

8:30 PM TRIVIA AT CITYSTEAM BREWERY CAFE

Friday, 4/13

4-6 PM CCSS/NEHTA AWARDS RECEPTION AT THE MARRIOTT (SPONSORED BY CCSU & BIG HISTORY)

6:30 PM UCONN DODD CENTER'S HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTE GALLERY RECEPTION (AT THE CHARTER OAK CULTURAL CENTER)

7:15 PM HARTFORD WOLFPACK HOCKEY GAME

Saturday, 4/14

10 AM - 1 PM FREE SECOND SATURDAYS FOR FAMILIES AT THE AMISTAD CULTURAL CENTER & WADSWORTH MUSEUM OF ART

2 - 3 PM TOUR "THAT'S WEIRD" AT THE CT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Daily/Outdoor

CONNECTICUT SCIENCE CENTER

BUSHNELL PARK AND CAROUSEL

FREE DASH SHUTTLE OPERATING DOWNTOWN

MOBILE TOUR RIVERFRONT SCULPTURE WALK

RESERVE THE MARRIOTT'S DISCOUNTED ROOM RATES HERE
Efforts grow to help students evaluate what they see online
By RYAN J. FOLEY  APNews  Dec. 31, 2017

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — Alarmed by the proliferation of false content online, state lawmakers around the country are pushing schools to put more emphasis on teaching students how to tell fact from fiction. Lawmakers in several states have introduced or passed bills calling on public school systems to do more to teach media literacy skills that they say are critical to democracy. The effort has been bipartisan but has received little attention despite successful legislation in Washington state, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Mexico.

Several more states are expected to consider such bills in the coming year, including Arizona, New York and Hawaii. “I don’t think it’s a partisan issue to appreciate the importance of good information and the teaching of tools for navigating the information environment,” said Hans Zeiger, a Republican state senator in Washington who co-sponsored a bill that passed in his state earlier this year. “There is such a thing as an objective source versus other kinds of sources, and that’s an appropriate thing for schools to be teaching.”

Advocates say the K-12 curriculum has not kept pace with rapid changes in technology. Studies show many children spend hours every day online but struggle to comprehend the content that comes at them. For years, they have pushed schools to incorporate media literacy — including the ability to evaluate and analyze sources of information — into lesson plans in civics, language arts, science and other subjects.

Their efforts started getting traction after the 2016 presidential election, which highlighted how even many adults can be fooled by false and misleading content peddled by agenda-driven domestic and foreign sources. “Five years ago, it was difficult to get people to understand what we were doing and what we wanted to see happen in education and the skills students needed to learn,” said Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. “Now there is no question about the vitalness of this in classrooms.”

A study published last year by Stanford University researchers also brought the issue into focus. It warned that students from middle school to college were “easily duped” and ill-equipped to use reason with online information. The researchers warned that “democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish.” In June, Connecticut Gov. Dannel Malloy signed a bill establishing an advisory council to develop recommendations that will include instructing students on evaluating what they see and read online.

Jennifer Rocca, a high school librarian in Brookfield, Connecticut, was among several supporters who urged lawmakers to pass the legislation. Her digital literacy course, a requirement for freshmen, challenges students to evaluate the credibility of online sources so they can spot falsehoods and biased information. She requires students to cite their sources when conducting research and explain why each would have the authority to be credible. Without stronger statewide standards, Rocca said she worries that some school districts will not do enough to develop skills that are critical for students and society. “You should be expected to navigate the internet and evaluate the information no matter where you go to school,” she said.

Many of the state bills are based on model legislation backed by a coalition of groups, including Media Literacy Now and the Digital Citizenship Institute. Advocates say the laws are a good first step that must be paired with updates to teacher education programs, funding for professional development and other changes throughout the education system. The efforts have run into concerns about school funding shortfalls, and supporters say they are mindful of adding mandates on districts and teachers. That’s why the laws have so far stopped short of dictating changes and instead called for voluntary actions. New Mexico Rep. Antonio “Moe” Maestas, D-Albuquerque, said media literacy is an elective in the state’s secondary school curriculum — unlike financial literacy, which is required. He said he would like to see that changed in coming years and “intertwined throughout the entire curriculum regardless of what you are teaching.”

