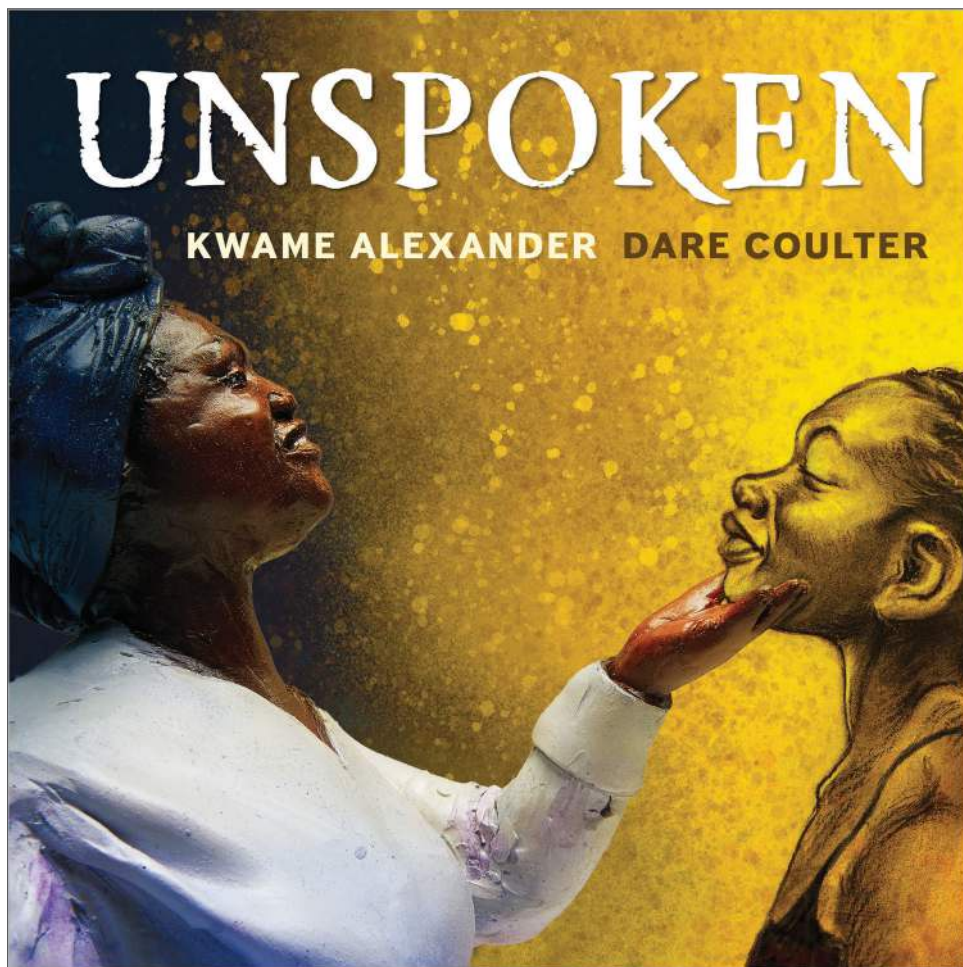


Teaching Notes for **UNSPOKEN**

By Kwame Alexander & Dare Coulter

Published by Andersen Press



These notes have been written by the teachers at the [CLPE](#) to provide schools with ideas to develop and deepen comprehension around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use quality picturebooks to enhance critical thinking and develop creative approaches in art and writing. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on both text and illustration, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.

N.B. The activities suggested are planned with children at Upper Primary and Secondary aged pupils in mind. If you are using this sequence of activities with children younger than this, you will need to carefully consider and modify the content to suit their age and emotional maturity.

