



Fieldwork vs. Housework

Common Core Standards

RH.9-10.9 Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

- This lesson challenges the assumption that enslaved labor in the house was “better” or more “advantageous” than working in the field. It will seek to highlight how discourse around enslaved labor needs to be challenged. Not every labor camp was the same. Many students and adults also have assumptions that those who worked in the house were lighter skinned than those who worked in the field. This lesson confronts these assumptions about colorism.

★ **Note:** When discussing racial vocabulary with students, remind them about the importance of language. Point out that some historians prefer the use of the phrase “labor camp” to highlight forced work on the location. A balance for this is using the words “fieldwork” and “housework” instead of “field slave” and “house slave.”

- To introduce students to the lesson, have them answer two “Think, Write, Share” questions:
 - What do you think the person who worked inside of the house may have said about the person who worked outside of the house?
 - What do you think the person who worked outside of the house may have said about the person who worked inside of the house?
- After the “Think, Write, Share” remind students about norms for discussion regarding slavery and the importance of centering Black humanity. Remind students to use the words “enslaved person” or “forced work.” Explain that the words “plantation” and “labor camp” will be used interchangeably throughout the lesson.
- Next, conduct a class discussion using the following questions:
 - **Ask:** What did someone in the field have to work about?
 - **Ask:** What did someone working in the house have to work about?

Approx. Time



50+ minutes

Success Criteria



- Students will compare and contrast the role and advantages of fieldwork vs. housework.
- Students will evaluate the complexity of the division in fieldwork vs. housework.

Big Questions



Using evidence from one of the sources used in class, answer one of the following questions:

- Why is there so much complexity in the history of fieldwork vs. housework?
- Do you agree with Malcolm X’s assertions about the “field” and “house” negro?

Materials



- [Slide Deck](#)
- [Description of Fieldwork and House Work](#)
- [Malcolm X: “Field vs. House Negro” speech](#)

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Lesson Plan

- Following the discussion, lecture and set the stage for the next portion of the lesson by saying something like:
 - “There are a lot of assumptions that all plantations/labor camps were the same, but there is no evidence of this. Because of the lack of historical evidence/perspective of enslaved people, it makes it very difficult to compare one lived experience in a labor camp to another person’s lived experience.”
- The purpose of this lesson is to further discuss and explore what the lived experiences of Black people in labor camps were, what division was or was not created, and what from this perceived division can relate to life in society today.
 - **Ask:** If we are trying to compare fieldwork vs. housework, how do you think we should set up our notes?
Answers may vary, but students should set up a T-chart for their notes.
- Next, distribute the speech **“Field vs. House Negro” by Malcolm X**, and direct students to read for basic comprehension. Instruct students to take notes and answer the following questions:
 - What was daily work like?
 - What worries did people experience both in and out of the house?
 - What other general information did you learn about the kind of work done in the field and in the house?

Exemplar Notes:

FIELDWORK

Roles/Jobs

- pick cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco
- worked from sunrise to sundown
- monitored by an overseer
- all genders work hard
- sometimes plant their own food

Worries

- weather
- having enough clothes and food
- being abused for not working hard/fast enough

HOUSEWORK

Roles/Jobs

- serving food
- babysitting
- cooks, maids, butlers, nursers, and gardeners
- on call at all hours

Worries

- worried about how they were perceived
- close White supervision
- cut off from enslaved community



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- ★ **Note:** Reading could be assigned for students to complete individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Consider having students share their notes and thinking after independent work time.
- Once students have completed their T-charts, checking for understanding by having students participate in a turn and talk peer discussion. Other discussion options include a small group discussion or a whole class discussion.
 - **Ask:** How might someone who worked inside the house help someone who worked in the field? *Possible answers include sneaking food to others outside, sharing information they learned from the enslaver when company came over for dinner.*
 - **Ask:** How might someone who worked in the field help someone who worked in the house? *Possible answers include sharing information about opportune times during the night or day to seek freedom.*
 - **Ask:** Why do you think there is so much focus on the division between fieldwork vs. housework then?
 - **Ask:** What stereotypes exist about those who stayed in the “Big House”?
- Inform students that they will soon watch two video clips. As they watch the video clips, instruct students to problematize myths, assumptions, and stereotypes about fieldwork vs. housework.
- Show the clip of Django Unchained. Follow the viewing of the clip with a whole class discussion.
 - **Ask:** What stereotypical character does Samuel Jackson play?
 - **Ask:** Why is he so appalled by a Black person staying in the “Big House”?
 - **Ask:** Were all people who worked in the house lighter skinned?
 - **Ask:** Why do you think these stereotypes exist?
- Next, show the clip of Malcolm X giving his speech “Field vs. House Negro.” Follow the viewing of the clip with a whole class discussion.
 - **Ask:** What does Malcolm X say that the field Negro wants to happen to the master and his house?
 - **Ask:** What does Malcolm X say that the house Negro wants to happen to the master and his house?
- After viewing both video clips, discuss ideas from both with the class.
 - **Ask:** How is Malcolm X’s assertion relevant today? Explain your thinking.
 - **Ask:** What ways do some Black people put the interest of White people first? Why might this happen?
 - **Ask:** How does this lesson make you think differently about colorism?



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Assessment

- As an exit ticket for the lesson, have students choose to answer one of the two **Big Questions** in a written response:
 - Why is there so much complexity in the history of fieldwork vs. housework? In your response, cite evidence from one source used in class today.
 - Do you agree or disagree with Malcolm X's assertion? Why or why not? In your response, cite evidence from one source used in class today.