Last summer, Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo signed two bills calling on state education officials to work with media literacy organizations to consider incorporating the subject into the basic education program. The new law in Washington requires the state school superintendent to create a website with links to successful media literacy practices. The office also must conduct a survey to understand how librarians, teachers, principals and technology directors are integrating those subjects into their curriculum.

Supporters are helping lawmakers in several states draft similar bills to be introduced in 2018. “The combination of social media and misinformation really captured people’s awareness and attention in the last year,” said Erin McNeill, president of Media Literacy Now, a nonprofit based in Watertown, Massachusetts. “It took a long time to get media literacy into the public consciousness.”
A class of middle-schoolers in Charlotte, North Carolina, was asked to cite “four reasons why Africans made good slaves.” Nine third-grade teachers in suburban Atlanta assigned math word problems about slavery and beatings. A high school in the Los Angeles-area reenacted a slave ship—with students’ lying on the dark classroom floor, wrists taped, as staff play the role of slave ship captains. And for a lesson on Colonial America, fifth-graders at a school in northern New Jersey had to create posters advertising slave auctions.

School assignments on slavery routinely draw national headlines and scorn. Yet beyond the outraged parents and school-district apologies lies a complex and entrenched set of education challenges. A new report released by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance project points to the widespread failure to accurately teach the hard, and nuanced, history of American slavery and enslaved people. Collectively, the report finds that slavery is mistaught, mischaracterized, sanitized, and sentimentalized—leaving students poorly educated, and contemporary issues of race and racism misunderstood.

In what it describes as the first analysis of its kind, Teaching Tolerance conducted online surveys of 1,000 American high-school seniors and more than 1,700 social-studies teachers across the country. The group also reviewed 10 commonly used U.S.-history textbooks, and examined 15 sets of state standards to assess what students know, what educators teach, what publishers include, and what standards require vis-à-vis slavery.

Among 12th-graders, only 8 percent could identify slavery as the cause of the Civil War. Fewer than one-third (32 percent) correctly named the 13th Amendment as the formal end of U.S. slavery, with a slightly higher share (35 percent) choosing the Emancipation Proclamation. And fewer than half (46 percent) identified the “Middle Passage” as the transport of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to North America.

Maureen Costello, the director of Teaching Tolerance, said the research, conducted in 2017, revealed the urgent need for schools to do a better job of teaching slavery. “Students are being deprived of the truth about our history [and] the materials that teachers have are not particularly good,” she said. “I would hope that students would look at this and realize that they deserve to know better … and teachers need to know there are better ways to teach this [topic].”

The student results, which the report labels “dismal,” extend beyond factual errors to a failure to grasp key concepts underpinning the nature and legacy of slavery. Fewer than one-quarter (22 percent) of participating high-school seniors knew that “protections for slavery were embedded in [America’s] founding documents”—that rather than a “peculiar institution” of the South, slavery was a Constitutionally enshrined right. And fewer than four in 10 students surveyed (39 percent) understood how slavery “shaped the fundamental beliefs of Americans about race and whiteness.”

Examining the teachers’ survey results might help explain why students struggled to answer questions on American enslavement: Educators are struggling themselves. While teachers overwhelmingly (92 percent) claim they are “comfortable discussing slavery” in their classroom, their teaching practices reveal profound lapses. Only slightly more than half (52 percent) teach their students about slavery’s legal roots in the nation’s founding documents, while just 53 percent emphasize the extent of slavery outside of the antebellum South. And 54 percent teach the continuing legacy of slavery in today’s society.

