

Teaching about Multiple Systems of Oppression: Ellen Craft's Escape from Enslavement

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Due in part to their shrewd and successful escapes from slavery, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass are two of the most widely known formerly enslaved people in U.S. history. Their accounts populate K-12 social studies curricula nationwide, and these references typically highlight the outsized role of race in their lives.¹ However, in addition to these important figures, it's critical that students learn about a wider range of remarkable individuals who escaped slavery and the variety of experiences alongside race that shaped their lives.

Developing the requisite skills to discuss race and racism competently and candidly is an ongoing process; and delving into the more complicated realities of enslaved people, or bondspeople,² may seem overwhelming or risky to some educators.³ At a time when various legislative bodies across the United States are working to ban the teaching of topics mislabeled "critical race theory"—an academic perspective of the structural role of race and racism that originally focused on the law—teachers are confronting increasing pressure to avoid and downplay any seemingly controversial issues.⁴ However, we know that attempting to teach social studies in a race-evasive (or "colorblind") way can condition students to believe race does not matter, when both our past and our present show the opposite to be true.⁵ We argue that giving students robust historical examples can enhance their ability to critically analyze both the past and their present social reality, preparing them to advocate for social and racial equity. Ellen Craft's daring escape story presents an excellent opportunity for middle school students to analyze the crucial role social identity played across various categories, namely race, gender, class, ability status, and queer-antagonism. Of central concern in this case is the complexity of race, more specifically Blackness,



A drawing of Ellen Craft in her disguise as a white man.
(Source: *The Illustrated London News*, 1851, vol. 18, p. 315)

in its relevance to U.S. history broadly, U.S. history education specifically, and other overlapping systems of oppression.⁶

The summary of Ellen Craft's escape that follows can aid middle level teachers (as well as secondary history teachers) build stu-

ON THE COVER: Ellen and William Craft, circa 1840s

dents' critical thinking skills and understanding of overlapping social identities in a historical context. Encouraging students to contemplate the meaning of race *and* gender, for example, in historical context can support their abilities to challenge ideas about historical progress and the tenuous nature of laws and policies established to protect whiteness and maleness, among other dominant social identities.⁷ One pressing issue facing teachers is the understatement or the complete omission of overlapping social identities and their material consequences, both historically and in the present.

As a former middle and high school history teacher, I (ArCasia James-Galloway) regularly drew my students' attention to the implications of multiple social identities in one person or group's experience.⁸ I taught sixth-grade social studies at a grossly under-resourced, all-boys public school, whose student population was more than 90 percent Black. Despite the lack of resources, I regularly designed book studies that taught historical content while allowing students to grow their writing and argumentation skills alongside their sense of social justice. I strove to diversify and complement my students' engagement with the predominantly Black male protagonists about whom they usually read. For one of these units, I selected the award-winning book *One Crazy Summer*, which features Black girl protagonists who travel from New York to California in 1968 and get involved with community-strengthening efforts of the Black Panther Party.⁹ We studied the non-fictional elements of the story, and one of the essays I assigned my students centered on the Black Panther Party's activism. Watching my mostly Black male students learn about the Black Panther Party through the lens of Black girl protagonists showed me how powerful and illuminating Black female perspectives could be in the teaching of history. I wish this had been taught more explicitly when I was a preservice teacher.

For the following lesson about Ellen Craft, I partnered with sixth grade social studies teacher Joshua Sonnenberg. While some teachers may find it difficult to dedicate time specifically to Ellen Craft, we hope to inspire a change in how educators approach teaching the more commonly included individuals like Tubman and Douglass, in a manner, for example, that pushes students to weigh the meaning of both their genders *and* their race.

Summary

Published in 1860, the book *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* provides a firsthand perspective on Ellen and her

husband William's experiences.¹⁰ Although William was originally credited as the sole author, Ellen's contributions were significant. Like other slave narratives, such as those written by Frederick Douglass, this book proved important to the abolitionist cause.¹¹



Ellen and William Craft, circa 1840s

Ellen and William Craft lived in Georgia. Ellen was born in the city of Clinton. Her white enslaver was also her biological father. Ellen's mother also had a white biological father. Consequently, Ellen's skin was fair in color, and she had more European than African features. Because of the legal doctrine *partus sequitur ventrem*, which declared that children born to enslaved women were enslaved, regardless of the status of the father, Ellen remained enslaved. Despite having three white grandparents and only one Black grandparent, Ellen was considered Black.

