

Ethnic Literature and How It Colors Learning

By Tana Shealey

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University at Montgomery
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Arts
Montgomery, Alabama

2 April 2018

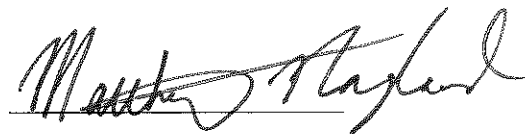
Approved by



Dr. Robert Evans
Thesis Director



Dr. Eric Sterling
Second Reader



Dr. Matthew Ragland
Associate Provost

COPYRIGHT

© 2018

Tana Shealey

All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5-16
Chapter 1: Harriet Jacobs: A Slave Girl Fought for Control.....	17-24
Chapter 2: Frederick Douglass: From Slavery to Freedom.....	25-29
Chapter 3: Solomon Northup: From Freedom to Slavery	29-33
Chapter 4: Ethnic Literature Inspires Learning in Classrooms	34-38
Conclusion.....	39-40
Works Cited	41-44

Introduction

American slavery is a difficult part of our history for many people to discuss. The cruelty inflicted upon enslaved people and the attitudes of entitlement expressed by some slave owners leave many of us reluctant to study this impactful portion of American history. Even though slavery is an uncomfortable subject, it is a necessary subject to consider because this part of history is a link to understanding the viewpoint of the slaves' descendants as America grapples with its continuing racial issues.

Learning about slavery through the words of enslaved persons influences readers' understanding of the emotional struggles and physical burdens generations of African American slaves endured. Although many black families pass down oral history of how their families came into being, there are still gaps in the written records of black American families. In this modern time, while many are able to research genealogy back to the Mayflower landing, many black Americans hit a brick wall and can rarely find information prior to the early 1800s. Some may ask why learning black genealogy and history is significant. Writer Lerone Bennett answers the question by writing, "Black history is important, first of all, because people need a sense of history in order to make history. In order to articulate and carry through a historical act, people must have a minimum understanding of historical reality. Without such an understanding, without a complex historical sensibility informed by a long sweep of event, it is impossible to make large scale political appraisals. And from this standpoint, we can say there is an urgent need for a greater use of Black history as a tool of analysis" (Bennett 62). It is this writer's argument that learning about black history includes reading the stories about a controversial time in our country as told by those who lived

through it – slaves. It is because of the stories written by slaves about their enslavement that this researcher became interested in this subject. This thesis reviews the need for exposure to ethnic literature, particularly slave narratives, in the learning process.

This thesis will consider how three works, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, and *12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup, offer first-hand accounts of slavery that are beneficial additions to required reading lists for high school students because of the drive and determination of each person to obtain freedom and take ownership of telling his or her own story.

First, this work will consider that each of the three slave narratives by Jacobs, Douglass, and Northup covers subjects which could inspire discussion and learning about a difficult period of American history. Jacobs told the story of being a young girl who outwitted a slave owner and took control of her body and gained freedom for her children and herself. Douglass spoke out against those who argued they had God-given rights to own and abuse slaves. Northup's story relates how a freed man is kidnapped and sold into slavery but fights to regain his freedom. This thesis will offer research that shows that including ethnic literature in K-12 coursework may enhance learning.

Slavery remains one of America's most deeply emotional topics. Much of the earliest writings about slavery are by abolitionists. For example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work widely read by students, was written by abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe's tale is based mostly upon stories that she heard from freed slaves who worked in her family's home. The website titled "The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center" offers this

statement: “More moderate anti-slavery advocates and reformers praised the book for putting a human face on those held in slavery, emphasizing the impact slavery had on families, and helping the public understand and empathize with the plight of enslaved mothers.” While Stowe’s work presents some of the human suffering of slaves, it does not offer the first-hand accounts that slave narratives offer. However, one narrative, written by former slave Harriet Jacobs in 1861, definitely tells that story. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a story of survival told by a woman who took control of a horrible circumstance and used her sexuality to survive.

Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography differs from work such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* because it is told from the vantage of a slave woman who avoids an unwanted sexual encounter with her owner. Many accounts of slavery discuss the physical beatings of male slaves, but few of the widely read slave narratives are written by females who were targeted for sexual abuse. This thesis suggests that Harriet Jacobs used her sexuality in an attempt to protect herself from a cruel slave owner and to try to secure freedom for herself and her future children.

By many historical accounts, slaves had no control over their lives, but Harriet Jacobs tried to use her sexuality to avoid being raped by her owner. Jacobs accepted the sexual advances of another white man because she hoped that her owner, Dr. Flint, would lose interest in her if he discovered that she was sexually involved with someone else. Jacobs’ reaction to her situation was well planned for a teenaged slave girl. In fact, in the 1800s, there were no laws protecting black female slaves in America from rape by their owners. Slave owners did not consider the act of forcing themselves on slave girls or slave women a violation of any kind. Many women slaves worked alongside

men in harsh conditions, performed housework in slave owners' homes, and were also raped. Researcher Gwinn Campbell notes, "Unlike men, female slaves were also . . . valued for their reproductive capacity, for nurturing as wet-nurses and nannies, for their domestic house skills, and for sexual services for white males" (165). Additionally, because slaves were considered property, an owner was legally allowed to handle his property as he wished. Writer Andrea Stone suggests that if a slave woman was raped by someone other than her master, then the owner could take matters to court and seek to be paid for damage to his property, the slave (67). As these facts suggest, Jacobs was left with few options to avoid her cruel master's intentions. She could have fled, which could have ended either with her death or with her being sold into an even worse situation. She could have fought off or killed her attacker, but that action also certainly would have led to Jacobs' death. Stone notes:

