



## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

# Using Young Adult Trade Books with John Bickford

### HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

The documentary film *The Abolitionists* explores the people and personalities who breathed life into the crusade to end slavery in America. The two-hour film made its national broadcast debut on PBS’s “American Experience” in January 2013. Not too long after that, I assigned it as required viewing for students in my African-American History through Film class.

I began teaching my film course in 2012, just before *The Abolitionists* came out. Then as now, the class meets one day a week—always on Mondays—for three hours. During our time together, my students and I watch a major motion picture that attempts to chronicle an aspect of the black experience, from slavery through the present. Over the years, we’ve watched everything from *12 Years a Slave* to *Fruitvale Station* to *Moonlight*. Last year, I tossed in *Mudbound*. This year, I’ve added *Blackkkklansman* and *The Hate U Give*.

This class has proven to be wonderfully effective in getting students to think critically about popular perceptions of the black past. The key to its success, though, is not the movies we watch together. That’s just what fills seats. Tell a kid that we’ll be watching *Black Panther* and *Get Out* in lieu of a textbook, and they’re down for whatever. The reason the class actually works is because I pair each movie with several hours of documentary films on the movie’s core subject. I have a devil of a time getting students to read for 20 minutes, but they’ll watch a two-hour documentary on Netflix in a heartbeat.

The students view the documentaries during the week leading up to our Monday classes. And I watch those documentaries that I’ve never seen before during the weekend before we meet. And so it was a few years ago on a quiet Sunday afternoon that I was watching *The Abolitionists* in preparation for viewing *Glory* in class the next day. And as I was doing so, my then five-year-old daughter, Asha, kept popping in and out of the room—stealing glances at the television trying to figure out what I was watching. And whenever she appeared, I immediately paused the program to keep her from seeing slavery dramatized. This quickly devolved into a game of cat and mouse: her peeking, me pausing; me pausing, her peeking. It was not the most efficient way to prepare for class. Then she slipped into the room without me seeing and caught sight of a young Frederick Douglass fending off an attempted whipping by his enslaver.

When I saw Asha, she was staring at the television, mouth agape. I stopped the program and beckoned her toward me. She came, we sat, and I waited. Then finally she asked, “Why was he doing that to him?”

“Well,” I started, quite confidently, “the young black man was Frederick Douglass, and he was enslaved.

And the white man was the one who enslaved him. And he was trying to force Frederick to do something against his will.”

I felt good about my answer, although I wasn’t quite sure “against his will” would register. But, that, I thought, could be easily clarified. But before I could say more, Asha asked, “But why was he a slave?”

I responded quickly, “First, he was enslaved, not a slave.” I thought to myself, *That’s a really an important point*, but really I was just stalling for time. I knew I was approaching a slippery slope. “Well,” I dragged the word out as long as I could to buy myself a few more seconds to think. “Frederick Douglass,” I continued, “was black. And black people were enslaved.” As the words escaped my lips, I thought, *That, was a gross oversimplification; I’m going to have to unpack that.*

But before I could figure out what to say next, Asha pressed on: “Were you a slave?”

*Whoooooa. Wait. What?* I thought to myself. “No, no I wasn’t,” I answered quickly. “Slavery happened long before I was born.” *Good recovery*, I thought, before adding, “But had I been born during slavery, I would have been enslaved too.” That hung in the air for a while.

Then Asha said, “Because you’re black?” It was more of a statement than a question, but I answered anyway. “Yes, because I’m black.”

Then she hit me with a series of questions in rapid succession.

“Would mommy have been a slave?”

“Yes.”

“Grandma?”

“Yes.”

“Poppa?”

“Yes.”

“Uncle Hakeem?”

“Yes.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you too.”

“Because we’re black?” She was asking for final confirmation.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Because we’re all black.”

There was a long pause as we sat staring silently at a frozen image of a young Frederick Douglass on the screen. Then all of sudden—in the most nonchalant voice that you could possibly imagine—my five-year-old, African-American daughter declared: “Then I don’t want to be black.”

Did you hear that? That silence? That was me, at an absolute, complete, and total loss for words as I watched my African-American daughter bounce off the sofa and bound up the stairs, having come to the conclusion—based on the information that I had provided her—that it made no sense whatsoever to be black in this world.

I think often about that conversation with my daughter; about what went wrong. And I realize now that you can’t introduce the pain of being black in America without first introducing the beauty of being black in America. The problem that occurred is not that I had a conversation about slavery with my young daughter—it’s that I had the wrong conversation with her. I approached it from the wrong angle. Teaching hard history is like teaching the hard sciences; scaffolding is essential. Foundational concepts have to be taught in the early grades so that fundamental principles can be learned in the later grades. The question then, is: “How do we do this?”

I’m Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and this is *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, 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.

Young adult literature allows us to introduce fundamental themes and information about slavery to elementary school students. We can also use these fiction and nonfiction trade books to critically explore slavery in our middle and high school Language Arts classes. In this episode, I talk with John Bickford about the vital role these books can play in teaching hard history. Dr. Bickford is a professor of Social Studies Education who has researched how slavery is presented in works for children and young adults. And he has some valuable suggestions for us on how to capitalize on the strengths as well as the weaknesses of trade books. I’ll see you on the other side. Enjoy!