Please read the below guidance, if engaging in wider work around this book:

Before You Start:

Before reading this book with children, teachers would benefit from watching both author and illustrator talking about their motivations and thinking behind the creation of UNSPOKEN, as well as hearing how Kwame Alexander reads his text aloud to gain a sense of his intent and the fullest meaning behind the words in this moving and powerful picturebook:

- [Kwame Alexander talking about and reading UNSPOKEN](#)
- [Dare Coulter talking about her artwork and motivations and the process behind UNSPOKEN](#)

This book has been written to support parents, teachers, and anyone else, to talk about and teach slavery as a topic to children. It is important when teaching children about slavery respectfully and sensitively to follow some basic guidelines, such as those in [this guide](#) written for the Historical Association by Michaela Alfred-Kamala. Key points are summarised below but it would be useful for teachers to read the full guide before engaging in the book and its themes with a class:

- **The European and transatlantic slave trade is integral to everyone's history and should be taught as part of the *whole* history curriculum;** integral to the National Curriculum study of the Tudor or Victorian era, for example, and not reserved for Black History Month. A key motivation behind this book is that it not be an 'unspoken' part of history and that – whilst a difficult and upsetting topic to introduce to children – breaking the silence will support everyone to understand how to behave with humanity and pride, moving forward.
- **Focus on the dignity, resistance, resilience and strength of enslaved people in managing and overcoming challenge.** Avoid images, film footage or documentaries that don't centralise this understanding for children. Always watch them with this critical lens before sharing with children.
- **Ensure that portrayals of African life and people are accurate and specific and relatable** to the children's own lives and freedoms.
- **Black history does not start with slavery.** The slave trade followed centuries of rich and vibrant history in Africa which should be honoured and highlighted. When the Portuguese first explored the West African coastline in the 1400s, the cultures of African societies were highly evolved and had been so for centuries. You might include study of West African civilizations and peoples, such as the Volta Kingdoms and Asante Empire, the Yoruba States, Benin Dynasty, and the Kingdom of Kongo, in particular exploring the knowledge of textile production, weaving and dying, metallurgy and metalwork, carving, basket making, potting skills, architecture and agriculture techniques; all of which were relied upon to sustain these societies and which were exploited for enormous gain in Europe and the Americas.

- **Ensure that attention is paid to the contribution made by Black people to UK society**, as well as that in Europe and America, for example.
- **Do not engage in drama activities which may create scenarios in which the real experience of slaves is belittled.** Instead engage in plenty of debate and discussion in which to develop understanding and empathy.

Visual sources are useful to support children's growing historical understanding and critical enquiry. Source a range of images that speak to the resistance, culture and pride of Black people, such as the [Gullah Geechee people](#) as well as those of inspiring historical figures like [Sojourner Truth](#) and [Robert Smalls](#), featured in this book. The book starts by portraying positive images of people enjoying life in their home in West Africa

It would be useful to pin up a large world map on which to place the scenes in the book – in West Africa, the Atlantic slave trade route and the African diaspora across America and Europe, for example. You may also want to source contemporary maps of the world.

You may also want to create a timeline of the European and transatlantic slave trade between the 15th and 19th centuries to provide children with a sense of the scale of this period in history but also how the historical eras studied as part of the National Curriculum are connected; how British royalty, industry and everyday people benefitted from the slave trade as well as how Black people contributed to British society and the economy.

In order to engage fully with the layers of meaning and the details within the rich illustrations, it is advisable to ensure that you have access to a visualiser or similar device to enable you to share images from the text with the pupils on a large scale.

You might also want to collect together a range of art materials that will allow the children to engage in the activities exploring the illustration and artwork, and the additional meaning they add, for example: cartridge paper, sketching pencils 2B–4B, charcoal, acrylic paints and a variety of brushes as well as ceramic or polymer clay.

Reading the Book:

Begin by exploring this book as an object, first by looking at the image on the front cover without yet revealing the title, author or illustrator. Invite the children's overall impressions of this cover. *What emotions or feeling does it evoke in you? What do you think these people are thinking or feeling and what tells you this? Which words come to mind when looking at this image? Why?*

Now begin to read the image more closely, layering your prompts to support the children's thinking:

- Reflect on first impressions. What do you notice about these two people? How would you describe them and their relationship? Does anything puzzle you about you about this image?
- Draw attention to the way in which the woman is lifting the child's face with her own face uplifted and what this might signify. Explore the steady gaze of the woman on the child and

how the child smiles as she allows her chin to be tilted.

