



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Diverse Experience of the Enslaved

HASAN JEFFRIES

(singing) The soundtrack of my youth began and ended with New York City hip-hop. It started with “Rapper’s Delight,” the 1979 rap classic by the Sugarhill Gang—its opening lines as memorable as any *(singing)*. And it ended with “Fight the Power,” Public Enemy’s protest anthem for a generation of African Americans who came of age during the Reagan era. Who can forget “1989, the number, another summer, sound of the funky drummer”? *(singing)*. “Music hitting your heart, because I know you got soul, brothers and sisters.” But the soundtrack of my younger years was composed of more than just fresh beats and dope lyrics. It also featured the stirring oratory of Black Power prophet Malcolm X.

When I was ten years old, I stumbled upon four albums of Malcolm’s speeches buried in my father’s record collection. Included were “Message to the Grassroots” and “The Ballot or the Bullet.” And when I listened to them, I was transfixed, hypnotized by Malcolm’s wit and wisdom, by his ability to make it plain. When nothing was on television, and it was either too cold or too wet to play outside, I would drop the needle on one of his albums, stretch out on the sofa, and listen to Malcolm over and over again. I was especially taken by Malcolm’s allegory of the house negro and the field negro. “There were two kinds of enslaved people,” explained Malcolm in “Message to the Grassroots.” “There was the house Negro and the field Negro. The house Negroes, they lived in the house with master.”

MALCOLM X

The house Negro, they lived in the house with master. They dressed pretty good.

HASAN JEFFRIES

They dressed pretty good.

MALCOLM X

They ate good.

HASAN JEFFRIES

They ate good.

MALCOLM X

Because they ate his food, what he left. They lived in the attic or the basement, but still didn’t live near their master. And they loved their master more than the master loved himself. They would give their life to serve their master’s house quicker than the master would. The house Negro, if the master said, “We got a good house here,” the house Negro would say, “Yeah, we got a good house here.” Whenever the master said “We,” he said, “We.” That’s how you can tell a house Negro.

If the master's house caught on fire, the house Negro would fight harder to put the blaze out than the master would. If the master got sick, the house Negro would say, "What's the matter, boss? We sick. We sick." He identified himself with his master more than his master identified with himself.

And if you came to the house Negro and said, "Let's run away, let's escape, let's separate," that house Negro would look at you and say, "Man, you crazy. What you mean, separate? Where is there a better house than this? Where can I wear better clothes than this? Where can I eat better food than this?" That was that house Negro. In those days he was called a "house nigger." And that's what we call him today, because we've still got some house niggers running around here.

On that same plantation, there was the field Negro. The field Negro, those were the masses. There was always more Negroes in the field than there was Negroes in the house.

AUDIENCE

That's right.

MALCOLM X

The Negro in the field caught hell. He ate leftovers. In the house they ate high up on the hog. The Negro in the field didn't get nothing but what was left of the insides of the hog. They call them chitlins nowadays. In those days they called them what they were: guts. That's what you were, a gut-eater. And some of you all still gut-eaters. The field Negro was beaten from morning till night. He lived in a shack, in a hut.

AUDIENCE

That's right.

MALCOLM X

He wore cast-off clothes, and he hated his master. I say he hated his master. He was intelligent. That house Negro loved his master. But that field Negro, remember, they were in the majority, and they hated the master. When the house caught on fire, he didn't try and put it out. That field Negro prayed for a wind, for a breeze. When the master got sick, the field Negro prayed that he'd die. If someone come to the field Negro and said, "Let's separate, let's run," he didn't say "Where we going?" He said, "Any place is better than here."

HASAN JEFFRIES

The house Negro and the field Negro parable was vintage Malcolm, powerful and persuasive, humorous and hard-hitting. There was just one problem. As I later learned, this history was not true. To be sure, the political analysis of the rebellious spirit of the enslaved masses was spot-on, but the house Negro/field Negro binary was a false dichotomy, one rooted in a popular misunderstanding of the wide range of experiences enslaved people had. Experiences that shaped their actions and beliefs.

