



Our Side of the Story: African Americans Share Their Experiences of Slavery

Curriculum Unit 03.02.02
by Lorna Edwards

Introduction

I am employed as a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher in a racially diverse Arts Magnet Middle school in New Haven, CT. This 5-8 institution seeks to educate the child by integrating the arts and the academics. Students are encouraged to think, see, and move in artistic and academic ways that will help them become successful learners. Professional artists who provide instruction in Creative Writing, Photography, Visual Arts, Theatre, Dance, Music and Video teach the Arts program. This interdisciplinary approach to learning ensures that each child makes a positive contribution to the learning environment while at the same time rise to new heights of achievement.

I find that students' levels of performance are improved when lessons are geared to make them think outside the box. Textbooks are used, but the implementation of lessons that include research and integration of the Arts help these students to attain higher level of competency. Students look forward to teaching and learning about the cultures that are represented in their class. Many will bring in items to display and parents may assist in teaching them how to write in the language of their ancestors. In summary, this is a time when all students are on task because they are given an opportunity to learn about real-life situations that take place "outside the textbook".

Overview

The story of African American history is more than slavery, emancipation, and the civil rights movement. I thought it would be interesting to research the significant contributions that Africans have made in shaping American society as told from their viewpoint.

This idea for this unit came from heterogeneously grouped students in my seventh grade English class while we were studying the African Diaspora. In the class, there were a few students who were either born in Africa or had parents who had come from Africa and the Caribbean. Their oral traditions sparked interest in

information that was not formally recorded yet expressed important ideas. While we engaged in discussions, many students were interested in knowing how people lived in Africa and how immigrant Africans assimilated in the North American culture upon their arrival in the United States. The culminating activity for this lesson was to write an evaluation of the project. I asked the students to indicate ways in which I could improve on this lesson should I use it in another class. Many suggested that we examine the life of Africans before they left their ancestral homeland as well as find out how they adapted to life in the New World. Others indicated that we "let the Africans speak for themselves" and tell their own story of what life was like during that era. The students thought that since we are always talking about viewpoint, this would be a great way to get the other side of the story of slavery. I immediately agreed with the students that this would be an excellent topic for further research. Our English Language Arts classes are always having lively discussions on celebrating our differences and similarities and this is just another opportunity to continue that pattern.

For implementing this unit, various formats will be used to accommodate different learning styles. All other teachers who work with these students will be included within my overall lesson plans. Some may be involved for just one lesson, while others will incorporate a few lessons related to examining the extent of African influence in the creative and performing arts. The teachers of African and Hip-Hop dance will discuss the history of rhythm and dance of the Caribbean and Africa and their influence in today's pop culture in the United States. The Music teacher will explain the purposes and meanings of Negro Spirituals; they were used as a means of communication and expressing comfort and hope of a better life in the future. The Band teacher will incorporate the African influence in music in Puerto Rico, Brazil, Haiti and other Caribbean Islands. Language Arts and Social Studies will explore the topics from a more historical viewpoint. The Social Studies teacher will review the traditional recordings of slavery on accounts of the Middle Passage and life on a typical slave plantation in the United States. Language Arts will focus on researching slave narratives and obtaining information from slaves. One portion of the unit will describe the experiences of African Americans living in the New England states. We will pay close attention to the story of slavery as told from the perspective of the African American. We are already familiar with what was done to these people; therefore, we will focus on obtaining information on what people of African descent did for themselves in spite of the hardships that they endured.

The lessons in this unit will allow the students to express themselves in various forms. As a class, we will again visit the story of the African Diaspora, which celebrates the preservation of African culture in the New World. The lessons are geared for four seventh or eighth grade classes with an average of twenty-four students in each class. Modifications to the lesson plans will be made as necessary based on the needs of the students. Lessons will run for duration of three weeks, four periods per week. Each class period lasts for approximately forty minutes.

Unit Objectives

- To share in the use of oral tradition of folktales
- To gain a better understanding of slavery through role-play
- To determine how point of view influences the understanding of history
- To demonstrate literary skills required to identify and analyze visual, oral, and written sources

related to slavery in the United States
- To engage in the writing process

Oral Tradition

In every culture people tell stories that are passed down from one generation to another. Before there were languages and words, people told stories through images, signs and sounds. Images on cave walls, stone, and wood were carved out to create meaning. Oral tradition is one way to keep the values of a culture alive. These stories are based on real events that convey information about human behavior. Even if the stories are made up, there is some amount of truth in them. Sometimes, the history of a people can be told through songs, rhythms, dance, and performance.

The spread of slavery in the New World has led to the creation of many stories about that institution. African slaves were not allowed to read or write English so they passed down their experiences orally. They still managed to tell their stories even though they were not able to put them in writing. Storytellers used their craft as a way of expressing how slaves felt about the conditions under which they lived and to provide comfort and hope, as well as preserve the history of the people of African descent. Slaves would remember the past and communicate with each other through stories that were created in Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean. Once the stories were told, they became a part of the lives of those who heard them. Then the stories would be retold, and the oral tradition would continue.