- Consider the materials the artist has used to depict the figures. Why do you think the illustrator has created the older figure as a clay sculpture and the child as a charcoal drawing? Which do you prefer and why? What does each technique bring to our understanding of each figure? Draw attention to the clothing and what this might tell us about each of the figures and their role in this book.
- Now look at how the figures are placed on the page and the sparing background compared to the detail rendered in the figures. Consider the contrast that has been created, exploring how the figures have each been spot lit. *To where is your eye first drawn and where is it then encourage to look? What might this signify and how could it relate to what we are going to read in this book?* Reflect further on what the golden colour palette and the splattering technique adds to our understanding; perhaps a sense of pride being conveyed by the figures; maybe something magical rising from them. *What does this suggest?*

Now reveal the title and the author and illustrator. *What do you think **UNSPOKEN** means? How might it connect to this image and our interpretation?* If the children are familiar with Kwame Alexander, they might make the connection with his award-winning picturebook, [***THE UNDEFEATED***](#), illustrated by Kadir Nelson which remembers with pride, famous and overlooked figures in American history. *In this case, what might be **UNSPOKEN**? What might Kwame Alexander want us to talk about?*

Turn to the back cover, taking the time to explore the illustration. Give the children time and space to share their personal connections to this image and their understanding of what **Black Lives Matter** means, what the children are doing and why. Some children may have seen or created signs like this themselves during the protests of 2020, in response to George Floyd's murder by US police officers. Others may know it originated in 2013 after the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer. Some may believe and have heard the counter-argument that *all* lives matter. Take the time to discuss experiences, mediating and unpacking ideas about why it is 'Black Lives Matter' rather than 'All', providing the children with background to the slogan's origin; what it aims to achieve in challenging the notion of white supremacy and in inequality; and what it represents in terms of Black empowerment and agency in achieving this with dignity, knowledge and respect.

Now read aloud the blurb. Invite the children's responses, asking them to consider why they think Kwame Alexander would feel compelled to **tell the story that's almost impossible to recount**. *Why does he believe it is important?* Make a note of connections children are making between his words and their understanding of slavery as well as anything unfamiliar to the children in their understanding of slavery to explore further, such as 'copper dreams'. Teachers may find it useful to read more widely about how [copper](#) was used as the currency by European transatlantic slave traders to support the children's discussions around how people's lives were of so little value to other people that they could have been stolen, then bought and sold for some metal. As the book unfolds, the children can return to their early knowledge base and reflect on what more they are learning and why this knowledge is important for everyone to hold.

Look also at the illustrative style used for the figures on the back and front pages of the cover. *What*

more might this suggest? Children may notice the differences in the rendering of children and adults or they may even begin to make the relationship between the art materials and techniques used which differentiates the contemporary children and figures from the past. Leave this open so that it is revealed as the book unfolds.

Re-read and explore the text. *What do you think he means when he writes that it is **The story of us**?* Take this opportunity to explore the fact that the story of slavery – and its legacy – has often been untold or unspoken and is missing from mainstream historical study of eras with which the children will be familiar, such as the Tudors and the Victorians, instead being confined to Black History Month, if taught at all. Reflect on the ‘us’ and explore the notion that this is a story so significant to global history, it is one to which we are *all* connected. And that it should be recognised and spoken about, however difficult.



Now open the book and slowly unfold the end paper, dedication spread and title spread, without yet reading the text. You might enlarge these images or provide children with copies of them so that they can explore the illustrations together. *What emotions do these images evoke, individually and in series? What do you like or dislike? What connections do you make to them? What questions do you have? Does anything puzzle you?* Invite the children to consider what is happening, where and when. Naturally, the children will be building narratives around the two figures depicted and imagining their lived world, relationships and community. They could even create a written narrative episode involving these figures. Invite the children to share their ideas with each other. Summarise and note together the common themes that different narratives share, perhaps those of love, happiness, hope, comfort, community.

