



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Ten More Film and the History of Slavery

SPEAKER 1
(singing)

HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

I'm Hasan Kwame Jeffries, and this is a bonus episode of *Teaching Hard History, American Slavery*. This special series is 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 our previous episode we spoke with Ron Briley about using film to teach slavery in the classroom.

RON BRILEY

Students do notice the connections between the two films, and many times leads us into discussion of how the memory of slavery is molded in the American mind.

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In this bonus episode, Ron provides a great list of additional films and documentaries that you can use with your students. I'll see you on the other side. Enjoy.

RON BRILEY

Previously, we discussed teaching American slavery using films such as *Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Amistad* and *Glory* to be incorporated into the history classroom to teach about American slavery. Today, I'd like to talk about additional films one might bring into the classroom to teach slavery.

There are a number of choices, both documentary and feature films. So, I would like to briefly talk about a few of these films that teachers might consider using. First maybe we should look at documentaries. It's very important for teachers to realize that documentaries are not simply facts. They are representations of facts and that documentaries have a point of view which they're trying to drive home. So, students need to be very careful when presented with documentaries and ask some of the same questions of documentaries that they ask of feature films. So, I think that's very important that students must realize that documentaries are also subjective and not simply objective.

I think there have been a couple of excellent ones produced by PBS that we might talk about for just a minute. One of those is the Ken Burns *Civil War* series from 1993. Now most of that series deals with Civil War battles and it's very well done. I think for our purposes, we might want to consider the first episode which focuses on slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War. This is a causation that is widely accepted by American historians, however, again in the general culture this is not really the case. When you often ask Americans about the cause of the Civil War, you'll have discussions of economics, and

especially of state's rights. I think this particular episode is very good in the classroom for making a strong case to students that indeed slavery is first and foremost in the causation of the Civil War.

Something I've also done in the classroom sometimes is used some of the secessionist documents and look at the wording of those, and again you will see how prominent a role slavery plays in this, and reinforces the case made by Burns. Although it is interesting this remains a very hot subject for some students and sure to provoke some discussion in the classroom. But again, I think this first episode of Burns' is really excellent for looking at the central role played by slavery in causing the Civil War. We'd really encourage teachers to use it in the classroom.

Another PBS production, which is less well known is from 2005, entitled *Slavery and the Making of America*. It's a four-part documentary by a film maker Dante Joseph James, and the series uses, again, a lot of documentary techniques but also uses reenactments of various episodes in the history of slavery, and I think these reenactments tend to make this series more popular with students.

Especially of interest is episode one, "The Downward Spiral," which does a good job developing the origins of American slavery, as well as slave resistance. I think this particular episode is especially good for looking at the role of Bacon's Rebellion in which you had poor whites and blacks coming together to oppose the aristocracy in colonial Virginia and how efforts were made with slave codes to separate poor blacks and whites.

I think this is really a crucial issue to be discussed and certainly has repercussions down to the present that can be discussed and addressed in the classroom. I've also found it useful to use episode three, "Seeds of Destruction," which is excellent on abolitionism, a very important topic to get into the classroom, in terms of reform movements, encouraging student activism, and of course, this episode also deals with the Civil War.

I think this particular documentary is also good because of the supplementary materials available, for example, WPA [Works Project Administration] slave interviews are available on the website and there's a very strong companion volume by James Oliver Horton and Louis E. Horton. This did not do as well as the Burns documentary in terms of ratings, but I think in terms of the classroom, it's a very useful teaching tool in terms of using documentaries.

Other films which teachers might consider using in the classroom, one of course is the 1977 television series, *Roots*. This is very long one, one could really not bring in the whole series, and in some ways it is dated, and the book on which it is based by Alex Haley does indeed have some problems, as far as historical accuracy, nevertheless, *Roots* is a very important source, because this television series in 1977, which looked at slavery from a black perspective, addressed largely to a white audience, had incredible ratings, and really did begin to change the perception of some Americans about slavery. I think looking at the history of Kunta Kinte and his family is very useful.

I think that something else comes out in the television series and that is the perspective of a black female slave, and here you have to consider the story of his daughter, Kizzy Reynolds in the series. I think that is a topic which is often rather ignored and that is black women in slavery. Enslaved black women. I think

that's very important that students take a look at.

Here, you might also look at the 1998 film, *Beloved*, which was based on the 1987 novel by Toni Morrison starring Oprah Winfrey and directed by Jonathan Demme. Again, this is a good source because you're looking at the degree of sexual exploitation within American slavery, a topic that many would wish to ignore, but I think in terms of understanding slavery, I think the exploitation of black women by white masters as Winthrop Jordan talked about in his book, *White Over Black*, is something that needs to be discussed.

I would encourage teachers to think about using *Beloved* in the classroom.

Another film that you might use is another Seven Spielberg film. We've talked before about *Amistad*, but also one must look at his *Abraham Lincoln* from 2012. A great film, a simply marvelous performance by Daniel Day-Lewis in the title role for which he won an Oscar. But again, there is some problems with this production. The film concentrates upon how Lincoln sought to manage and manipulate Congress to obtain ratification of the 13th amendment and end slavery. The film is very strong on that topic.

However, there's very little in the way of black agency in the film, and in fact, there are not very many black people in the film. This is primarily a film about whites and their efforts to end slavery. So, I think the film is very good, but I think there are also some limitations the film and if one uses *Lincoln*, one has to look at some of the broader issues as well and perhaps again think of *Glory* and the role of black agency with the 54th Massachusetts regiment.