In 1837, when Ellen was 11 years old, one of her enslaver's white daughters got married and moved to Macon. The bride's mother—the enslaver's wife—seeking to remove a reminder of her husband's infidelity, sent Ellen to Macon as a wedding present. That cruel decision separated Ellen from her mother and other enslaved family members. In Macon, as Ellen grew up, she worked indoors as a ladies maid, a position that gave her the freedom to travel on foot, with a pass.

William Craft's enslavers had sold him and his family members off separately, scattering them across the South. William's Black racial identity was apparent; he had dark skin and African features. When he was 16, his enslavers used him to settle a debt in Macon, which was where he and Ellen met. Soon after becoming a couple, the two began planning their escape from slavery.¹² The pair were determined not to have children in bondage. Unlike many enslaved women, Ellen was able to

practice a measure of agency over her sexual autonomy. This fact illustrates how gender, race, and status simultaneously shaped enslaved people's lives.

Ellen and William Craft deliberated all aspects of their escape. They planned to set out on December 21, 1848, and end up in Philadelphia four days later, on Christmas Day. Because Ellen and William lived in different slave labor camps, they were granted travel passes from their enslavers to visit one another for the Christmas holiday. This timing allowed them to make significant progress from Macon before their enslavers would realize they were gone. Nineteenth-century custom considered it improper for (white) women to travel with male servants. However, a white man traveling with an enslaved person or servant would not raise eyebrows. The couple decided that Ellen should pose as a white male invalid, a sick person, who was traveling with his enslaved Black valet (i.e., male servant) from Macon to Philadelphia, a city known at the time for its pioneering medical resources and located in a free Northern state. Part of Ellen's disguise included an arm sling to mask her inability to write (due to anti-literacy laws for the enslaved).

The Crafts also wrapped bandages across Ellen's face to mask the absence of facial hair and to serve as an excuse for having difficulty speaking or hearing, so Ellen's voice would not expose them. Additionally, the couple gave Ellen a short haircut, glasses, and a hat. She donned men's clothes befitting of the era. During their planning period, William hired himself out as a carpenter and saved money to purchase the necessary items as well as pay for tickets and accommodations. Ellen used her sewing skills to stitch the clothing.

The social privileges that came with Ellen's changed identity, smoothed the way for their escape, although they had many close calls. Some near misses included meeting individuals they knew from Macon. They traveled by steamboat and train, leaving Macon for Savannah, then on to cities including Wilmington, North Carolina; Charleston, South Carolina; Fredericksburg, Virginia; Washington D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland; and finally, Philadelphia. As was customary for a white man traveling with his enslaved valet, Ellen and William traveled in separate sections, with Ellen in first class. Their act was so convincing that the captain of the boat they took in Charleston invited them to join him for dinner, complimented Ellen on the attentiveness of her valet, and warned her against Northern abolitionists if she wanted her servant to remain loyal.

Ellen's status as an invalid invited sympathy from several individuals, and in Charleston, it procured them one of the hotel's best rooms and best dining tables. On multiple occasions, Ellen benefitted from exception and sympathy given her largely disabled condition.¹³ However, they encountered border patrol officers who temporarily refused to let them pass because Ellen lacked the ownership documentation required when traveling with an enslaved person.



Pennsylvania Railroad Engine (Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund)



Map of railroad lines between Macon and Savannah, Georgia. Created in 1882.

A few weeks after arriving in Philadelphia, Ellen and William continued on to Boston, where they found work and established a new free life. Two years later, when fugitive hunters from Georgia arrived searching for them, Ellen and William fled to Britain, where they lived for two decades before returning to the United States. In

their life in freedom, the Crafts raised five children without having to fear that their family would be torn apart.¹⁴

Subverting Multiple Systems of Oppression

In the section that follows, we explore the overlapping systems of oppression that Ellen Craft had to navigate during her escape: racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and queer-antagonism.¹⁵ In order to build a *critical sociohistorical consciousness*, we must be clear about the connection between racial justice and social justice.¹⁶

Racism

Racism is the most obvious system of oppression to identify in the Crafts' escape from enslavement. Ellen Craft knew that her best chance for escaping enslavement was to present as a white person, which gave her immediate access to vast racial privileges, while also demonstrating the fluidity of race as a category or construct. Ellen's transformation from an enslaved Black person to a white enslaver highlighted a societal structure that privileged those categorized as white while repressing those legally labeled Black. The Crafts' escape was possible because Ellen was able to cross the "color line," as renowned scholar activist W. E. B. Du Bois noted, something most Black people, like William, were unable to do.¹⁷

Sexism

Patriarchy, a system of society that considers men superior and more deserving of power and authority, disadvantages women of all races. Ellen Craft knew that as a Black woman, changing her defined race alone would not give her enough social power to escape enslavement. She was keenly aware of the social customs that frowned upon white women traveling in the company of a male servant. She also knew that it was perfectly acceptable for white men to travel with a valet. This inconsistency reflects the belief that men could and would take physical or sexual advantage of women if given the opportunity, and that women were incapable of protecting themselves.

