



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1998 Volume I: The Use and Abuse of History in Film and Video

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## **Slavery of Africans in the Americas: Resistance to Enslavement**

Curriculum Unit 98.01.03  
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As an African American female, I do not recall being taught the myriad day-to-day attempts of resistance that African and African American slaves carried out while enslaved. I was, however, taught that the only forms of resistance the African and African American slaves displayed were running away occasionally and the ability of some slaves, who were house slaves, to learn to read and write. Throughout my childhood, I was under the impression that only a few slaves were brave and successful in their ventures of running away. I thought, like many students of the past and present, that only Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and Harriet Tubman escaped slavery. I knew nothing of the mental freedom of slavery through literature(poetry, songs, stories), and I knew even less of the common day-to-day forms of resistance that my African ancestors managed to carry out.

I was under the misconception that African and African-American slaves were very docile and submissive to their oppressors. I felt ashamed of my African ancestors because to me, they didn't fight back enough. As a child, I wanted the topic of slavery for African slaves in the Americas to be mentioned as little as possible. Just think about this situation for a minute. I was ashamed of my heritage because of what I was being taught at school about slaves.

Many questions would cloud my mind. For example, if slaves were docile then, why were they shackled by chains? This question would follow me into my undergraduate years where I discovered the answers to such curious questions. I was determined to teach others about what I had discovered. My self-esteem increased greatly because I had learned of the great and strong people I had descended from. It is extremely important, to me, that I give my students the needed information about the resistance to enslavement of African and African -American slaves in the Americas.

I teach a sixth-grade self-contained "Inclusive" class at Fair Haven Middle School. The Fair Haven community is mostly populated with Latino-Americans and African-Americans. Many students have knowledge of being descendants of Africans who were placed in enslavement in the Americas. However, my students do not comprehend the arduous struggle of their African heritage.

When teaching facts about the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, I have noticed that my students think of the United States of America as the only land in the Eastern Hemisphere that enslaved Africans. My students are from diverse backgrounds and cultures with the majority being of African and Latino descent. It is important that they be able to identify the areas where African slaves were held.

Therefore, it is my intent throughout the curriculum unit to explore the many ways African and African-American slaves resisted their enslavement in the Americas. I will place special emphasis on the slave songs and maroon societies of slaves.

The “Sambo” image of the African slave in the Americas has left a lasting perception that all slaves were docile and eager to assimilate to the culture of their captives. The stereotypical image of a “Sambo” was that of a lazy, easy going, childlike, irresponsible, helpless, uncontrollably smiling, shiftless, dancing, and senseless singing slave who was content with his life as a servant. This “Sambo” stereotype has transcended decades. It is believed that the typical African slave in the Americas did not rebel against their oppressors.

There were different intensity levels of resistance that slaves epitomized. A common day-to-day passive rebellion of slaves was, for example, pretending to be sick in order to lessen the workload. Some slaves would make themselves vomit while complaining of stomach pains. Others would pretend to suffer from food poisoning in which they would become delirious and dizzy. Some female slaves even pretended to be pregnant in order to be assigned light work duty. Slaves often destroyed property like crops and tools. They organized work slowdowns in the fields. Slaves also used the “Sambo” stereotype to their advantage by appearing to be “stupid” to elude punishments once subtle forms of resistance were revealed to their masters. As mentioned by some historians, slave masters would often complain that slaves had little intelligence and that they could barely complete a day’s work. Slave masters also complained that slaves were incapable of comprehending or remembering orders.

Other forms of day-to-day rebellion of slaves were the refusal to bow down to slave masters and the refusal to relinquish their African culture. Although the acculturation of the African slave into the African -American slave was evident, the African heritage survived through the folklore, stories, music, and songs passed down through many generations of slaves.

It is also my desire that this curriculum unit will examine the extreme forms of slave resistance such as arson, self-mutilation, suicide, and murder of slave masters and mistresses. According to William T. Harris, Remarks Made During a Tour Through the United States of America in the Years 1817,1818, and 1819, slaves often assaulted, robbed, poisoned, and murdered whites in desperate hopes of receiving their freedom.<sup>1</sup> There were reported cases, in newspapers, that slaves were unruly and that they killed livestock. Slaves also burned plantation buildings and damaged equipment in retaliation of the harsh treatments they were receiving.