Additionally, dozens of teachers rely on “simulations”—role-playing and games—to teach slavery, a method that Teaching Tolerance has warned against on the grounds that it can lead to stereotypes and oversimplification. Meanwhile, a large majority—73 percent—use “slaves” when talking about slavery in the classroom instead of “enslaved persons” (49 percent), the latter term of which has gained favor for emphasizing the humanity of those forced into bondage.

The overwhelming majority of teachers who participated in the survey (90 percent) are somehow affiliated with Teaching Tolerance and its learning materials. Costello said this indicates the problems revealed in the survey results could be much more pervasive than the findings suggest. “If anything, I think [this collection of survey respondents] is a group that’s more sensitive to issues of race, more likely to confront them in classrooms” compared to the broader teacher workforce, she explained, adding that the findings are “a silhouette of the problem.” Similarly, many of those surveyed were elementary-school teachers, which Costello said was noteworthy considering the ability of slavery education in the early grades to form the narrative—the “fake history”—that students carry through high school.

Ursula Wolfe-Rocca, a high-school U.S.-history teacher in Lake Oswego, Oregon, a Portland suburb, has encountered students’ common misconceptions—such as the belief that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, and that the Civil War was really about states’ rights. Her straightforward solution is assigning original documents: “Read Lincoln’s first inaugural address and you do not find a fiery abolitionist, but someone promising to enforce the fugitive slave clause; read the articles of secession, and you find striking declarations from slave states that their actions are rooted in a desire to protect [slavery].”

Still, Wolfe-Rocca echoed the report’s teacher respondents in stressing the inherent challenges in tackling the subject well. As a white teacher, she admittedly struggles with presenting an unsanitized version of slavery that doesn’t desensitize her students at Lake Oswego High School to the violence and black pain. “Kids walk into my class ‘knowing’ about slavery. But their recitation of this knowledge is dull, lifeless, and bored,” she said. “It has the feel of something memorized [and] rote, rather than internalized and meaningful.” She uses
Special Notice on Membership Dues and NERC Registration

Membership in CCSS runs from July 1 to June 30th each year. Members who are current on their dues for the 2017-2018 year will be sent a discount code for registration for NERC. To be eligible for reduced rates for the NERC conference, please be sure to renew your membership as soon as possible. Dues may be sent to CCSS, PO Box 5031, Milford, CT 06460.
Greetings! The CSDE will be sponsoring or co-sponsoring three upcoming webinar series that all social studies educators are invited to participate in. We think that these will be valuable for all high school and middle school social studies teachers. All will take place from 3:30-4:30; teachers who cannot participate “live” can receive a link to watch them whenever they want. If you are interested in signing up (it is not necessary to sign up for an entire series) contact CSDE social studies intern Enrique Loya at SocStudiesIntern1CSDE@ct.gov.

I. Teaching Critical Issues in United States History and World History
   March 15: Teaching the Civil War
   April 5: Teaching World War I and World War II
   May 3: Teaching the Vietnam War
   May 17: Teaching 9/11 and its Aftermath

   This series will be taught by Allison Norrie, Fairfield Warde High School, Kate McGrath, Central Connecticut State University, and Stephen Armstrong, Connecticut State Department of Education

II. Teaching Difficult Issues in the Social Studies Classroom
   March 27: Discuss classroom techniques and strategies on discussing challenging political and social issues in the social studies classroom.

   This webinar will be taught by Sarah Harris, Portland Public Schools, Sean Patrick Crane, Enfield Public Schools, and Todney Harris, New Haven Public Schools

III. Teaching Human Rights in the Social Studies Classroom
   April 24
   May 8
   May 15

   This webinar series will be taught by Glenn Mitoma, Director of Thomas J. Dodd Research Center and Assistant Professor of Human Rights and Education, University of Connecticut