Classism

Shifting from the role of oppressed to oppressor enabled Ellen Craft to bring her husband, posing as her "property," to freedom. The society's class structure extended greater privileges to more affluent people, allowing the wealthy to seek out effective medical treatment for their maladies, or sicknesses, with

fewer questions asked. Yet even as a wealthy white woman, who could afford first class travel, dine in fine restaurants, and stay in upscale hotels, Ellen Craft would not have been able to go about her trip with the same freedom as a wealthy white man. Ellen had to be white, male, and wealthy for the escape to be successful.

Ableism

Societal structure privileges able-bodied people. Though as a wealthy white male enslaver with debilitating physical conditions, Ellen received considerations awarded certain people with disabilities: the Crafts faced several situations in which people in authority expected Ellen to complete tasks as an able-bodied person would, such as signing or presenting documents, despite Ellen's bandaged arm or apparent visual impairment. Despite this, Ellen Craft's assumed race, gender, and class worked together to exempt "him" from usual restrictions. As the Black enslaved woman she truly was, Ellen would have been far less likely to have her dis/ability excused or overlooked.

Queer-Antagonism and Cisgender Privilege

Ellen's gender presentation during her trek reflects the normalcy of cisgender privilege and queer-antagonism, or hostility to the queer (or LGBTQIA) community. Ellen effectively cross-dressed, meaning she dressed as a man although she was a woman. U.S. society has historically disparaged this practice, which threatens the fragile and porous boundaries around masculinity and femininity. Because Ellen Craft was able to convincingly present as a man, she faced no reported suspicion. But she and William knew they would be risking their safety if discovered, a threat not faced by people whose assigned sex at birth matches their sense of self (i.e., cisgendered people). For individuals who are not cisgender and who identify as trans, gender presentation can be precarious, or dangerous. Had Ellen's female sex been discovered by a man on her journey, she risked her life, given the trans-antagonistic and patriarchal society in which they lived.

Taken Together

Many if not most social studies stakeholders will be able to relate to at least one of the difficulties that marked Ellen's route out of enslavement and the multiple, overlapping systems of oppression that she and William had to navigate. Identifying a point of connection is a starting point for advancing social

and racial equity. Ellen’s “masculine disguise,” however, “in and of itself was no innovation.” Black enslaved women such as Clarissa Davis, Mary Millburn, and Maria Weems also camouflaged themselves as white men to access freedom.¹⁸ Their

stories also warrant attention.¹⁹ Featuring Ellen and William Craft’s story is an excellent way to help middle school students develop a more nuanced understanding of a history dominated by issues that remain pressing today.

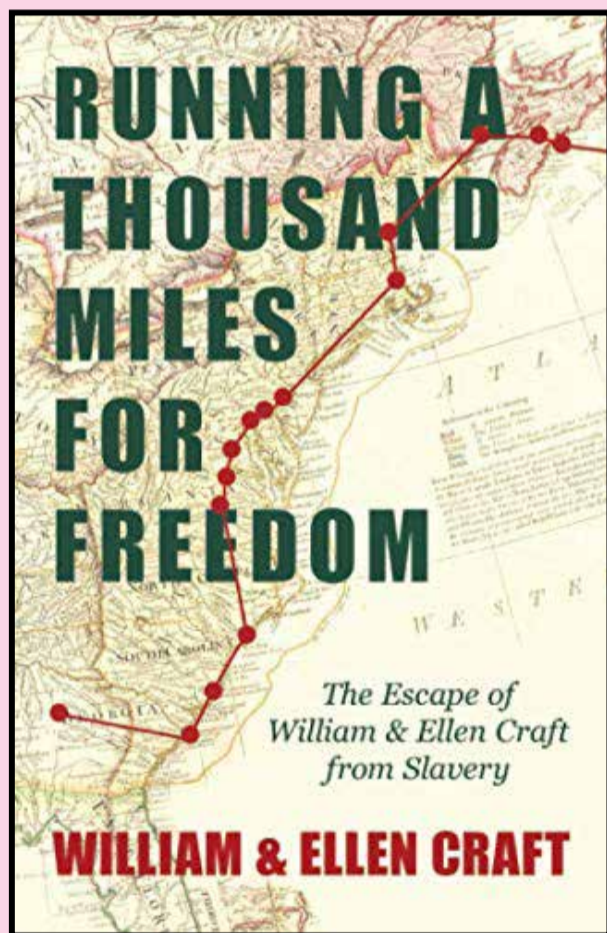
Learning Activities

Grade Level: 6-8

Essential Question: How did systems of oppression interact and influence Ellen Craft’s escape to freedom?