I’m really excited to have with us Professor John Bickford, who teaches at Eastern Illinois University and really is a specialist on the kinds of books we use and should be using in the classroom for curriculum, instruction and the like. John, thank you so much for taking time to share your insights and expertise with us.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Thanks for having me.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

Absolutely. So, we’re all familiar—certainly as students, and former students, and teachers—with using textbooks to teach the history of American slavery. But you, in your research and in your teaching, you

focus on trade books. Could you explain to us what's the difference between trade books and textbooks?

### JOHN H. BICKFORD

Sure. Sure. Trade books are like biographies, narrative nonfiction, expository texts, historical fiction. It's different books that you'd give kids on a different topic—Harriet Jacobs or Harriet Tubman, narrative nonfiction about the Middle Passage, things like that. Those are trade books. And they're great for teachers because you can really pick the reading level. And say you're doing a topic on the Middle Passage or Harriet Tubman, you can find high, middle, and low books for your particular grade range. There's hundreds on virtually every topic. When you get more into certain historical figures, there may be just a dozen or so, but there's a lot of options.

And unlike a textbook—where there's one narrative, and there's one voice, and it presents it kind of like, you know, Morgan Freeman narrating history—in a way the trade books—where students look at different trade books; they can see what different authors focus on. This is really the historiography that historians engage in. When they look at different interpretations of the same event or era, and they can see how different authors focus on different things. It's more discipline-specific than simply reading a textbook that tries to be but is never comprehensive. Textbooks, they're a mile wide and an inch deep. In trade books, you can delve deeper.

### HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

So what are some of the strengths of some of the best trade books that you have encountered that deal with the topic of American slavery?

### JOHN H. BICKFORD

Oh, in the last 20 years there have been 2,000 books published focusing on slavery, or some aspect of slavery, or a slave, or a slave owner—you know, like Jefferson or Lincoln. There are thousands of options. And it is not just boring biographies. There are some remarkable, remarkable different trade books, historical fiction books and books that are very difficult to categorize within a genre.

It is not just historical comprehension where you're giving kids names and dates. These are stories. And E.L.A.—whether it's in second grade or 12<sup>th</sup>-grade AP Literature—E.L.A.'s all about stories. And there are some remarkable stories that are stranger and more engaging than any fiction. And there's some historical fiction out there that'll blow your mind, too.

Julius Lester is a remarkable author. And he's perhaps my favorite children's and young adult author. He's written some remarkable books. One of my favorites is *To Be a Slave*, where he had etchings from artists on different slave plantations and different oral histories. And they're juxtaposed in powerful ways, powerful ways. When I used to teach the seventh grade using different excerpts from this book, every year there would be kids drawn to tears looking at some of these images with some of these stories. One that just blew me away was a guy talking about looking for his kids after freedom. He kept saying, "After freedom, I've been looking. I've been looking since freedom. I've been looking since freedom." It was in 1888 ... 1888 that that oral history was captured. And he's talking about how he just wandered. He was a vagabond looking for his kids, for 23 years. Oh, it's powerful stuff.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

So what are the commonalities in the books that really treat slavery in a way that can help a teacher teach it accurately and effectively in the classroom? You mentioned Lester as an example. And one of the things that he does really well is give voice to enslaved African Americans who are caught up in this historic and horrific sort of sale of human beings—largest in America. What are some of the other things that he does and that others do in these trade books that really make them essential for teaching in the classroom?

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Oh, they offer space for exploration into the primary sources. Sometimes they'll show an image, say of a slave poster. Okay? Where it'll say, you can get clues for certain things. And it just shows the image. But now teachers can locate the original Library of Congress document or in the National Archives. And they can explore in more depth. For example, if one of these slave sale or say a runaway advertisement, if it says, and I'm quoting here, "Ran away. A negro girl called Mary. Has a small scar over her eye, a good many teeth missing. The letter A is branded on her cheek." Okay?

Now, this is just an image that's inserted in a trade book. And students may look at it, skip it, you know what I mean? Move forward. But the teacher then has the opportunity to get the original, to print it off so they can look at the details and then to ask, "Look at that small scar. Where do you think she got that? And those missing teeth? Did she get hit, or is this malnutrition? Now, what does 'branded' mean?" And in a way, these trade books hop and skip between secondary source, like a narrative of an event, and the primary sources. And students are able to go back and forth, back and forth between the contemporaneous historical documents, and then what historians know. And that's the secondary narrative. And I love the way Julius Lester especially brings in archival documents right into the narrative. And he adapts it in a way that's very accessible for young students. Because for these kids, if they're 10, if they're 15 years old, their working memory is all in the 21st century. And to go back 200-some years, it's very difficult.

And these trade book authors, they're specialists when it comes to children's and young adult readers—their reading levels and things like that. And in a way, they're kind of at the convergence between reading and history. If it's a Venn diagram, they're right in the middle there. And they make very difficult topics accessible for young learners.

Another thing that teachers really value is how you can differentiate. One great book isn't going to cover every topic. You can't. You just can't. So you get three or four books and you let the students pick. Teachers know that choice is powerful in the classroom. Students value choice. They want choice: "Look: you can read this book, this book or that book." Or the way teachers can organize it into literacy circles for high, middle and low students' abilities. It's a wonderful way to adapt and to differentiate: using materials that aren't available in a textbook.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

Given that there are so many trade books out there to choose from, on the good side, what should teachers be looking for in these books to help them select which books to use in the classroom?

