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Don't Say Slave: Interpreting Slavery at NAI 2011

Jacob Dinkelaker
National Park Service

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Don't Say Slave: Interpreting Slavery at NAI 2011

Abstract

Slave, servant, fugitive, runaway, master, slave owner, and farm. What do all of these words have in common? Well, if you went to Angela Roberts-Burton's NAI session, "Overcoming the Obstacles of Interpreting Slavery," you would know that all of these are words that she urged interpreters not to use when interpreting slavery and slave life. Instead, you should use: enslaved, freedom seeker, fled bondage, slave holder, and slave plantation. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Interpreting Slavery, Black History

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Don't Say Slave: Interpreting Slavery at NAI 2011

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2011

Back from the [2011 NAI workshop](#) and back to our regularly scheduled programming! We both have plenty to share from sessions on interpretation, field trips to local history sites, and eating breakfast in a [dining car on the national registry of historic places](#).

Slave, servant, fugitive, runaway, master, slave owner, and farm. What do all of these words have in common? Well, if you went to Angela Roberts-Burton's NAI session, "Overcoming the Obstacles of Interpreting Slavery," you would know that all of these are words that she urged interpreters not to use when interpreting slavery and slave life. Instead, you should use: enslaved, freedom seeker, fled bondage, slave holder, and slave plantation.

Although Roberts-Burton's presentation was overall, highly informative with some great discussion, I had several issues with her presentation, mainly her handout, "Words Have Power". In the handout, she urged the above mentioned restricted vocabulary when interpreting slavery. The reasoning behind not using words such as slave and fugitive is that they are demeaning. The handout argues, referring to the word slave, that:

No one asked to be a slave. This is not what or who they were. When people (especially African Americans) are referred to slaves, it is dehumanizing. they become ambiguous, without feelings, thoughts, or individual personalities.

Roberts-Burton's handout continues on the words fugitive and runaway:

These terms imply that wanting freedom was wrong.

I agree with Roberts-Burton on what these words mean. Words do in fact carry a lot of power and implied meaning - that's their nature as bits of language. And that's precisely why I don't think interpreters can or should restrict their vocabulary when dealing with such a controversial and important issue such as slavery.

I want to use the word slave, fugitive, and slave holder interpretively. I want to be able to point out the fact, or better yet, have a visitor realize how stilted the language we use today and those in the past used to talk about slavery. I want to use the word fugitive to illustrate the paradox of someone who is fighting for their freedom and yet simultaneously breaking the law. I want to use those above mentioned terms to illustrate multiple perspectives, those of the slave holder and the slave, those who benefited from slavery and those who are only known principally for their status as slaves. Using those terms is essential to confronting one of the worst facets of slavery: that although slaves were in fact human beings with emotions, feelings, needs, and wants, they were after all in many people's

minds *just* slaves - pieces of property to be bought and sold by slave owners and masters. I want

visitors to respond to the injustice and inherent wrong that is the word slave and all that it represents.



Courtesy Prints and Photographs, LOC.

By not using these words and confronting all the difficulties and layers of meaning represented by these words, we risk losing sight of the nature of slavery, and all of its intricacies. We risk painting it with broad strokes instead of rooting out all of the details that made slavery a degrading, morally corrupt, and overtly hypocritical human system that it was. Slavery is too important an interpretive subject for us to confine ourselves to certain vocabulary words. Instead, we need to embrace the whole vocabulary of slavery for all its interpretive possibilities and worth.