Problematic Language and Difficult History

Problematic Language

Types of Problematic Language:

- Racist and dehumanizing language: slurs and derogatory terms.
- Caricatures and stereotypes.
- Paternalistic and colonial framing.
- Gender bias
- Anachronistic Bigotry

Scholarly resources for dealing with problematic language in historical documents

A compilation of statements from libraries and archives on harmful or offensive language in description and bias in cataloging. This list includes statements about problematic language in both description and resources themselves, as statements about resources will frequently discuss the description of those resources.

1. Provide students with the website link: https://cataloginglab.org/list-of-statements-on-bias-in-library-and-archives-description/
2. Ask the students to open the list and then select a site to explore.
3. Ask the students to explain how their resource organization is choosing to handle problematic language.
4. The students will learn different strategies by looking at varied examples.
5. Consider using the chalk/white board or large sticky notes to create a list of class "norms' that can be referenced in talking about problematic language.

Teacher Notes

When this lesson was piloted here is a list we came up with:

This class has a lot of different topics, some uncomfortable, some comfortable and is largely discussion based. On the first day, we will collectively create some class norms. For example, in order for you to be successful you will need to complete the reading before coming to class. We will make a list of norms, and they will appear here.

Norms:

1. Read before coming to class.
2. Participate in class and online discussion in a meaningful way.
3. Please be on time. Class will start on time.
4. No shouting or yelling.
5. Consider your tone when speaking about controversial topics. Being passionate about something is great.
6. Take ideas at face value and assume good intentions by the speaker.

7. In light of #6, bring your best self to the class.
8. Be an active listener rather than simply thinking of what you will say next.
9. If you are someone who is quick to speak up, allow others to speak first too.
10. Normalize establishment of boundaries and be willing to address triggers.
11. We will talk about problematic language and stereotypes but will not perpetuate them.
    a. We will not say the N-word (or the spelled-out slur) for example, we will say N-slur because that is more descriptive.
    b. Where the books use the term Blacks, we will always use the word Black as an adjective with a noun when it refers to people, never as a noun. For example, Black community, Black people, enslaved people.
    c. We will emphasize the personhood rather than using dehumanizing language.
12. Be kind (it's free)!

A Note About Difficult History

The history of the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 includes difficult subjects.

Students will encounter evidence of:

- racial segregation and discrimination;
- forced or coerced labor;
- unequal disaster relief;
- restricted mobility;
- exploitation and economic dependence;
- violence and intimidation;
- unequal political power;
- language and attitudes that are offensive today.

These topics are not included to sensationalize the past. They are necessary to understand how the flood affected people differently and why the disaster became more than a hydrologic event. The purpose of this book is to investigate these histories carefully, respectfully, and honestly.

Race and Inequality. The 1927 flood occurred within the racial hierarchy of the Jim Crow South. Black communities were essential to the agricultural and economic systems of the Mississippi Delta, but they often had far less political power, access to resources, freedom of movement, and influence over disaster decisions. This means that race is not a separate topic added to the flood story. It is part of the flood story.

Students will examine how race interacted with:

- land ownership
- labor
- credit
- transportation
- evacuation
- relief
- housing
- political authority

- migration

The goal is not to assume that every person experienced the flood in the same way.

It is to ask: How did existing inequalities shape who was vulnerable, who had choices, and who had power during and after the disaster?

Forced Labor and Coercion. Some of the most difficult evidence in this book concerns labor. During the flood and in the flood-control construction that followed, Black workers sometimes experienced pressure, threats, restricted movement, unequal wages, debt, or other conditions that limited their ability to freely choose whether and where to work.

Students should distinguish among:

voluntary labor — work freely chosen;

required labor — work expected as part of an institutional or emergency system;

coerced labor — work performed because of pressure, threats, punishment, confinement, or a lack of meaningful choice;

peonage or debt bondage — systems in which debt or obligation is used to keep a person working and limit the ability to leave.

These terms should be used carefully since not every labor camp was identical so not every worker had the same experience. The evidence may be stronger in some places than in others. Students should avoid making claims broader than the sources support.