Primary sources analysis

Focal resource: *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (digital pages available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/craft/craft.html>)²⁰



Key Terms: social identity, oppression, privilege, deliberate, social construct, custom, abolition, race, gender, class, ability status, queer antagonism.

Part 1: Introducing Identity and Oppression

Time required: approximately 40 minutes

Instructions: Give students a piece of paper and ask them to draw a line across the middle so there is a clear top half and bottom half; make sure they leave the backside of the paper blank. Then, on the top half of the paper, ask students to describe themselves with short identifiers based on hobbies or pastimes they choose, such as reader, Laker fan, or gamer. Next, on the bottom half, ask them to provide more enduring characteristics, such as their race, social class, or gender. Then, introduce and briefly discuss the Key Terms listed, using this article as background to explain how the terms relate to oppression and deprivation or unearned privilege. Finally, on the backside of the paper, ask students to explain in a paragraph how society privileges or represses certain groups based on their social identity/ies.

Activity Part 2: Background and Planning the Escape

Time required: Day 1 and Day 2, 50 minutes each (100 minutes total)

Instructions: One day will be dedicated to reading a passage multiple times, and the second day will focus on answering the provided questions and sharing responses with the whole group.

Day 1: In *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, read the excerpt that begins on page 29 and ends on 41, two to three times. Before reading, introduce the questions to the class to prime students to look out for information in the reading that will help them find evidence-based responses.

For the first reading pass, read aloud pages 29–41 as students follow along. While reading, stop to briefly com-

ment on central ideas or themes from the reading, such as aspects of daily life for the enslaved or the South's rigid social hierarchy. For the second reading pass, give students the choice to either re-read the passage individually or with a partner they select.

However, if the teacher determines at any point students would benefit from reading the passage a total of three times, read it twice as a whole group; then, allow students to read individually or in pairs. This second reading pass (the second of three total) should include the teacher modeling for the whole group how to think about and annotate the text. For example, as the teacher reads, the teacher might highlight the hesitation Ellen Craft expresses in the first several paragraphs of the passage and encourage students to consider why Ellen Craft was reluctant about using a disguise to escape enslavement.

Day 2: After students have gained a satisfactory understanding of the passage, divide them into groups of two to three. In each small group, instruct students to generate a response to the provided questions, record them, and share them with the class.

- What does the Crafts' deliberation process show about their understanding of social identity in the 1840s United States?
- Which social customs most importantly shaped their plans?
- What strategies did the Crafts create to reduce the attention they brought to themselves as they traveled?
- Why is Ellen Craft's story important?

Activity Part 3: The Escape

Time required: approximately 50 minutes

Instructions: Following a similar whole group to small group or individual model as that discussed for Activity 1, read to students the "Summary" and "Subverting Multiple Systems of Oppression" sections from this article. Additional evidence available to students for analysis are the images included in

this essay of Ellen and William Craft. Before reading, present to students the questions provided below to help students filter information from the reading. Because this passage is shorter than the passage from pages 29–41, it is reasonable to plan to complete this activity within 50 minutes. After reading, organize students into groups of two to three. In each small group, instruct students to generate responses to the provided questions, record them, and share them with the class.

- What does it mean for social identities to be socially constructed?
- How did this idea (the social construction of social identity) influence Ellen and William Crafts' escape?
- How did this idea (the social construction of social identity) influence what the Crafts, especially Ellen, actually experienced in her escape from enslavement?
- In other words, although race, for example, is socially constructed, what are its material or concrete consequences based on Ellen Craft's escape?
- What are some present-day connections to Ellen Craft's disguise and escape as related to racism, sexism, classism, ableism, or queer-antagonism?

Extension Exercise: Summative Activity

If time permits, instruct students to compose a five-paragraph essay based on group class discussions, which focused on Part I of *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* or the Crafts' life and journey before their escape, and the entire text, including Part II, which covers their life after escape. In the essay, invite students to address the following prompt:

Which parts of Ellen Craft's disguise and behavior reflected her and William's understanding of (select three of the five options): racism, sexism, classism, ableism, queer antagonism? Given their social positions and upbringing in nineteenth-century Georgia, explain how the Crafts came to understand these forms of oppression?