The People Could Fly (McDougal Littell, 2001, *The Language of Literature: Grade 7*, p.767) is one of many African American folk tales that was developed among Africans who were transported to America as slaves. It tells the story about Africans who had the power to fly long ago. They had to leave their wings behind in their ancestral homeland. The wretchedness of their capture and enslavement caused many of them to forget how to fly even though they still had the power. An elder among the slaves, who still had the magic, reminded them and many flew away to freedom. Those who could not fly eventually escaped to freedom on foot and told the story to their children. This story, which inspires hope to survive against all odds, has been passed down to many generations.

The class will start off this unit by reading from the above named textbook. This will be followed by a rendition of the same folk tale by the Storytelling Troupe at this school. This group of performing artists consists of a member of staff and three or four students who visit mainly elementary schools to render oral traditions for younger students. They are also frequently involved when teachers conduct interdisciplinary lessons at this school. I will need their assistance as they share in oral traditions of folktales from Africa, the United States, and the Caribbean. Afterwards, students will discuss and compare the effectiveness and difference of reading

a story versus using the craft of storytelling.

The Arrival of the Africans in the New World

During the eighteenth century alone, approximately 44,000 Africans were transported annually on European ships (mainly from Great Britain, Holland, Portugal, Spain, and France) to the New World. Most of these people went to the West Indies to work on sugarcane plantations. Others went to Brazil and other Latin American countries. Only about five percent ended up in the thirteen colonies in North America where many worked in the fields planting and harvesting crops such as tobacco, indigo, rice, and cotton. It was customary for European settlers to choose only slaves who were fit and in the prime of life. There were more black men transported than women. Many slave women avoided having children so that neither they nor their children would be sold. Less than half of the Africans came from the same societies that sold them. Many of them were outcasts from close-knit systems, or were convicted of crimes; others owed debts. Some were captured in war and sold to other Africans or Europeans who desired to buy slaves.

The captain of a Dutch ship brought the first group of twenty Africans to Virginia in August of 1619. That was one year before the arrival of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower. African people were enslaved from more than two centuries. Even though the first Africans were slaves, they were treated more like indentured servants. Many did extra work for their owners or neighbors and earned enough money to buy their freedom. One such slave was Anthony Johnson from Chesapeake, Virginia who bought 250 acres of land, grew tobacco and raised livestock. Johnson hired indentured servants and owned at least one slave called Castor. Many freed men and women participated fully in their communities. They paid taxes, took out loans, voted, served on juries and sued whites in court. Unfortunately, this system did not last for long.

All this changed by the late seventeenth century when the institution of slavery became profitable. Laws were passed that stripped blacks of their rights. At the same time, planters in the north bought slaves who were working on sugar plantations in the British and Dutch West Indies. Additional slave labor came from West African nations that had well-established court systems and flourishing markets. Today, these areas include countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. Not all Africans were common laborers in their homeland; many were doctors, warriors, priests, and royalty. Many families were captured and separated on the long journey from their ancestral homeland to the Americas.

Creole slaves born in North America were encouraged by their owners to feel superior to the Africans. Owners felt that if there were some division among the slaves, then it would lessen the chance of having rebellions on the plantations. They also reinforced the idea that the lighter-skinned slaves were superior to those who were dark-skinned. Because the slaves came from various regions in Africa, they spoke different languages. This made it difficult for them to communicate with each other and their owners. They then developed a Creole dialect which is a mixture of African and European words. Today, French, English, and Spanish Creole dialects are spoken in many countries with people of African descent.

There were many levels in slave societies in the Americas (*Berlin, 1988*). Those who earned money for themselves, mainly the highly skilled slaves, were at the top. On plantations, drivers who drove the pace of the slaves with a whip were at the top. Very often, drivers were of mixed race. Next in line were those with special skills and the domestic slaves. Some domestic slaves considered it a privilege to work in close

proximity to their owners in the house while others found it to be a special burden. Many women had jobs as cooks, housekeepers, and nannies; men were bricklayers and barrel-makers. The vast majority of slaves, the field hands, were at the lowest level of society.

As Africans adapted to the British North American culture, they also adopted the Christian religion. Many gave their children Christian or English names instead of the traditional African names. Sometimes the slave children were named after their owners. There were some Africans who resisted Christian teachings that instructed them to be obedient to their masters and mistresses. Local ministers would often read to slaves from the Bible and try to give them religious instructions. In order to make the new religion more suitable to their needs, many slaves focused on the idea of a God who would bring them freedom from the evils of slavery. Many religious songs called spirituals, connected slaves to God and each other. These songs had a message that they were chosen by God and would inherit heaven. Worship services were filled with singing, shouting, and the clapping of hands. There were joyful screams and much animation as they felt the "Spirit" during worship. Although this was a joyous occasion for the slaves, many masters forbade this kind of worship because they feared that the slaves would use these gatherings to plan revolts. As a result, church meetings were held in secret. Special codes were devised to announce the meetings. On one plantation, if slaves began singing the spiritual, *Steal Away to Jesus*, others knew that a religious meeting was scheduled for that evening. The influence from the African tradition of worship is still found in African American congregations today.