In addition, we are forming a group that is interested in the topic of using popular music in the social studies classroom. In the future this group may be doing a variety of things, including creating a specific website, doing a webinar series for teachers, and doing sessions on the use of music at upcoming social studies conferences. If you are interested in being involved, contact CSDE Social Studies Consultant Stephen Armstrong at Stephen.Armstrong@ct.gov.
WARSAW — President Andrzej Duda said on Tuesday that he would sign into law a bill making it illegal to accuse “the Polish nation” of complicity in the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities, a measure that has roiled relations with Israel and the United States, and spurred claims that the nationalist government is trying to whitewash one of the bloodiest chapters in Poland’s history. Opponents have predicted that the law — which prohibits, among other things, the phrase “Polish death camp” — would stifle free speech and put questions of historical accuracy into the hands of judges and prosecutors who may be more motivated by politics than scholarship. Despite weeks of ferocious criticism from other nations and from independent scholars, Mr. Duda’s right-wing Law and Justice Party pressed ahead with the bill.

Mr. Duda said in a speech broadcast on Polish television and radio that he would sign the measure, while asking the Constitutional Court to determine whether the law violated free-speech protections and to make clear specifically what kinds of speech could be prosecuted. He said that the government wanted to be sure that survivors of war crimes felt free to tell their stories without fear. But a judicial review is unlikely to placate those who have accused the Law and Justice Party of dangerous revisionism. It is unclear when the high court, which is controlled by judges appointed by Mr. Duda’s party, might act; the law would remain in effect at least until then.

In Poland, the governing party has tightened its control of the courts and state media in ways that have brought condemnation from the European Union, which has accused it of undermining democracy, and has opened the door to the bloc’s taking punitive action. The new law reflects a broader effort by the government to shape both memories of the country’s past and its vision for the future. For more than 20 minutes on Tuesday, Mr. Duda reviewed his country’s bloody history, noting time and again that both ethnic Poles and Jews died during the war. Like many Poles, he has a personal story of suffering: He said that his grandfather’s brother was killed by the Nazis. “Those years when Poland was occupied by the Nazis was one of the darkest time in Poland’s history,” he said.

The Israeli response was muted on Tuesday, unlike the angry reactions of recent weeks, as the law neared enactment. The Foreign Ministry took note of the Constitutional Court review, and expressed hope that Israel would “manage to agree on changes and corrections.” “Israel and Poland hold a joint responsibility to research and preserve the History of the Holocaust,” the ministry said. Ten days earlier, after Polish legislators approved the bill, the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said, “One cannot change history, and the Holocaust cannot be denied.” Israel’s ambassador to Poland, Anna Azari, canceled a planned speech, saying, “Everyone in Israel was revolted at this news.”

Polish officials have said they will work with Israel and others to ensure that the law would not affect the work of scholars and artists. “The worst thing about a law like this is that it convinces you that you understand yourself,” said Timothy D. Snyder, a professor of history at Yale whose book “Bloodlands” examined the deaths of 14 million civilians in Eastern Europe who were killed by the regimes of Hitler and Stalin. “Your confidence in yourself grows as your knowledge of yourself goes down.” Dr. Snyder, whose book spurred highly politicized arguments about collaboration, national suffering and ethnic chauvinism, said the fight over the Holocaust law was also tied to current tensions with the European Union, which in Poland is closely identified with Germany. “The notion of wartime victimhood at the hand of Germans follows pretty easily into one of sovereignty,” he said, adding that sovereignty “is the right to define yourself as innocent.”

The new law taps into the widespread feeling in Poland that the world does not fully understand the scale of wartime suffering for ethnic Poles. From 1939 to 1945, some six million Poles were killed, more than one-sixth of the population. Half of those were ethnic Jews, and the Nazi regime built some of the most notorious concentration camps on Polish soil, including Auschwitz, Treblinka and Belzec. At the outset of the war, Germany invaded from the west and the Soviet Union from the east; they partitioned Poland, which did not exist as an independent nation for more than five years.

As a result, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told foreign journalists on Friday, it was not possible to blame the country for any of the horrors that took place during the war. He compared it to a bandit invading a home with two families: If the bandit slaughtered one family and killed several members of the other, he asked, how could that second family bear any culpability in the crime.