A study of slave executions states that [most] slave women resorted to crime in retaliation for brutal treatment by their masters. A typical case of a murder by a female slave, for example, involved the killing of a white master after repeated sexual assaults and rapes. Ironically, such analyses reveal that an enslaved woman's crime was necessary, first, for the law to view her as a person -- though as a criminal, not a victim -- and second, to suggest her owner's moral guilt. (71)

However, despite the fact that Jacobs had no legal avenue of help to keep her slave owner from sexually attacking her, she tried to take control of her situation by selecting another white man to be her sexual partner. Jacobs' narrative is just one of several that detail an enslaved person's fight for control. Another writer, Frederick Douglass, told

his story and campaigned to end slavery through his story and his written analysis of flawed arguments claiming that Christianity supported slavery.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Douglass' memoir, served a dual purpose of detailing the hardships of slavery and challenging arguments that slavery was practiced by true Christians. In his autobiography, Douglass attacked arguments favoring slavery by disputing the logic of claims made by slave-owners who tried to use biblical scripture to support one race's enslavement of another race. For example, referring to the growing number of persons born into slavery, Douglass wrote:

Every year brings with it multitudes of this class of slaves. It was doubtless in consequence of a knowledge of this fact, that one great statesman of the south predicted the downfall of slavery by the inevitable laws of population. Whether this prophecy is ever fulfilled or not, it is nevertheless plain that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase will do no other good, it will do away with the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently are their own masters. (5)

Douglass wrote that some of his cruelest slave owners purported to be Christians who prayed often but practiced extreme cruelty against slaves, including beatings, one of which Douglass witnessed during his childhood. Douglass wrote about the beating of his aunt: “The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cow skin (Douglass 14).” Douglass’ autobiography was written during a period of history when few former slaves could write, and yet he clearly details his life and organizes his words detailing the horrors of his enslavement in an autobiography that he used to criticize slave owners who called themselves Christians but behaved cruelly towards slaves.

Researcher Robert Levine notes in his article “Frederick Douglass and Thomas Auld: Reconsidering the Reunion Narrative” that one of Douglass’ owners, Auld, professed Christian faith but behaved in what Douglass considered a non-Christian way towards slaves. Levine noted: “Auld sadistically deprives Douglass and the other enslaved workers of food, and he masks his cruelty with Christianity – a tactic that intensifies after Auld claims to have found God at a Methodist camp meeting” (37). Douglass pointed out throughout his autobiography that slaveholders’ behavior did not match with their Christian beliefs; however, in the appendix of his narrative, Douglass noted that he was not anti-Christian. Douglass wrote:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for between the Christianity of this

land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. (118)

Douglass' narrative was told from the vantage of a man born into slavery, but another writer, Solomon Northup, used his autobiography to detail his wrongful enslavement after he was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

For some, reading slave narratives is uncomfortable. For me, reading work detailing slavery is interesting. In fact, it is mind-boggling to me that my grandfather's father was born a slave. My grandfather did tell me some of the stories he heard from his father about slavery. While reading different ethnic work during my current courses of study, the story *12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup was assigned, and I read a story that was unfamiliar to me: the experiences of a man who was born free but kidnapped and sold into slavery but escaped after twelve years of suffering. Even though this story was recently adapted into a movie, for some reason, I had not read it in my earlier educational years.

Reading Northup's autobiography in my early educational years would have been beneficial because it explores a side of ethnic literature that I had not read about, a freed slave being sold into slavery. Northup was born to a man who initially was a slave but who worked hard and bought his freedom (Northup 19). Northup, as a free man

born in New York, played a musical instrument to support his family. It was during one of his trips to earn money for his family that he was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Interestingly, Northup noted in his story that his understanding of slavery was naïve. Northup wrote:

Having all of my life breathed the free air of the North, and conscious that I possessed the same feelings and affections that find a place in the white man's breast; conscious, moreover, of an intelligence equal to that of some men, at least, with a fairer skin, I was too ignorant, perhaps too independent, to conceive how anyone could be content to live in the abject conditions of a slave. I could not comprehend the justice of that law, or that religion, which upholds or recognizes the principle of Slavery; and never once, I am proud to say, did I fail to counsel anyone who came to me to watch his opportunity, and strike for freedom. (26)

Northup never gave up his quest for freedom, which is one of the reasons that this non-fictional account is interesting. Northup tells his story from the viewpoint of a man who had experienced freedom, and when it was taken from him he fought to regain it; Northup's account of what happened to him complements historical documents about the lives of slaves in America.

Northup also details the cruelty of slave owners who used Biblical verses to support their cruelty to enslaved people. For example, shortly after Northup was sold into slavery, a man for whom Northup was hired out to work, Peter Tanner, read a

scripture that he used as evidence that the Bible condoned beating slaves. Northrup wrote that Tanner said:

“And that servant which knew his Lord’s will” - he paused, looking around more deliberately than before, and again proceeded – “which knew his Lord’s will, and prepared not himself”- here was another pause – “prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. D’ye hear that?” demanded Tanner, emphatically. “Stripes,” he repeated, slowly and distinctly, taking off his spectacles, preparatory to making a few remarks. “That nigger that don’t take care - that don’t obey his lord - that’s his master - d’ye see? - that 'ere nigger shall be beaten with many stripes.” (128)

Tanner justified his cruel whipping of slaves by twisting scripture to mean something that it did not suggest: that it was acceptable for a slave owner to beat a slave severely because the Bible scripture refers to the roles of “masters” and “servants.”

Teaching Slave Narratives in Literature Classes

These accounts of slavery offer a first-hand look at the history that shapes many families of African American lineage. While literature is a virtual melting pot of authors and concepts, books specific to ethnicity are not considered as “classics” by many teachers and are not often required reading. It is the argument of this thesis that including ethnic literature, including slave narratives, can enhance learning by helping students become confident readers and writers.