Knowing whether an enslaved person worked in the house or in the field is not nearly enough to understand their lived experience. You also have to know what kind of work they did in the house, what kind of crops they tended in the field, whether they were enslaved on a large plantation or a small farm, in a port city or an inland community, in a northern colony or in a southern state. You have to know whether

the enslaved was a man or a woman, a parent or a child, whether he or she was new to America or several generations removed from Africa. Reducing the manifold experiences of enslaved African Americans to a simple binary might be good for making political points. But it obscures far more than it reveals.

The soundtrack of my youth was shaped by when and where I was born, by my race and my gender, and by my parents' political leanings. And to hear it, all you have to do is know where to listen. Enslaved African Americans have their own soundtrack, one that wasn't captured on wax, but echoes through time nonetheless. And like my own, it too can be heard, all you have to do is know how to listen. And that's what we'll be talking about today.

I'm Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and this is *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*. It's a special series from Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. This podcast provides a detailed look at how to teach important aspects of the history of American slavery. In each episode, we explore a different topic, walking you through historical concepts, raising questions for discussion, suggesting useful source material, and offering practical classroom exercises. Talking with students about slavery can be emotional and complex. This podcast is a resource for navigating those challenges, so teachers and students can develop a deeper understanding of the history and legacy of American slavery.

Understanding the diverse experiences of enslaved African Americans is important. It teaches students to think critically about the form and function of the institution of slavery, about the kinds of work the enslaved performed, which enriched slaveholders and the nation as a whole. In this episode, Deirdre Cooper Owens shows how the experience of slavery varied and evolved based on such factors as time, place, space and gender. I'll see you on the other side. Enjoy.

DEIRDRE COOPER OWENS

When you're teaching your students about slavery in America, do you feel comfortable? Are you satisfied that the history you're teaching is accurate? How do you determine fact from mythology? I've taught college students across the country about United States slavery, from its colonial past to its abolishment brought on by the Civil War's end. I've had students share their insights with me about slavery, and unfortunately, much of what they know is either wrong or misinformed.

For example, I have had students believe that enslaved women were only allowed to perform domestic work, while enslaved men did all the agricultural work. I have also been told that very light-skinned black or biracial black slaves were called mulattoes, were house slaves, and all dark-skinned slaves were in the fields. My students also learned much of what they know about slavery from Hollywood films that, until recently, romanticized the Old South and sanitized the harsh and often brutal treatment enslaved people received from their owners. So how do you teach students about a past that shows the country's inconsistencies with liberty, democracy and equality for all people?

You do so with honesty, a commitment to having open dialogue with your students who will need to understand historical context, and expose them to the numerous primary sources that tell the diverse experiences of the enslaved.

I'll begin with a story from Mary Raines. She was a former slave who lived in Fairfield County, South

Carolina, during the 1930s. A government worker interviewed her about her life in slavery when she was a much older woman. He asked basic questions like her age, and even how she received her name. Ms. Raines shared the following in her interview.

She stated, “How old would Marse William Woodward be if he hadn’t died before I gwine to die? A hundred and twenty, you say? Well, that’s about what they figured my age was.” She then shared a story about how her birth weight pleased her master so much that he named her after his mother. Ms. Raines explained that her mother’s yelling from the slave quarters alarmed her white owners and their dinner guests, who are about to enjoy a sumptuous meal. A local doctor was at the table and was asked to check on Ms. Raines’ mother. Ms. Raines shared, “All dis him leave to go see Mammy, who was a squallin’ like a passle of patarollers was a layin’ de lash on her. When the young doctor go and come back, him says as how my mammy done got all right and her have a gal baby. Then, him say that Marse Ed, his uncle, took him to de quarter where Mammy was, looked me all over and say, ‘Ain’t her a good one? Must weight 10 pounds.’ I’s gwine to name dis baby for your mama, William. Tell her I name her Mary for her. But I ‘spect some folks’ll call her Polly, just like they call your mama Polly.”

Mary Raines’ oral history tells us a lot about the nature of slavery. Through her admission to her interviewer, we learned the slaves had no real knowledge of their birth dates, and often used the birth years of their masters or some significant event to mark their births. The interviewer describes Ms. Raines as 99, although she believes she’s closer to 120 years old. Also, she likens her mother’s screams from childbirth to being whipped by patrollers. These were typically poor white men who worked for slave owners to keep watch for enslaved people who ran away or left their plantations without permission.