Female slaves were often given the job of cook for their slaveholders. These slaves would sometimes poison the food that they prepared for their masters. Slaves would create concoctions from different herbs and plants and put them into the food of their masters in which resulted in death for some slave owners. These slave cooks would grind up glass in food and they would prepare meals with other harmful items in them.<sup>2</sup>

In order not to work for their masters, slaves would practice self-mutilation. They would chop off their fingers, hands, toes, feet, arms or legs. Also, some slaves committed suicide by jumping out of windows, taking poison, drowning themselves, and partaking in hunger strikes.

During the time that slavery existed in the Americas, groups of slaves would join together to plan escapes. “When slaves lived near swamps, impenetrable forests, or near frontier areas, they often banded together in such mass efforts.”<sup>3</sup> These rebel slaves were called maroons. Throughout the Americas, African slaves would run away and hide out in swamps, mountains, and or the deep forest for long periods of time ranging from days to years. These maroon societies would manage to elude capture long enough to establish communities apart from the slave plantations. The maroons would often plan attacks on plantations. At these attacks, the maroons would burn crops, steal livestock and tools, murder slavemasters, and invite other slaves to join their communities. “A nest of runaway negroes was discovered last week in the fork of the Alabama and Tombecke Rivers...they had two cabins and were about to build a fort.”<sup>4</sup>

Today we live in a world of high technology and I find it very difficult, at times, to gain the interest and attention of my students. When teaching Social Studies, I find that my students need more than their history

books offer them when learning about a historical event of the past. They need visual images to help tell the events of the past.

. Using films in my class has opened the door of exploration for my students because they can actually see what might have happened in the past. Films are vehicles for students to visit the past through various avenues like the music, setting, clothing, dialect and the scenery of a particular film. I have chosen several films that will assist me in showing examples of the various types of slave resistance.

I will show the students excerpts from episodes 1,2,3,and 4 of the film "Roots" by Alex Haley. The students will view the various passive and extreme forms of the rebellion of African and African-American slaves. Using graphic organizers, the students will be able to identify and write obvious and subtle actions of resistance. The volumes of the film "Roots," will also be used as a tool to show students what slave living quarters looked like. This film also lends itself to giving examples of what slaves wore and how they communicated with each other from day to day. This film is especially helpful in exposing students to the way slaves held on to their will to be free shown through the character Toby. The character Toby struggles and manages to hold on to his desire for freedom until the day he dies. The students will also write comparative and contrasting paragraphs showing the similarities and differences of what they have read about the resistance of slaves and how the resistance of slaves is portrayed in the film "Roots."

The film "Roots" based on the book written by Alex Haley is an excellent film to show students how some African slaves resisted their enslavement. In episode one of "Roots" the character Kunta is introduced to the viewer. The village where Kunta is from in Western Africa is where the film takes place. Throughout this episode the customs of the natives are revealed. Watching this episode the students will be able to experience the life of a typical young African boy. Also in this episode Kunta is captured by slave holders and placed on a vessel headed for the Americas.

In episode two of "Roots" Kunta's passage across the Atlantic Ocean is shown. This film exposes the students to the harsh conditions the captured slaves experienced while aboard the slave vessel. Kunta's desire of freedom and his longing to be back in his village, Gambia, West Africa, is made known to the viewer. Kunta talks to himself constantly to remind himself of the greatness of his people and this idea helps Kunta to persevere. In this film, there is a scene when Kunta talks to the other slaves from different tribes. The students will notice that African slaves weren't all from the same tribe. The students will notice, after watching this film, that because the African slaves were in the same situation they bonded together as a family regardless of them being from different tribes who spoke different languages and had different customs.

In episode three Kunta is sold and he is given the name Toby. The students will be able to see how slaves were prepared to be sold and how slave owners picked them out. Throughout this episode Kunta's resistance to his enslavement is evident. For example, Kunta was tied up and whipped until he said that his name was Toby. Toby also kept the dream of being free one day. He even tries to escape in this episode. Upon his capture, he is then punished by having his foot chopped off. Also in this film, the students will see examples of the slave's living quarters and clothing. The students will be able to experience the way slaves communicated with each other and with their slave masters.

In episode four of "Roots" the character Toby still desires to be free and he continues to practice his African religion. The character Toby gets married in this episode. Toby and his wife has a baby in which he names her Kizzy. Kunta resists his enslavement by giving his daughter an African name.

After viewing excerpts from the episodes of "Roots" the students will gain a better understanding of why and how slaves resisted their enslavement.

I will show the students the movie "Sankofa" by Haile Gerima. While viewing this movie, the students will see the dramatization of slaves organizing themselves to seek revenge on their slaveholders. The students will experience through film the emotions that the slaves encountered while trying to gain their freedom. The class, as a group, will discuss the events taking place in this film. Using the film as a reference, the students will create diagrams of a slave plantation and its surrounding area.

