

Sharing History

READINGS FROM THE SLAVE NARRATIVES

Between 1936 and 1938, more than 2,300 African Americans shared their memories of slavery with members of the Federal Writers' Project, a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The result of these oral history interviews was the Slave Narrative Collection, an extraordinary set of autobiographical accounts, now housed at the Library of Congress, that chronicle slave life from the interviewees' eyewitness perspective.

Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives, a powerful new documentary, features readings from these narratives by some of today's most prominent African-American actors. Accounts of slave auctions, field work, escape attempts and emancipation come to life through these readings, which are juxtaposed with rich historical images and musical interludes to provide context and background. Viewing this film will enable students to hear and analyze the words of former slaves—and to reflect on the “peculiar institution” of slavery as it existed in the U.S.

Approaching the Material

The producers of *Unchained Memories* portray many aspects of slave life. Accordingly, the film does not shy away from accounts of violence or sexual themes. Teachers may find it useful to preview the film—or to excerpt selected passages for classroom viewing—before showing it to students. In addition, the narratives contain strong language that may be considered offensive. Please see page 2 of this guide and page 3 of the inTIME magazine for further discussion of the narratives' language.

Before Viewing

To provide context on the scope and history of slavery in the U.S., distribute the inTIME magazine produced to accompany the film. Direct students to page 2 and discuss: How many Africans were taken from their homes and shipped to the Americas between 1450 and 1850? From what countries did these slaves come? What arguments were made for and against slavery? As a class, read “What Are the Slave Narratives?” on page 3, including the note on language. Then turn to pages 4 through 7, and have individual students read aloud these excerpts from the narratives. What does each narrative reveal about life during slavery?

After Viewing

The total running time of *Unchained Memories* is 75 minutes. This film can spark class discussion and critical thinking on a myriad of topics. Questions to ask after students view the film include:

THE POWER OF VOICES

What is the impact of hearing these first-person accounts? Which narratives did you find most powerful? Most disturbing? Most surprising? Most uplifting? Cite specific details. What similarities and contrasts do you see among the narratives? What questions would you like to ask the former slaves?

MEMORIES OF DAILY LIFE

What was life like for enslaved children? What does the film reveal about family life, work, community and religion during slavery? What role did music play?

CREATING THE NARRATIVES

How and when were the slave narra-

IN THIS GUIDE

- ▶ Why Study the Slave Narratives?
- ▶ Create Your Own Oral History
- ▶ Resources for Further Exploration and Assignment Ideas



tives created? The Federal Government paid interviewees to record the stories of former slaves. Is that a valuable use of taxpayers' money? What is the role of the government in preserving stories?

THE VALUE OF ORAL HISTORY

What is oral history? Why are oral histories valuable for understanding the past and present? (For a worksheet designed to help students conduct their own “WPA-style” oral histories, see page 3.) ■

Unchained Memories

READINGS from the SLAVE NARRATIVES



Premieres on HBO

Monday, February 10, 2003, at 8PM/7c

Replays February 14, 16, 20, 22, 24, 26

Check local listings for times

Slavery REMEMBERED

PROFESSOR HENRY LOUIS GATES JR., chair of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard, is the author of numerous books, including *Colored People and Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. The essay below is excerpted from Gates' foreword to *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives* (Bulfinch Press, 2003).

I imagine hundreds of interviewers, white and black, fanning out all over the South at the height of the Great Depression, armed with a list of questions, writing down the testimonies of thousands of aged African Americans about their recollection of their lives under America's "peculiar institution," slavery in the antebellum South, and the whole splendid project funded by the United States government! As incredible as it may sound to us today, this ambitious undertaking did indeed take place in the 1930s, preserving the recollection of ex-slaves in the archive known as the Slave Narrative Collection of the Federal Writers' Project ...

Why turn to the slave, so very many

years after the abolition of slavery? There are several reasons, but the most important, as the historian Norman Yetman argues, is the emergence of black historians in the first three decades of the twentieth century who were intent upon refuting the rosy—and often racist—depictions of slavery propagated by scholars who were little more than apologists for the Confederacy. Chief among these was the Yale historian Ulrich B. Phillips, whose *American Negro Slavery* (1918) portrayed the slave as happy and content, his treatment by his master generous, "civilizing," and humane. Even many black people accepted these stereotypical notions about the slave experience, urging us to forget about slavery, at best an

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



embarrassing episode in African-American history. What more effective way to counter these claims than to hear from the ex-slaves themselves? ...

