

Artifact Packet: Teaching Resource Vocabulary Surrounding Enslavement

“The Vocabulary of Freedom” *from the Underground Railroad History Project*

Slave. Master. Among the many rocks we can turn over to see the dark side of our country’s racist past and present, the very words we use to tell the story of our history are ones that are hiding in plain sight. Language holds power, and our beliefs and prejudices are embedded in it; we must look more closely at the words used to describe the institution of slavery in America.

We talk about the institution of slavery with a set of words that have been used to identify the parts and the whole of the institution, and these words still carry the vestiges of white supremacy and power. Words such as “slavery,” “master,” “slave,” “fugitive,” and “plantation” are used with complacency. They’ve become innocuous and no longer fully demonstrate the scope and tragic impact of our history.

In identifying the system as a whole, “slavery” is the word that is still used today. The word lacks specificity; it fails to show the roots and the extent of the institution as something intentionally designed by specific people, and fails to acknowledge the social, economic, and political supports that allowed the system to thrive and flourish. In replacing “slavery” with “the institution of slavery,” we actively acknowledge that slavery was a system with far-reaching roots.

Also important to reevaluate is the use of “master” and “slave” in our lexicon. With the word “slave,” we deny the humanity of the enslaved person; with “enslaved person,” we recognize their enslaved state as imposed on them and not intrinsic to their identity as a human being. With the word “master,” we assume the power of the enslaver as intrinsic, without acknowledging the enslaver’s complicity and active participation in upholding and perpetuating the violent oppression of fellow human beings.

Even the language of describing an enslaved person seeking freedom – “fugitive” – is deeply problematic. The word “fugitive” reinforces the stereotype of Black criminality and takes autonomy away from the enslaved person, without acknowledging the agency of the individual and the immorality of the legal structure that supported enslavement. Additionally, it completely ignores the bravery of the enslaved individual who, in choosing to seek freedom, risked

everything. In changing our use of 'fugitive' to 'freedom seeker,' we recognize the agency of the individual and the bravery of their decision to seek freedom.

Traditionally, we have referred to the sites where enslaved people labored as "plantations." This word, benign and neutral, ignores the reality that these sites were in truth enforced labor camps. Both before and after the Civil War, many southerners used the word to conjure up the institution of slavery as a benign, even beneficial institution. The reality is that on plantations, enslaved people endured horrific working conditions and savage violence. Enslavers frequently treated those they had enslaved as capital, even investments, to be bought and sold at will. As we know from the many testimonies left by enslaved people, enslavers constantly broke up families and other deep personal relationships in order to maximize their profit and establish generational wealth through inheritance packages with no regard for the welfare of those they enslaved.

The vocabulary that has been used to identify and describe the institution of slavery in the United States does not paint a full and just picture of the institution. The same words that were used to describe the institution when it was still functioning are used today, but it is time to change a vocabulary that obfuscates the reality of this brutal system of terrorism and is detrimental to the legacy of the enslaved people who suffered under it. The Vocabulary of Freedom, in ensuring that the institution of slavery is seen clearly for what it was and holds oppressors accountable, is a path forward toward a more perfect democracy, greater acceptance, love, and an anti-racist community.

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<https://undergroundrailroadhistory.org/the-vocabulary-of-freedom/>