The movie "Sankofa" is a serious film exposing the horror of being a slave. The title of this film translates into "returning to your roots, recapturing what you've lost and moving forward." The meaning of the title is a perfect way to introduce this film to students. It is very important that the students understand the need to view this film. This movie is as vital tool for this unit because it takes a modern day model of the 20th century and places her in the 19th century where slave trade is taking place. In this film there is a conflict amongst the slaves. Some slaves want to avenge themselves from the inhumane ways they have been treated by their slave holders. Other slaves in this film are afraid to take such drastic and violent methods against their slave masters. However, the masses decide to revolt against their slave masters. The students will see the replica of the holding stations that slaves were kept of the coast of Western Africa and they will see how the slave were bounded together and chained to each other.

The movie "Sankofa" exhibits the emotions that the slaves experienced while being captured. Although "Sankofa" is a movie that everyone needs to experience, there are some parts of the movie that are very graphic. For example, there is a scene where a slave is being raped. So some parts of this film should be audited for younger students.

The film "Night John" by Disney gives students the experience of what life on a slave plantation was like for a young person. This film is about a young slave girl ,named Sarny ,who learns to read and write from another slave who had gained his freedom but chooses to return to slavery to teach other slaves how to read and write.

Throughout this film Sarny's desire to read and write escalates and she finds herself reading everything. This movie also exhibits the dangers of a slave being able to read and write. Sarny's will to read puts her in danger because she steals a book and the book is discovered missing. A surrogate mother of Sarny takes the blame for stealing the book and she is punished.

This film shows how slave families were broken up because of the selling of family members. "Night John" is a film that can be shown to students of all ages.

"Night John" provides the needed visual experience of how slaves were given clothing, how they survived from day-to-day, and what types of food they ate. It shows the resistance of slaves through their ability to read and write. "Night John" develops an exciting plot that shows how being able to read and write empowered the

slaves.

With the film “Amistad” by Steven Spielberg, the students will view and learn how slaves committed suicide as a form of resisting their enslavement. The students will watch the excerpt from this film that shows a slave woman jumping into the ocean with her baby rather than choosing to live as a slave. The students will also be able to identify and discuss the emotions of the slaves while they were seizing the slave ship. It is important that the students understand the need for such violent and desperate acts of the captured slaves. This film gives the students the experience of actually seeing the emotions that slaves were experiencing.

The film “Amistad” is based on a true historical event. The film is about fifty-three Africans who were kidnapped and sold into slavery. While in route to the United States, the slaves took over the slave vessel. The slave ship Amistad was eventually seized by a United States navy ship and the slaves were incarcerated in New Haven, Connecticut. After a legal battle which lasted two years the Africans who were aboard the Amistad were released from jail and sent back to Africa. This film allows the students to retrace the path of a historical event that took place here in New Haven, Connecticut. The students will experience how slaves were treated as living property. This movie shows how slaves were forced to learn a new language and culture under extreme circumstances.

“Amistad” is a movie that allows the viewer to experience scenes from the viewpoint of the Africans in the movie. This film shows the reluctance of some U.S. citizens to participate in this particular case. “Amistad” shows how some people opposed the institution of slavery but for financial profit some people ignored the moral injustice of slavery.

Orlando Bagwell’s “Roots of Resistance: The Story of the Underground Railroad” is a film in which the story of the Underground Railroad is shown. The students will be able to see the dangers that slaves, who ran away, encountered. The students will write paragraphs, using John Collin’s Writing Across the Curriculum, to create slave journals. The students will pretend to be a runaway slave who uses the Underground Railroad to freedom. The students will write entries describing how they feel and what they expect to encounter on their journey to freedom.

In the film “Daughters of the Dust” by Julie Dash, the students will see what a swampland looks like. This film takes place in 1902 off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. This film shows the migration of the Peasant family from their Sea Island to the mainland. This movie shows how, on an isolated island, a group of people manages to hold on to their Ibo customs and traditions. “Daughters of the Dust” portrays many African rituals through various forms of religious figures, symbols, and drawings in the film. This movie can show students how African slaves adapted to their new surroundings once they were in the Americas. For example the language used in this film is a mixture of the English and Ibo languages. “Daughters of the Dust” is a film with a complex plot however the cinematography is a must see for all students. With the film, the students will have a visual idea of where a maroon slave village would be located and what it might have looked like.