Reflect again on the artistic depiction of their world; the night sky and clouds, lit in concentric circles by stars and a full moon; the seeping of this into the dedication page and the golden orange tones of the beach scene; and the rich painterly blues surrounding the lit homes of the two people and the other homes in their community on one page and the acacia trees lit by the moon. Allow the children time to discuss how this connects to their initial responses and what they think the illustrator wants us to feel about these people. You might engage in a literature study in which groups of children can compare the opening layout of this picturebook to others, to appreciate the significance of these spreads and the way in which they can be used to set the tone or create a reader connection before even beginning to read the text.

Read the dedication and discuss what this tells us about the author's motivation to write this book. Share with the children how it makes you feel as a teacher to be given a book as a gift to share with them.

Now read aloud the opening pages to the children until '...to steal them away from their lives and sell them in America.' Take time for the children to share their immediate responses to what they have heard and seen and how it makes them feel, connections they are making and questions they have. Revisit the spreads in turn, inviting the children to explore them in more depth and offering them prompts to deepen their thinking. For example, in the opening spread, *what do they notice about the way the spread is designed? What is the impact of the two scenes being played out on a boat. How do they contrast and what does this suggest? Why do you think that the illustrator has chosen to start with the bright, joyful, image of the African couple on their fishing boat rather than dark image of the slave traders 'hiding in the night.'? What difference would it make if it were the other way around to the story? How does this image foreshadow what is to come for the people on shore? What is the impact of being given a view of this couple, in particular, rather than the more general view of a people or community?* Explore with the children the way the author and illustrator have depicted the life and culture of these people in the first three spreads and what it tells us about them. *How do their lives relate to those of the children and their families and communities?* Give the children time to share relatable experiences and shared interests to embed the idea that these people led full and rich lives before the transatlantic slave traders took it from them.

Re-read and revisit the text from the beginning and the way in which it is structured and laid out on the page, how it relates to the illustration on these three spreads. The children might notice that the slave traders remain hidden after the first spread in favour of depicting the rich lives of these African people but make the connection between the repeated word **waiting** and their remaining presence. *What impact does the word 'waiting' have on us? What do you notice about the way the word is presented on each spread? What effect does the pausing in the read aloud have on your experience as the listening reader? How does it make us feel?*



Finally, revisit the last of the four spreads and discuss the effect this image has on us. *What is it showing us and what does it not show? Consider with the children how this contrasts with the parallel narrative that was created by the author and illustrator in the previous spreads. What is the impact of showing only the hands of these three people and not their faces? What is the effect*

of them being shackled to each other as a group? How does this compare to the lives of the individuals we have seen?

Turn the page and read aloud the text, exploring the illustration which is likely to strike the children most immediately given the visual relationship with and contrast to the previous spread. Flick back or display both spreads side-by-side and invite the children's responses. *How do they compare and contrast and what is the effect of this on us? What is the relationship between text and image.* For example, the children's hands are open, raised and outstretched; freely asking questions, sharing responses with agency, whereas the hands in the previous spread are shackled, close-fisted and facing downwards, towards the water.

Again, explore with the children the effect of sculpting the clay hands of these figures versus the effect of the charcoal sketches used to depict the children's hands. You might want to provide the children with polymer clay to create a sculpture of their own hand and compare the process and finished effect to that of drawing their hand in charcoal. You might reflect on the impression of strength that this creates, especially alongside the decision to render the hands in fist form rather than open. Turn the spread upside down and ask the children to talk about what effect this creates and what connections they might make to this reversed image. The fists are now raised upwards, mirroring the [universal symbol of protest against oppression](#) adopted by the Black Lives Matters movement. *Given what they are learning about the work of Dare Coulter, do they think this is intentional? How does our knowledge of this symbolism help us to further understand these people? What relationship is being sewn between them and the children?*

Return to the golden spread in which the children have hands up and re-read the single comment **But you can't sell people.** Take the opportunity for your own class to share responses and ask questions together or in smaller groups. They might record these on yellow paper to add to a copy of this spread, displayed on the board.