Let's also, perhaps, look at some more recent films dealing with slavery. One of those is *12 years of Slave*, in 2013. Directed by British director Steve McQueen, not to be confused with the American actor, and the film won best picture. It's based upon the 1853 slave narrative by Solomon Northup who was a free black in the north who was kidnapped in the north and taken into the south and spent 12 years as a slave before being freed and writing this powerful memoir, which also students might read for use in the classroom.

The film itself has a great deal of violence, it has a great deal of sexuality. I'm sure that some school districts would have trouble with using the film in the classroom, but slavery was a brutal institution, and it's hard to talk about slavery without including some of that brutality. So thus, I think the film is a very strong one.

Less graphic, and if you really can't use *12 Years of Slave* in the classroom, you might look at the 1984 PBS production *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, in which a film historian Robert Brent Toplin plays a key role in producing, and that film raises many of the same themes but in a less graphic fashion in terms of sexuality and brutality. That would be a possibility to use as well. *12 Years of Slave* did very well with the Oscars but not as well with the box office.

Another film that's worth looking at and considering for the classroom but very controversial is the 2016 version, *Birth of a Nation*. This particular film concentrates on the 1831 slave revolt in Virginia led by Nat Turner in which 60 whites perished and hundreds of enslaved people were murdered in retaliation, the vast majority of them having nothing whatsoever to do with the revolt.

This again is a very graphic film which depicts the brutality of slavery and also the brutality of a revolt against that institution. However, this film failed again at the box office. It had been a sensation at the Sundance Film Festival. Many people anticipated this film would do quite well at the box office, but one of the things that happened had to do with the film's director, Nate Parker, and actually star as well, and that dealt with allegations of sexual misconduct by Parker, an accusation of assault from earlier in his career, in which the woman who made the accusations ended up committing suicide. When this came to light, there was much less support for Parker's film. Nevertheless, I think the film and some clips from it still could be useful in the classroom. Also, there's several good books on Nat Turner that one might bring into the classroom here as well including the book by Steven Oates entitled *The Fires of Jubilee, Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*.

Another recent film from 2016 as well is entitled *The Free State of Jones*. This is another film which did not do well at the box office, at all. Big name cast, starring Matthew McConaughey, directed by Gary Ross, and based on a very interesting true story which is not well known, and concerns poor southern whites in Mississippi led by a man named Newton Knight played by McConaughey who rebelled against the Confederacy and Southern Planters. Knight and his followers were poor southern whites who did not own slaves. They resented very much Southern Confederate conscription laws which allowed exemptions for slave owners, and therefore they rebelled against being drafted and becoming cannon fodder in the war. In fact, ended up with a secessionist free state of Jones.

The film also is strong in that it depicts the reconstruction era in a very positive fashion. It does show Jones and Newton Knight in a positive way, a positive fashion, providing a biracial coalition, and in fact, Knight also remarried a black woman and had a biracial family. It's a very interesting film, yet it did not do well at the box office at all. Here, I think it raises the question of do people want to see films about American slavery? It's a difficult topic, it's a controversial topic, many people would rather not talk about it. Thus, I think all the more important about including it in the classroom.

So certainly, you get a lot of challenges teaching film, especially about American slavery, but I think it's interesting to look in conclusion at the current popularity of the film, *Black Panther*, based upon a comic book hero. I think that this film gives you an alternative vision of what we're looking at often in the films about American slavery. What if you had not had the transatlantic slave trade? What if you had not had European Colonialism in Africa? What might have developed? When you see the African nation in *Black Panther* with all its advancements and possibilities, you see almost a counterfactual alternative history presented, and I think in many ways in teaching about American slavery, it would be good to bring in some of the themes from *Black Panther* that probably the majority of your students would have seen in the theater. I think bring that in and I think that could be a very useful contribution.

So, what I've tried to do here is give an overview of some other films one might bring into the history classroom. Again, a very challenging topic. Many of these films are difficult, but the topic of slavery is difficult and we must not ignore it. We must not hide behind Confederate statues and assume that slavery never existed. I think as a society we have to confront slavery and its legacy in our land. Therefore, I think these films, incorporating them into the classroom will help provide that. It's a challenge, but a challenge well worth accepting and one that I have found quite rewarding.

HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

Ron Briley is a film historian who recently retired from Sandia Preparatory School in Albuquerque, New Mexico after teaching history for 37 years. He was also an adjunct professor of history at the University of New Mexico, Valencia campus for 20 years. Mr. Briley is the author of five books and numerous articles on the intersection of history, politics, and film. *Teaching Hard History* is a podcast from Teaching Tolerance, with special thanks to the University of Wisconsin Press. They're the publishers of a valuable collection of essays called *Understanding and Teaching American Slavery*. In each episode, we feature a different scholar to talk about material from a chapter they authored in that collection. We've also adapted their recommendations into a set of teaching materials which are available at tolerance.org.

These materials include over 100 primary sources, sample units, and a detailed framework for teaching about 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 those online at tolerance.org.

Thanks to Mr. Briley for sharing his insights with us. This podcast was produced by Shay Shackelford with production assistance from Tori Marlan and Megan Kamerick at KUNM Public Radio. Our theme song is "Kerr's Negro Jig" by the Carolina Chocolate Drops, who graciously let us use it for this series. Additional music is by Chris Zabriskie. If you like what we're doing, please let your friends and colleagues know and take a minute to review us in iTunes. 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*.