The movie “Glory” is a film based on the story of the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts. The 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was made up of Black soldiers who fought in the American Civil War. The movie “Glory” was based on the book written by Kevin Jarre. This film shows students the racial discrimination that the Black soldiers experienced. This movie also has a host of Black characters who all have distinct personalities and mannerisms.

This story is seen through the eyes of a white officer, Shaw, who is made the hero in this film. “Glory” is an excellent film to show to students to get them to think critically about the reasons the Black soldiers decided

to volunteer in a battle that they felt would probably not change the way whites in this country treated them.

A portion of the film “Glory” by Edward Zwick will be shown to the students with this unit. The part that will be shown is where a character, played by Denzel Washington, is ordered to take off his shirt to be punished. The students will see the whipping marks on his back and draw conclusions that he was once an ex-slave who resisted his enslavement.

Another film that can be used with this curriculum unit is “Frederick Douglass: When the Lion Wrote History” by Orlando Bagwell. This film is based on how Frederick Douglass, a born slave, finds his way to freedom. This film connects the students to a real historical person who beats all the odds and becomes a free man.

While researching films that expose the resistance of African slaves, I came across a series of documentaries that are in the making. The four part documentary is entitled; “Africans In America: America’s Journey Through Slavery” by Orlando Bagwell. This film is scheduled to be released in the fall of 1998. According to the director of the documentaries, these series will cover America’s history from the colonial period to the beginning of the Civil War. The film will focus on the enslavement of Africans and their experiences as slaves. I anticipate that this documentary will be very helpful in teaching the resistance of African and African-American slaves in the Americas.

The film “Quilombo” by Carlos Diegues is another film that can be used with this curriculum unit. The title of the film directly refers to the story of the Palm Nation. The Palm Nation was believed to have been founded in the early 17th century by run away slaves in the northeast of Brazil. This film show how a group of rebel slaves escape to the deep forest where they built their own society. As the plot in this film unfolds, the viewer undergoes the process that the rebel slaves carried out to form their society both mentally and physically. The movie “Quilombo” climaxes when the maroon society defends their nation against the Portuguese.

“Quilombo” is in Portuguese. I decided to use this movie because the students will understand what is happening in this movie based on the actions of the characters. One could even watch “Quilombo” as a silent movie. Watching this film as a silent film, the students will be able to draw conclusions about what is going on in the film. This movie can be used as a writing prompt. “Quilombo” gives the viewer the example of the day-to-day formation of a slave maroon society.

As stated above, I want the students in my class to be able to locate the areas throughout the North America and South America that African and African- American slaves were placed. The students will identify where maroon societies of slaves existed on a map. The students will draw maps of maroon villages. The students will acknowledge that the maroon villages were located in swamps and mountains.

Slave songs were used to convey hidden messages about planned escapes, meetings, and directions to freedom. The slaves knew that their every word would be heard by their slaveholders, so they used spiritual and secular songs to spread important messages. This form of resistance was very powerful and instrumental because it helped the slaves to organize themselves and in some cases, free themselves.

The students will read and decipher the hidden messages of various slave songs.

Steal Away  
Steal away, Steal away  
Steal away, to Jesus!

Steal away, steal away home,  
I ain't got long to stay here.<sup>5</sup>

In this song, the students will recognize the message of running away without alerting their slave master.

In "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd," the students will discover that the song was actually a map giving directions to runaway slaves. The directions would be to go north in the direction of the Big Dipper in the sky.

Another slave song that can be used with this curriculum unit is "Git on Board, Little Chillen." This song was used to alert other slaves of a mass run away scheduled that night.

Git on board, little chillen  
Dere's room for many a mo'  
The gospel trains a comin  
I hear the car wheels movin'<sup>6</sup>

The song, "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," was a song that slaves of the arrival of conductors of the Underground Railroad. These conductors would assist slaves to freedom in Canada.

Swing low sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home  
I looked over Jordan and what did I see,  
Comin' for to carry me home  
A band of angels comin' after me,  
Comin' for to carry me home<sup>7</sup>

Slave songs were used to help guide runaway slaves safely to Canada. For example in the song "Heav'n Boun' Soldier" runaway slaves were reminded that the homes of abolitionists and others who were helping runaway slaves, would have a lighted candle in their windows.