Return to the question which mirrors the opening question of the book, **How do you tell a story about slavery?** Revisit the book and reflect with the children how Kwame Alexander and Dare Coulter are telling this story, the kind of decisions they are making about whose story they are telling and how they are depicted, from the front cover, into the early book spreads and beyond. *Who and what is at the heart of the story and why?*

To further reinforce the important message that Black history does not start with slavery, you

might begin a wider historical study of West African civilizations. You could also begin a class read which is both engaging and supports understanding, such as, *Children of the Benin Kingdom* by Dinah Orji (Dinosaur Books, 2020)

Revisit the dedication which makes plain the author's intent to provide teachers with a book to help them share such a horrific story with children and share honestly why you think he feels it is needed – from your perspective as a teacher. You might talk about how this history was 'unspoken' in your own history lessons or life; or your concerns about presenting the story respectfully and accurately; or that it is difficult to share stories that are so upsetting with children in a classroom community versus the home setting.

Now read from the beginning and on until the next stopping point for the fictional class, created by the author. Again, give the children plenty of time and space to share their responses and ask questions as these children are. Reflect on the emotions that this has evoked in the child depicted and how this relates to their own feelings. Reassure them that these feelings are natural and entirely understandable when hearing such awful things have happened to people. Return again to the author's motivation for ensuring this story is not 'unspoken', however difficult it is for us to hear. In looking closely at this child, they might notice the shadows cast by the venetian blind and make a connection with those cast by the ship's decking in the earlier image. Reflect on why the illustrator is trying to create a relationship between figures from the past and present in this story. You might engage in wider cross-curricular work around the role historical knowledge can play in contemporary life.

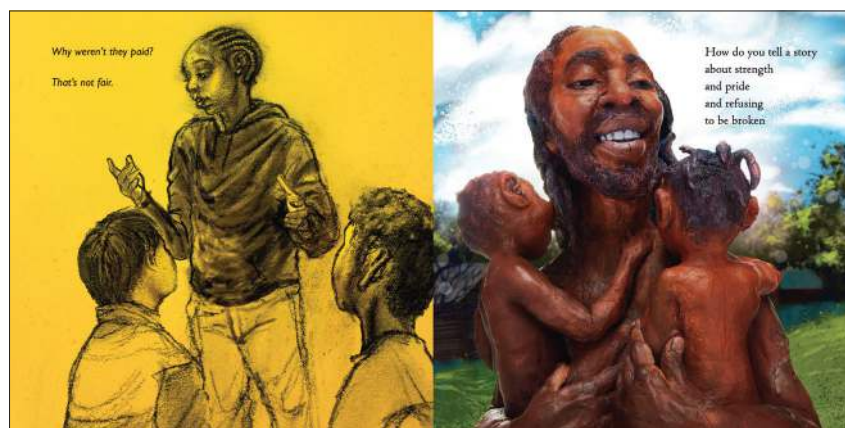
Revisit the spread in which the people are shackled below deck, re-reading aloud the text again. Compare this image to earlier depictions in previous spreads. Consider the impact of the close-up images of their faces to the description of the 'sly men' above deck through the text but, again, not seen in the image. You might draw attention to the way in which the text has been laid out in a column and in two halves, mirroring the two different groups and their position on the ship.

Look at the ways in which language has been used by the author to contrast the experiences of the two groups of people. Talk about which words and phrases are particularly vivid to them in provoking a particular response or image, for example the contrast created in the adjectives, **tall** and **small**. Give the children copies of the spread to text mark in pairs or small groups, exploring these language choices more closely and what they notice. In coming back together to share observations, you might draw attention to the contrasting collection of adjectives used for each group; the use of the progressive participle to describe the ongoing scheming and laughing of the slave traders and the lack of punctuation in this clause which emphasises this contrasted with the past tense of **shackled** and **crammed** and commas in the subordinate clause, describing the people captured below deck. The children may have noticed the rhyming words which connect the two stanzas (**places** and **spaces**, **tall** and **small**), and those at the end the last one (**cry** and **die**), and want to talk about the effect on them as readers in shaping their understanding.

Turning over, revisit the next spread, inviting the children to respond in a similar way – noting the effect that it has on them and what they are learning, then looking more closely at how this has been achieved by both author and illustrator. *What impact, for example, does the word **bold** have*

on them? Why has this been chosen? How does this tie in with what we have already learned? How does it connect to the depiction in the illustration of those jumping into the sea.