Slave women sewed warm and beautiful quilts. Sometimes quilting parties were organized jointly by plantation mistresses and female slaves. It was believed that if slaves covered their heads while sleeping, they would ward off evil spirits who might be lurking in the dark. African tradition stated that beds were positioned east to west so that people would not sleep in "the crossways of the world." Women also sewed clothes for their own families and the master's family. Shoes made from crude materials of cardboard and sheepskin often caused painful feet so slaves preferred to walk barefooted in spring and summer.

Brightly colored clothes was popular. For many Africans tribes, red was a royal and religious color. It signified blood and was regarded as sacred. For women, red meant life and fertility; for men, it meant war and the hunt. The creativity of the Africans caused many to make dyes to change the color of their clothing for various occasions such as work, church or other special events.

Masters gave out rations of food during the weekend in time for Sunday dinners. These small portions were often supplemented with rabbits, squirrels, possums and other hunted animals. Squirrel pie served with dumplings was considered a delicacy. Catfish, trout, crabs were caught from nearby streams and rivers. The slaves planted gardens with vegetables such as potatoes, beans, cabbage squash and okra. Slaves also raised chickens to feed their families. The use of spicy peppers, oils, and vinegars came from Africa and

the Caribbean. It was believed that sesame seeds, which came from Africa, brought good luck so it was added into every baked goods from breads and rolls to cookies.

Slaveholders would summon a doctor when slaves became seriously ill. Many slaves did not trust the "white" medical practices so they would resort to the use of various kinds of herbs to heal their conditions. These treatments often used in Africa and the Caribbean, combined medicine and magic. It later became common for the masters to use these folk remedies instead of calling on the doctor.

When a slave died, funeral arrangements began almost immediately. Friends and relatives would stay with the family of the deceased. They would sing and chant over the body that was never left unattended. The body

was washed and wrapped in clean white cloth. It was then placed on a cooling board, which looked like an ironing board until it was placed in the coffin. Funerals were often held at night so that slaves from neighboring plantations could attend this community effort. At the gravesite, mourners would sing, chant, and shout. Some funeral rituals maintained West African traditions so that the ghosts would not bother those who were alive or help the dead on a safe spiritual journey. Many believed that the soul would return to Africa to join their ancestors.

Contributions in Science

African-Americans made significant contributions in the field of science during colonial times. Cotton Mather was a leading clergyman who lived in Massachusetts and owned slaves. In 1721, one of Mather's slaves, Onesimus, told him about a method that African doctors used to protect people from diseases during epidemics. People would be injected with a mild dose of the disease and this would prevent them from becoming seriously ill later on. This led to the invention of a smallpox vaccine in colonial America.

The first black doctor to practice medicine was James Derham who was born a slave. Derham's owner was a doctor who encouraged him to read his medical books and watch him and other doctors as they worked. Derham later became a leading practitioner in New Orleans.

The well-known scientist Benjamin Banneker, who was never a slave, was born near Baltimore, Maryland in 1731. This brilliant man had a keen interest in science and math from the time he was a boy attending school. Although he had never seen a clock before, at the age of twenty-two years old, he built an instrument that kept accurate time for fifty years. Banneker is most famous as one of the surveyors who helped to build Washington, D.C.

Slavery in New England

Africans were a very small, yet distinct minority in New England. The population had grown anywhere from eleven to sixteen thousand by the second half of the 18th century.

The social conditions during slavery in the 17th and 18th centuries are more than cotton, forced labor and bondage in the Deep South. Slave life in the New England colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island was somewhat different. Instead of large plantations there were farms so these areas were merely societies with slaves.

The New England states were occupied by so-called Puritans, a religious and moral sect, who tried to justify slavery. They rationalized that it was acceptable if the Africans were prisoners taken by other tribes in a "just war". This probably seemed reasonable to them as they chose to understand the African origins of the whole business of enslaving human beings created in the image of God. In fact, many "good" Puritans, and very often clergy, held slaves. Some owned one or two slaves who were like household help. New slaves and white servants lived close within their masters' families; they shared the same dwelling place and daily activities. Sometimes the slave owners preferred that the slaves had separate cabins so they were built near the owners' dwelling places.