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Well, first, I always say, “Teachers need to consider the reading level,” ’cause that’s number one. If the kids can’t read it, it’s not worth it. So pay attention to the Lexiles and the reading levels, and, you know, that’s available on any website that sells books. The second thing is, pick a topic that’s engaging because American chattel slavery was three centuries. And you can’t cover everything, so pick a topic that’s really engaging. And the next thing I’d encourage them to do is to go to the *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery* framework and look at those themes. See what is present within the book, and see what’s absent. Because that framework is a wonderful guide for things to pay attention to. You can’t cover everything in every class, but in a week or a two-week period, the teacher can pick what’s most important.

And as they’re looking through the book, they can pay attention to, say, white owners’ compassion and even assistance. This is so common in trade books, especially the younger you go. And it’s so historically misrepresentative. Here’s a direct quote from one book: “One day you’ll be free, perhaps in the master’s will. I believe my husband will set you free.” This is a slave mistress talking to a slave about how “Yeah, you can hope for freedom.” That’s ridiculous. That’s ridiculous.

Or pay attention to your book when it comes to, say, slavery’s brutality. Is it actually present? So often you’ll hear threats like, “Don’t make me slap or punish you.” And if that’s the most [threatened] that slaves were in this book, then you’ve got to find ways to insert primary sources to fill this gap. This is a gap that shouldn’t be left alone because, otherwise, it makes slavery look like an exchange of free work for food, clothing and shelter. And it wasn’t.

Teachers can easily insert that primary source about the runaway slave advertisement to show “This girl got this scar somehow. This girl lost [these] teeth somehow. Her face was branded.” I’m not saying that you need to terrify children. I’m not saying that this should be things that you should incorporate, say, with second-graders. But if you look at the framework for *Teaching Hard History*, this gives you guideposts, signs on a highway, things to pay attention to. “Is the family presented as a nuclear family? Or was there a lot of forced family separation? How are the origins of slavery presented?” A lot of times they just skip it, like it’s the weather: “Well, winter comes after fall. So you know, slavery happened in North America.” That’s so false, it’s ridiculous.

Slavery was created and maintained by a group of people that benefited tremendously from it. How is that incorporated in the book? Paying attention to these things so that the teacher is aware of what’s included, and minimized, and excluded, will help teachers focus on important things that they’d like to include. Now those are common gaps. You could call them misrepresentations by omission. There’s also misrepresentation by commission, where they present anomalies as if these are the typical. Like Harriet Tubman—love the lady; I hope she gets on an American bill—but she represents a typical slave’s life about as well as September 11th, 2001, represents a typical day in New York City. She was an anomaly.

Take a look at Thomas Jefferson. In nearly all of his trade books, and I’ve reviewed a hundred on Jefferson, if you were to look in books that were intended for second grade and 12th grade, 20-page books and 200-page books, they all focus on this idea that he was a good master who loved liberty and wanted to give it to everyone. But he just couldn’t free his slaves because of the debt that he had or how the American high society was a difficult social structure for him to negotiate. Get serious! He was a

slave master. He spoke of liberty, but he only freed the slaves he most likely fathered. These are lies by commission, where they're presenting the anomalies as typical. Bill Gates is not a typical college dropout. Harriet Tubman was not a typical slave. And if only Harriet Tubman's story is told, then it implicitly blames other slaves like, "Why didn't you run away? Why didn't you fight back?" You know what I mean? It presents the anomaly as the typical, and that's wrong. And teachers need to be aware of that. And that's why paying attention to the *Teaching Hard History* framework—those 10 targets are wonderful goals to think, *Okay, what is included, what's minimized, what's disregarded? How can I integrate these sources?* It guides you to specific primary sources and others to help you fill the gaps, so to speak.

### HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

One approach to dealing with those problematic trade books is simply not to use them, to avoid them completely. But no book is perfect. And of course, any book that you use in a classroom is going to have its own flaws and shortcomings, both—as you pointed out—perhaps by omission and perhaps by commission.

But it seems to me as well that we shouldn't run away from the problematic books. These texts on Thomas Jefferson, for example, can, in fact, be used in the classroom, although they would have to be treated in a particular kind of way. Can you suggest some ways that teachers can use these problematic trade books on American slavery in the classroom itself?

### JOHN H. BICKFORD

Oh yeah, absolutely. Sometimes the worst historical books are the best curricular resources. You know, they're easy targets for kids to knock down. The bad books that are the most historically misrepresentative are also wonderfully evocative classroom curricular resources. And I encourage teachers to spark students' curiosity and elicit their critical thinking and disciplinary literacy in ways that are very cognizant of their children's educational psychology.

We know how kids think and what gets them excited. Young learners are remarkably inquisitive, so we have to give them something to be curious about. Organize your curriculum so it's a puzzle that they can piece together. Or adolescents. We know they are remarkably egocentric and confident. A teenager in a roomful of mathematicians and physicists knows he's the smartest. So find ways to prompt him to act like he's an authority. Find ways to put him in a position where he's acting like an authority figure because that's what adolescents want. Or all kids have a deep sense of fairness, a deep sense of fairness. So find ways to get kids to empathize with folks who are being mistreated and subjugated.