Read the story from the beginning and turn to read the next part of the book until the fictional class's stopping point. Don't reveal the page opposite until you read on again. Discuss this child's response as well as the children's own reactions, revisiting pages to support discussion about the abuses of slavery. The children may pick up on the change in colour palette and want to talk about the effect this creates. They may notice the ways in which page layout, illustration and text each convey the relentless work through repetition or patterning; or how strength is conveyed through body positioning and the strong brush strokes or sculpting. You might explore the use of gaze in these illustrations and how this shapes our understanding of viewpoint and our relationship with each person. In viewing the page in which 'blonde-haired boys and girls at their candy...', children may draw parallels with the earlier pages in which the now slaves enjoyed their own freedom and pleasures as well as those being made here between the two boys either side of the guttering and in the play on words in the repetitive refrain, **And no reading ALLOWED. And no reading ALOUD.** You might engage in wider work around the human right and entitlement to read and be a reader. *What does reading offer us? What would being a reader have given these enslaved people?*



Read on from 'How do you tell a story about strength and pride...' until the spread in the classroom, 'How do you tell that story and not want to weep for the world?' In considering this question, reflect on how **strength** and **pride** has been conveyed in each of the spreads and what emotions this has on the children as well as deep sadness. *How do these images connect to the lives of these people in Africa? What parts of themselves and their cultures have these people managed to keep despite having their life stolen from them and what does this tell us about them.*

Continue reading until 'I shouldn't have read this to you. I'm so sorry, children.' Give the children plenty of time and support to share their responses to what they have heard and seen, drawing on your own responses and those depicted in the fictional classroom to reassure the children that such responses are natural. When they are ready, ask the children to think about the teacher's words and discuss them. *Do you agree? Why or why not? What do you think the author would say to the teacher and why? Why does he think it is important that this history is shared? Why might he encourage us to continue? What do you think this teacher's children will say about continuing the story?*

Turn over to reveal and read their response. *Is this what you expected them to do and say? Why? Why not? How does their response resonate with you?* Invite the children to share their own experiences that they might relate to the belief that we should ‘speak the truth...even when it is hard.’ You might read the poem, *Still Here* by Langston Hughes - one of the most prominent poets of the Harlem Renaissance - which inspired the grandma’s song, inviting the children’s responses. Explore the signs the children have begun to create in response to hearing and talking about this story. *What does this tell us about the importance of speaking the truth and hearing stories like this, however distressing?* The children in your class might be inspired to create their own signs or express their responses in other forms of writing, such as poetry. Make accessible a range of poetry books from which poems of similar themes can be read and shared together, drawing on [CLPE’s extensive poetry resource website](#) which includes films of poet performances in own voice.

Turn the page, reading and exploring the next spread. Explore the way in which the children’s body position, facial expression and gaze reflects that of the significant figures from American history, depicted here. *What does this tell us about the impact of hearing a story such as this and the stories of these people?* Invite the children to reflect on and articulate their hopes and dreams for the future after hearing this story and understanding the current climate of inequality in which we live. You might play a recording of [Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a Dream’ speech](#) to inspire their ideas and evoke the mood they are trying to create for their audience when sharing their dream.

Children will want to engage in wider historical study into Sojourner Truth and v, the American Civil War or the US Civil Rights Movement, for example, as well as benefitting from the time, support and resources that will enable them to explore the significant figures and events in Black British history or that in the country in which they live.

Continue reading until the end of the book in which we see the front cover image brought further to life through the words. Invite the children to share their responses, the emotions it evokes in them, and how they feel the words relate to the mood created in the powerful image. Look too at the end paper and reflect on the impact of this in relation to the night sky of the first one; how it relates to themes the children have drawn out of the book as it unfolded.