Outside of the religious circles, many northerners owned slaves who worked in agricultural areas. In western

Connecticut and Massachusetts, Africans lived mainly in towns and cities near the coast. New London and Fairfield counties in Connecticut had a large concentration of Africans, many of whom worked on farms. Most lived close enough to enjoy friends and acquaintances of their own race. In Rhode Island, landowners had large estates that required a significant labor force. Slaves were also needed to build roads and new cities. Slaves also created wealth by supplying labor in the industrial areas of New England. Mining, shipbuilding, tanning, whaling, and lumbering provided sources of great income for many wealthy Europeans who lived or traded in the north.

There were enslaved people of royal heritage in the New England area. One such person was King Pompey, a slave of Lynn, Massachusetts. He was born a prince in Africa. When he became too old to work, he was still useful to the Africans who would have him as host, guest of honor, or master of ceremonies at many of the holiday celebrations of slaves from neighboring communities. Prince Robinson of Narragansett, Governors Tobiah and Eben Tobias of Derby, Connecticut, King Nero Brewster of Portsmouth, New Hampshire were of royal lineage. American slavery created equality between kings and paupers as the Africans were stripped of their human identities and social classes became nonexistent among the slaveholders. There were other black leaders in towns in Connecticut such as Hartford, Derby, Wethersfield, Norwich and Durham who were born in Africa.

Celebration of African-American Culture

African immigrants, who lived in New England, used their cultural heritage to set a tone for the black community. Many used their free time to earn income, which would often buy their freedom. They helped to support themselves by spinning yarn, build toy drums, make snares and traps for small games. Some made herbal medicine and others cooked. In addition to that, the Africans could always earn extra cash if they played music, sang or danced in order to entertain at white social gatherings. Sunday markets was very popular in Boston, Massachusetts. The poor whites enjoyed the music and revelry that was part of black social gatherings and even adopted some of those activities. Black nannies told stories and sang to the white children that they took care of.

Some students are familiar with or participate in The Freddie Fixer Parade which is an annual celebration in the African American community. This is a joyous occasion of much merry-making and float parades on a specific route through the city of New Haven. I thought it might be especially useful to focus on this event and compare it with the way slaves observed Negro Election Day.

Negro Election Day (Piersen, 1988) was the most important holiday of the year for the Africans. This festivity helped to form the African American culture in New England. It was common for Africans to elect their kings in their homeland and they sought to get their masters' approval to continue with this tradition. Black governors and kings were elected and their appointments to office celebrated. The candidate needed to have a wealthy master who could afford to financially support the cost of the elections. Slave owners contributed money for entertainment (food), expensive clothes, and horses for the parade in which the king was officially appointed. Because slaves in the north had a close relationship with their owners, they were able to persuade their masters to make generous contributions to the black celebrations. Landowners would lend them horses for the military procession through town. Masters and mistresses would give or lend clothes so that the slaves could march in the finest of apparels. The owners of the elected official would provide food, decorations and drink. The quality of the festivity also reflected on the status of the master in society. Slaves that were poorly dressed or those who did not have extravagant showings in the parades indicated the position of their owners. The title of king or governor was determined by the location of the elections. In Connecticut and Rhode Island,

black rulers were called governors just like the title given to their white counterparts. In New Hampshire and Massachusetts, white leaders were called governors and the black leaders were called kings.

On the morning of Election Day, Africans would proceed through the streets with a marching band and flags flying high. There was also a military honor guard escort that sometimes fired occasional salutes as the governor-elect, riding on a horse, proceeded to the poll. The beating of drums accompanied fancily clad slaves as they walked hurriedly to join others on the long journey to cast their votes. The votes were counted, the winner declared and the inaugural parade would begin. At this joyous event, one could hear many African languages being spoken along with some broken English. This was accompanied by music on instruments such as the fiddle, tambourine, banjo and drum. Such activities lasted for about a week and there was very little work done during that time.

In Connecticut, the new governor would ride through town in military style on one of his master's horses. Governors were usually honored with a sash and kings wore crowns or other emblems of royalty. Hartford's governor was sometimes escorted by a troop of about one hundred blacks riding horses and dressed in military style as they moved majestically through the town. In some places such as the Caribbean islands and Brazil, queens and other female officials were elected. Only males were elected in white New England and the slaves chose not to grant office to women, even though in Africa, women held important positions in society.

Celebrations occurred in Connecticut in towns such as Derby, Durham, Farmington, Hartford, Middletown, Norwich, Oxford, Wallingford, Waterbury and Wethersfield during the eighteenth century. By early nineteenth century, Connecticut also hosted black election celebrations in New Haven, Seymour, and Woodbridge. History records that in 1756, elections were held in Newport, Rhode Island. This state also observed the elections in North Kingston, South Kingston, and Warwick Neck. Massachusetts towns like Salem, Danvers, Lynn, Boston, and North Bridgewater joined in the festivities. In addition to that, was Portsmouth in New Hampshire.