Heav'n Boun' Soldier  
Hold out yo' light, you heav'n boun' soldier  
Hold out yo' light, you heav'n boun' soldier  
Let yo' light shine a roun' de world8

The song, "O Canaan, Sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Cannan," will expose the students to the metaphor of Canada being a land of heaven or freedom for fugitive slaves. The other songs students will be able to read and decipher are "O Judyas he was a 'cetful man." This song warns slaves who were about to runaway that another slave has told the slavemaster about the attempted escape. I will also use other slave songs with this curriculum unit such as, "Many Thousand Gone," "Wade in the Water," "Deep River," and "Go Down Moses."<sup>9</sup> These songs will be used as poetry. The students will analyze and identify the hidden information that these songs obtain. These songs will be used to display the image of hope for freedom that the slaves were keeping alive inspite of their unbearable situation.

There are several language skills that the students will be exposed to through these songs. The students will experience how rhyme and rhythm are used to create a certain mood or feeling. The students will identify and explain various metaphors and similes present in certain songs. Finally, the students will gain an understanding of imagery created through poetry.

**Goal:**

The overall goal of this curriculum unit is to have students acknowledge that African and African-American slaves resisted their enslavement in the Americas.

Main Objectives:

The students will be able to accomplish the following:

Decode double messages of slave songs.

Identify imagery projected from slave songs.

Identify regions where slaves were located in North America and South America.

Construct models of slave maroon villages.

Watch films and identify various forms of resistance that slaves carried out both passive day-to-day and aggressive resistance.

## Lesson One

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Objective:

To decode double messages of slave songs.  
To identify messages of rebellion in slave songs.

### Deep River

Deep River  
My home is over Jordan, yes  
My Deep River, lord  
I want to cross over into campground

Wade in the Water  
Wade in the water, Wade in the water Children  
Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water.

Steal Away  
Steal away, steal away  
Steal away, to Jesus!  
Steal away, steal away home,  
I ain't got long to stay here.  
Many Thousand Gone  
No more auction block for me.  
No more, no more,  
No more auction block for me  
Many thousand gone.

### Activity One

Working in groups of two or three, read excerpts from each slave song and write the double message of the songs.

### Activity Two

Using John Collin's Writing Across the Curriculum, write a type 3 paragraph describing the image projected from the slave songs above. The following are the focus correction areas, correct spelling, end punctuation, and two projected images.

### Extension

Pretend you are a young slave who plans to runaway. You have planned to runaway with three of your slave friends. Create a slave song that would alert your friends that you are about to runaway. Be sure to choose your words carefully so that the slave master will not understand your message.

### Lesson Two

Objective: To identify passive day-to-day rebellion of slaves and aggressive forms of resistance.

The class will review parts of the following films, "Roots," "Amistad," "Glory," and "Sankofa." The students will complete the following activities individually for each film.

Activity One: "Roots" volumes 1,2,3, and 4.

Write a list of the passive forms of rebellion that the slaves displayed in this film. Write a list of the aggressive forms of rebellion that the slaves carried out in this film.

#### Activity Two: "Amistad"

Describe the emotions of the captured Africans when they were taking over the slave ship.

Write a paragraph explaining why you think some slaves committed suicide as a form of resistance to slavery.

#### Activity Three: "Sankofa"

Write a summary of how the slaves devised a plan to fight back and win their freedom.

#### Activity Four: "Glory"

Write a paragraph describing the reasons why you think the character, played by Denzel Washington, resisted his enslavement. How do you know he was playing the part of a character who once resisted his enslavement?

#### Extension

Write a paragraph explaining why you think it was important for the character, Toby, of "Roots" to teach his daughter, Kizzy, African words and about his village in Gambia, West Africa.

## Lesson Three

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Objective: To watch film "Night John" and complete activity sheet.

#### Directions

Complete the following.

1. List the main characters in the film.  
Describe their personalities.

2. Draw a sketch of the slave cabin.

3. Describe the various forms of passive resistance that the characters in the film portrayed.

4. Describe the various forms of aggressive resistance that the characters in the film carried out.

5. List the reasons why you can think the slaves in this film would've been successful in running away.

#### Extension

After watching this film, write whether you think a person can be enslaved both mentally and physically. If no, write why not. If yes, write how.

## Lesson Four

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Objective: To construct a maroon slave village.

#### Directions

Complete activities

#### Activity One

Describe the environment viewed in the film.

Draw sketch of the environment you viewed.

#### Activity Two

Using the materials at your table, construct a maroon slave village.

#### Materials

pencils construction paper twigs

crayons shoe boxes glue

leaves tooth picks markers

#### Extension

Questions for thought

1. How do you think the slaves survived in swamplands?
2. Do you think that you could survive in a swampland? If yes, write how. If no, write why not.

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### Endnotes

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