When considering the impact of ethnic literature on learning, this thesis will review how teachers of English as a second language (ESL) students find ways to reach students of different cultures. Author Linda Fernsten studies understanding the connection between culture and learning, and she shares her findings in an article titled “Writer Identity and ESL Learners.” In this article, Fernsten focuses on a Korean student, Mandy, analyzing how Mandy sees herself as a writer. Fernsten studies an approach called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which required taking writing samples from Mandy at different stages of her college writing experience (45). Mandy participates by writing about her feelings on how she performed on several writing tasks. The CDA process revealed how Mandy related her writing abilities to how people perceived her grasp of English as being below standard because of her cultural identity (45). Mandy even wrote about how conversations with her relatives in broken English seemed normal to her. This observation makes one wonder how different Mandy’s writing experiences might have been had she been reading literature written by Korean Americans. Those authors might have given Mandy encouragement to write more confidently because of their shared culture. As if addressing that concept, Fernsten notes that there is no escaping one’s ethnicity when writing: “Because people are bound by their histories and access to different discourses, understanding identity in general and writer identity in particular can be complex” (45). By the end of the study, Mandy reveals that although she is not a bad writer, she was hard on herself because of how she was perceived as not using English well because she is Korean. Mandy’s experience points to the importance of allowing students’ different cultural identities to be included

in the learning process. Positive appreciation of ethnic differences might encourage a timid writer and reluctant learner to become more engaged.

English as Second Language students who are encouraged to read about characters or situations which reflect their cultures are more engaged in the learning process than those who are not encouraged to do so. Writers Michelle Johnson and Debbie Chang conclude that more must be done to engage students culturally, so that those students will learn more in their studies as they use their second language, English (24). Educators can teach new concepts by incorporating familiar ideas in the lessons or literature selections. Johnson and Chang observe that some “instructors sought to incorporate ‘every-day’ American culture into the classroom by using cultural icons introduced in the literature” (23). Similarly, educators find that literature with ethnic themes can also help English instructors. Writer Sam Girgus discusses how difficult it is to separate culture from writing; thus, ethnic writing is an unconscious product of multi-cultural American writers. For example, Girgus writes of black authors Toni Morrison, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Frederick Douglass, “They use language to reconstruct ideological discourse as part of a process that resituates the position and role of ethnic groups within American culture and society. Together the writers and works of this renaissance turn ethnicity into a universal condition that undergoes continuous change within the American experience” (5). That experience is captured in autobiographical work that focuses on racism, religious differences, and social injustice.

For example, Frederick Douglass was born a slave, escaped to a freedom, learned to read, write, and published work that detailed his experiences as a slave. His

experiences resemble the experiences of many families of African American heritage, and it is the argument of this thesis that including slave narratives in literature courses is a needed part of the learning process because such narratives can generate discussions on such topics as human rights and social equality. For example, modern author Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye*, offers as its main character a little black girl who thinks she would be beautiful if she had blonde hair and blue eyes. Morrison's novel could be used to generate discussions about literary style, social issues, and cultural awareness, all of which could aid in the learning process.

This thesis supports the premise that ethnic literature, in particular the slave narrative genre, is an important asset to the learning process because such literature can lead to discussions about a historical period that still impacts African Americans today. My research supports the concept that studying ethnic literature can increase student involvement in the learning process by helping teachers reach diverse student populations in our schools. Ethnic literature, in the form of slave narratives, offers the observations and feelings of the enslaved in the discussion of American slavery, and for that reason, many African Americans learn about an important portion of their history. African American history, as taught in American schools, is not yet as detailed as the history of other cultures. Reading works by and about African Americans can benefit not only readers of all backgrounds but especially African American readers in particular.

Chapter 1: Harriet Jacobs: A Slave Girl Fought for Control

Many of the earliest writings against slavery in America were written by abolitionists. For example, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work widely read by students in classrooms today, was written by abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe's tale is based mostly upon stories that she heard from freed slaves who worked in her family's home. According to "The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center" website, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a compilation of those stories which Stowe hoped would end slavery. She wrote it following passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. The website notes:

Stowe was furious. She believed slavery was unjust and immoral, and bristled at a law requiring citizens – including her – complicity. Living in Brunswick, ME while her husband taught at Bowdoin College, Stowe disobeyed the law by hiding John Andrew Jackson, who was traveling north from enslavement in South Carolina. When she shared her frustration and feelings of powerlessness with her family, her sister-in-law, Isabella Perter Beecher suggested she do more: '...if I could use a pen as you can, Hatty, I would write something that would make this whole national feel what an accursed thing slavery is' (Stowcenter.org).

While Stowe's work presents some of the human suffering of slaves, it does not offer the first-hand accounts that slave narratives offer. However, one narrative written by former slave Harriet Jacobs in 1861, definitely tells that story. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a story of survival told by a

woman who took control of a horrible circumstance and used her sexuality to survive.

Harriet Jacobs' autobiography differs from works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because it is told from the vantage point of a slave woman who avoids an unwanted sexual encounter with her owner. Many accounts of slavery discuss the physical beatings of male slaves, but few of the well-read slave narratives are written by females who were targeted for sexual abuse. This thesis suggests that Jacobs used her sexuality in an attempt to protect herself from a cruel slave owner and to try to secure freedom for herself and her future children. By many historical accounts, slaves had very little control over their lives; they were told where to go, what to do, and were beaten at the whim of their owners. But Jacobs took action and fought for control of one area of her life, her sexual experience with her slave owner. Jacobs created a plan that involved accepting the advances of another white man in a move that she hoped would make her owner, Dr. Flint, lose interest in her. Jacobs' plan was well-thought-out, and it worked to protect her from unwanted sex with her owner.