White slaveholders viewed these offices of king and governor very useful and convenient ways to maintain the everyday running of the black society. The black rulers made sure that laws were upheld. Stealing was not tolerated and punishment was issued by the African leaders. On the other hand, to the Africans, the presence of black kings and governors represented a proud part of their heritage. Slaves obeyed black rulers not because they wanted an easier life but they recognized their own form of traditional government. Holidays acknowledged the royal heritage of Africa. As the original Africans began to die out, so did the festivities of the Election Day celebrations. After the abolition of slavery, these festivals slowly died out because they were seen as a form of ridicule in which slaves pretended to be kings who mocked the local white population. To the people of African descent, Negro Election Day was a time to celebrate their ancestry with great pride.

Fourth of July was also another big day for celebration among the slaves as well as whites. Slaves got the day off to attend barbecues and dances. For Africans, this holiday was different because they got to hear political speeches about freedom, independence, and revolution. Some slaves celebrated every holiday that their owners celebrated.

Most slaveholders provided a three-day holiday for Christmas. Some even gave five days off. At times a burning log determined how many days the holiday would last. Slaves would search for the biggest and slowest burning log they could find so they would not have to work for many days. Many owners did not think the slaves were intelligent and they would use it to their advantage.

Even though there were laws that prevented the slaves from existing under human conditions, they managed to develop and maintain a culture of their own and keep some of their African traditions. These early African

people helped to establish the African-American society in which both cultures, African and American, were embraced. Today we still celebrate the coming of the Africans and the impact they made on influencing the larger American culture.

Slave Narratives

A very important strand of reading comprehension is making connection with the text. Students will connect to the text, the institution of slavery, as they try to imagine themselves as slaves. Class discussions on conditions of slavery often lead to comments such as, "If I were a slave, I would refuse to work so they would have to beat me to death", or "I would fight back and defend my family." There is always the idea that one could escape by running away. There are a few recordings of slaves sharing their experiences. Some are stored as historical government documents. One can usually spark interest in students as they research the lives of other children during slavery. A commonly asked question is how did the children feel when they knew that their parents could not protect them from the beatings inflicted by their owners? At what age did they realize that they were not free like the white children with whom they played? How did it feel to be a slave when they lived privileged lives in their ancestral homeland in Africa? We will attempt to answer some of these questions by reviewing narratives from both adults and children. At this point, students will demonstrate their literary skills as they identify and analyze visual, oral and written sources. They will begin with viewing the video " *Unchained Memories* " and then follow up with reading from the suggested list of slave narratives in the student bibliography.

The video, *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives* runs for about seventy-five minutes. This HBO documentary portrays a historical memory of slaves as they remember events ranging from being auctioned, working in the fields, attempted escapes and emancipation. Famous African American actors narrate this video. Viewers of the video can almost feel the pain, suffering, pride, and strength of spirit in these powerful readings.

The Library of Congress houses a collection of more than twenty-three hundred autobiographical accounts of African Americans who tell their stories of what it was like to be a slave. Many slaves did not receive any formal education, therefore, some of these interviews were reported in the vernacular of the time of the recordings between 1936 and 1938. Many interviews were translated into Standard English for the sake of using them in court to argue for or against slavery at the time when the abolitionist movement was seeking the emancipation of this inhuman institution that forced people into bondage. A section of the student bibliography lists books that students might peruse to get additional written accounts. I have also included some information that will introduce students to other slaves who described their painful past. A few are recollections of slavery during childhood.

On the whole, slaves were dissatisfied with their living conditions and it must be noted that many of them worked unwillingly. Some escaped to freedom but others resisted in various ways. Armed resistance took place as enslaved people very often resisted their slaveholders. Many slaves knew not to plan massacres or rebellions because they would be put to death or severely beaten so they resisted the slaveholders in more passive ways. Tools and other equipment were broken and they would work slowly in order to protest cruelty. Harvest time was a fitting time for them to work so slowly that the crops would rot in the fields. Many slaves burned crops and farm buildings. Others pretended to be sick. Many slaves often ran away in order to escape

the abusive treatment even though they knew that they would be beaten when caught. Some even killed their masters when the cruel treatment became unbearable; this was definitely punishable by death.

Cornelia was a slave who lived into the twentieth century. In 1930, at the age of ninety-six, she told the story of her mother, Fannie, who raised her on a small farm in Eden, Tennessee. Cornelia recalled that her mother's mistress struck her with a stick and Fannie struck her back. A fight then ensued and it lasted for about half an hour as the two women wrestled in the kitchen. The mistress ran into the street with Fannie chasing after her. Fannie ripped the clothing off the mistress until she was almost naked. The law required that Fannie should be whipped but two days later when the men came to beat her, she charged at them too. Eventually Fannie was sent to another plantation in Tennessee.

