



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume III: Afro-American Autobiography

Dark Voices From Unmarked Graves

Curriculum Unit 91.03.08
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This unit will present to the students various samplings of oral and written testimony about slavery from slaves as they experienced it and from former slaves as they remembered it. The narratives will be read, analyzed and reenacted in the classroom. The narratives will be examined for their content and their style. Common themes and characteristics will be highlighted.

The scope of this unit will not be confined to nonfictional narratives, but will also include those fictionalized narratives of Charles Chesnutt which appeared in *The Conjure Woman*. "Po' Sandy" wrenches the heart with its poignant rendering of Uncle Julius' tale of a slave turned into a tree to escape slavery only to be chopped down for lumber to build a new kitchen. Arguably all autobiography is fiction at some point. This unit will cross that imaginary line shamelessly.

More obscure slave narratives will be sought for this unit. Many are beginning to surface in recent studies. Dark voices from unmarked graves haunt quietly yet incessantly. These voices beg to be heard.

OVERVIEW

The introduction to the unit should include a brief history on the origins of the African slave trade. To Be A Slave by Julius Lester serves as a practical model to outline the scope of the unit on slave narratives. Lester's Prologue begins with an excerpt from a letter from John Rolfe of the Jamestown, Virginia colony to Sir Edwin Sandys, Treasurer of the Virginia Company in London. (The Negro in Virginia, p. 1) (Lester, p. X.)

In brief, the letter chronicles the delivery of more than twenty African slaves to the colonies after the ship survived a storm in the West Indies. According to Lester, "[t]he African slave trade was already over a hundred years old when the Dutch ship landed twenty Africans at the Jamestown colony in 1619." Lester tells us further that "[e]ighteen years after the first Africans came to the Jamestown colony, the first American built slave ship sailed from Marblehead, Massachusetts. Its name was the Desire." (Lester, p. X.)

I. Slave Narratives of Capture

The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa provides one of the most intriguing and beguiling slave narratives in print. First appearing in two volumes in London in 1789, the story unfolds like an enchanted fairy

tale told through the eyes of a little African prince who is captured first by African slavers and then is ultimately sold to European slavers who thrust him aboard a ship laden with human cargo bound for the West Indies. There he witnesses all the atrocities of the Middle Passage. Destined to be a free man, the young prince fights, cajoles, and connives his way to a dubious citizenship in his new home England. The African prince becomes the English gentleman.

The narrative is told in the characteristic two voices of many slave writings (Gates, xiv). The first voice is that of the eleven-year-old Benin prince who is captured with his sister by marauding rival tribesmen. In this phase of the narration, the reader learns fragmented aspects of West African Igbo culture. We learn that Olaudah came from a tribe known for its poetry, music and artistry, that his father was a wealthy chieftain who had many slaves, and that slavery as it was practiced among the West African people for all its brutality was in no comparison to the total denial of humanity that Olaudah and his kinsmen were to face.

The second voice belongs to the cultivated black Englishman who cleverly, ingeniously fashions a story whose sharp purpose is to seduce the reader into loving and respecting the African boy's courage, craftiness, intelligence, and his invincible yearning for freedom.

Lesson Plans

Advanced students may wish to read this narrative in its entirety. In this unit, however, I suggest that the teacher focus upon the kidnapping and enslavement of the speaker (Being Chapter II of *The Interesting Narrative*) (Brawley, pp. 57-74).

Study Questions

1. Describe daily life of Olaudah among his family.
2. How did Olaudah plan to escape his African captors?
3. What character traits do we notice about the narrator?
4. Describe Olaudah's first recollection of a slave ship and of the European captors on board.
5. Describe life in the hole below deck.
6. How effective do you feel is Olaudah's appeal to the conscience of his Christian readers?

Activities

1. View video from *Roots* by Alex Haley on the capture of Kunta Kinte.
2. Reenact household slavery as practiced by the Igbo people.

3. Make a list of major differences between slavery in Africa and slavery in the New World.

II. Slave Narratives Upon Arrival

Slaves born in Africa could not directly tell their tales of how it felt to be snatched from their homeland where they were free and suddenly to realize that their new lives in slavery would be wrought with endless pain. Language was a barrier, for few could speak even the most rudimentary European tongue.