And there's ways that you can do this for second grade, for seventh grade, for 12th grade. There's ways you can do this in a social studies classroom and also in an English, or reading, or Language Arts classroom. The *Teaching Hard History* framework, it's wonderful for teachers. I worry that it would be only adopted in the social studies and history classrooms. But with Common Core focusing on about half of all reading, writing, word study, Language Arts topics should be nonfiction, there is a place for history and social studies in the English Language Arts curriculum. I can give you some examples with, with say, the elementary grades and middle grades and high school, if you like.

### HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

Oh absolutely. Let's start with the elementary grades and work our way up.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Sure. The first one is for second- or third-graders. Deborah Hopkinson wrote this book called *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*. In it, there's a young female slave named Clara. And it talks about her experiences on the plantation and the Underground Railroad. I'm going to focus on different close-reading tasks that students don't just seek to answer, but answer again and again, and build their answers as they're going through the reading. And there's also different text-based writing tasks that you can engage the students with when it comes to different forms of narrative writing. The themes that are included are family separation, and the division of labor between field and house slaves, and slaves trying to free themselves through escape. There's also some misrepresentative themes, like the lack of violence or how easy it was to obtain freedom.

Clara makes a quilt based on a map with guidance about locations from other slaves on how to escape to Canada through the Underground Railroad. Now she sneaks off her plantation onto her mama's plantation to set her mama and her baby sister free. From a historian's standpoint, it's remarkably implausible that she escapes so easily; and that she even knew exactly how to go to a boat hidden in the brush along the Ohio River hundreds of miles away; and that she left a quilt on the plantation as a guiding tool for other slaves to escape. There's also no violence, there's just threats of violence.

But it's also very representative in [various] ways. She's tended to by Aunt Rachel who (and I'm quoting here) "wasn't my for-real blood aunt, but she did her best to care for me." So it shows that slave families were separated frequently. Clara also works in a field, but Aunt Rachel works in the big house. And there's some disparities between field slaves and house slaves, and that's brought up in the book. Or how the master joins the pattyrollers, their euphemism for patrollers, to catch escaped slaves. These are very historically representative aspects.

Now, it's a great story. Second- and third-graders will probably be engaged by this story. And there's some good aspects and some bad aspects. Now, what if a teacher were to say, "Okay, I'm going to give you these three or four questions, and we're all going to look at these questions now before you read. And as you're reading, I want you to answer them. And answer them as many times as they come up. Don't give me one answer because you saw 'an answer' on page two. Give me all the answers that come up. Here, let me give you a couple." And these close-reading questions can guide students' scrutiny of the book.

And if you were to say to these second-graders, "Tell me about Clara's family and friends and other folks in the plantation. What did kids and adults do on the plantation?" Or, "How was Clara—and her enslaved friends—treated? How did she escape? Who helped? What was scary? What was lucky?" Or, "Clara escaped. Did others?" And thinking back, "How did slavery begin?" Or, "Why did it begin?" Now these are for children to answer, and reconsider, and adjust their answers, and add to their answers as they're reading this book. And if you hear them again, you'll see how these questions carefully humanize the enslaved African Americans with language like, "Clara's family, friends and other folks on the plantation." They weren't slaves, but people. And each of these questions target different elements—often minimized elements—of chattel slavery, like the division of labor or treatment and violence, or the sheer luck of escape, or the origins of slavery.

Some of these, there are no answers to, like, "Why and how did slavery begin?" That's not in the trade book, and kids won't find that. That's a wonderful opportunity to insert primary sources. Some of the



other ones kids can target, like, “What was lucky and what was scary about escaping?” The idea of finding a boat that was safely hidden 300 miles away. Second-graders can look at that and see that it’s implausible. These are wonderful opportunities to add engaging primary source materials, like oral histories, that can illustrate plantation life. Or teachers can integrate other aspects, like a slave whip—just an image of a slave whip—to talk to the kids about different forms of punishment. There’s definitely rated-R and -PG examples of primary sources that you probably wouldn’t want to give these second-graders. But there are G- and PG-rated versions that can show that slavery was more than just “free work.”

One of my favorite primary sources that I would insert—especially with this particular story—it’s about a slave named Jordan Anderson. He escaped from his master, I think in one of the Carolinas, and he made it to Canada. And sometime after the Civil War, his master wrote a letter asking, “Would you come back and work for me on my plantation? You can be free.” And what you have is Jordan’s response. You have Jordan’s response to his former master, the guy whose dad owned his dad and whose grandfather owned his grandfather. And statements like, “Even though you shot at me twice when I was running, I’m glad to hear the Union soldiers didn’t get you.” You know, he’s wonderfully audacious in asking his former [slaveholder] for back pay. And he also integrates things about how incredibly precarious his escape was. And that’s very different than Clara’s escape, which was very serendipitous and lucky.

And it gets into the starvation where he’s saying, “I’d rather freeze up here in Canada than scrounge for food down there with you. I’d rather be a man here than your servant there, even if you’re giving me your freedom.” You know? To show that slavery was far more than just ownership. There was indignity and marginalization and subjugation that came from this. And this primary source is a wonderful little supplement to *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* that you can add into a trade book that can really, really add nuance and detail to the story.

#### HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

You know, I really love the way you are suggesting that teachers incorporate the primary sources as supplements and complements to fill in gaps and to enhance the reading, especially for the youngest students. At second grade, we often don’t think about using these kinds of primary sources at that young age. Would you do something similar for middle school kids?

#### JOHN H. BICKFORD

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And the primary sources aren’t perfect, just like the secondary sources aren’t perfect. Take Jordan’s story or an oral history. So often the slave dialect comes out. One of the things from my own experiences when I was a teacher: kids looking at the dialects and the accents as if they’re indicative of ignorance or something silly. And a lot of times children try to present it and talk like that. In a way, it’s like literary blackface. And teachers need to be very mindful of that. Whatever they include, teachers need to carefully consider, “Big picture, what’s the worst thing that can happen with this?”

And within the middle level, you’re probably going to use more text-based sources; you don’t need to rely on visual sources near as much, because they’re much stronger readers. But teachers need to pay attention with that. When you get into adolescence, bullying is ubiquitous. So we can’t give them a victim to mock. We can’t find ways to teach about the worst subjugation in American history and allow it to be reason to mock those people that were subjugated.

Within the middle grades, my favorite book is the Julius Lester *Day of Tears: A Novel in Dialogue*. It's remarkable. It's about the largest auction of enslaved African Americans in American history. If I could just give a brief synopsis: Pierce Butler, this enslaver, he had to auction off his chattel slaves to pay for debt accrued from a divorce from his abolitionist wife Frances, or Fanny. Fanny didn't know that he owned a slave plantation. They lived up in Philadelphia. And the book is problematic because the violence is minimized, and it's only to the slave men, not women and children.

There's a lot of positives, too. Family separation was sure obvious. But slaves' literacy and white benevolence—those were very common in the book. There was a white abolitionist store owner who lived down near them who taught Joe, a slave, to read and later told Joe how to escape. But the book shouldn't be jettisoned because this story gives voice to folks who've history [we] really haven't heard from—especially history students in the middle schools. They haven't heard these stories of these particular folks in this one particular event.

And the primary sources that you can include—the Kemble Collection of the Lenox Library Association has photographs on this plantation, on this plantation, where it just says, “A slave girl.” But you can look in the book at the list of the slaves that were sold and wonder, *Which one would this be?* She's probably 12 or 15. We know their ages by their slave sale records. “Who might this be?” And saying to the kids, “This photo is a nameless, enslaved, African-American girl. Look at what she's doing in this image. Based on the story, who do you think this is?” There's lots of different, young, African-American chattel slaves in the story. And students can explore and argue and consider who this image is of. And in a way, that's what historians do. They argue about whose interpretation is right.

This one photograph—and there's dozens in the Kemble Collection at the Lenox Library—this one photograph can spark remarkable discussions. Or, say when it comes to the threats of whipping, one of the more often reproduced photographs is of Gordon, who was an escaped slave who ran to the Union troops during the Civil War, sometime around 1863 or '4. And they took a photograph of his back. And those whip marks weren't just scars. They were raised welts on his back. They looked like worms crawling on his back, they were raised so high. And unlike just a story about a whip or an image of a whip, this one image can very graphically portray to kids what a whip does, what a cat-o'-nine-tails does to the human body.

Or they can read William Lloyd Garrison's article. He called it “The Peculiar Institution,” the great slave auction at Savannah. Often textbooks use the phrase “the peculiar institution.” This is one of the times where Garrison—one of the great abolitionists and one of the owners of *The Liberator*—where he uses that phrase. Where he's talking about this one particular slave sale. And you can get an outsider's perception. Or you can get the actual journal by Frances Kemble, Fanny Kemble, called *A Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation* [sic]. And you can get actual excerpts from her diary on what it was like to go by boat to this slave island for the first time and to see these people that your husband owned. And how profoundly sad it was for her, and how she knew she had to do something. And how giving extra food or doing small gifts of kindness got rebukes from her husband. And she's writing in her journal about this. It's a wonderful supplement to the story, and it gets students to explore things that they may not have considered.

The trade book is great because it has so many gaps that can be filled with so many evocative primary sources that really spark students' interests. That's what I do for the middle grades.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

And for high school?

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Oh, man. I'd go into someone big like Lincoln or Jefferson. Everybody knows something about this person. And it's great because people have a lot of prior knowledge about this, or they think they do. But there's a huge gap between what historians, and ordinary citizens, and American teenagers understand about Lincoln. Lincoln's relationship with slavery illustrates this divide more than anything else. He opposed slavery, but he did not believe in equality. Today, he'd be considered a segregationist. He was not a radical abolitionist as an adult—and he sure didn't feel that way as a kid. He wasn't elected on an abolitionist platform. It was one of containment, actually. And he certainly didn't try to start the Civil War. And he certainly didn't do it to abolish slavery. And the Emancipation Proclamation, it didn't free all the slaves. Only those in rebellious states. In reality, African-American slaves contributed mightily and in various ways to their own freedom. But this idea of "Lincoln freed the slaves," it's so common. It's like "Columbus discovered America."

Now, this isn't about historical quibbles like, "Who did the Emancipation Proclamation actually free?" That's just a detail. That's *Jeopardy* stuff. My goal is to get teachers to be aware of what's included, excluded and minimized so that they can use this as a puzzle piece to get kids to examine primary and secondary sources. Not reading to comprehend, but reading to interrogate; reading to scrutinize. Like a detective at a crime scene.