And nothing will do more to breathe life into these thousands of pages of testimony, pregnant with nuance and implication, than HBO's documentary *Unchained Memories*. It is as if a section of the lost Library of Alexandria had been rediscovered, filmed and narrated by many of the greatest actors of our era. ■

SLAVE NARRATIVES IN THE CLASSROOM

INTIME ASKED MARJORIE MONTGOMERY, A VETERAN SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATOR, TO share her thoughts on using the slave narratives in the classroom. Montgomery, a teacher at Day Middle School in Newton, Massachusetts, has incorporated the slave narratives into her social studies curriculum for several years.

Voices. Voices to connect us to those who came before. We have our students listen to the unforgettable words FDR spoke on "a date which will live in infamy"; our Februaries echo with Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream." When we can provide the voices of our past to the keepers of our future, we enable our students to respond with both their heads and hearts.

The WPA Slave Narratives give us the opportunity to hear and respond to voices long lost. Many of the former slaves speak as people who were denied the right to read and write; both their

accents and their syntax are hard for our students to understand. But once you unlock their words, you can unlock their world. They tell of brutal beatings and rape. They tell of families ripped apart. They repeatedly use the word "nigger." This is their world and these are their words. Times change. Both their lives and our use of that word change. What was appropriate for the former slaves in the 1930s is no longer appropriate in the 21st century. Instead of censoring these words, deal with them. Don't keep students from these words. They know all these words; they hear them on tele-

"Once you unlock their words, you can unlock their world."

vision. Give students a responsible context in which to deal with this history.

To prepare students for viewing *Unchained Memories*, divide the class into small groups, giving each group two or three short narratives. After reading the narratives aloud, ask students to identify similarities and differences. What are the common themes? Where did these slaves live? Were any of these slaves sold? What was their relationship to their masters? How old was this narrator when he or she was freed? ■

CONDUCTING YOUR OWN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

As the WPA interviews with former slaves prove, ordinary people often have extraordinary stories to tell. Oral history interviews—in which living people share memories about their own lives—are a terrific way to record and preserve these stories. Working in small groups or as a class, follow the steps below to gather your own oral histories of people in your community or family. And remember: you don't have to be a celebrity to have powerful stories!

1. **Select** a topic to explore. For ideas, see the list at right.
2. **Identify** a person (or group of people) to be interviewed.
3. **Create** a list of specific questions and general topics about which to ask your interviewee.
4. **Practice** interviewing other students in your class.
5. **Contact** the person you want to interview, and schedule a date and time for the interview.
6. **Locate** a quiet place for the interview. Be sure your interviewee understands the purpose of the conversation. Explain that this is not a private chat: information from the interview will be shared with teachers, classmates and perhaps the community.
7. **Start** each interview by stating your interviewee's name; also tell when and where the interview is being conducted.
8. **Ask** introductory questions first, then move to general topics. Allow the discussion to guide the questions you ask. Stay flexible! Ask whatever questions seem pertinent and interesting, even if they are not on your list.
9. **Listen** actively. Utilize positive body language, such as nodding and smiling. Encourage your subject with statements such as, "This is fascinating," or "That is very helpful information." But don't interrupt your interviewee.
10. **Record** the interview on audiotape or videotape, if possible, or take careful notes as your interviewee answers your questions.
11. **Follow up** the interview by making notes about the session. Notes could include topics to pursue in the next interview, areas for additional research, and questions to ask your instructor.
12. **Transcribe** and analyze the interview. Did you get the information you wanted? If not, how could you obtain it? Set up another interview if necessary. Send a thank-you note to the interviewee.
13. **Share** your oral histories with people around the country. Go to www.timeclassroom.com/histories to submit your interviews.

Sharing History: Project Ideas

FAMILY HISTORY Collect oral history from parents, grandparents, great-grandparents or other relatives. You can use audio or video equipment and then transcribe the interviews, or simply write down answers to questions. After gathering the oral history, you might also want to collect family photos and create a book that chronicles your family history.

EXPLORING YOUR COMMUNITY Locate community residents with unusual life experiences, special skills or other valuable insights into your community. For example, the class might want to interview a former mayor, someone who took part in a historic local event, or a doctor who provided medical care to the town for several decades.

