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Why We Must Stop Referring to Enslaved People as 'Slaves'

How we use language matters



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Published in Human Parts

6 min read · Jun 12, 2020



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Detail of a Portland Freedom Trail marker, where Elias and Elizabeth Widgery Thomas lived and provided a safe house for fugitive slaves and provided housing for notable abolitionists. Photo: Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald/Getty Images

I have a new pet project, and it appears to be a cause taken up by countless other word enthusiasts. I'm finding Wikipedia articles where people are referred to as "slaves" and editing the entries to refer to them as "enslaved persons" or "victims of enslavement." In my editing, "masters" and "owners" become "enslavers." In this way, enslavers rightfully join the ranks of rapists and colonizers throughout human history. References to "ownership" become references to "then legally permissible, immoral forced enslavement" and so on. Sometimes I come up with new terminology on the fly.

It's not just transatlantic slavery that gets this treatment. Enslaved people in the Bible and throughout history are liberated from their proverbial word bondage to the word "slave" by me and other editors. We recognize how dangerous and insidious thoughtless words, when left unanalyzed, can be.

I know these preferred phrases can be clumsy and, well, wordy, but they strike me as just more

accurate and necessary. They should strike you this way, too.

Since I was a child, the word “slave” has always rubbed me the wrong way. As a student, I remember thinking how wrong it was that the enslaved people in the textbooks I was required to read were referred to almost exclusively as “slaves” and not as people—even if I could not articulate why when I was younger.

Today, you’ll notice the trend if you read a textbook or Wikipedia articles that haven’t been corrected. They are filled with words that tell us how “slaves” lived, how “slaves” died, and how “slaves” rebelled. A human being who mustered the courage to attempt to escape their enslavement, in the face of certain death, is referred to as a “fugitive slave”—as if the condition of slavery followed them. The word “fugitive” evokes illegality and wrongness, even when we reject the immoral laws that permitted slavery. Using the word “slave” implies their enslavement changed their nature forever and bears little significant effect on the enslaver.

While the definition of “master” technically includes forcibly enslaving other people, all the other accepted definitions of the word carry positive connotations. I’m done attributing even remotely positive attributes to people who enslaved other human beings or passively sustained systems that permitted the enslavement of other human beings.

The focus shifts, the onus shifts, and the shame of slavery shifts from the enslaved to the enslavers.

When I am making my edits, “John’s slave” becomes “a person enslaved by John.” “John owned Sally” becomes “John enslaved Sally.” While it is easy for me to evoke the horror of the life of an enslaved person because I can easily see myself in the Black and Brown bodies reflected, that isn’t true for everyone.

When I talk to people about transatlantic slavery and frame the narrative this way, they don’t just passively accept the condition of slavery as historical reality or an attribute of the enslaved person. They reflect on the horrific actions that were allowed to persist for several hundred years. The focus shifts, the onus shifts, and the shame of slavery shifts from the enslaved to the enslavers. It results in more compassion for the plight of the enslaved victims.

The word “owner” is just as problematic. Ownership is accepted as a legally protected condition and generally does not reflect on the nature of the person alleged to have ownership. The words “owner” and “ownership” imply that is even possible to “own” another person—which, of course, it is not.

Consider this sentence: “George Washington owned slaves at Mount Vernon.” It doesn’t agitate our sense of morality as much as the sentence “George Washington enslaved people at Mount Vernon,” does it? To most people, it seems much worse to say, read, or hear that someone “enslaved” other people than that they “owned” other people.

That’s partially because ownership is one of the primary rights and most cherished ideas in the American system—and most Western systems—of government. Many places give people broad swaths of freedoms when it comes to how they choose to defend their property—in some states, even allowing for death. Students take an entire semester of classes about it in law school. The concept of ownership is so fundamental that it’s embodied in our Fifth Amendment. You cannot be deprived of your property in this country without due process of the law. Property rights are foundational to our entire sociopolitical system. When you designate something as atrocious as enslavement as “ownership,” you are subconsciously elevating it to a socially respectable position that it does not deserve.

Conversely, and perhaps not ironically, the same phrase in the Fifth Amendment of our Constitution bolstered the earlier enshrined legal denial of personhood to Black people through the “three-fifths compromise” in Article 1. Remember that is the same sentence within the Fifth Amendment, which also grants a right to life and liberty, a benefit obviously not extended to enslaved people.

When we refer to slavery in terms of “slaves” and “owners,” we strengthen a belief that has existed since the earliest days of the republic that Black people are not human beings but something less, usually property but sometimes animals, too. While this country thankfully has since settled the matter in law (see: 14th Amendment), there should be no question in our thoughts, words, and deeds that this proposition has been and must be rejected. That’s why I do this.

My ancestors were not slaves. They were people who were forcibly enslaved.

What so-called slave owners really “owned” was the system of slavery. We should focus on that. When we refer to enslaved people as “slaves,” we disembodied the very real and pedestrian actions that actively promoted and passively permitted the system of transatlantic slavery to flourish for hundreds of years. Rather than asking how much cotton or sugar an enslaved person was forced to pick, we should ask why a system as brutal as slavery could coexist within a nation so married to ideals of liberty.

When we use language to casually make enslavement a personal attribute or identity of the enslaved—as opposed to a condition forced upon them—we withhold dignity from the enslaved and limit them to their enslavement. When we refer to them as “slaves” instead of people, we assign this as a primary attribute of their being so significant that it overshadows every other aspect of their personhood. Referring to someone as an “enslaved American” or an “enslaved person” seems to garner more empathy than referring to them as a slave. Doing so consciously assigns unquestionable personhood to them.

Many of us recognize that enslaved people in the Americas and the Caribbean were far more than “just” slaves. Some were artists and creatives, like Drake the Potter. Some were abolitionists, like Harriet Tubman. They were men, women, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, aunts, and uncles. They were all the things that classify us as human beings. And when the wretched condition of their enslavement could not be voiced in other terms, they were musicians and singers. We owe the blues and spirituals to their suffering. We thank them for their unpaid contributions to the world.

My ancestors were not slaves. They were people who were forcibly enslaved. I categorically reject any description referring to their enslavement that does not maintain focus on the forced sociopolitical position thrust upon them and the onus for such systems, and whether your ancestors were enslaved or not, you should, too.

We can dignify and bolster the denied personhood of enslaved people by ceasing and desisting from referring to them in these old passive ways that forever tie them to their servitude and subtly absolve enslavers of their inhumanity.

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