Solomon Northrop endured slavery for twelve years in Louisiana. His last owner was a cruel man named John Tibeats who always found Northrop's work faulty. Once Tibeats attacked Northrop with a hatchet. Staring death in the face, Northrop grabbed his master by the throat, kicked him and threw the hatchet away from his reach. Tibeats then grabbed a club and later tried to get an axe to kill the slave. Northrop knew that if he killed his master then he would have to face death so he decided to "fly" or escape.

Children of Slavery

Millions of children, either born in Africa or America were forced to endure the barbaric system of slavery. To the slaveholders, these children had no human rights but they were loved by their families. The parents offered as much comfort to them as they possibly could but they could not protect them from the harsh treatment of the slaveholders. Parents taught their children survival skills. All children had to know how to be resilient and courageous in order to endure the terrible hardships. A few children learned how to read and write and some ran away to freedom. Records show that the last people who grew up in slavery died in the 1960s. Many were reluctant to talk about their childhood and their descendants were not interested in hearing about their painful experiences either. Parents wanted to spare their offspring of the psychological damage that could be done to their minds.

Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African, was born in the late eighteenth century (around 1745) in Benin, which is now part of Nigeria in West Africa. He was the son of a warrior and was being trained to walk in his father's footsteps. At the age of eleven, Equiano and his sister were captured from their home and eventually ended up as slaves in the West Indies. Later, Equiano was sold to a Quaker named Robert King in Philadelphia. Many religious people owned slaves but records show that they treated them kindly and the slaves were regarded more as help than laborers. Equiano was twenty-one years old when he earned enough money to buy his freedom at the cost of £140. During the 1700s, the buying power of the dollar (\$) and English pound (£) was worth about fifty times what it is today. Therefore, £140 back then is worth nearly \$12,000 in today's money. Equiano later settled in England and became a campaigner against slavery. This very educated sailor became very active among the **abolitionists**. He is well known for his written accounts of the sufferings he endured on the journey across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. This journey was called the **Middle Passage**. His writings also compared slavery in Africa with slavery in the Western Hemisphere. We are especially interested in Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, written in 1789, because it is one of the documentations that gives an account of the European slave trade from a slave's point of view.

There were laws forbidding the slaves to read and write but many slaveholders instructed them. Sometimes if well liked slaves insisted on learning, they would be taught. An example of this is **Phillis Wheatley**, the famous poet, who was captured in her homeland in Africa and enslaved at eight years old. She became a

house slave in Boston, Massachusetts and was singled out by her mistress who taught her to read. There were several reasons for wanting to teach slaves how to read and write. Many Christians thought that it was the right thing to do since they were humans who should be treated with dignity and respect. Sometimes the slave children would sit outside the white schoolhouses and memorize lessons they overheard. White children would teach black children lessons they learned in school. Older slaves who were literate would teach others at night under the light of pinewood torches. On one occasion, a young slave girl name Margrett Nickerson helped to dig out an older slave, Uncle George Bull, who was beaten and buried for knowing how to read.

Frederick Douglass , a well-known abolitionist, wrote in his autobiography that as a young child he did know that he was a slave. He thought that his grandparents, with whom he lived, owned their own cabin. As he got older, he realized that his grandparents and the cabin both belonged to another person--the slave master.

Harriet Jacobs recalled that her parents were owned by different masters but they were allowed to live together and raise two children. Her father was a highly skilled carpenter and her mother was a lady's maid. When Harriet was six years old, her mother died and she was sent to replace her. She had a kind mistress but at the age of twelve, her mistress died. Harriet Jacobs was then bequeathed to her former mistress's niece who was a five-year-old child. Jacobs described an occasion when her brother Willie was called by both his father and owner at the same time. Her father strongly reprimanded her brother for disobeying him and going to the owner instead.

Salih Bilali was horseback riding at the age of fourteen when he was captured in Africa. At that time, Balali was a practicing Muslim and somehow managed to get a Qur'an or Koran, the Muslim holy book, in Arabic while he was a slave on the remote St. Simons Island in Georgia. He rose to the position of driver or foreman on the plantation on which he was enslaved. He never lost the ability to remain literate in Arabic even though he was a slave for sixty years.

Samuel Ajayi Crowther was also from Nigeria. Being the great-grandson of a king, he was a privileged child. His mother was a priestess and his father, a well-known weaver.

Ajayi, his relatives, and other women were captured when he was fifteen years old. He was eventually returned to Sierra Leone, learned to read and write and became a popular bishop in the Anglican (Episcopalian) Church.

John Homrn , at twelve years old, was tricked by his father's friend and became enslaved in Cuba and Puerto Rico. He tried to send letters to his family in Sierra Leone to obtain proof that he was a freeman but that did not work out. Homrn became a stowaway on a ship headed for England and eventually returned to his homeland twelve years later.