John Blassingame in *Slave Testimony* provides an 1847 third person interview with a John Homrn, age twenty-four (24) who was born in Sierra Leone in 1823. John apparently was English speaking. According to the interview:

His parents, though ranked amongst the humbler class, lived in comfort and respectability. At an early age he was placed at school, and was grounded in the rudiment of knowledge; hence he was able to read and write well . . . [H]is father intended that he should learn his business, which was that of a carpenter. (Blassingame, 254.)

The story further tells that John's father entrusted his son's care to a gentleman Paul Fevre, a native of the United States who was in need of a valet. Unsuspecting the underlying treachery, John left with the merchant for Cuba where he was enslaved. John became the slave of a Francisco Solen, a brutal man. Information taken from John revealed that:

[T]he nature of the labour generally performed by slaves is of the most arduous description . . . The usual hours of labour on the estates were from six in the morning until ten at night, without any intermission, save a half hour devoted to meals. During crop time, the hours were from three o'clock in the morning until eleven at night. A driver was placed over them to watch their proceedings, and the slightest cessation was punished with severity . . . The punishments inflicted on these slaves are of the most horrifying character the whip, the stocks, chains, gags, and other instruments are employed. There is a severe mode of punishment adopted, called "bucking," the hands of the poor victim are first tied together, and then passed over the knees; a stick is then passed between the arms and knees, and the sufferer being rendered helpless, the castigation is administered. (Blassingame, 257.)

But not only are the slaves overworked and cruelly punished, but they are ill-fed. Their food never varies throughout the year: a little corn flour and salt fish is their only nourishment . . . (Blassingame, 260).

Above quoted passages reprinted by permission from Slave Testimony © 1977 by Louisiana State University Press.

Fortunately for John Homrn, he was able to escape his cruel fate by boarding a ship bound for England. With the help of a sympathetic sea captain, Homrn reached the office of the British and Foreign Antislavery Society where he was able to convince the authorities that he was a free born man. He returned to Sierra Leone. (261)

Lesson Plans

Read the third person testimony of John Homrn in its entirety.

Activity Rewrite the third person narrative in the first person. Imagine what emotions would be expressed that may have been omitted in the third person narration.

III. The Auction Block

Julius Lester in *To Be A Slave* found no redeeming virtues in slavery. Slaves had no semblance of security. Families could be broken up at any time without warning. The auction block, where slaves were sold, became the focal point of horror:

I don't know how old I was when I found myself standing on the toppen (sic) part of a high stump with a lot of white folks walking around looking at the little scared boy that was me.

Prince Bee

Library of Congress

(Lester, 40)

Above quoted passage reprinted by permission from To Be A Slave © 1968 by Dell Publishing Company .

Poignant first person slave narratives about being sold at auction are provided by B. A. Botkin in *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* , from the Federal Writers' Project, 1938. A narration "He Sold Him Over and Over" gives a humorous account that ends in understated tragedy:

There was a white man live close to us, but over in Louisian'. He had raised him a great big black man what brung (sic) fancy price on the block. The black man sure love that white man. This white man would sell Old Johnthat's the black man's name on the block to some man from Georgia or other place far off. Then after while the white man would steal Old John back and bring him home and feed him good, then sell him again. After he had sold Old John some lot of times, he coaxed Old John off in the swamp one day, and Old John found dead several days later. The white folks said that the owner kilt (sic) him, 'cause a dead nigger won't tell no tales. (Botkin, 158-9)

Another moving tale is entitled "Two Sellings That Day."

Then they says they gwine sell me, 'cause Miss Nancy's father-in-law dies and they got rid of some of us. She didn't want to sell me, so she tell me to be sassy and no one would buy me. They takes me to Houston and to the market, and a man call George Fraser sells the slaves. The market was a (sic) open house, more like a shed. We all stands to one side till our turn comes. They wasn't nothing else you could do.

They stands me up on a block of wood, and a man bid me in. I felt mad. You see, I was young then, too young to know better. I don't know what they sold me for, but the man what bought me made me open my mouth while he looks at my teeth. They done all us that-a-way, sells us like you sell a hoss (sic). Then my old master bids me goodbye and tries to give me a dog, but I 'members what Miss Nancy done say and I sasses him and slapped the dog out of his hand. So then man what bought me say, "When one o'clock come, you got to sell her 'gain, she's sassy. If she done me that way I'd kill her." So they sells me twice the same day. They was two sellings that day. (Botkin, 153)

Above quoted passages reprinted by permission from LAY MY BURDEN DOWN © 1945 by University of Chicago Press .