One of the things that I would have the students do is engage in "narrative revision," where they're taking different sections of the trade book and they're picking it apart, sometimes deleting completely misstatements, or adding in citations or endnotes to add details. For high school students, I would say, "Hey, we're going to include lots of different trade books. Some of these are definitely below your reading level. But I want you to be able to pick them apart. After we've explored all these wonderful elements of the *Teaching Hard History* framework, I want you to find where these elements are present in the books, and where they're absent in the books."

And you can see different quotes like, "In New Orleans, young Abraham saw a slave market for the first time. Black slaves in chains were being sold like cattle. Seeing that done to people made Abraham miserable, and he said he would change things when he grew up." The idea of comparing that to certain things that Lincoln did and didn't do. When he was a state senator, he criticized a New York presidential candidate who voted to enfranchise free African Americans in New York. When Lincoln was president, he tried to negotiate repatriation back to Africa or Central America, or the American West in what is now Oklahoma. Comparing this quote with Lincoln talking with other folks about, "Look, we've got to get 'em out of here. Whites can't live with their former slaves. Where will we put them?"

This idea of the history versus the history that's told in that trade book. Or a quote like Lincoln saying, "I helped pass a law that ended slavery in America and freed all those people." You know, slaves freed themselves in numerous ways. There's this one journal by a white Southern woman called *The Journal of Kate Stone* [sic]. And she wrote it two or three years after the Civil War. And she talks about how incredibly difficult it was well before the Civil War—and especially during the Civil War—to control the

slaves. How they were constantly slowing down work. They were constantly breaking equipment. They were constantly stealing. They were constantly doing very agentive acts, where they were acting as agents of their own freedom, to make things harder for their owners, and then to run away and to gain freedom.

And in a way, this journal from a white Southern woman who talks about, “Oh, when will this terrible war be over?” It’s a wonderful way to show how slaves freed themselves—but you’re not telling the kids that. If you just told the students that and gave them a test question and they answer it, that’s historical comprehension. That’s not historical thinking.

What I would do is have them engage in what I call “narrative revision.” Say you give these 12<sup>th</sup>- graders or 10<sup>th</sup>-graders a book intended for fourth grade. And you were to say to everybody, “All right, pick five pages. You can pick any five pages. And now add footnotes and endnotes—and, including citations—about where there’s omission and where there’s misrepresentation about Lincoln’s attitudes as a child, or where they’re talking about slaves, slaves, slaves. Do you want to point out, “These were humans. These were enslaved African Americans, not simply slaves”? Or when they use the phrase ‘plantation,’ do you want to point out this is a euphemism for ‘slave labor camp’?”

The idea of telling these teenagers, “Hey, this adult author got it wrong. This person didn’t enslave, but this person got it wrong—what slavery was about. Let’s correct this. There’s something unjust, not only about slavery, but about presenting slavery in this very innocuous way. Or making Lincoln seem like the hero on high trying to fix everything. What I’d like you to do is revise this narrative. Add to the trade book in certain places where there’s gaps. Add citations where the trade book author got it kind of right and then kind of wrong, you know?” And in a way, this engages students in the close reading and text-based writing that’s essential within Common Core for English Language Arts teachers, and also the C3 framework. The idea of: “This is how slavery’s told. How should it be told?” Does that make sense?

#### **HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

That makes a lot of sense. And it also seems to play directly into what you were talking about before, about the sort of psychology of playing into the psychology of the students.

#### **JOHN H. BICKFORD**

And what do teachers want more than anything? They want kids excited about their classroom. They want students engaged, and hooked, and curious. These are wonderful ways to evoke their curiosities and elicit their attention through the puzzle format, or through their sense of fairness, or through their sense of authority. Like, “I know this. This author doesn’t, but I do. They were wrong!” And ELA teachers can use that. In a way, it’s kind of like fire. Where fire can heat your house or burn it down. Students’ attention and their interests is a wonderfully powerful thing in the classroom. And this is a great spark, in my estimation.

#### **HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

Right. This sense of empowering the student to say, “We have these texts and we’re supposed to see them as definitive, and yet, based upon what we have been studying in the classroom, you are able to not only pick out and identify the flaws. But now I’m empowering you as the instructor to correct it and to right the wrong—not of the past but of the present and how we are remembering.”

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

You got it. Absolutely. And if you've seen Bloom's Taxonomy—his pyramid of critical thinking: comprehension, application, understanding, so to speak. Those are all at the bottom two or three tiers. “Did Lincoln free the slaves? Did the Emancipation Proclamation free slaves in the border states?” That's comprehension or application. It's bottom-level historical thinking, where they're just memorizing something that somebody else said. What I'm encouraging teachers to do is to look at Bloom's Taxonomy as guideposts. This is the educational psychology part. And then look at the *Teaching Hard History*—this is the content part. And kind of mix and match them. How can you get kids to evaluate? How can you get kids to analyze? If analysis is third from the top, and evaluation's the second from the top, the idea of, “Okay, how can we get kids to scrutinize this? ‘What do you think?’” Or, “‘Where is there something wrong?’” That's *immediate* evaluation.

