

STORY BY NOAH HOSKINS, HISTORY DEPARTMENT CHAIR

WE LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES. The current moment, globally, nationally, and here at Putney allows and demands us to use the study of history to its fullest capacity, not just as a tool to understand what happened in the past, or to understand the present, but to give our students agency and power in the future. The imperative that we face to confront the challenges of our times, including climate change, war, and structural racism, comes with dynamic and exhilarating opportunities to listen to new narratives and viewpoints that have long been silenced or removed from our society’s canon. Our understanding of who and where we are is built on the voices of the past, and we in the history department at The Putney School are engaged in a significant evolution of our curriculum that is challenging long-held historical narratives and our own understanding of what it means to teach history and the skills of the discipline. As we revise what we know of the past, and ask our students to do the same, we revise what we know about ourselves, and what we are able to understand, and do, in the future. As we collectively strive to push past the commonly accepted and taught timeline and facts of history, and open ourselves to new voices and ideas, the stability of history slips away, and we are left with the opportunity and responsibility to make new meaning and to take action.

FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Across Putney’s history courses, we are challenging the notion that a core set of sources exists. We, and our interdisciplinary teaching teams, are constantly pushing each other to ask hard questions about whose perspectives are represented in texts. Working with our students, we aspire to create a fuller understanding of the historical record through this work. Core questions and reading selections from our 9th grade course, *Humans in the Natural World*, our 10th grade course, *Trends and Forces*, and our 11th grade course, *American Studies*, demonstrate our forward movement and our continued commitment to growth, change, and evolution in both curriculum and process.

Ninth-grade students in ***Humans in the Natural World*** explore how our species has interacted with the environment across time and space. Along the way, students focus on three essential points. First, our identities—racial, gendered, and class—are integral to understanding humanity’s evolving relationship with the natural world. Second, as big and impersonal as certain concepts may seem, such as capitalism or colonialism, they are in fact visible everywhere in the landscape around us. In fact, students spend much of the year asking how their home here in Vermont is a product of these forces. Third, we recognize that Indigenous people’s history is indispensable for an understanding of human history, and so the history of the Abenaki people—and a number of Indigenous nations—is central to the curriculum throughout the year.

Trends and Forces, the 10th grade history course, explores the political, economic, and social formation of the modern world. Students are asked to consider how globalization, in particular the interaction between Africa and Europe, drove the creation of the modern era of European hegemony, and how the battle for economic and political domination of the globalized world has been impacted by, and has impacted, independent nations struggling to recover

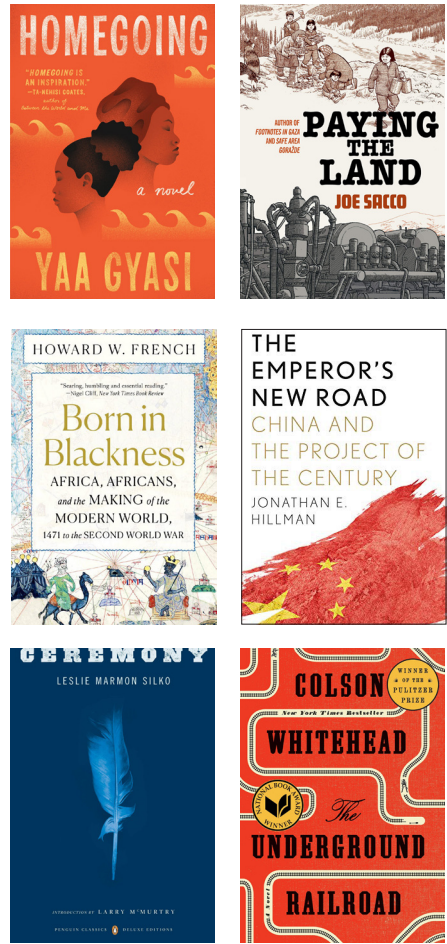
from colonialism. Students finish the year exploring how China’s history has shaped its emergence as a global power and its political and economic goals in the modern era.

We hope students understand from this course that history is not a fixed process, and that decisions and accidents throughout time shape the world that we live in. By working with texts that challenge traditional historical narratives regarding the last 500 years, and putting them side by side with accounts of contemporary political and economic developments, the link between the past, the present, and the future is made clear. There was nothing inevitable about the rise of the modern world, and this opens doors to understanding the myriad possibilities that lie ahead in the future.

The central question of ***American Studies***, our interdisciplinary 11th grade course, remains unanswerable. The question “What does it mean to be an American?” has as many answers as there are people to answer it. Students are asked to face the many challenges inherent in this question and to explore central themes in the development of the United States and the building of this nation. The evolution of this course has fundamentally changed the ways in which both teachers and students approach questions about U.S. history, identity, and the central tensions and processes by which the United States has formed. Fields such as women’s history and African American history, which were once seen as separate areas of study, have become an essential part of the way we explore this country’s history.

A MORE AUTHENTIC EXPLORATION

Despite the ways in which tensions and misguided notions around Critical Race Theory are threatening history teaching, this lens for understanding history, law, and the legal grounds by which white Americans have systematically been offered privilege is broadly accepted by historians and our department. The United States may be a nation founded



on the idea of equality, but many of our laws and much of our history perpetuates inequality, often around race.

We are deeply fortunate, as educators, to work for an institution that has embraced a wholehearted commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. When so much of our society is actively seeking to avoid the uncomfortable and unhappy parts of our history and our present, we have been challenged and encouraged to move beyond our own educational experiences and launch into a more authentic and new way of exploring history and how it can help forge citizens and agents of change in our country and across the globe. We embrace that challenge and are committed to continued change and evolution in our work.

CORE TEXTS

COURSE: HUMANS IN THE NATURAL WORLD

- Yaa Gyasi’s “Homegoing,” which traces the histories of two families during the rise and aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, provides students a vivid illustration of identity, place, exploitation, and healing.

- Joe Sacco’s “Paying the Land” shows how the Dene people of Canada’s Northwest Territories” are attempting to retain their traditional practices amid the expansion of fossil fuel extraction in their homeland.

COURSE: TRENDS AND FORCES

- Howard French’s “Born In Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World” reframes the story of medieval and emerging Africa, demonstrating how the economic ascendancy of Europe, the anchoring of democracy in the West, and the fulfillment of so-called Enlightenment ideals all grew out of Europe’s dehumanizing engagement with Africa.

- Jonathan Hillman’s “The Emperor’s New Road: China and the Project of the Century” is an overview of China’s expanding role in the globalized world with a focus on the Belt and Road Initiative and its challenge to Western-dominated systems of trade and political alliances.

COURSE: American Studies

- “Ceremony” by Leslie Marmon Silko explores the tensions between race and nationalism through the experience of a Native American veteran of WWII.

- Colson Whitehead’s “The Underground Railroad” explores race, oppression, and freedom through alternate histories, keying off of historical narratives to explore what might have been.