Ms. Raines also describes how involved slave owners were in the lives of their slaves and had absolute control in every way imaginable. Mary’s mother was neither able to name her daughter nor give her a cherished nickname. Just as there are multiple themes that can be explored in this oral history source, I intend to emphasize how the institution of slavery was influenced by chronology or time, region or geographical location, and gender. First, however, you must establish definitions and provide basic facts for students to understand the institution so that everyone is on the same page.

Initially, I introduce the concept of race to my students. Secondly, I link American slavery to other international institutions of slavery, especially those that emerged in the Atlantic world. Those are the nations that border the Atlantic Ocean. Lastly, I follow a chronological and region-based approach that demonstrates how salient slavery was to the United States of America and its government through the exploration of various industries, with a particular emphasis on gender.

One of the major objectives that I outline for my students is how utterly American the institution of slavery was, that it was not solely southern during the colonial period. By the late 1700s, slavery was becoming largely a southern affair because of the cash crops produced in the region, like tobacco, rice, indigo, and later, cotton. However, by the mid 19th century, northern industries profited greatly from Southern slavery, especially textile mills that relied heavily on cotton grown in the deep South. Thus, teachers can have students acknowledge that the existence, growth and maintenance of American slavery was not unique during the era of its emergence, and the institution affected all parts of the country.

One of the more important functions of history is to contextualize the past. By doing so, it helps sharpen critical thinking skills and also helps students to understand differing viewpoints. They begin to understand quite clearly that the past was dynamic and not static. One of the best methods for addressing the proverbial elephant in the room is to first provide students with a clear definition of race and its social construction. Often, students believe race is a biological concept and find it difficult to view it as an idea that has undergone transformation in different regions and areas.

Understanding American slavery must begin with the discussion centered on the changing definitions of race, especially blackness, because students can be confused about the early terms used to describe black people hundreds of years ago. For example, Guineamen, Ethiopes, Mulattoes, Negresses and Coromantees. It's important to contextualize how various European people thought about those of African descent. Europeans' conceptions of blackness were based on their prior experience, or lack thereof, with African peoples.

Starting with Christopher Columbus is an effective way of discussing how historical eras matter. You can also tie in a lesson around race and labor. Columbus is typically taught as an explorer who was heralded as the founder of the Americas. As contentious as Christopher Columbus has become, he is a good example to use in the study of American slavery, because his voyages to Hispaniola and the Caribbean introduced chattel slavery to the Americas—slavery where human beings are considered movable property, and in the United States and colonial British America, it also designated that one would be a slave for life.

As a young man, Christopher Columbus was trained in the Madeira Sugar Trade on behalf of the Spanish crown, working in sugar plantations in Porto Santo Island off the coast of Portugal. He brought this experience to the islands he called the West Indies. During his second voyage to the New World in 1493, Columbus introduced sugar cane to the Caribbean. He literally established the first successful cash crop for a European nation that used native people—that means people born on the island—and African born slaves.

Indigenous people were not good laborers on sugar plantations for many reasons, particularly because so many became sick and died as a result of disease and violence. The Spanish, in turn, began to primarily use African slaves much as the Portuguese had done in Madeira. White gold, as sugar was called, worked as the engine of the initial slave trade that brought millions of Africans to the Americas, beginning in the early 16th century. The history of every nation in the Caribbean begins with sugar cane plantations. These plantations produced cash crops that shaped much of South America and later parts of the Southern United States, like Louisiana, which was colonized initially by the French and Spanish, before the English took over the colony.

Profits from the sugar trade were so significant that it may have even helped America achieve independence from Great Britain. During the American Revolutionary War, Britain devoted much of its military defense to the protection of its Caribbean sugar colonies, as compared to the colonies on the North American mainland. By the turn of the 16th century, West Africans have become more important to New World slavery than indigenous Indian groups had. Many Africans had been skilled in sugar cane cultivation, and as New World slavery developed, the labor system became increasingly associated with blackness.

As North American colonies grew, and thousands of west and central Africans were brought in primarily as slaves, the English began to codify, or make into law, the labor and preservation of slavery based on race and gender. We'll now talk about the first British colony in what becomes the United States, Virginia.