Even those who oppose the law agree that the phrase “Polish death camp” is historically inaccurate. Both Israel and Germany have issued statements saying that the use of the phrase is wrong. But it is the part of the law making it a crime to accuse the “Polish nation” of atrocities that has caused the deepest concern. “Whoever claims, publicly and contrary to the facts,” the law reads, “that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich or for other felonies that constitute crimes against peace, crimes against humanity or war crimes, or whoever otherwise grossly diminishes the responsibility of the true perpetrators of said crimes — shall be liable to a fine or imprisonment for up to three years.” The Constitutional Court could decide uphold all of the law — which prohibits, among other things, the phrase “Polish death camp” — would stifle free speech and put questions of historical accuracy into the hands of judges and prosecutors who may be more motivated by politics than scholarship. Despite weeks of ferocious criticism from other nations and from independent scholars, Mr. Duda’s right-wing Law and Justice Party pressed ahead with the bill.

The Polish government has said repeatedly that it wants to work with Israel and other opponents to address their concerns. But on Monday, the government canceled a planned visit by the Israeli education minister, Naftali Bennett, after he criticized the law. “The blood of Polish Jews cries from the ground, and no law will silence it,” Mr. Bennett said in response. “The Government of Poland canceled my visit, because I mentioned the crimes of its people. I am honored.” “Now, the next generation has an important lesson about the Holocaust of our people, and I will ensure that they learn it,” he said, adding that the Polish government’s decision “has a role to play in Holocaust education, even if they intended it to achieve something else.”

Mr. Morawiecki, who called into effect the law Poland’s “Rubicon,” told state-run television in an interview on Monday that it was too late to change the law. He said that the “real intention” of the legislation was “not to write history differently” or to “cover it up.”
About That Song You’ve Heard, Kumbaya

By JOHN ELIGON  FEB. 9, 2018  The New York Times

We chant it with locked arms and closed eyes, at campfires, in protest lines and from the pews at church, but the truth is, many of us have no clue what the lyrics mean or exactly where they come from.

Kumbaya my Lord, kumbaya. Kumbaya my Lord, kumbaya.

Thanks to research and lobbying by residents of a coastal community descended from slaves, the origins and meaning of Kumbaya” have been recognized in Congress, raising hopes that a fading culture might get a boost. The song may be sung more often than usual this month, especially in the part of Georgia where its soulful lyrics are said to have originated almost a century ago. Speaking on the House floor two months back, Representative Buddy Carter of Georgia recognized the Gullah Geechee, whose ancestors were brought to America’s southeastern coast from West Africa, as the probable creators of the famous folk song. If you’re searching for deep meaning in the word itself, the truth, as Mr. Carter laid out in his proclamation, is that kumbaya is probably a made-up word. Still, it has come to evoke peace and harmony — sometimes mockingly so.

The first known recording of the song was made in Darien, Ga., in 1926, sung by a Gullah Geechee man named H. Wylie. The chorus was actually “Come By Here,” which in the Gullah’s Creole accent sounds like cum-by-yah. Over time, that pronunciation transformed into what we know today as kumbaya. The hymn was a call to God to come and help the people as they faced oppression. The Gullah Geechee, who have seen their land and way of life threatened by rising property values, now hope to use the congressional proclamation, as well as the Georgia Legislature’s recognition of “Kumbaya” as the state’s historical song, to help promote their story. An exhibition about the song is planned for this month in Darien, which sits along the 1,200-mile coastal corridor where the Gullah people settled.


Someone’s singing Lord, kumbaya. Someone’s singing Lord, kumbaya.

For decades, the dominant narrative was that a white evangelist, the Rev. Marvin V. Frey, had originally composed “kumbaya.” This story was spread in part by Mr. Frey himself, who got a copyright on the song in 1939, claiming to have written it in 1936 based on a prayer he heard in Oregon.