Lesson Plans:

Other moving tales of the horrors of the auction block are featured in B. A. Botkin's work in the section entitled "Going High, Going Slow," pp. 153-162. Students may wish to read all of those presented in that section. Most are short in length.

Activities Assign individual students to memorize the narratives as speeches to be presented in class. Other students may choose to mime the action in the story during the recitation.

IV. Slave Life on the Plantation

Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl featured in *The Classic Slave Narratives* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., gives extraordinary testimony on what it was to be a slave and a woman. In the words of Maya Angelou, the experience was "the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." (Angelou, p. 6) Ironically, Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative was met with much skepticism by John Blassingame who in *Slave Testimony* initially dismissed Jacobs's story as a fake. (Washington, 7)

Critics of Blassingame asserted that he found the work "too melodramatic to be authentic" because he used the male narrative as the standard, the most notable example, *Narrative* by Frederick Douglass, (Washington, p. 7) Issues of sexual liaisons between slave women and white masters were not the major concern of black men in their quest for freedom. Slave women in their narratives told of their struggle to resist their brutal treatment which was often sexual in form. Slave men told of their flight to freedom, a direct route to manhood. For women, flight was not always feasible, for it invariably meant leaving the children behind, as in the case of Harriet Jacobs. Freedom was not a place (the North) but rather a state of mind. Women in their struggle endured victimization in ways that make them appear passive. Yet their struggle is no less noble or heroic.

Lesson Plans

Again, advanced students may wish to read the entire 1860 narrative by Jacobs. In this section, however, I suggest the teacher focus upon the following chapters that are featured in the Washington text as well as that prepared by Henry Gates, Jr.:

The Trials of Girlhood which introduces the lecherous white master Dr. Flint who pursues Linda relentlessly.

The Jealous Mistress which reveals how Linda uses the jealousy of the white mistress to protect her from Dr. Flint's sexual advances.

The Lover which laments the futility of a slave woman to choose her own husband under slavery's bitter yoke.

A Perilous Passage in The Slave Girl's Life which reveals Linda's clever plot to repel Dr. Flint by

selecting a kind white man to be the father of her children.

The New Tie to Lifewhich relates further details that Mr. Sands, the father of Linda's child, had promised to care for their child and to perhaps buy Linda.

Another Link to Lifewhich tells of the baptism of Linda's child.

Continued Persecutionswhich shows Linda's grandmother, a free black, to have power and courage to rebuke Dr. Flint when he comes into her house to torment Linda.

Scenes at the Plantationwhich introduces Miss Fanny, the great aunt of Mr. Flint who for fifty dollars had purchased the freedom of Linda's grandmother.

Free at Lastwhich tells of the sudden death of Dr. Flint after Linda's long-awaited flight to New England to freedom where she rejoins her children.

Study Questions

1. Why did Harriet Jacobs and her collaborators publish this narrative under the pseudonym Linda Brent?
2. Why might any critic consider the work to lack authenticity?
3. What central themes are presented in this narrative that are in sharp contrast to those central themes in classic male slave narratives?
4. Is the heroism of Linda significantly compromised because she has chosen to have sexual relations with Mr. Sands, a white neighbor?
5. Discuss the symbolism in Linda's self-imposed imprisonment in her grandmother's cramped attic space as a means of attaining freedom. How does this compare to the male slave narrative which deals with flight to achieve manhood and freedom?

Activities

1. Have students recreate the cramped attic space in the classroom by using chairs and tables. Let them keep a log of their experiences.

2. View the video “Digging for Slaves” A and L Footsteps which gives an archaeological and historical view of slavery in colonial Williamsburg and at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello in Charlottesville, Virginia.

V. Slave Revolts and Escapes

Many slaves were able to escape to freedom using a variety of methods. Yet escape remained a dangerous proposition. Capture meant torture and death. Also, there was to ponder the terrible, unpredictable fate of those loved ones left behind. Charles Chesnutt in “Po’ Sandy” from *The Conjure Woman* creates a fictional account of the escape a slave planned with the help of a conjure woman, a person with supernatural powers to transform slaves into animals and trees.

Julius McAdoo, a colored coachman, tells the story to a white Yankee couple who have chose to settle in central North Carolina on an old plantation. One day the wife of the couple requested her husband to build a new kitchen. To save money the husband wanted to tear down the old schoolhouse nearby and use the lumber for the new project. Uncle Julius persuades them to abandon to construction by weaving a yarn about “Po’ Sandy.”

