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## Use of Language

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### Why language matters

Many words associated with the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade are considered offensive or dismissive, often because they objectify the people who were enslaved or disregard the African perspectives of the history. Language and words that give dignity to the people oppressed are important. They can also be discussed and analysed as part of the learning experience.

Review the terms in this section as an introduction to good practice when teaching transatlantic slavery. Also see the Glossary for full definitions of terms and their meanings.

### African countries rather than Africa

Africa is often described as if it is a single, homogeneous country rather than a continent of great contrasts. There was also a very different Islamic slave trade operating from East Africa. Being specific in discussing West Africa when referring to the transatlantic slave trade and, where possible specifying countries and states such as Benin, Ghana etc. will help clarify the aspects of the history being addressed.

### Enslaved rather than slave

Using the terms ‘captives’, and ‘enslaved African people, men, women, and children’, rather than ‘slave’ helps to reiterate the fact that people were being treated like property. These words avoid the objectification of African people, help humanize the history and avoid a tendency for it to become abstract.

### Chattel slavery rather than slavery

The term ‘chattel slavery’ can be useful to described the fact that African people trafficked during the transatlantic slave trade were treated as property, with no possessions and no rights as a means to differentiate the transatlantic slave trade from other forms of slavery and serfdom.

Freedom fighter rather than rebel

The term ‘rebel’ can have negative overtones, whereas ‘freedom fighter’ is more positive and respectful. Using ‘resistance’ and ‘rebellion’ also helps to reinforce the fact that the enslaved were active and capable.

### History rather than story

The word ‘story’ can trivialize the importance of this history and raise questions about the reliability of the evidence. Using ‘history’ helps to reinforce the facts and add gravitas to the narrative. However, ‘story’ can be useful when discussing personal narrative accounts. Maafa rather than Holocaust

The term ‘holocaust’ is sometimes used when discussing the transatlantic slave trade, to draw comparisons with the murder of millions of

Jewish men, women and children by the Nazis during the Second World War, and to underline the extreme brutality and mass annihilation of both peoples. Maafa is the contemporary term used to describe the enslavement of African people in the 1700s and 1800s, and makes the distinction between these brutal histories.

## **Racial terms**

The words 'negro' and 'negress' will appear in many historical documents and need to be understood as specific to the historical period. The term 'Black' has been used to define people of African descent in the Emancipation and Legacy sections of this website and 'White' to describe Europeans.

Transatlantic slave trade rather than the slave trade

There have been slave trades throughout the course of human history and they still exist today. When referring to the forced trafficking of African people across the Atlantic, being specific in describing it as the transatlantic slave trade will reinforce the distinctions between this and other periods in history.

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