TEACHING TRANSATLANTIC SLAVERY AND ANTISLAVERY SENTIMENT
TEACHER TOOL 2

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For four centuries, European traders trafficked an estimated 12 million Africans to Britain and the Americas. They were forcibly transported across what is known as the Middle Passage, chained and crammed together on ships, to the West Indies and to the Americas. You can read the accounts of survivors like Olaudah Equiano, who described the conditions aboard such ships as "intolerably loathsome," with the horrific sounds and smells of the living and the dying. Equiano wrote a narrative of his experiences in 1789 available here: https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano1/equiano1.html.

Britain played a leading role in the slave trade and transatlantic slavery: Its wealth as a nation, its cities, its buildings, and its landscape are forever shaped by the slave trade. Indeed, Britain was built on the backs of enslaved labor.

By the end of the 18th century, slavery had become entrenched in North America and the West Indies. In 1807, the British government abolished the slave trade and then outlawed slavery in the British Empire by the end of the 1830s. However, to enact this, the government laid out a huge compensation plan to enslavers, £20 million, meaning that the enslavers were paid money for the loss of their so-called property, the enslaved men, women and children on their plantations. The enslaved themselves got nothing. The nation patted itself on the back for abolition and celebrated white abolitionists like William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson for their activism while ignoring the heroic efforts of Black abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho and Mary Prince. That's something Britain still does today – it celebrates abolition without acknowledging its role in slavery, colonialism and murder.

However, the popular image of Britain bowing out from the slave trade is distorted – in some parts of the Empire, slavery continued to exist, and in others, the nation took a large percentage of its profits. Over five million were enslaved in India in the 1840s, and it wasn't until 1928 that an Act of Parliament ended slavery in the Gold Coast of Africa. Merchants and ship manufacturers traded in slave-grown goods and built ships to sell or carry enslaved people. By 1849, it was believed Britain funded the majority of the slave trade to Brazil and Cuba, and in 1860, slave ships were still being made and equipped in Liverpool.

Throughout the 19th century, numerous African Americans and survivors of U.S. slavery travelled thousands of miles across England, Ireland, Scotland and even parts of rural Wales to inform the transatlantic public about slavery. They lectured in large cities to small fishing villages, speaking in town halls, churches, chapels, the private parlor rooms of wealthy patrons, schoolrooms, and even open spaces.

Many African Americans sought a temporary reprieve from American soil, others permanent; some raised money to free themselves or enslaved family members, and others sought work with varying degrees of success. Between the 1830s and early 1900s, Black women and men wrote and published narratives, stayed with influential reformers, and appealed to different classes, races, and genders, with no discrimination against profession, religion, or age. Whatever their reasons for visiting, Black abolitionists exhibited whips and chains, sometimes together with

their scars; read runaway slave advertisements from Southern newspapers; created visual panoramas, and used fiery rhetoric to tell their stories.

During this period, millions of British and Irish people witnessed formerly enslaved people lecture. They read about their lives through slave narratives or pamphlets, watched antislavery panoramas unfold, purchased daguerreotypes (an early form of photography) and raised money to free enslaved individuals and their families. Activists inspired poetry, songs, woodcuts, pamphlets, children's literature, wax models, religious remonstrances, along with hundreds of editorials and letters to the press.

Why Did African Americans Visit the United Kingdom?

1. To publish their books, called slave narratives, which became a central part of the transatlantic antislavery movement. The literary and commercial success of these narratives has largely been forgotten, but in numerous cases, authors like Frederick Douglass, Moses Roper and Josiah Henson outsold their famous Victorian contemporaries (in terms of initial sales). For example, Douglass sold 13,000 between 1845-1847, and Moses Roper sold 38,000 copies from 1838-1848. Josiah Henson sold 250,000 copies of his narrative from 1876-1878. Lewis Carroll (author of Alice in Wonderland) published 13,000 copies of between 1865-1868. In 1897, Bram Stoker's Dracula published 3,000 copies and was almost considered a failure.

2. African Americans encouraged Britons to sign petitions, practice non-fellowship with enslavers in the South and slaveholding churches.

3. They raised money for the legal purchase of themselves or family members. In the eyes of U.S. law, they were still enslaved if they had fled: Once the money was raised, they entered into a negotiation with their former enslavers to receive a "bill of freedom."

4. To raise money for specific anti-slavery societies or causes (for example, the American Anti-slavery Society and the Canadian Anti-slavery Society).

5. To encourage boycotts of slave-produced goods like cotton and rice. James Watkins argued that if the audience "could hear the groans of the slaves, and witness for a moment their sufferings" they would "never again touch Savannah rice – you would feel you were eating the blood and bones of the negroes." Men like Watkins urged British and Irish audiences to be more thoughtful and aware of the origins of products they regularly bought and consumed.

6. To live and work in the British Isles. William and Ellen Craft lived in Britain and raised their children there for nearly two decades; James Johnson lived there permanently; John Brown and James Watkins tried to find work in the mining and hospitality industries.

But primarily, African Americans came to Britain and Ireland to share their testimony about slavery, racism and white supremacy.

Most African Americans were traveling to Britain and Ireland in the 1840s-1860s until slavery was legally abolished in 1865, but many came after, as the legacies of slavery still persisted through racism, segregation and lynching, which of course we can see today.

What Did African Americans Do in Their Lectures?

1. They exhibited whips, chains and other instruments of torture.

2. They sold their slave narratives at the end of meetings.
3. Some exhibited paintings about slavery.
4. Others read their own poetry or sang songs.
5. Some African Americans showed the scars on their bodies to illustrate the torture they had experienced.
6. They talked about their stories of escape, the brutality of slavery, the separation of husband and wife, mother and child on the auction block, the hypocrisy of American independence, boycotting slave-produced goods, the history of the abolitionist movement, the racism they experienced both in the U.S. and in Britain and Ireland, and Black heroic figures like Madison Washington, Toussaint L'Ouverture and Margaret Garner (the latter escaped with her children and when cornered by slave-catchers, slit the throat of her daughter so she would not have to live in slavery).

And they were speaking to all audiences too – working class, middle class or upper class, women, men, and children. Some meetings were specifically organized for working class groups. British and Irish people flocked to hear these speakers due to a variety of motivations. They may have had political reasons, sympathies with the antislavery cause, racial curiosity, or a desire to hear witnesses of slavery speak for themselves.

Some Questions for students about the transatlantic antislavery movement

- ➢ What does the transatlantic anti-slavery movement mean?
- ➢ When and why were African-American abolitionists coming to Britain and Ireland?
- ➢ How did African Americans convince their audiences about the brutality of slavery/that their testimonies were worth listening to?
- ➢ Who were African Americans speaking to?
- ➢ Why would primarily white audiences listen to Black abolitionists speak