In the 1800s, there were no laws protecting female slaves from rape. Slave owners did not consider the act of forcing themselves on slave girls or slave women a violation of any kind. Many women slaves were expected to work alongside men in harsh conditions. Other women slaves performed housework in slave owners' homes, and many women slaves were subjected to physical violations. Additionally, because slaves were considered property, an owner was legally allowed to handle his property as he wished. Writer Andrea Stone suggests that if a slave woman was raped by someone other than her master, then the owner could take matters to court and seek to be paid for

damage to his property, the slave (67). As these facts suggest, Jacobs was left with few options to avoid her cruel master's intentions. She could have fled, which could have ended either with her death or with her being sold into an even worse situation. She could have fought off or killed her attacker, but that action also certainly would have led to severe punishment of Jacobs or even to her death (Stone 71). Researcher Patricia Hopkins writes in her essay "Seduction or Rape: Deconstructing the Black Female Body in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" that Jacobs' story reveals that white slave owners routinely raped female slaves. Hopkins writes:

No white male, some would have us believe, would desire, sexually or otherwise, a black female, much less an enslaved one. These social constraints, however, do not eradicate the act of rape for enslaved females; they just confine it to closed doors and darkened rooms, the high grass around the fields, or any other silent, dark, space of no witnesses, a private space. (12)

Jacobs described how her owner planned to build a house and keep her in it for his sexual pleasure. As a young teenager, Jacobs figured out her master's intentions and picked another white man to be her first sexual partner. In Chapter Ten of her narrative, Jacobs writes, "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way" (39). So, instead of allowing Dr. Flint to take her to this house, away from any chance of protection from her family, the 15-year-old Jacobs consented to a sexual relationship with another man. It was a relationship that Jacobs pursued to escape.

Even if someone tried to argue that Jacobs' decision was based on romance, there is no evidence that romance was involved. For example, Jacobs writes that Sands asked her about her family and grandmother and smiled at her when he saw her in public (38). This might pass as flirting in the eyes of modern readers if it were not for the fact that Jacobs was a slave. Hopkins writes: "Male rivalry is not played out in the text because there is none. Flint and Sands are not rivals for Brent [Jacobs]. They could both have her, at the same time even, and no law would prevent it, for she is an enslaved black female and her virtue does not fall under social or legal protection" (10).

Jacobs' action of succumbing to Sands' inappropriate advances did not prevent unwanted sex with a man that she did not love, but it did save her from the possibility of what she thought would have been sexual cruelty from Flint. Therefore, by choosing another white male "lover" instead of her master's controlling sexual advances, Jacobs exercised a small measure of control over her sexuality.

Even Jacob's decision to put her story in writing shows her effort to control how her actions are viewed by others. Researcher Sara Emsley observes that when Jacobs wrote of her life she decided to do so under an assumed name, possibly because Jacobs did not want to focus just her own life, but she wanted to reveal the shared horrors of the lives of all enslaved women. Emsley notes that some of Jacobs' "instances" could have happened to other slaves, but Jacobs' purpose for telling about her encounter with Mr. Sands had a purpose. Jacobs wanted to make an emotional connection to female abolitionists. Emsley states:

The sisterhood of readers must exert moral influence over the men who have the power to effect change. Jacobs writes so that northern women will identify with slave women through universal female concerns of identity, love, and motherhood. Because it would be difficult, if not impossible, to develop an easy identification between the experiences of white middle-class women and the sexual experiences of a slave girl, Jacobs evades the details of the sexual relationship concentrating instead on women's oppression and female power. (149)

Even though Jacobs' decision to write about her life drew literary attention to the suffering of enslaved women, Jacobs wrote that it was a difficult story for her to tell. Jacobs apparently thought that anyone reading her autobiography might react critically to her teen-aged plan to allow a sexual relationship with a man who was not her husband or a fellow slave. Jacobs wrote:

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice. (39)

Jacobs further exercised control over her fate when she planned a situation in which she and her children might earn freedom. Jacobs chose Sands to father her children because she believed he would be useful. Hopkins notes:

With Sands, Brent [Jacobs] would have a semblance of hope. Brent would be able to see any children from her union with Sands set free, and still further, she might compel Sands to set the mother of his once enslaved children free as well. With Flint there was absolutely no hope of gaining freedom for herself or her children; with Sands, Brent had every hope to obtain “the boon.” (17)

Throughout the period of slavery in the United States, laws existed which held that people born to slaves were also born into slavery. Jessica Millward notes:

Early laws of colonial America reveal planter dependence on the natural reproduction of the enslaved population. In 1662, the Virginia state legislature determined that racial chattel slavery would be a permanent, inheritable condition by asserting that the status of the child follows that of the mother. If the mother was enslaved, so too would be the children, regardless of the status of the children’s father. This law ensured that children of free black men and enslaved women also faced a lifetime of enslavement and that children descended from white men could not lay claim to their fathers’ free or Christian status. (24)

Millward acknowledges that although slaves were denied traditional family lives, there was one option available to enslaved women who become pregnant after being forced into sexual acts with their masters. Millward writes:

Laws specifying slavery as a permanent, inheritable condition represented one end of a spectrum of statues governing the status of bonds people of African ancestry. At the other end of this spectrum were laws stipulating conditions under which enslaved individuals could gain their freedom through manumission. Manumission laws initially developed so that slaveholders could free children they fathered with bondwomen. (24)