Something about that story never sat right with Stephen Winick, who has a Ph.D. in folklore. For one, the song sounds like something from the African-American tradition. Mr. Winick had also heard rumors that there was an earlier recording of the song in the archives of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, where he works. “I think it’s important to restore cultural materials to their communities of origin,” he said. “Give credit where it’s due.”

Several years ago, Mr. Winick dug up that old wax cylinder recording. It was captured in 1926 by Robert Winslow Gordon, the first head of the Archive of American Folk Song. It was the recording of H. Wylie singing “Come By Here” in an accent that sounds like “kumbaya,” a decade before Mr. Frey claimed to have written “Kumbaya.” Mr. Winick said it was possible that Mr. Frey may have heard a prayer with the kumbaya lyrics, and composed them into a song, thinking he was the first to do so. But the evidence on that remains murky.

Mr. Winick also found in the archives lyrics collected in 1926 by a high school student outside of Gullah territory for a song similar to “Come By Here.” That raised the possibility, Mr. Winick said, that the song might not have originated with the Gullah Geechee, though he maintains that it is quite possible that they could be its creators. The version of the song as we know it today very likely traces to the Gullahs because of the pronunciation of “come by here” as “kumbaya,” he said. “I think that in the general public, if you ask someone on the street, ‘What does kumbaya mean,’ they wouldn’t know,” he said. “They would think it means joining hands and being friendly to each other.”

Someone’s laughing, Lord, kumbaya. Someone’s laughing, Lord, kumbaya.

Griffin Lotson, the Gullah historian, knew nothing of the song’s connection to his people until he started researching it in 2012, and since then he has been on something of a crusade to elevate its history. Many Gullah Geechee, Mr. Lotson included, were conditioned to think that in order to live a successful life, they had to leave their dialect and traditions behind, he said. But now there is great interest in Gullah culture, from inside and out. He was hired to consult on a scene in the remake of the television mini-series “Roots.” He is often called upon to give cultural tours.

Lawmakers realized the importance of preserving the Gullah Geechee culture years ago when, in 2006, Congress created the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. The Gullah Geechee hope that the recognition of their role in the origins of “Kumbaya” will represent one step toward popularizing, and preserving, who they are. “Gullah Geechee culture has influenced everything, from our music to the way we speak,” Heather Lorraine Hodges, the executive director of the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, wrote in an email. “It is a foundational culture for the United States.”

Someone’s crying, Lord, kumbaya. Someone’s crying, Lord, kumbaya.
New Lesson Plan: Immigration versus Nativism

February 19, 2018 by Alison Noyes
http://emergingamerica.org

Carolyn Ritter, author of this newly available lesson on Immigration versus Nativism, writes: “The topic of immigration is just as controversial today as it was at the turn of the twentieth century. In this lesson, students will immerse themselves in the attitudes and opinions of many native-born Americans who did not welcome the arrival of immigrants from certain countries (Nativists).” Drawing on a primary source recording of a popular 1916 song, and on political cartoons from the period, the lesson invites students to construct new understandings of popular opinions towards immigrants at the time. Helping students understand views from the past gives students background to aid them to better understand and deal with similar views today.

The lesson provides the teacher with a customized primary source analysis worksheet, detailed instruction for leading classroom activities, and a rubric for editorial writing that can be used with the culminating project of writing a period-correct Letter to the Editor expressing opposition to or support for immigration.

View more details, and download or access the lesson plan online at the address above.

Emerging America brings this lesson to you thanks to the resources of the Library of Congress. Aligned to Common Core and Massachusetts State History standards.

Ed Note: We frequently get an extensive listing of travel and study opportunities from the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Arizona. The list is extensive – far too long to include here. If you are interested and seek additional information contact the email addresses below. The offerings include a number of programs outside the middle east including Europe, and Asia.

Opportunities and Resources for K-12 Teachers and Pre-Service Teachers, a guide to available free/low-cost PD programs and resources for teachers

https://cmes.arizona.edu/outreach or . . .
https://list.arizona.edu/sympa/info/middle_east_outreach
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