Historical Language. Primary sources often preserve the language of their time. Some documents, newspapers, songs, government reports, advertisements, and personal correspondence may contain terms that are now recognized as racist, demeaning, or otherwise offensive. When such language appears, it should be treated as historical evidence.

Students should ask:

- Who used the language?
- Who was being described?
- What does the wording reveal about attitudes, institutions, and power?
- Was the term commonly used at the time, and by whom?
- How might the people being described have referred to themselves?

Historical language should not be repeated casually or for dramatic effect. When possible, this book will paraphrase offensive language rather than reproduce it unnecessarily. If an original term is important to interpreting a source, it may be identified in context and discussed explicitly. The purpose is to understand the historical evidence, not to normalize harmful language.

People Are More Than Their Suffering. Black residents of the Mississippi Delta should not appear in this history only as victims. They were farmers, laborers, parents, musicians, business owners, religious leaders, organizers, migrants, investigators, journalists, and members of

communities with their own knowledge, traditions, relationships, strategies, and goals. Similarly, disaster survivors should not be defined only by what happened to them. When studying inequality, it is important to examine both: the structures that constrained people and the choices, strategies, creativity, resistance, and resilience people demonstrated within those structures. A respectful history recognizes both.

Avoid the Simple Hero-and-Villain Story. Historical actors rarely fit perfectly into categories of "good" and "bad." A person may oppose one form of racial injustice while participating in or benefiting from another unequal system. A relief organization may save lives while also operating within discriminatory institutions. An engineering project may protect thousands of people while creating new ecological or social risks. A government official may believe a policy is necessary while people affected by that policy experience it very differently. This complexity does not mean that all actions were equally ethical or that responsibility disappears.

It means students should evaluate:

- What did people do?
- What choices did they have?
- Who benefited?
- Who was harmed?
- What evidence supports our conclusions?

Respectful Inquiry. Students may disagree about how to interpret historical evidence. That disagreement can be productive.

Respectful inquiry means:

- criticize ideas and interpretations rather than classmates;
- support claims with evidence;
- listen when another source or perspective complicates your argument;
- avoid assumptions about classmates' identities or experiences;
- do not ask classmates to speak for an entire racial, cultural, or social group;
- use historically and academically appropriate terminology;
- remain willing to revise your interpretation when new evidence appears.

A strong discussion is not one in which everyone agrees. It is one in which disagreements become more careful, informed, and evidence based.

Do Not Look Away, but Do Not Sensationalize. Some historical events are uncomfortable to study. That discomfort can be useful when it leads to better questions. But the goal is never to make suffering into spectacle. Sources involving violence, coercion, discrimination, or deprivation should be used only when they contribute meaningfully to understanding the historical question. Graphic detail is rarely necessary to understand how power operated.

The most important questions are often:

- What system allowed this to happen?
- Who had the authority to intervene?
- Who documented the problem?

- Who was believed?
- Did exposure produce change?

Evidence Before Assumption. Students should not begin with the assumption that every official was dishonest, every landowner acted the same way, every relief camp operated identically, or every Black flood survivor had the same experience. They should also not assume that official records provide the whole story.

Instead, compare:

- government records
- Black newspapers
- NAACP investigations
- letters
- photographs
- oral histories
- music
- worker testimony
- maps and data

The goal is to build conclusions through corroboration.

Language for Careful Historical Claims

When the evidence is incomplete, students can use language such as:

- The evidence suggests...
- Several sources indicate...
- This source describes...
- These accounts are consistent with...
- Conditions appear to have varied by location...
- We cannot determine from this source alone...
- The available evidence does not support a broader conclusion...

Careful language is not evasive. It shows respect for both the evidence and the people whose lives are being studied.

The Goal. Studying difficult history should help us understand how environmental disasters interact with existing social systems. The flood did not arrive in an empty landscape. It entered communities already shaped by race, wealth, labor, land ownership, politics, and unequal access to power.

Investigating those relationships allows us to ask larger questions that remain important today:

- Who is most vulnerable when disaster occurs?
- Who has the ability to leave?
- Who controls relief and recovery?
- Whose experiences become part of the historical record?

- What responsibilities do institutions have when existing inequalities shape disaster outcomes?

Approach these questions with curiosity, evidence, care, and respect. Difficult history deserves nothing less.