This option of gaining freedom for slave children was something that Jacobs was aware of because of her family history. In the beginning of her narrative, Jacobs recalled that her grandmother, the daughter of a slave owner, and her children were set free when the slave owner died. Sadly, they were forced back into slavery (Jacobs 9). Ironically, Jacobs' fate mirrored her grandmother's as Jacobs did not receive the freedom she sought from Mr. Sands. Hopkins observes that Sands was more like Flint than young Jacobs could have known. Sands did purchase the children resulting from his union with Jacobs, but Sands did not grant Jacobs and their children freedom (Hopkins 8). Hopkins writes that Sands' behavior was typical of that time:

Though a Northerner, Sands is nevertheless part of the patriarchal system that perpetuates the enslavement of blacks and the sexual exploitation of black women. His behavior suggests that he shared the

Southerner's contention that black bodies had but two reasons for their existences: to produce work and babies. (8)

So even though Jacobs did not get the results she had hoped for, she did take action and attempted to control the fate of her children by electing to enter into a sexual relationship with someone other than the husband of her legal owner.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* reveals how a teenaged slave girl controlled her body and earned a small amount of freedom by choosing one unwanted sexual situation over another. Jacobs out-maneuvered her slave owner by consenting to a sexual relationship with a white Northerner to prevent an unwanted sexual encounter. Jacobs' story is different from those of male freed slaves primarily because her text focuses on a topic that many slave narratives do not explore: sexual exploitation of female slaves. At one point, after finding herself pregnant again from a situation that didn't lead to the freedom she sought, Jacobs writes, "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" (54). While Jacobs tells a story of a slave girl who took control of a horrible situation and survived, another writer, Frederick Douglass tells his story about surviving slavery and the evils of Christian slave owners.

Chapter 2: Frederick Douglass: From Slavery to Freedom

Slave narratives offer a first-hand look at the history that shapes many of the families of African American lineage, and the *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass: An American Slave*, served a dual purpose of detailing the hardships of slavery and challenging arguments that slavery was practiced by true Christians. In her work titled “Writing as Self Creation: ‘Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,’” Maria Del Mar Gallego Duran notes that historian Henry Louis Gates acknowledges the importance of documenting the African American slave experience. She writes:

As the critic Gates affirms: “The slave, by definition, possessed at most a liminal status within the human community. To read and to write was to transgress this nebulous realm of liminality” (Gates 128). This passage is very significant because it already proposes a model for the understanding of this early production. In the first place, it establishes the status quo of the slave within the “human-white” community very transparently: he is the absence, in every single sense of the term, including the absence of actual voice. Secondly, and a direct consequence of this racist assumption, the slave by means of literacy can therefore challenge and oppose this racist ideology. (122)

Gallego Duran is supporting her statement that slavers intentionally kept slaves from knowledge of their birth, language, and cultures and moved them about to take away their feeling of self-worth as humans. If a slave is not allowed to read or write in his own language or his captor’s language, then it becomes difficult to document his existence and enjoy his cultural stories, faith, etc. Gallego Duran writes:

Although Douglass himself does not suffer the traumatizing experience of the “Middle Passage,” the almost immediate recognition of a link between these two states place him, right from the beginning, in the same liminal status in which the former captured slaves found themselves on their arrival to America: deprived of any sense of roots or community, he feels lost in a society that excludes him completely. (123)

To extrapolate further on Gallego Duran’s observations, it is possible that slave-owners kept slaves from learning to read as a means to prevent them from developing their own understanding of the Biblical literature. If a slave learned, then he or she might understand that some Bible verses were being misused in support of slavery.

In his autobiography, Douglass attacked arguments favoring slavery by disputing the logic of claims made by slave-owners who tried to use biblical scripture to support one race’s enslavement of another race. Douglass wrote that some of his cruelest slave owners purported to be Christians who prayed often but practiced extreme cruelty against slaves including beatings. Researcher Zachary Hutchins observes that Douglass’ gave examples of slave owners reciting biblical verses while beating slaves in an attempt to point out the slave master’s ignorance of the Christian Bible. Hutchins references a passage in which Douglass wrote that his master, Thomas Auld, would: “...frequently tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cow skin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture – “He that knoweth his master’s will, and does it not, shall be beaten with man stripes” (297).

Hutchins points to an observation by researcher Shaindy Rudoff who states that Auld's misuse of the scripture reveals Auld did not understand the scripture correctly. Rudoff suggests that the person committing the bloody beating (Auld) would be punished – not the slave (Hutchins 297). Hutchins argues that Douglas was so familiar with the Christian Bible that he included stories about slave owners who misused scripture to imply his own doubts about the Bible. Hutchins writes:

Douglass clearly was familiar with traditional scriptural exegesis; he drew on the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah to write that slaves “were in very deed men and women of sorry, and acquainted with grief” (*Narrative*, p. 39), a statement that equates each slave with Jesus Christ in his role as a suffering servant. Still, Douglass' familiarity with the use of common biblical interpretive practices does not confirm his belief in their conclusions. On the contrary, these obvious references constitutes a smokescreen of religious respect behind which Douglass conceals his distrust of both the Bible and Christianity itself. (298)

Regardless of his own beliefs, Douglass used the words of slave masters as part of his critical opposition to slavery. Douglass' autobiography and publications in newspapers, coupled with his speeches, made him a forceful opponent of slavery.

Researcher Robert Levine notes in his article “Frederick Douglass and Thomas Auld: Reconsidering the Reunion Narrative” that one of Douglass' owners, Auld, professed Christian faith but behaved in what Douglass considered a non-Christian way towards slaves. Levine noted: “Auld sadistically deprives Douglass and the other

enslaved workers of food, and he masks his cruelty with Christianity – a tactic that intensifies after Auld claims to have found God at a Methodist camp meeting” (37).

