



Discussion about then and now

Lesson 5.1: West Indies

Topics that may provide an opening for a discussion about the voice of the slaves

Oral history

In the archives of the Middelburg Commerce Company (MCC) we hear the voices of the first mate through his log, the surgeon through his journal, the captain through his letters, the members of the ship's council through their statements and the MCC directors through their regulations and orders. In the MCC archives the voices of the slaves are not heard. They did not write about what happened to them. They did talk about it, with each other, their partners, their children and their grand children. The narrative of slavery was passed on from one generation to the next orally.

Written accounts

Some (former) slaves did write down their narrative. One of the best-known examples is Olaudah Equiano (ca. 1745 – 1797). He wrote the book [The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African](#). The book, first published in 1789, has since been published in many languages. A widely known example of a woman who wrote about her life as a slave in the United States is Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897). Her book [Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl](#) was first published in 1861. She wrote the book using the pseudonym Linda Brent. Her book has also been published widely in various languages.

Voices of former slaves

In the aftermath of slavery in the United States various freed slaves were interviewed about their life in slavery. The interviews are kept in libraries and archives in the United States or published in articles, books and films. A well-known example is the story of Solomon Northup, a free black American, who was abducted, forced into slavery, and worked in slavery on various plantations for 12 years. The book with his narrative appeared in 1853: *12 Years a Slave* and was [filmed](#) in 2013. The narratives of the freed slaves are of great value for our knowledge about slave trade and slavery.

Discussion assignment: reading and talking

The discussion assignment consists of two parts: reading and talking about what you have read.

Reading:

With your classmates and teacher select a book that you will read together. Below you will find some suggestions.

Read the book and write a short report on it. In the report also include your own opinions about the narrative.

Trouble Don't Last

Author: Shelley Pearsall. Publisher: Random House. Published: 2003. ISBN: 9780440418115. Age: 8+. Short description: Eleven-year-old Samuel was born as Master Hackler's slave, and working the Kentucky farm is the only life he's ever known—until one dark night in 1859, that is. With no warning, cranky old Harrison, a fellow slave, pulls Samuel from his bed and, together, they run. The journey north seems much more frightening than Master Hackler ever was, and Samuel's not sure what freedom means aside from running, hiding, and starving. But as they move from one refuge to the next on the Underground Railroad, Samuel uncovers the secret of his own past—and future. And old Harrison begins to see past a whole lifetime of hurt to the promise of a new life — and a poignant reunion — in Canada.

Tutuba. The Girl from the Slave Ship Leusden

Author: Cynthia McLeod. Publisher: Conserve. Published: 2013. ISBN: 9789054293583. Age: 10+
Short description: On November 19, 1737 the slave-ship Leusden left Elmina (Ghana) with a 'cargo' of 700 abducted and imprisoned Africans who would be sold as slaves in Surinam. One of them was the fifteen-year-old girl Tutuba. On January 1, 1738, after a successful six-week voyage, the Leusden stranded on a sandbank in the Marowijne River and was wrecked. All the crewmembers were able to save themselves, but the 664 prisoners in the hold met a piteous death because the crew had battened down the hatches. By chance, Tutuba and fifteen others survived this disaster. Her tale and the captain's account are described in this gripping historical novella by Cynthia McLeod.

The Cost of Sugar

Author: Cynthia McLeod. Uitgever: Vaco. Published: 1987. ISBN: 9781908446015. Leeftijd: 13+
Short description: The Cost of Sugar, at times also translated as The Price of Sugar, is the successful debut of Suriname's most celebrated historical novelist, Cynthia McLeod. In an engrossing historical account, Cynthia McLeod takes her readers back to the 18th century (between 1765-1779) recapping the intriguing history of those rabid times through the eyes of two Jewish step sisters, Elza and Sarith, descendants of the settlers of 'New Jerusalem of the River', known today as Jodensavanne, the oldest Jewish settlement in Surinam, which boasts the first synagogue in the Western Hemisphere. The Cost of Sugar is a frank exposé of life in the Dutch slave colony when sugar ruled as king – and the tragic toll it took on the lives of colonist and slaves alike. In 2013 the book was [filmed](#).

[The Book of Negroes](#)

Author: Lawrence Hill. Publisher: Harper Collins. Published: 2011. ISBN: 9781443408981. Age: 14+
Short description: Abducted as an 11-year-old child from her village in West Africa and forced to walk for months to the sea in a coffle — a string of slaves — Aminata Diallo is sent to live as a slave in South Carolina. But years later, she forges her way to freedom, serving the British in the Revolutionary War and registering her name in the historic "Book of Negroes." This book, an actual document, provides a short but immensely revealing record of freed Loyalist slaves who requested permission to leave the US for resettlement in Nova Scotia, only to find that the haven they sought was steeped in an oppression all of its own. Aminata's eventual return to Sierra Leone — passing ships carrying thousands of slaves bound for America — is an engrossing account of an obscure but important chapter in history that saw 1,200 former slaves embark on a harrowing back-to-Africa odyssey. The book will be [filmed](#).

Other [suggestions](#) for books about slavery / slave trade.

Discussion:

Based on some general questions you can discuss the book.

1. What do you think of the book you have read?
2. Is the narrative a true telling, partially true and partially fiction, or completely fictional? How can you tell?
3. Did the author do research into the time of trans-Atlantic slave trade and/or slavery on the plantations? How can you tell?
4. In your opinion, does the book give a good representation of the situation during the time of trans-Atlantic slave trade and/or slavery on the plantations? Why does/doesn't it?
5. Does the book give more insight into the lives of slaves or slave owners (either on a slave ship or on the plantation)?
6. With which main character in the book could you empathize the most? Explain why.
7. Did it make a difference for you if the character in the book with whom you empathized the most was a boy or girl, slave, crewmember, plantation owner, his wife, daughter, son, or other character in the narrative?

8. What was the most gripping scene in the book? Indicate why and how you felt or what you thought when you read this.
9. What was good about the book? Explain why.
10. What was not so good about the book? Explain why.
11. Did the narrative get you thinking? In what way?
12. Did the narrative give you a different perspective on slave trade or slavery? If so, what has changed? If not, why not?

More information

Dutch Canon of National History – [Slavery](#).

[Slave Narratives](#)