Sandy was a “good nigger” whose first slave wife was sold right from under him by an insensitive master while Sandy was away at work. His second wife Tenie, a conjure woman, told Sandy she had the powers to turn him into any animal to escape being sent off to work again. Instead of being turned into an animal, Sandy is turned into a big pine tree. Convinced that Sandy had escaped, Sandy’s cruel master accused other slaves and Tenie of assisting in the “crime.”

The plan to wait until the master gave up looking for Sandy backfired. While Tenie was distracted to nurse young Master Dunkin’s sick wife, Master Marabo needed lumber to build a new kitchen. The old pine tree, Sandy, became the source of that lumber. The new kitchen was of no use to the master for it was now haunted with the moanings and groanings of Sandy’s spirit. The master’s wife was afraid to go out in the yard after dark. The kitchen was dismantled and converted into an old schoolhouse building that the new Yankee owners are now considering to tear down.

Uncle Julius convinces the couple that the lumber is still haunted. New lumbar was purchased to build the kitchen. The couple learns later that Uncle Julius used the schoolhouse himself for church meetings.

Martin B. Duberman recounts in his play “In White America” that “slaves constantly tried to flee the plantation and head north to freedom. Efforts by their masters to trace them led, in a few rare cases, to an exchange of letters: (Duberman, 479)

Mrs. Sarah Logue: To Jarm: . . . I write you these lines to let you know the situation we are in, partly in consequence of your running away and stealing Old Rock, our fine mare. Though we got the mare back, she never was worth much after you took her. If you will send me one thousand dollars, and pay for the old mare, I will give up all claim I have to you. In consequence of your running away, we had to sell Abe and Ann and twelve acres of land; and I want you to send me the money, that I may be able to redeem the land. If you do not comply with my request, I will sell you to someone else, and you may rest assured that the time is not far distant when things will be changed with you. A word to the wise is sufficient . . . You know that we reared you as we reared our own children.

Yours, etc.

Mrs. Sarah Logue

Jarm: Mrs. Sarah Logue: . . . Had you a woman's heart, you never could have sold my only remaining brother and sister, because I put myself beyond your power to convert me into money.

You sold my brother and sister, Abe and Ann, and twelve acres of land . . . Woman, did you raise your own children for the market? Did you raise them for the whipping post? Did you raise them to be driven off, bound to a coffle in chains? . . .

Did you think to terrify me by presenting the alternative to give my money to you, or give my body to slavery? Then let me say to you, that I meet the proposition with scorn and contempt. I will not bulge on hair's breath. I will not breathe a shorter breath . . . I stand among free people. (Duberman, 480)

Rebellion, revolt were alternatives to running away. Duberman tells of the slave Nat Turner, who in 1831 led other slaves in a bloody battle against their masters in Southhampton, Virginia:

Nat Turner: I was thirty-five years of age the second of October last, and born the property of Benjamin Turner. In my childhood a circumstance occurred which made an indelible impression on my mind . . . Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother, overhearing, said has happened before I was born. I stuck to my story, however, and related some other things which went, in her opinion, to confirm it. Others being called on, were greatly astonished, and caused them to say, in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet . . .

I studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting my time to fasting and prayer. I obtained influence over the minds of my fellow servants . . . by the communion of the Spirit . . . they believe and said my wisdom came from God.

About this time I had a vision I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened the thunder rolled in the heavens, and blood flowed in streams and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see; and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely hear it." I communicated the great work laid out for me to do. It was quickly agreed, neither age nor sex was to be spared.

It was my object to carry terror and devastation wherever we went. We killed Mrs. Waller and ten children. Then we started for Mr. William Williams . . . Mrs. Williams fled, but she was pursued, overtaken, and after showing her the mangled body of her lifeless husband, she was told to get down and lay by his side, where she was shot dead. The white men pursued and fired on us several times. Five or six of my men were wounded, but none left on the field . . . Finding myself defeated . . . I gave up all hope for the present . . . I was taken, a fortnight afterwards in a little hole I had dug out with my sword. I am here with chains, and willing to suffer the fate that awaits me. (Duberman, 480-81)

Above quoted passages reprinted by permission from "In White America" © 1964 by Houghton Mifflin .

Lesson Plans

“Po’ Sandy”

Many students will have difficulty reading “Po’ Sandy” because of the use of dialect. It is best to read the story in its entirety aloud. A good exercise is for the teacher to select a passage from the story and have students rewrite the section in standard English.