And then the idea of creation, which is the highest level of Bloom's Taxonomy. Not create anything, but creatively demonstrate a newly generated understanding. Creatively show me your new ideas. It comes across in that narrative revision I was talking about, where they're picking apart the narrative with citations and endnotes, and they're adding and deleting and crossing out, and then they're justifying why they're doing this. Where it's not just an opinion. They're making a statement. And then they're substantiating it with sources.

Students can easily do this. You're putting them in a position to act like historians. Think about this. A second-grade teacher gives her kids a math problem. “Two plus blank equals seven.” That is pre-algebraic thinking. It's analysis and evaluation. “Two plus blank equals seven; find the blank.” In a way, those second-graders are engaging in math-level thinking like a mathematician. A kindergarten teacher playing Sink or Float—where they're looking at boats and bottles and shoes in a big tub of water, talking to kids about buoyancy—they're engaging in scientific thinking in age-appropriate ways for kindergartners but much like a scientist would, where they're testing hypotheses.

Our students deserve the same out of history. Our students deserve more than a textbook to be memorized. And the way to do that is to position students to evaluate like historians, to position them to analyze and then creatively show what they know in new and novel ways. I've got a ton of suggestions on different close-reading strategies, or text-based writing strategies that can definitely hook the students. And I'm sure not the only one out there offering these things, but pairing primary sources from the *Teaching Hard History* framework with different trade books that are age-appropriate, and engaging narratives—teachers can do a lot of fun things with that. And the best part about this is, they're engaging their students like historians at the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

What should teachers do in preparation for using trade books in the way that you're talking about using them, which I think is phenomenal and really engaging, and should really draw students in? What kind of preparation should teachers do walking into the classroom, so that they can be most effective with using trade books in these ways?

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

The first thing is to explore the *Teaching Hard History* framework. It's exceptional. It covers all the gaps.

And I love how accessible it is. So you can see: “Okay, these are themes that cannot be ignored entirely.” And to recognize there are historical gaps in whatever source I take. The diary from Fanny Kemble? It’s a great diary, but this is just one lady, a Northerner who just had a year on what we’d call a plantation. It’s limiting. So recognizing whatever source you pick, there’s going to be gaps. Whatever trade book you have, it’s not going to cover everything.

But be aware of those gaps, and compare it to what’s in *Teaching Hard History*, because there’s some wonderfully engaging and free resources through the National Archives and the Library of Congress. And *Teaching Hard History* directs teachers to these places and others. There’s wonderfully free resources where teachers can find ways to fill these gaps.

Now there’s also creative ways to pair close reading and text-based writing using these resources. Okay, take the idea of writing a newspaper, a historical fiction newspaper. If you were to say to the kids, “All right, we’re gonna look at this event. And let’s say that you guys have 1850, which is right after the Fugitive Slave Act. Or 1860, during the election, but before President Lincoln is inaugurated. Or 1859, right after John Brown. And let’s say one group of students does it from a Northern perspective, an abolitionist perspective. Say, “All right, you’ve got Chicago.” And somebody else does it from a border state. Pick a town in Kentucky. “You’ve got that town newspaper because you’re a border state.”

And now another group’s got a group from the Deep South: “Okay, you’ve got Birmingham. Pick an event or a date. Now write a historical fiction newspaper with this date in mind and with this perspective in mind.” And there’s a lot of multi-genre writing that’s involved here. When it comes to the Common Core, take an op-ed, or a letter to the editor. That’s a persuasive essay. That’s one of the Common Core writing standards. Or do a current event. Something that just happened. “There’s stuff going on at Harpers Ferry with this guy named John Brown who came from Kansas.” That’s narrative writing. That’s a different form of Common Core writing. Or take political or social commentary. That’s an evidentiary argument. All three of these are three very distinct writing styles that are all represented within the Common Core, and English Language Arts teachers know what that’s about. And the idea of, say you’ve got five different groups of five kids in your classroom. And you were to say, “Pick a year, pick a region, get started.”

What if you were to say, “You’ve got the classified ads. What would be sold? What would be sold at this time and place?” And think about how you can incorporate geography and economics into this discussion of history. You know, there’s wonderful ways with just this one idea—historical fiction newspapers—to get kids to select and present different perspectives that they created, that represent different years and different events in the history of our country. That’s what I would have teachers do.

It’s a four-part thing. Identify the gaps in the books that you like—that’s the first one. The second one is find different free resources to fill these gaps. You could pay for them with things like Jackdaws, which are \$50 a pop for primary sources you can get free at the Library of Congress. Or you can go to *Teaching Hard History* and Teaching Tolerance and they can offer you these. That’s the second step: Find wonderfully free resources that can fill these gaps.

And then the third one, there’s lots of creative ways to pair close reading and text-based writing with the primary and secondary sources. And the last one would be to find ways to use their educational

psychology against them. Find ways to puzzle students. This idea of confusion is a wonderful thing. Confusion, in a way, is the antecedent to discovery. Confusion is a powerful thing. When kids are confused, they can be engaged. Not confused to the point of tears. Nobody's saying make them cry, but find ways to confuse or intrigue them. Just like a puzzle. The goal of a puzzle isn't to look at the picture at the end. It's to piece these together. It's the same thing with these different historical resources that you can fit together in a puzzle.