Further Resources

Story map detailing each stop along the Crafts' escape journey
www.nps.gov/articles/-a-desperate-leap-for-liberty-the-escape-of-william-and-ellen-craft.htm

Summary of the Crafts' freedom-seeking journey with teaching tips and author questions
www.learner.org/series/american-passages-a-literary-survey/slavery-and-freedom/william-and-ellen-craft-c-1826-1897

Plaque of the Crafts erected in 2021 by English Heritage in London
www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/blue-plaques/ellen-and-william-craft

Lesson and supporting materials about the Crafts
www.gpb.org/georgiastories/stories/william_and_ellen_craft

Pamphlet and supporting activities about the Crafts
<https://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Running-a-Thousand-Miles-for-Freedom-the-story.pdf>

Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: Great Lakes-focused curriculum
www.canr.msu.edu/news/learn-about-freedom-seekers-and-the-underground-railroad-in-this-free-great-lakes-focused-curriculum-msg21-gass21

Relevant C3 Standards

D2.His.1.6-8. Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

D2.His.6.6-8. Analyze how people's perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.

D2.His.13.6-8. Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

Notes

1. For respective comprehensive biographies of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, see Jean Humez, *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006) and David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019).
2. ArCasia D. James-Gallaway, "Critical History Monographs and Intersectionality in Social Studies: A Case from Enslavement," *Multicultural Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (2021): 33–39.
3. Abby Reisman, Lisette Enumah, and Lightning Jay, "Interpretive Frames for Responding to Racially Stressful Moments in History Discussions," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 48, no. 3 (2020): 321–345; and Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "Teaching Hard History," Southern Poverty Law Center (January 31, 2018), www.splcenter.org/20180131/teaching-hard-history; LaGarrett J. King, ed., *Racial Literacies and Social Studies: Curriculum, Instruction, and Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2022).
4. Cathryn Stout and Thomas Wilburn, "CRT Map: Efforts to Restrict Teaching Racism and Bias Have Multiplied across U.S.," *Chalkbeat* (February 1, 2022).
5. Reisman et al., "Interpretive Frames."
6. LaGarrett J. King, "Black History is not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness," *Social Education* 84, no. 6 (2020): 335–341.
7. Maribel Santiago, "Historical Inquiry to Challenge the Narrative of Racial Progress," *Cognition and Instruction* 37, no. 1 (2019): 93–117; National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, Md.: NCSS, 2013), 45–50; and Lightning Peter Jay, "Contextualizing Octavius Catto: Studying a Forgotten Hero who Bridges the Past and Present," *Social Education* 84, no. 6 (2020): 342–347.
8. ArCasia D. James-Gallaway discusses some of her approaches in this article: Autumn Griffin and ArCasia James, "Humanities Curricula as White Property: Toward a Reclamation of Black Creative Thought in Social Studies & Literary Curricula," *Multicultural Education* 25 (2018): 10–17.
9. Rita Williams-Garcia, *One Crazy Summer* (New York, N.Y.: Amistad, 2010). Teacher education researchers have lauded the book for its many strengths, one of which is its nuanced depiction of Black girls and the Black Power Movement; for example, see Christy M. Howard and Caitlin L. Ryan, "Black Tween Girls with Black Girl Power: Reading Models of Agency in Rita Williams-Garcia's *One Crazy Summer*," *Language Arts* 94, no. 3 (2017): 170–179 and Mary J. Henderson, "Black Girls Matter: Black Feminisms and Rita Williams-Garcia's *One Crazy Summer* Trilogy," *Children's Literature in Education* 50, no. 4 (2019): 431–448.
10. William Craft and Ellen Craft, "Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom," in *Slave Narratives*, edited by William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 2000), 677–742; Barbara McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).
11. Douglass's most well-known narrative was titled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself* (Boston, Mass: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845); an extensive biographical account of Douglass, see Blight, *Frederick Douglass*.
12. Summary drawn from Craft and Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles* and McCaskill, *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery*.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

15. Uri McMillan, “Ellen Craft’s Radical Techniques of Subversion,” *e-Misférica* 5 no. 2 (2008), <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-52/mcmillan>; see also Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).
16. Anthony L. Brown, Keffrelyn D. Brown, and Angela Ward, “Critical Race Theory Meets Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Advancing a Critical Sociohistorical Consciousness for Teaching and Curriculum,” *Social Education* 81, no. 1 (2017): 23–27.
17. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
18. Barbara McCaskill, “Yours Very Truly’: Ellen Craft—The Fugitive as Text and Artifact,” *African American Review* 28, no. 4 (1994): 510.
19. James-Gallaway, “Critical History Monographs and Intersectionality in Social Studies”; Daina Berry and Kali Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States* (New York: Beacon Press, 2020).
20. Page numbers are derived from the digital copy of this book, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/craft/craft.html>.



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