

## **Writing About Slavery? Teaching About Slavery?**

Senior slavery scholars of color community-sourced this short guide to share with and be used by editors, presses, museums, journalists and curricular projects as well as by teachers, writers, curators, archivists, librarians and public historians. Considering the legal, demographic and other particularities of institutions of slavery in various parts of the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia, and also considering how slavery changed over time, this guide is a set of *suggestions* that raises questions and sensitivities rather than serving as a checklist that enforces any set of orthodoxies.

This document is offered in the spirit of Laura Adderley's response to it; all words we "know to talk about enslaved people of African descent in these Americas prove insufficient, both for the brutality against them, and for their remarkable overcoming." This document helps us in our grappling to describe and analyze the intricacies and occurrences of domination, coercion, resistance, and survival under slavery. It complicates the assumptions embedded in language that have been passed down and normalized. Depending on context, some words clarify, some obscure. For that reason, as one contributor put it, this is a "worthy language struggle." Those who have contributed to this crowdsourced guide include leading and upcoming scholars in the field of slavery studies. They come together to make this intervention in the spirit of building ethical community.

During the time of document generation, please feel free to add not only to the checklist but to its goals, objectives, organization, scope, etc. Afterward, please see contact below.

### **Language to Consider Adopting/Preferred Terms:**

- Enslaved (Africans, people, mothers, workers, artisans, children, etc).
  - Using enslaved (as an adjective) rather than "slave" (as a noun) disaggregates the condition of being enslaved with the status of "being" a slave. People weren't slaves; they were enslaved.
- Captive (Africans, fathers, families, workers, infants, etc). Note that this term nuances depending on geography vis-a-vis the slave trade, as Ana Lucia Araujo notes.
- Enslaver (rather than many of the terms below).
  - The term "master" transmits the aspirations and values of the enslaving class without naming the practices they engaged.

### **Language to Consider Avoiding:**

- Slave master (see above)
- Slave mistress and enslaved mistress (to name sexual violence/relations/conditions)
- Slave breeding/breeders (for forced reproduction)
- Slave concubine and enslaved concubine
- Slaveholder
- Slave owner

- Alternatives: those who claimed people as property, those who held people in slavery, etc.
- Planter (when referring to enslavers)

### **Principles to Consider:**

- Avoid using “runaway slave.” Alternatives: “fugitives from slavery” or “self-liberated” or “self-emancipated” individuals.
- If you’re writing about sexual violence, rape, assault and coercion under slavery, please name that violence rather than obscuring it by using terms such as “interracial sex” or “sexual intercourse.”
  - The headline language in this [JSTOR piece](#) about abolition and venereal disease is one example of using “interracial sex” to describe sexual violence.
- Please honor the humanity of the millions of people treated as chattel property by naming enslaved people whenever possible.
- Please consider the trauma and indignation caused by creating papers or assignments that have students “role play” being an enslaved person, enslaver, self-liberated or free African in the Americas. Please see this piece from [Teaching Tolerance](#).
- North American nineteenth-century Black activists often were activists for decades after the Civil War. Calling them “abolitionists” reduces the scope and depth of their work which extended beyond slavery both in the antebellum period and beyond.
- Consider using not only the term “stolen labor,” but also “stolen labor, knowledge and skills.”
- No one was “born a slave”; instead people were born with “free” or “slave” status.
- Avoid using “people of color” as a blanket term when writing about Black people or other specific groups - unless you are referencing Cuba, where “gente de color” was a legitimate term used by peoples of African descent in the nineteenth century.
- Remember that slavery was the economic foundation of every country in the Americas, not just the United States. If you mean specifically the U.S., please use that term rather than “American,” unless you mean to reference the entire landmass.
- Be mindful that the vast majority of enslaved Africans lived in Latin America and the Caribbean; this includes Mexico, when more than half of the country we now call the United States was Mexico until 1848. Havana, Cuba and Salvador, Brazil were the most important port cities of the region.
- Be specific when using the names of nations that often were not nations at the time of consideration, or at least underscore their colonial political condition until independence --this points to questions not only of sovereignty but also of political agency on the ground. For example, abolition in Cuba does not occur until 1886, when it was still a colony of Spain.
- Be aware of shifting allegiances with regards to national identities as claimed by the people on the ground themselves: if a child was born free in Western Africa, captured and traded to Havana, and lives the majority of his adult life in New Orleans, how would you describe him? Understand and highlight his multilingual, diasporic, multiple existence.

**Practices to Adopt:** (for editors/journals, etc).

- Accept when scholars capitalize Black; please don't argue with them.
- Accept when scholars use the term "enslaver"; please don't use its "inelegance" or "awkwardness" as a reason to ask for revisions.
- Accept when scholars want to italicize or place in quotation marks the vocabulary of racial taxonomies, i.e. "mulatto," "quadroon," "octoroon," etc.
- Consider "nation," "language group" or "ethnicity" instead of "tribe." "Newspaper articles, student papers, tweets, Facebook posts discussing the slave trade often refer to African "tribes" whereas none of the pieces refer to French or British [or Dutch or Portuguese] tribes," notes scholar Ana Lucia Araujo.
- Accept when scholars of slavery in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking areas do not want to italicize racial taxonomies within an essay written in English, and instead want to simply write negro, pardo, mulato, etc. Italics mark difference (see below).

**Pieces (about or that grapple with language) to consult:**

- Ramey Berry, Daina. Introduction to *Enslaved Women in America* (2012) R
- Ramey Berry, Daina. "Jefferson and Hemings: How Negotiation Under Slavery Was Possible" By Daina Ramey Berry  
<https://www.history.com/news/slavery-negotiations-freedom-concubines-thomas-jefferson-sally-hemings>
- Araujo, Ana Lucia. "Jefferson was not a benevolent slave owner and doesn't need any apologists" <http://www.historianviews.com/?p=360>
- Araujo, Ana Lucia. "The problem of using the term "mistress" to refer to enslaved women" <http://www.historianviews.com/?p=249>
- Jones, Martha. "Julian Bond's Great-Grandmother a "Slave Mistress?" How the *New York Times* Got it Wrong," <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/160451>
- Owens, Emily. "On the Use of 'Slave Mistress'"  
<https://www.aaihs.org/on-the-use-of-slave-mistress/>
- "The Afterlife of Slavery: Language and Ethics," Wakelet compiled by LaTanya S. Autry  
<https://wakelet.com/wake/f589cdc4-7512-43ff-a489-5ed48062179f>.
- Lara Harmon and DJ Older,, "Why We Don't Italicize Spanish"  
<https://intralingo.com/why-we-dont-italicize-spanish/>
- Walter Johnson's "On Agency" might be a useful addition to the list of sources:  
[https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/on\\_agency\\_johnson.pdf](https://glc.yale.edu/sites/default/files/pdf/on_agency_johnson.pdf). Johnson, Walter. "On Agency." *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 113–124.

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P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al. "Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help" community-sourced document, Date, Time, URL.

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<http://dh.jmjafrx.com/citation/>

Note: This document uses "community-sourced" instead of "crowdsourced" to acknowledge the ways in which the connotation of "crowd" has been historically racialized, as P. Gabrielle Foreman points out. The term is also more accurate; an online community contributed to this document and its multiple interventions.