MAIN STREET USA Interview longtime operators of downtown businesses about shifts they have observed in your community's downtown over the years. Topics for discussion include the downtown's economic health, population shifts, changes in the socioeconomic status of customers, and campaigns for historic preservation and/or revitalization of the business district.

MEMORIES OF IMMIGRATION What do immigrants remember about their homeland? Why did they decide to come to America? Did the reality live up to the expectations?



WPA Interviewers Asked Former Slaves in the 1930s

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Give the names of your father and mother. Where did they come from? Tell about your life with them.
3. What work did you do in slavery days?
4. What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? Did the slaves have their own gardens?
5. Tell about your master, mistress and their children.
6. Did the slaves ever run away to the North? How did slaves carry news from one plantation to another?

Sources: Thad Sitton, George Mehaffy and O.L. Davis, *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (And Others)* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1983); Emily Pennel, *Preserving the Past With Oral History* (Little Rock: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program).

©2002 Time Inc. This page may be photocopied for use with students.

For a full list of questions that interviewers asked the former slaves, see page xx of the Administrative Files Volume at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtim/snhome.html>



For Further Exploration

BOOKS

► Berlin, Ira, Marc Favreau and Steven F. Miller, eds. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

► Blockson, Charles L., with Ron Fry. *Black Genealogy: How to Discover Your Own Family's Roots and Trace Your Ancestors Back Through an Eventful Past, Even to a Specific African Kingdom* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991).

► Crew, Spencer with Cynthia Goodman. *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2003).

► Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1969).

► Franklin, John Hope and Alfred Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 8th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

► Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

► Perdue, Charles L. Jr., Thomas E. Barden and Robert K. Phillips. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992).

► Yetman, Norman, ed. *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000).

FILMS

► *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery* (1998). This documentary series is centered on enslaved Africans' experiences and the impact of slavery on American society as a whole.

► *Amistad* (1997). Steven Spielberg's film about the 1839 insurrection aboard the slave ship *Amistad*.

► *Beloved* (1998). Jonathan Demme's adaptation of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, in which a former slave named Sethe (played by Oprah Winfrey) is forced to confront her past.

► *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). A fictional chronicle, directed by Julie Dash, of two days in the life of the Peazant family, descendants of slaves who live on islands near South Carolina and Georgia.

WEBSITES

► <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> The Library of Congress' *Born in Slavery Project: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-38*.

► www.timeclassroom.com/unchained Resources to help students and teachers delve more deeply into the narratives.

► www.hbo.com/unchained Additional information about the documentary *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives*.

► www.undergroundrailroad.org Using the Underground Railroad as a lens through which to explore a range of freedom issues, this site offers lessons and reflections on the struggle for freedom in the past, in the present and for the future. (The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is due to open in downtown Cincinnati in 2004.)

► <http://gropius.lib.virginia.edu/slavery> A visual record of the slave trade.

► www.antislavery.org The world's oldest international human rights organization, Antislavery works against modern-day slavery.

Starting Points for Writing and Research

1. Extending your knowledge. Select one narrative quoted in *Unchained Memories*. Then visit the "Born in Slavery" website at the address at left and locate the full text of this narrative. What additional details about this former slave's life are revealed in the interview? When and where was the interview conducted? What can you deduce about the person who conducted the interview? Share your findings with members of your class.

2. Escaping to freedom. What does *Unchained Memories* reveal about the risks and benefits slaves faced when they considered escaping from slavery? Imagine you faced the decision that every slave did: Would you attempt to escape from bondage? Why or why not? Respond in a first-person essay.

3. Analyzing the narratives' language. Historian Lawrence Levine has written that the transcripts of the slave narratives contain a mix "of sensitivity and stereotype, of empathy and racism." Choose two (or more) narratives and, working individually or in a small group, look for evidence to support or refute Levine's observation. In what ways do these transcripts reflect stereotypes about African Americans? Do you see evidence of racism? Empathy? Point to specific passages in each text to support your answer.

SHARING HISTORY

In addition to *Unchained Memories: Readings from the Slave Narratives*, HBO, in partnership with TIME FOR KIDS, the Library of Congress, and the AOL Time Warner Foundation, is launching the **Sharing History Project**. This multi-faceted community, educational and Web-based effort uses the program as a catalyst for public engagement with history and its impact on contemporary life. Go to www.hbo.com/unchained for more information.