Chapter 3: Solomon Northup: From Freedom to Slavery

For many African Americans, learning about family history and family origins is limited. Family lines prior to American slavery are difficult to trace, and many blacks cannot find out from whence they have come. Having access to the first person accounts of the lives of slaves provides valuable information about the lives of people who were once not allowed to read or write the English language. Reading their narratives helps Americans of African ancestry learn more about first-hand survival of slavery. This knowledge helps the learning process and might help more blacks become invested in America's history.

Many slave owners argued that their rights to enslave other humans were based upon "biblical entitlements," but after reading some of the literature written by former slaves, it is this writer's position that those slaveholders abused Christianity by using their versions of Biblical text to fool African slaves and their descendants into believing that a life of service and suffering was sanctioned by God. *12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup was an assigned reading for me. I had read stories of slavery prior to reading Northup's work, but the concept of a person living as a free black man who is sold into slavery points to frightening truth that black Americans lived through when human slavery was legal. Northup's father was born a slave, but he was granted his freedom when his owner died, which meant that Solomon Northup was born a free man who lived in New York (Northup 19). Northup, a musician, was kidnapped during one of these musical events and was shipped south as a slave.

Northup never accepted his enslaved condition and never gave up his quest for freedom, which is one of the reasons that his story is interesting to me. Northup speaks from the viewpoint of a man who had experienced freedom, and when it was taken from him he fought to return to freedom. His account of what happened to him complements historical documents about the lives of slaves in America. Northup also details the cruelty of slave owners who used Biblical verses to support their cruelty.

Author Gary S. Shelby states in his essay on slavery in antebellum America, “Although other influences may have helped to sustain slavery, its main support was religion” (326). According to some slave narratives, including *12 Years a Slave*, many slave owners read Bible verses to slaves during gatherings called “camp meetings” Because slaves were not allowed to read, they could not read scripture and base their understanding of Christian tenets on what they understood from the Bible. So, even though slaves could not read for themselves about the relationship between “masters” and “servants” of Biblical times, some slaves accepted Christianity.

Slaves who endured whippings and horrible living conditions no doubt thought it was ironic that people who professed Christian values of love and comforting one another could beat slaves mercilessly when they failed to pick enough cotton or chopped off body parts when they tried to escape. Frederick Douglass noted in his autobiography:

While I lived with my master in St. Michael’s, there was a white young man, a Mr. Wilson, who proposed to keep a Sabbath school for the instruction of such slaves as might be disposed to learn to read the

New Testament. We met but three times, when Mr. West and Mr. Fairbanks, both class-leaders, with many others, came upon us with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and forbade us to meet again. Thus ended our little Sabbath school in the pious town of St.

Michael's. (55)

So perhaps there was no genuine interest among some slave owners to spread true Christian beliefs; instead, they used it to convince generations of black slaves that enslavement was sanctioned by Christianity. Writer Jared Hardesty noted in his research that conversion was a goal, but it was not a goal to save souls as the Christian Bible encourages. He wrote: "Conversion to Christianity made slaves more docile. Rather than empowering the slave, Christianity stripped them of their ability to resist, made them more likely to collaborate with whites, and changed enslaved converts to the point that they rationalized their own bondage" (68).

Harriet Jacobs, in a chapter titled "The Church and Slavery," shares with readers a sermon by Reverend Mr. Pike which supports the idea that at least one slave owner twisted Bible verses to make slaves believe they deserved their treatment. Jacobs wrote:

Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. 'Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don't forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master's back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your

heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work... If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. (48)

There were even churches that owned slaves and hired them to work for people. For example, writer Jennifer Oast studied the 1851 writings of Presbyterian Minister William Hill of Prince Edward County, Virginia who wrote that he did not serve the Briery Presbyterian Church for long because of “the state of slavery, as connected with the congregation. Their minister was supported by a fund which consisted of slaves, who were hired out from year to year, to the highest bidder, which I considered the worst kind of slavery” (867). Oast writes in her essay that Hill’s church was not the only church that owned slaves. Oast observes that churches in the South owned many slaves:

In many cases the slaves were the only endowment the congregation required. This freed members from the necessity of making financial contributions to their church – a substantial benefit. Slaves were a good investment; they often improved on the original outlay through childbearing, so that in a few generations, a humble purchase of a handful of slaves might result in a substantial endowment of forty or fifty slaves. Congregational slave owning made all members of the church beneficiaries of slavery whether or not they owned slaves themselves or even approved of slavery. (868)

Oast continues by observing that church ownership of slaves created debate. Oast notes, “It bolstered the members’ willingness to accept slavery; if God prospered their church’s investment in slaves and used slavery to promote the

Presbyterian faith, could slavery be wrong? On the other hand, Presbyterian slave owning undermined one of the most significant defenses of slavery – the paternalist ideal of the caring master. Thoughtful church members recognized the contradiction” (686).

It is interesting to this writer that many slaves converted to Christianity, even after learning that biblical verses were being misused to justify the horrible enslavement of first and second generation Africans in America. Also, churches which brought messages of Christianity to its congregants were involved in slavery. One could wonder what an example that must have been for slaves converting to the Christian faith. But apparently just as Douglass wrote, it was not Christianity that slaves and their descendants doubted, but as Douglass noted it was the men and women who twisted scripture to justify their actions that slaves questioned.