Examining our past will help us to understand the present. Hopefully, as human beings, we will be more equipped to predict and pave the way for our future. A look at the experiences of African Americans and the hardships they endured during slavery is a compelling story that is always being told. Now that we have had on opportunity to revisit the story but from another perspective, that of the African Americans' viewpoint, perhaps some ideas have changed. Point of view certainly influences the way we understand the history of what people of African descent did for themselves during a time when there were laws that prevented them from existing under human conditions. People coming from Africa to America have helped to mold the

American culture through their religious beliefs, work habits, family, community, and holiday celebrations. I hope that as the students complete this unit, they will come away with a new perspective and a greater appreciation for people living in a world different from theirs. The story of the African Diaspora lives on.

Lesson One

(Recommended for Language Arts, Creative Writing, Visual and Performing Arts)

Oral Tradition-- *The People Could Fly* as retold by Virginia Hamilton

The Language of Literature, McDougal Littell, p. 767

Objectives: To understand and appreciate an African American folk tale

To discuss and compare reading a story versus telling a story

To create and share folktales with peers

CMT Objectives: To use context clues to define vocabulary terms

To use active reading strategies

Procedure: After reviewing the elements of a folktale, students will read the folktale in their textbook. The Storytelling Troupe will then perform this and other folktales for the class. Students will discuss and compare the effectiveness and difference between reading a story versus using the craft of storytelling. Students will also read other folktales from the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean (see Student Bibliography, Folktales and Legends). Folktales will be read both silently and orally. After viewing videos on other folktales of African origin, students will create their own stories.

Activity : *Oral Presentation* Pretend you are a slave living in New England in the 18th Century. Create your own folktale and share it with your peers. Use the writing process to draft, revise, edit and publish your folktale. Your final product could be in the form of a book, poster, or cartoons. You may also choose to do a video recording or PowerPoint Presentation.

Lesson Two

(Recommended for Language Arts, Drama)

A Journey in the Past

Objectives: To use role-play to gain a better understanding of the journey of slavery

To respond in writing to a journal prompt

Procedure: This lesson will require the assistance of other teachers who are fluent in a foreign language such as Greek, Chinese or Russian to execute this lesson. It will be arranged beforehand for the assisting teacher to "interrupt" my teaching and take the students to another classroom in the building. The teacher will communicate with the students using only the foreign language and gestures. Absolutely no English must be spoken. After the students are taken from one classroom to another, they will be handed the journal prompt to which they must respond.

Activity 1: *Journal Topic* - You have just experienced someone entering the room and forcing you to go to a destination unknown to you. This person spoke a language that you did not know and you did not have the faintest idea of what was happening. What was your reaction to this situation? Imagine how the Africans might have felt when they were captured and taken from their ancestral homeland. Describe what you think their thoughts and feelings might have been.

Activity 2: Students will be divided into groups of three or four. They will share their written responses and discuss whether they were able to empathize with the Africans when they first came to the New World. Each group will then select one response to share with the whole class.

Lesson Three

(Recommended for Language Arts, Social Studies)

Unchained Memories (Video)

Objectives: To determine how point of view influences our understanding of history

To learn about the experiences of African American during slavery

To further develop critical thinking and analytical skills

Materials: Video, Selected Books (See Student Bibliography, Slave Narratives)

Procedure: Students will use a K-W-L Chart while conducting research. They will begin by completing the K column (What they know about slavery). The teacher will then provide background information on this documentary of slave life narratives. Students will then fill in the W column (What they want to know about slavery). Remind students that research will focus on obtaining information from the slaves' perspective. Review various methods of note taking. As students view excerpts of the video, they should note what each account reveals about life during slavery. During the research process, students will also seek to find answers to the questions they had written in the W column of the KWL chart. Students will share their findings during a class discussion. For additional reading of autobiographical accounts, see student bibliography. Students will then complete the L column (What they learned) of the K-W-L Chart.

Activity: Write a narrative depicting what you learned about slaves and their contribution to the creation of the larger American culture. This account should be written from the African-Americans' viewpoint.

Activity: Describe at least three things you learned from the video. Were you surprised about anything? If yes, explain. How have these findings changes your learning experiences?

Final Assessment of Unit

Integrating the Arts

Based on your Art Emphasis, select a medium to explain the life of a New England slave in the 17th or 18th century. For Creative Writing and Visual Arts, you may write a storybook for fourth or fifth grade students. For Video, create an animated cartoon or a documentary. Dance students may retell the story through dance with the aid of a narrator. Students of Photography will create a photobiography (documentary). Feel free to form groups of three or four students. Be creative and have fun. Remember, your final product will be viewed by your peers and teachers.

Optional Lessons

Write a poem about an average day in the life of a New England slave.

Create a story quilt or collage depicting the life of a New England slave in the 18th century.

Persuasive Essay Many African Americans have made significant contributions to society in the field of business, science, literature and the Arts. Do you think that we should focus on these contributions just during the month of February when we celebrate African American History or do you think this topic should be taught year round in the school curriculum?