Extension

- There are multiple opportunities to extend the learning in this lesson. Consider the following options:
 - Have students compare and contrast excerpts of the fieldwork and housework experiences from Solomon Northup's "[12 Years a Slave](#)" and "[The History of Mary Prince](#)."
 - Instruct students to write a one-paragraph response answering the prompt:
 - To what extent is Malcolm X's assertion relevant today?
 - Have students research the ways in which fieldwork vs. housework is portrayed in the entertainment industry.
 - Instruct students to research and present evidence in colorism in society today.

Additional Resources

- [Freedom Friday Malcolm X Discussion](#)
- [Malcolm X: Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?](#)



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Excerpt and revised from Gibbs Smith Education publications

Fieldwork

- Enslaved people worked long, hard days in the fields and around the property, plowing, planting, and harvesting. They also worked in the stables and smokehouses. They could be blacksmiths, carpenters, weavers, and wagon drivers. Overseers could whip anyone they believed was not working hard enough.
- Every enslaved person was expected to work: men, women, and children. Work did not change if someone was sick or pregnant. All of the needs of the farm had to be met by the enslaved person.
- Fieldworkers often lived away from the house in small cabins built by enslaved people. The cabins would be next to the fields, ensuring people could work as long as possible. This also allowed enslaved people who worked in the fields to create and enjoy a sense of community when not working. On most plantations, they were not constantly supervised.
- Those enslaved people who worked in the fields would receive limited amounts of food, and they would have to provide any other food for themselves. They would often grow small gardens near their cabins to feed their community and, if they were lucky, sell any extra food to earn money.
- Enslaved people doing fieldwork had little control over their own lives, and they had no freedom or rights. They were bought and sold as if they were livestock. For many, that meant being torn away from their families and loved ones.

Housework

- Enslaved people worked long, hard days in the house of the plantation owner, serving the White family living in it. The work was not as physically difficult as fieldwork, but kitchen work could be physically demanding. They could be tasked with serving the slaveholders, caring for the property, or caring for White children. They could be whipped or punished if someone in the home did not believe they were working hard enough.
- Enslaved men and women had different roles within the plantation house. Women were called on to run the household, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and serving the women and children who lived in the house. Enslaved men served as butlers for the home and primarily were tasked with serving the men who lived there.
- Houseworkers often lived in the plantation house, with a small space to sleep next to the kitchen or in the basement. They were kept separated from the enslaved people who worked in the fields and were more isolated when they were not working. Sometimes they were required to sleep on the floor outside of enslavers' bedrooms so that they would always be available. They were almost always being watched by the slaveholders.
- Those enslaved people who worked in White plantation houses may have received cast-off clothes or food from White families. They likely would not have access to a garden plot of their own to grow food for themselves.
- Enslaved people doing housework had little control over their own lives, and they had no freedom or rights. They were bought and sold as if they were livestock. For many, that meant being torn away from their families and loved ones.



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Malcolm X, “Field Negro vs. House Negro,” January 1963

So you have two types of Negro. The old type and the new type. Most of you know the old type. When you read about him in history during slavery he was called “Uncle Tom.” He was the house Negro. And during slavery you had two Negroes. You had the house Negro and the field Negro.

The house Negro usually lived close to his master. He dressed like his master. He wore his master’s second-hand clothes. He ate food that his master left on the table. And he lived in his master’s house—probably in the basement or the attic—but he still lived in the master’s house.

So whenever that house Negro identified himself, he always identified himself in the same sense that his master identified himself. When his master said, “We have good food,” the house Negro would say, “Yes, we have plenty of good food.” “We” have plenty of good food. When the master said that “we have a fine home here,” the house Negro said, “Yes, we have a fine home here.” When the master would be sick, the house Negro identified himself so much with his master he’d say, “What’s the matter boss, we sick?” His master’s pain was his pain. And it hurt him more for his master to be sick than for him to be sick himself. When the house started burning down, that type of Negro would fight harder to put the master’s house out than the master himself would.

But then you had another Negro out in the field. The house Negro was in the minority. The masses—the field Negroes were the masses. They were in the majority. When the master got sick, they prayed that he’d die. [Laughter] If his house caught on fire, they’d pray for a wind to come along and fan the breeze.

If someone came to the house Negro and said, “Let’s go, let’s separate,” naturally that Uncle Tom would say, “Go where? What could I do without boss? Where would I live? How would I dress? Who would look out for me?” That’s the house Negro. But if you went to the field Negro and said, “Let’s go, let’s separate,” he wouldn’t even ask you where or how. He’d say, “Yes, let’s go.” And that one ended right there.

So now you have a twentieth-century-type of house Negro. A twentieth-century Uncle Tom. He’s just as much an Uncle Tom today as Uncle Tom was 100 and 200 years ago. Only he’s a modern Uncle Tom. That Uncle Tom wore a handkerchief around his head. This Uncle Tom wears a top hat. He’s sharp. He dresses just like you do. He speaks the same phraseology, the same language. He tries to speak it better than you do. He speaks with the same accents, same diction. And when you say, “your army,” he says, “our army.” He hasn’t got anybody to defend him, but anytime you say “we” he says “we.” “Our president,” “our government,” “our Senate,” “our congressmen,” “our this and our that.” And he hasn’t even got a seat in that “our” even at the end of the line. So this is the twentieth-century Negro. Whenever you say “you,” the personal pronoun in the singular or in the plural, he uses it right along with you. When you say you’re in trouble, he says, “Yes, we’re in trouble.”