Virginia's law makers were the earliest to use gender in making explicit distinctions about the work responsibilities of enslaved African men and women, and white indentured servants. Almost a century after Virginia became the first British colony, in what we later called the United States, they established a rule that went against everything the English had believed in and enforced regarding the importance of a child status.

In 1705, Robert Beverley, a legislator and historian, who also grew up as the son of a prominent Virginia plantation owner, wrote a book on the history and present state of Virginia. In distinguishing the differences between indentured servants, and these were contract workers with a defined period of time for working, and slaves, he wrote, and I quote, "Slaves are the Negroes, and their posterity," that means their children, "following the condition of the mother, according to the maxim, *partus sequitur ventrem*, they are called slaves in respect of the time of their servitude, because it is for life."

The fact that English lawmakers created an edict that went against gender norms in their country, and was rooted in economics, shows the importance of slavery. White men impregnated enslaved women routinely. If they enforced paternity and inherited statuses of children based on paternity, those men would lose money. So, they created a rule that all infants born to enslaved women, no matter the race or even the status of the father, would inherit the condition of the mother.

Another feature of Beverley's book was, he wanted to attract more English men and women to immigrate to the British colony. He assured potential colonists that they would not enter Virginia as slaves, and he distinguished between the labor of slaves and indentured servants. He wrote, "Because I have heard how strangely cruel and severe the service of this country is represented in some parts of England, I can't forebear affirming that the work of their servants and slaves is no other than what every common freed man does." So, in terms of the work that black slaves and English servants were to perform, the legislator stated, "The male servants and slaves of both sexes are employed together in tilling and manuring the ground, in sowing and planting tobacco, corn, et cetera."

The legislator also defined that slaves were Negroes who would inherit the condition of the mother, and that all black slaves, regardless of sex, would work the ground, and that English women servants were not to work on the ground. Ultimately, these rules about labor, race, and gender had reverberations that influenced how enslaved men and women would be treated on plantations and smaller farms across colonial America. Black women were perceived as physically stronger than white women, and would perform the same strenuous agricultural labor as both black men and white men.

Further, white women were considered a protected class, not meant to perform harsh agricultural labor. Black women in contrast to white women were not protected, and were akin to black men in terms of the farming work they did. As slavery became a permanent fixture in Virginia, and more broadly, within colonial British America, black people experienced the dichotomy between freedom and slavery, especially as the 18th century progressed.

HASAN JEFFRIES

This is *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*. And we're talking about the diverse experiences of enslaved African Americans. I'm your host, Hasan Kwame Jeffries. This podcast is a companion to the Southern Poverty Law Center's report on teaching slavery in American schools. You can find the report at Tolerance.org/HardHistory. Now, we're going to turn our attention to Charleston, South Carolina, and the practice of urban slavery. Again, here's Deirdre Cooper Owens.

DEIRDRE COOPER OWENS

At one point, South Carolina had the largest number of slaves. And in urban spaces, their numbers often predominated over white residents of the colony that later became a state. So, in urban centers like Charleston, especially as cash crops began to boom, slaver owners began a trend that changed the way they lived and displayed their wealth to others. They began to demand house servants and craftsmen as an addition to the slave population on their plantations and large slave farms.

Thus, for wealthy white men who owned large numbers of black men and women, usually upwards of 30 or more, their need for slaves to perform more specialized work and domestic chores also meant that more of the enslaved engaged in more diverse and non-agricultural labor, especially in regions like South Carolina's low country and Georgia. Largely, enslaved men performed the skilled labor, such as driving, carpentry, and smith work, and their abilities to do so greatly increased their economic value among white slave owners and traders.

Like most enslaved men, bondswomen were mainly confined to field work in the late 18th century too. However, there were a few skilled domestic workers and slave nurses and midwives who began to appear on slave lists. Their numbers tended to be small and restricted to larger plantations. Although nursing was tedious labor for enslaved women, who continued to work in fields, their homes, took care of their families, their healing work allowed them to garner respect from the members of their slave communities, and sometimes earn money for their owners if they were sent to assist the local white community.