Find ways to evoke their curiosity and to spark their interest. And with adolescents, find ways to think, *The author was wrong. I know something the author doesn't know.* Or find ways to spark kids' deep sense of fairness. Kids want to empathize. They feel mistreatment very powerfully, 'cause they've all been bullied in some ways. So, respond to their sense of fairness. That's the fourth step, when it comes to how should teachers approach this. And this is just my own suggestions, and I'm sure not the only one out there doing this. There's some great authors out there doing neat stuff, too.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

Confusion is the antecedent to discovery.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

It is!

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

You're absolutely right. I mean, it just hits home. And this idea, you're right. Process means everything in terms of where we want to begin and where we want to end. Let me ask you one more question.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Sure.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

We often hear—sometimes they make headline news—of teachers doing things with regard to how they teach American slavery, problematically.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Oh, I know!

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

In other words, it's not just sort of the book they use, but it's what they do in the classroom itself. So in thinking about these trade books, what are some things that teachers shouldn't do, or should absolutely avoid when using them in the ways that we want to use them in the classroom?

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Yeah, and I get this. Every year I get sent different articles from former students about teachers doing ridiculous things, like reducing the Underground Railroad to a game of tag on the schoolyard, where one group's the pattyrollers, and one group's the escaped slaves, and home base is Canada. I mean, that's ridiculous. Or making the kids sit underneath their desk as they're reading stories about the Middle

Passage—as if this is going to create the Middle Passage.

So often I see teachers try to engage in a “brown eyes, blue eyes” kind of thing. Jane Elliott in the 1960s after Martin Luther King died, made this popular with teachers: privileged the blue-eyed kids and then marginalized the brown-eyed kids one day, and then flipped it the next. And it was really powerful. And I know that in Riceville, Iowa, a very small lily-white town, I’m sure it worked out well. But you can’t re-create slavery. You can make people feel discriminated against, but you can’t re-create hundreds of years of subjugation where that dude owned my dad, and he will own my child and there is virtually no hope unless I do something. So I wouldn’t encourage teachers to try to role-play it out.

I think teachers need to, first think about the Hippocratic Oath: do no harm. If you’re a teacher and there’s 24 white kids and two black kids, don’t find a way to say, “Hey, you want to be Frederick Douglass for this role-play?” Do no harm. Another thing: you definitely want kids to creatively demonstrate what they know, but be careful with the creative writing. Creative writing can be very beneficial because it puts students in a role as if they were this historical figure. But what about the kid that asks, “Can I be a slave catcher?” Or the kid who wants to be the plantation owner’s child who takes pride in his father’s brutality?

Teachers should carefully consider subjugation. And the role of the aggressor, or the abuser—it should never be taken or even toyed with. Suffering should not be trivialized. And I think teachers need to ask themselves this when it comes to the language that’s used: “Is suffering trivialized when it comes to this?” Or when it comes to reading oral histories. I used to say this to my students all the time: “If you’re reading it and you don’t understand it, try to pronounce it exactly as it’s written. Pronounce it like it’s written phonetically, and you’ll probably piece it together. But don’t you dare laugh. We don’t make fun of people from Boston who don’t drop their Rs, okay? And they certainly weren’t picked on the way these slaves were. And we’re not going to engage in literary blackface.” But find ways that suffering isn’t trivialized, and pay darn careful attention to that.

And pick your words carefully, because so often in some of the oral histories, the n-word is present. And slaves refer to themselves that way. Teachers use their own judgment, but I mean that should not be a word that students read and talk about. That should not be a word, in my mind, that students can even read aloud. Do you know what I mean? Find different ways to humanize these folks, because they were forgotten and mistreated for their entire lives. Teachers need to be very cognizant of suffering and abuse in their curriculum because it can get away from them.

I encourage teachers to be very, very mindful of what they do and the implications of what they do. Because sometimes the best intentions don’t mean anything if you’re playing tag on the playground. You know what I mean?

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

No, absolutely. I mean we need to be mindful of the guardrails.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Yeah.



**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

And that if we want to get from point A to point B, there are certain restrictions just because of the world in which we live and the cultural baggage that students are bringing with them into the classroom that they don't leave at the front door. So these are really helpful reminders I think, of what we should do and also what we shouldn't do.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Yeah, yeah. I agree.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

John, thank you so much. This has really been fantastic. You have provided us with tremendous, not only insights and observations, but practical ways of taking this material, using trade books to teach the hard history of American slavery, both accurately and effectively in the classroom. Thank you so much.

**JOHN H. BICKFORD**

Thank you for your time.

**HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES**

John H. Bickford is an Associate Professor of Middle Level Education at Eastern Illinois University and a former middle school social studies teacher. He has published numerous articles on history literacy and the pedagogy of social studies education, including “Examining the Representation of Slavery within Children’s Literature,” with co-author Cynthia W. Rich.

*Teaching Hard History* is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance, with special thanks to the University of Wisconsin Press. They're the publishers of a collection of essays called *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*. Throughout this series, we have featured scholars to talk about material from a chapter they authored in that award-winning collection.

We've also adapted their recommendations into a set of teaching materials, which are available at [tolerance.org/podcasts](http://tolerance.org/podcasts). These materials include over 100 primary sources, sample units and a detailed framework for teaching 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 these online at [Tolerance.org](http://Tolerance.org).

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If you like what we're doing, please let your friends and colleagues know. And tell us what you think on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We always appreciate the feedback. I'm Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, Associate Professor of History at The Ohio State University and your host for *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*.