Study Questions:

1. Discuss why Charles Chesnutt chose to have Uncle Julius tell his yarn to white Northerners.
2. Discuss whether the story’s meaning is at all hampered by the fact that magic plays a major role in the advancement of the plot.
3. What was Uncle Julius’ real motive in telling the story?
4. What evils of the institution of slavery are highlighted in this tale?
5. What effect, if any, does the ending have upon Miss Annie? Her husband? The class?

“In White America”

Study Questions:

1. How would students characterize the relationship between Jarm, the escaped slave and Sarah Logue, his former owner?
2. What facts can be deduced or inferred from reading the exchange of letters?
3. Is Sarah Logue justified in rebuking Jarm for stealing the mare? Should Jarm repay her for the loss?
4. Write a final reply to Jarm’s letter from the point of view of Miss Logue.
5. What character traits are revealed about Nat Turner in his narration?
6. Does Nat Turner show any signs of remorse for the killing of women and children?
7. How might Nat Turner justify his deeds?

VI. Civil War and Emancipation

Fighting for their own freedom had a powerful, liberating feeling for many blacks during the Civil War. *The Negro's Civil War* by James M. McPherson contains a wealth of speeches, editorials, letters by Negroes involved directly in the struggle. In Chapter XIII, "Negro Soldiers Prove Themselves in Battle, 1863," McPherson gives William Wells Brown's poetic account of the Port Hudson assault, May 27, 1863, where Negro troops comprised of ex-slaves and free Negroes from Louisiana showed they are able soldiers, fighting in the open against heavy artillery fire. (McPherson, 187)

A middle-aged sergeant in that regiment relates:

I had been a-thinkin' I was old man; for, on de plantation, I was put down wid de old hands, and I quinsicntly (sic) feeled myself dat I was a old man. But since I has come here to de Yankees, and been made a soldier for the United States, an' got dese beautiful clothes on, I feels like one young man; and doesn't call myself a old man nebber no more. An' I feels dis ebenin' dat, if de rebs came down here to dis old Fort Hudson, dat I could jus fight um as brave as any man what is in the Sebenth Regiment. Sometimes I has mighty feelings in dis ole heart of mine, when I considers how dese ere ossifers come all de way from the North to fight in de cause what we is fighten fur. How many ossifers has died, and how many white soldiers has died, in dis great and glorious war what we is in! And now I feels dat, fore I would turn coward away from dese ossifers, I feels dat I could drink my own blood, and be pierced through wid five thousand bullets. I feels sometimes as doe I ought to tank Massa Linkern for dis blessin' what we has; but again I comes to de solemn conclusion dat I ought to tank de Lord, Massa Linkern, and all dese ossifers. "Fore I would be a slave 'gain, I would fight till de last drop of blood was gone. I has 'cluded to fight for my liberty, and for dis eddication what we is now to receive in dis beautiful new house what we has. Aldo I hasn't got any eddication nor no book-learnin', I has rose up dis blessed ebenin' to do my best afore dis congregation. Dat's all what I has to say now. (McPherson, 191-192.)

Despite the fact the Negro soldiers had fought valiantly to help the North win the war, many northerners after the war wanted to see all Negroes repatriated to Africa. In response to this thinking, James F. Jones, a black soldier in the Fourteenth Rhode Island, wrote in June 1864:

I think, Mr. Editor, that, under God, this will yet be a pleasant land for the colored man to dwell in, the declarations of colonizationists to the contrary, notwithstanding. Step by step we are emerging from darkness into light. One by one the scales that have so long blinded our raceignorance and superstition are falling off; prejudice, with all its concomitant evils, is fast giving way; men begin to reason and think of us in a rational and religious way. As a people, we begin to think of our race as something more than vassals, and goods, and chattles; and with this increasing good opinion of ourselves, we make all people respect us. (McPherson, 315)

Above quoted passages are reprinted by permission from The Negro's Civil War © 1965 by Ballantine Books .

Lesson Plans

Other selections in the McPherson text may be selected, of course, but these two particular passages feature interesting contrasts. The first is obviously given by an uneducated ex-slave who has hopes of receiving an education as preparation for good citizenship. The second passage is written by an almost scholarly black man who looks positively to the future for full acceptance in the country whose freedom, along with his own, he has secured in battle.

Writing Assignment:

Assign students to write a fictionalized slave narrative fashioned after any of those covered in this unit. Students may wish to present their narratives as real life characters complete with costumes and properties.

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TTeacher Resource

SStudent Resource

TSBoth Teacher and Student Resource

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