Teaching students to view slave labor through the lens of gender allows them to examine slavery more complexly. By understanding American slavery from various vantage points, ultimately aids students to broaden their views about the kinds of work men and women were supposed to do in early America. This teaching framework allows students to develop a fuller and more critical understanding of American slavery's diversity. For instance, region or place is really important. The life of a North Carolina slave on a tobacco plantation would be very different from that of a domestic slave who lived in Delaware.

Place is central to other themes mentioned, because understanding where and how black men, women, and children moved across the African continent, to the Caribbean, and migrated up and down colonial America, and lastly, the United States, demonstrates that the diverse experiences of the enslaved included migration based the development of cash crops. All slaves did not live on large plantations. Some lived on small, family-owned farms, where they worked alongside their owners or released out for work.

Until the Antebellum era, from 1810 to 1860 or so, slaves worked on cash crops depending upon where they lived, and most did not pick cotton until the middle of the 19th century. In the Piedmont and Tidewater areas in Virginia, Maryland and North Carolina, tobacco was huge. In South Carolina, slaves

worked in rice fields, grew and processed indigo, and later picked cotton. In New York, when slavery was legal, enslaved people worked on ships, at wharfs, performed agricultural and domestic labor, and worked as craftsmen. Whereas in Mississippi, enslaved people primarily picked cotton during the Antebellum period, until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

Region determined culture. Language, like the West African-influenced Gullah Geechee language spoken by many slaves in isolated parts of South Carolina, the Georgia coastal region, and Florida. And even skill levels in work: cotton pickers were considered largely unskilled compared to low country South Carolina and Georgia enslaved men, who were considered master iron workers. Even blues music that came out of Mississippi has origins in slavery from that region. There were commonalities that linked slavery throughout the years, but also regional distinctions emerged as well.

What teachers of American slavery must emphasize for their students is how varied the experiences of the enslaved were over three centuries. Teaching American slavery does not have to be a task fraught with difficulty. It is one of the subfields of United States history that has flourished for many decades. With a plethora of primary and secondary sources available, teachers can employ a variety of approaches that reveal how the enslaved lived through and responded to their bondage over time. I'll list four that I find really helpful for my students.

Harriet Jacobs, who was a former slave, wrote a memoir, *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*, that spoke about her experiences and escape from slavery in North Carolina. The Works Progress Administration Slave Narratives was a collection of over 3 thousand interviews of men and women who were formerly enslaved, and that source can be found on the Library of Congress's website. Pioneering historian, Deborah Gray White, wrote, *Aren't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, that speaks about the unique experiences of black women across the South, living in bondage. And lastly, Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* provides a wonderful backdrop of the development of slavery in what becomes the United States of America.

Through an examination of race, region, place, labor, gender and a host of other topics and themes, students are able to move past the one note generalizations that describe the enslaved found in popular culture and media representations. They can think deeply about how slavery was not solely a southern phenomenon, but began as a colonial American institution that had international implications. As such, slavery informed how the United States would ultimately treat people of African descent who lived within its borders, even after the labor system was abolished. For history teachers, the reward in teaching these kinds of lessons about American slavery is that a new generation of Americans can appreciate how all members of society contribute to the building of a nation, even those considered the most oppressed.

HASAN JEFFRIES

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Teaching Hard History is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance, with special thanks to the University of Wisconsin Press. They're the publishers of a valuable collection of essays called Understanding and

Teaching American Slavery. In each episode, we're featuring a different scholar to talk about material from a chapter they authored in that collection.

We've also adapted their recommendations into a set of teaching materials, which are available at Tolerance.org. These materials include over 100 primary sources, sample units, and a detailed framework for teaching about the history of American Slavery. Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, providing free resources to educators who work with children from kindergarten through high school. You can also find those online at Tolerance.org. Thanks to Dr. Cooper Owens for sharing her insights with us. This podcast was produced by Shae Shackleford, with production assistance from Tori Marlin and Robert Auld at the Radio Foundation Studios in New York.

Our theme song is "Kerr's Negro Jig" by the Carolina Chocolate Drops, who graciously let us use it for this series. Additional music is by Chris Zabriskie. If you like what we're doing, please let your friends and colleagues know, and take a minute to review us in iTunes. We always appreciate the feedback. I'm Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, associate professor of history at the Ohio State University and your host. You've been listening to *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*.