Chapter 4: Ethnic Literature Inspires Learning in Classrooms

The narratives of Jacobs, Douglass, and Northup are examples of literature that can inspire learning because they help engage and inform readers in ways that generate discussions about race, culture, religion, and historical events. Not only do these works add to learning by allowing the reading of many slaves' experiences during slavery, but these narratives also provide diversity in the recording of American history. For example, by reading Douglass' many works, people can learn about cultural customs of African origins that were adapted by first and second generation African slaves in America. In his book *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa*," writer Jermaine Archer notes that slave narratives contain bits of cultural history which are sometimes left out of books about slavery. For instance, Douglass referenced a practice of slaves gathering in a circle to enjoy a "shout." Archer writes,

The ring shout was the primary vehicle for the Africanization of Christianity that made its way into the slave quarters and the main components lasted well after slavery ended. Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (A.M.E.) offered his accounts of the strong presence that the ring should have had in even the urban areas of Maryland during the second half of the nineteenth century. (6)

It could be argued that the view of slavery was very different among those who endured it as compared to the views of those who recorded what happened during slavery. Similarly, descendants of slaves might consider slavery as a painful part of family history, while a person whose ancestors were not American slaves might view

the stories as merely a recording of a difficult time of American history. For example, during a 9th grade history class at my high school, one of my teachers told us that many slaves were “happy slaves” because they had food and shelter provided for them by their owners. I knew that this “happy slave” analogy wasn’t true for at least one family because my late grandfather, who was born in 1896, told me stories that his father and his grandparents had told him about the horrors of enslavement in Alabama. So for me, reading ethnic literature an opportunity to learn about historical situations impacting my culture and race. But ethnic literature also allows me to learn about other ethnic groups and their experiences.

For some, works by ethnic authors are not considered “classics,” and some ethnic groups might feel left out if they don’t see literature with stories that reflect their histories and cultures listed as required reading in schools. For example, in 2016 a little black girl in New Jersey found that she read more books that were written by and about people of other cultures than books written by and about black people. Therefore, (then) 11-year- old Marley Dias of Orange, New Jersey made national headlines by starting a campaign to make more books with stories written by black people about black people available for black children to read in their schools. “Whenever you see a character you identify with, you carry it with you and it inspires you,” Marley said. “I want to introduce girls like me to books that will inspire them” (Grinberg). She decided to start the campaign, which was named #1000BlackGirlBooks. Marley’s desire to read more books with main characters whose skin colors looked like hers has become a part of conversations about the importance of ethnic literature in learning environments.

Even with the diversity that exists in our classrooms today, many students do not have much social interaction with people of different races outside of classroom settings. Literature is one way in which different cultures, historical events, and customs could be introduced to students from all walks of life. For example, Latino writer Americo Peredes wrote *George Washington Gomez: A Mexo-Texan Novel*, which is a story of a young Mexican-American boy who is torn between embracing the cultural lifestyle of his Mexican mother and living in the Anglo world of his white father (Perez 27). Written in the 1930s, this novel centers on the struggle of Texas Mexicans who fight white Americans taking over the Rio Grande Valley. Gualino, the protagonist named after America's George Washington, attends a school in which Mexican children are taught English and encouraged to abandon some of the cultural identity to better assimilate to the leadership of Anglo educators. Researcher Hector Perez observes that the novel, written by a Latino-American, combines culture and history in a manner that could be useful in an educational setting. Perez observes that the narrative opens with a descriptive passage about the border's terrain, with the description being interrupted by the appearance of Texas Rangers. Perez writes:

The narrator's attitude towards the Rangers does not escape the reader: 'At first sight one might have taken them for cutthroats. And one might not have been wrong.' We know that Paredes, as author and scholar, had more than enough reason to believe the worst of the Rangers, but the fruition of that project was to come later. Here the Rangers were on the lookout for Anacleto de la Pena, an obvious stand-in for the historical Aniceto Pizana, leader of the seditionist

movement to create the Republic of the Southwest, and or any of his men. (33)

Paredes' background influenced his writing, and in turn, that background adds an element of how he and possibly fellow Latinos felt at the time that the novel was written in 1930s. The novel was not published until 1990. Perez writes, "The novel's plot development and stylistics also evoke the form of American realism and naturalism, combining 'the old and the new' and looking 'both backward and forward' (Pizer xi)" (27). So this work weaves fact and fiction in a manner that could spark conversations about culture and perceptions of historical events that might interest not only today's Latino-Americans, but all students studying the history of the battle to control the Texas-Mexican border. The novel allows a peek into the growing pains of a boy caught between two cultures. Reading it might lead to discussions about many cultural and ethnic matters being considered today in America. For example, Gualinto's name was chosen by his parents because Gualinto's mother is Mexican and his father is a white Texan who is killed while the boy is young. Gualinto's uncle helps name him and thinks that giving him a name reflecting America's history will encourage the boy to become a famous leader like George Washington was. Essayist Ramon Salivar observes that the name, like the circumstances into which Gualinto was born, proved to be too much, and as an adult, the protagonist changed his name to equally reflect his bicultural heritage. Salivar writes:

But his disowning of his family's and his people's history is achieved within a specific horizon of blurred personal and social experience. At novel's end, Gualinto is curiously troubled by a recurring dream

which itself is a return of repressed boyhood daydreams. In the dream he imagines himself leading a victorious counterattack against Sam Houston's army at the decisive battle of San Jacinto in 1836, which had led to the creation of an independent Anglo Republic of Texas. In his dream, Gualinto rewrites history. (285)

But in the novel, this dream not only frustrates the main character, but it offers readers a peek into an imaginary life in which a bi-cultural child feels out of place. Because of current debate over immigration issues in America, classroom discussion about such a novel could possibly generate discussion about some of the many struggles involved in understanding and appreciating America's multi-cultural population. Perez notes:

Finally, the novel's artistic texture is enhanced by the identification of problematic issues within the Texas Mexican community, especially in terms of class and gender; these issues contribute to the protagonist's alienation from that community and his attempt to formulate a new 'American' way of life. (27)

In this case, *George Washington Gomez* is another example of ethnic literature which could be used to enhance and color the conversations about American and Mexican-American's contribution to history.