Write a letter to a friend or relative telling them what you learned about New England slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries. Were you surprised about anything? If yes, explain your answer.

Teacher Bibliography

Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* , 1988.

William D. Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an African American Subculture in 18th Century New England* , University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988.

J. D. Fage, *A History of Africa* , Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1978.

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Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* , Hill and Wang, New York, 1993.

J.C. deGraft-Johnson, *African Glory: The Story of Vanished Negro Civilizations* , Black Classic Press, Baltimore, Maryland, 986.

Richard Newman and Marcia Sawyer, Ph.D., *Everybody Say Freedom: Everything You Need to Know About African-American History* , Penguin Books USA Inc., New York, 1996

William L. Andrews, *To Tell A Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* , University of Illinois Press,

Urbana and Chicago, Illinois, 1986

Milton Meltzer, *All Times, All Peoples: A World History of Slavery* , Harpers & Row, Publishers, New York, 1980

Henry Louis Gates Jr. and William L. Andrews, *The Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815* , Civitas Counterpoint, Washington, D.C., 1998

Student Bibliography

Rappaport, Doreen, *Escape From Slavery: Five Journeys to Freedom* , Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1991.

Greene, Meg, *Slave Young, Slave Long: The American Slave Experience*, Lerner Publications Company, Minneapolis, 1999.

Kent, Deborah, *African-Americans in the Thirteen Colonies* , Children's Press, Danbury, Connecticut.

Rees, Bob and Sherwood, Marika, *The Black Experience: In the Caribbean and the USA* , Peter Bedrick Book, New York, 1995.

Veronica Chambers, *Amistad Rising: A Story of Freedom* , Harcourt, Brace & Company,

San Diego, New York, London, 1998.

Slave Narratives

Michele Stepto, *Our Song, Our Toil: The Story of American Slavery as Told by Slaves* , Milbrook Press, Brookfield, Connecticut, 1994.

Sylviane A. Diouf, *Growing Up In Slavery* , The Milbrook Press, Brookfield, Connecticut, 2001

Julius Lester, *To Be A Slave* , The Dial Press, Inc., New York, 1979

Fisk University, *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Accounts of Negro Ex-Slaves* , , Nashville, Tennessee, 1968

Belinda Hurmence, *My Folks Don't Want Me To Talk About Slavery* , John F. Blair, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1992

Milton Meltzer, *In Their Own Words: A History of the American Negro 1619-1865* , Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1964

Folktales and Legends

Kathleen Arnott, *African Myths and Legends* , Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne, 1979

Terry Berger, *Black Fairy Tales* , Atheneum, New York, 1975

Ashley Bryan, *The Ox of the Wonderful Horns and Other African Folktales* , Atheneum, New York, 1993

Petronella Breinburg, *Stories from the Caribbean* , Raintree Steck-Vaughn Publishers, Austin, Texas, 2000

Ashley Bryan, *The Story of Lightning & Thunder*, A Jean Carl Book, Atheneum, New York, 1993

Nick Greaves, *When Hippo Was Hairy and Other Tales From Africa* , Barron's, New York, Toronto, 1988

Frances Carpenter, *African Wonder Tales*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1963

McDougal Littell Inc., *The Language of Literature* , A Houghton Mifflin Company, Illinois, 2001

Philip M. Sherlock and Carl Craig, *West Indian Folktales* , Oxford University Press, 1998

Videos

Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives

An HBO documentary film in association with the Library of Congress, 75 minutes black and white. This video is based on a collection of slave narratives. These powerful testimonies will help to increase students' understanding of the conditions of slavery as told by the slaves themselves.

Below are other examples of oral traditions.

Stories from the Black Tradition

- *A Story-A Story*

- *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter*

- *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears*

- *The Village of Round and Square Houses*

- *Goggles*

(Children's Circle, Weston, CT 1993) 52 minutes color

African Story Magic : A Young Boy's Magical Journey to the Wondrous Roots of African Folklore

(Family Home Entertainment, California 1992) 27 minutes

Anansi the Spider

(Films Incorporated Video, Chicago, Illinois 1989) 10 minutes

Africans in America: 1450-1750 The Terrible Transformation

(WGBH Boston Video, 1998) 90 minutes color

Children's Stories from Africa

- *The Greedy Spider*
- Honey Guide
- Warthog & Bushpig
- Monkey & Hyena
- the Hare & the Baboon
- Kafumbi & the Crocodile

(Monterey Home Videos, 1998) 26 minutes color

Websites

www.time.com/time/classroom/unchained.pdf/teacher.pdf

www.si.umich.edu/chico/UMS/Drummers/materials.html

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/wpahome.html>

<http://vi.uh.edu/pages/mintz/primary.htm>

<http://csmweb2.emcweb.com/durable/1997/10/29/feat/feat.1.html>

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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