Re-read from beginning to end and revisit the book, as a whole. *What do they like about the book? What did or do they dislike? Why? What connections or patterns did you notice? Do you have questions or does anything still puzzle you?*

Read the author and illustrator note at the back of the book and consider the picturebook form the author and poet, Kwame Alexander chose over a verse novel, for example. *Why do you think that was? What did this picturebook offer us in our reader experience and in understanding a story that has previous been ‘unspoken’?* Consider the crafting involved in his language choices as well as that in Dare Coulter’s artwork, and what this - and the production of this book as an object - tells us about how they feel about the subject matter; how they want the reader to feel. *Reflect on the way in which this story has been told. What do you think the author and illustrator want the reader to take away after hearing this story? What key messages are they sharing with you?* You might want to write to share with Kwame Alexander or Dare Coulter, in writing and illustration, what impact hearing this story has had on you as a class. *If you were to tell somebody else about this*

story, what would you say? Who do you think should read it and why? Note these down as a class. You could create a book corner exhibition around this book and other related titles, along with these notes of recommendation.

After reading, you could also:

Engage in writing and research around key events, places or historical figures featured in Black British History. Investigate and demonstrate the many examples of the contribution that Black people made to Britain throughout history; its infrastructure, economy, global position, culture, language and heritage.

Look for and share other examples of resilience, strength and resistance in enslaved Africans, such as revolts like the Stono Rebellion of 1739; running away or aiding escape in the way Harriet Tubman did; or engaging in small daily acts of resistance, such as slowing down work.

Create picturebooks or artwork, drawing on the style of poetic text and artwork in this book and the effects it creates for readers.

Engage the children in a personal investigation into their family history, if appropriate, and provide time, support and resources so that they can make choices about how they record their story for others.

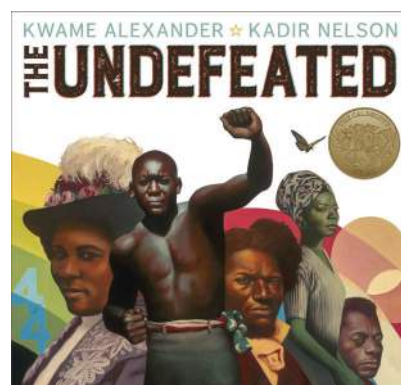
Put the knowledge of this story and of the history of slavery into the context of modern history, including continuing inequality, racism and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement.

Explore the concept of freedom in more depth, exploring the autonomy we exercise in our own daily lives and comparing this to those for whom this is repressed, past and present.

Explore human rights in more depth, looking at the work of Amnesty International and UNICEF, as appropriate, in particular the Rights of the Child.

Suggestions for further reading:

- *The Undeclared* by Kwame Alexander and Kadir Nelson (Andersen Press)
- *The Door of No Return* by Kwame Alexander (Andersen Press)
- *The Crossover, Rebound & Booked* by Kwame Alexander (Andersen Press)
- *Our Story Starts in Africa* by Patrice Lawrence and Jeanetta Gonzalez (Magic Cat)
- *Africana: An Encyclopaedia of an Amazing Continent* by Kim Chakenetsa and Mayowa Alabi (Wide-Eyed Editions)



- *Children of the Benin Kingdom* by Dinah Orji (Dinosaur Books)
- *Freedom 1783* by Catherine Johnson (Scholastic)
- *Two Sisters: A Story of Freedom* (Hidden Voices) by Kereen Getten (Scholastic)
- *Diver's Daughter: A Tudor Story* (Hidden Voices) by Patrice Lawrence (Scholastic)
- *Bright Stars of Black British History* by J.T. Williams (Thames and Hudson)
- *Black and British: A short, essential history* by David Olusoga (Macmillan)
- *Black and British: An illustrated history* by David Olusoga, illustrated by Jake Alexander and Mellany Taylor (Macmillan)
- *The Black History Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained* by David Olusoga (DK)
- *What is Race? Who are Racists? Why Does Skin Colour Matter? And Other Big Questions* by Claire Heuchan and Nikesh Shukla (Wayland)
- *Silence is Not An Option: You can impact the world for change* by Stuart Lawrence (Scholastic)
- *Stolen History: The truth about the British Empire and how it shaped us* (Puffin)



This sequence of activities was created in partnership with CLPE.
 CLPE is a charity working to improve literacy in primary schools.
 To access more free resources from CLPE, visit: www.clpe.org.uk