Conclusion

When I began working on my Master of Liberal Arts degree, I considered myself to have been a fairly well-read person who had been exposed to different cultures and a respectable amount of literature. But it was not until I took a class on ethnic literature that I fully considered how exposure to different cultures influenced how I learned. Because of my ethnic background, I experience certain feelings or make certain connections to the literary works that I read. That is perhaps why slave narratives make me feel that learning about parts of our American history from those who lived and wrote about it is a fascinating way to learn.

With that being considered, I believe that everyone's perceptions of events are influenced by what each person makes a connection with, learns or feels based on his or her culture and ethnic background. Combining many different views of an event gives a more colorful and rounded look at history, in my opinion. Years ago, when I read *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger, I realized that beauty is truly in the eye of the beholder. Berger pointed out that many factors influence what each individual considers to be a "classic" beauty or "classic" novel. His book encourages considering how others see the world around us. Berger writes:

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. Nevertheless their idea of Hell

owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining – as well as to their experience of the pain of burns. (8)

Thinking about this made me aware of different angles to the broadcast news stories that I wrote when I was a TV reporter, because the better I could answer the question “So what does this story mean to Joe?” the better I could explain how a news item impacted the listening audience. Going forward and realizing how we each bring our familial histories, culture, faith and ethnicity into the learning process, I realized that including literature that involves something that touches our lives helps us make connections that lead to learning.

Works Cited

- Archer, Jermaine O. *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa*. Routledge, 2009. Studies in American Popular History and Culture. Web.
- Beach, Richard, Anthony Johnston, and Amanda Heartling Thein. "Identity-Focused ELA Teaching: A Curriculum Framework for Diverse Learners and Contexts." New York: Routledge, 2015. Web.
- Bennett, Lerone. "Why Black History Is Important to You." *Ebony*, 1982, pp. 61-66. Web.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. BBC, 2008.
- Campbell, Gwyn, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller. "Women in Western Systems of Slavery: Introduction." *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2005, pp.161-179. *Academic Search Premier*. Web.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office. First Edition. 1847. Web.
- Emsley, Sarah. "Harriet Jacobs and the Language of Autobiography." *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1998, pp. 145–161. Web.
- Fernsten, Linda A. "Writer Identity and ESL Learners." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy International Reading Association*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2008, pp. 44-52. Web.
- Gallego Duran, Maria Del Mar. "Writing As Self-Creation: 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.'" *Atlantis*, vol. 16, no. 1/2, Nov. 1994, pp. 119–132. Web.
- Gates, Henry Louis, editor. "The Classic Slave Narratives." Mentor Books, 1988.

Girgus, Sam B. "The New Ethnic Novel and the American Idea." *College Literature*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1993, pp 1-16. Web.

Grinberg, Emanuella. "Young Reader on the Hunt for #1000BlackGirlBooks." CNN, 5 Feb. 2016, Web.

Hardesty, Jared. "An Angry God in the Hands of Sinners: Enslaved Africans and the Uses of Protestant Christianity in Pre-Revolutionary Boston." *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 35, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 68-83. Web.

Harper, Candace, and DeJong, Ester. "Misconceptions about Teaching English-Language Learners." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 48, no. 2, October 2004, pp. 152-162.

"Harriet Beecher Stowe." *Harriet Beecher Stowe Center*,
www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/harriet-beecher-stowe.

Hopkins, Patricia D. "Seduction or Rape: Deconstructing the Black Female Body in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Making Connections." *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity*," vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 4-20. *Academic Search Premier*. Web.

Hutchins, Zachary McLeod. "Rejecting the Root: The Liberating, Anti-Christ Theology of Douglass's Narrative." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 68, no. 3, Dec. 2013, pp. 292-322. Web.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, edited by L. Maria Child. Black & White Classics, 1861.

- Johnson, Michelle A. and Chang, Debbie. "Balancing Act: Addressing Culture and Gender in ESL Classrooms." *Journal of Adult Education*, vol. 41, pp. 19-26. Web.
- Kubota, Ryuko. "Voices from the Margin: Second and Foreign Language Teaching Approaches from Minority Perspectives." *Canadian Modern Language Review*, vol. 54, no. 3, 1998, pp. 394-412. Web.
- Levine, Robert. "Frederick Douglass and Thomas Auld: Reconsidering the Reunion Narrative." *The Journal of African-American History*, vol. 99, nos. 1-2, Winter-Spring 2015, pp. 34-45.
- Millward, Jessica. "The Relics of Slavery." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2010, pp. 22-30. Academic Search Premier. Web.
- Northup, Solomon. *12 Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup*, edited by David Wilson. Derby & Miller, 1859. Web.
- Oast, Jennifer. "'The Worst Kind of Slavery': Slave-Owning Presbyterian Churches." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 76, no. 4, Nov. 2010, pp. 867-900, Academic Search Premier. Web.
- Perades, Americo. *George Washington Gomez*. Arte Publico Press, 2014.
- Perez, Hector. "Voicing Resistance on the Border: A Reading of Americo Paredes's *George Washington Gomez*." *MELUS*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp.27-48. Web.
- Saldívar, Ramón. "The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes's *George Washington Gómez* and Chicano Literature at the End of the Twentieth Century." *American Literary History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1993, pp. 272-293. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/489748.

“Slavery and the Making of American,” PBS,

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/education/docs1.html>. Web.

Stone, Andrea. “Interracial Sexual Abuse and Legal Subjectivity in Antebellum Law and Literature.” *American Literature*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2009, pp. 65-92. *Academic Search Premier*. Web.