

# HUM 101

## Activism



LIBRARY INFORMATION AND SCIENCES

COLLEGE OF  
MARIN

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# ASSIGNMENT PROMPT: PROJECT

## #RepresentationMatters PSA Meme Campaign

DUE DATE	TO DO

For over 150 years, African Americans have been excluded by historians from the records of American achievement and innovation. As *Hidden Figures* taught us, this does not mean that Black men and women have not made significant contributions to areas such as science, technology, sports, art, politics, music, and more in American life, including contributions to fields to which they have been historically denied access. The truth is, Black people have done far more than they've been given credit for by history.

As a result of this white washing of history, opportunities for advancement, inspiration, and innovation have been denied for many generations of Black Americans and lost for the entire country. From history, to Hollywood, to science and sports, the names and faces we collectively associate with relevance, power and success determine our aspirations and possibilities. In short, representation matters!

### PART 1: Meme

For this assignment, you will work in a group to create a Public Service Announcement (PSA) in the form of an Internet meme prepared to go viral, under the hashtag #RepresentationMatters, publicizing the significance and achievements of one African American “hidden figure” whose contributions have been minimized by those people in power who write history.

Choose an image of your “hidden figure” and create a catchy slogan that explains who they were and what the impact of their anonymity has been. Use several different social media formats such as Instagram stories, square posts, and Facebook. You can use a free app like Canva to make a professional-looking social media post.

For example: Can little Black girls grow up to be mathematicians? Just ask Mary Jackson: Wife. Mother of three. Engineer for NASA, sending our astronauts to space.

#RepresentationMatters.

### PART 2: Script for Presentation in 4 paragraphs and a statement

**Be sure to discuss how today’s most pressing topics relate to our unit and use current events to bolster your evidence, support, and analysis.**

1. Short biographical information
2. What did your hidden figure do?
3. What aspects of colonization do you see manifested in the exclusion of this figure from history books?
4. What are the negative impacts of keeping them hidden?

#### Presentation Guidelines:

1. Use Google Slides or PowerPoint to create your presentation.
2. Each member of group will be responsible for their own slides.
3. Each member of group must speak on presentation day.
4. Professional attire and attitude expected on presentation day.

# Decolonizing Our History

*By M. Campbell Yahn*

Decolonizing Our History presents a history of the United States that is interconnected, wide-ranging, holistic, evolving, and radical. Above all, it is a decolonized history.

What does it mean to “decolonize” history? To colonize means to take over, to invade and conquer, to impose and establish the culture, the values, the social, political and economic systems of the conquering colonizer by eradicating the civilizations of those conquered and colonized.

The United States originated with the invasion and conquest by the Europeans over 500 years ago. But the civilizations of our continent were not the only or even the first to be conquered by the Europeans. Over the centuries, the Europeans have conquered and colonized all the civilizations and people of the Global South, and have established a division of humanity that has been both geographic and racial. It has also been gendered because the very first conquering and colonizing began before the Europeans, perhaps as long as 10,000 years ago, when patriarchy conquered, occupied and colonized collectivist matrilineal civilizations.

## TO DEFINE A WORD IS TO DEFINE YOURSELF

When the two writers Bushra Rehman and Daisy Hernández began editing their book of essays, *Colonize This!*, they looked up the definition of “colonize” and found that it meant “to create a settlement.” It sounded “so simple and peaceful,” they wrote.<sup>1</sup>

For the colonizer, it is so much simpler. For the colonized, that bland, innocuous definition glibly disappears the host of sins

and slaughters, the legacy and violence of invasions, enslavements, occupations, and systematic abductions. That disingenuously innocent definition is the privilege enjoyed by the colonizer.

So Rehman and Hernández wrote their own definition, based on their realities as women of color, as members of communities and nations which had been and still are on the colonized side of uninvited created settlements. “To colonize,” they wrote, is “to strip a people of their culture, language, land, family structure, who they are as a person and as a people.”<sup>2</sup>

## COLONIZING HEARTS AND MINDS

To colonize is also to spread rapidly, as in a cancer cell. A cancer cell doesn’t just create a settlement, it reproduces quickly, lethally, crowding out and killing off the healthy cells. It turns a healthy organ into a mass of infected, cancerous cells so that even once-healthy cells now spread the DNA messages of lethal cancer.

This is how colonization of the mind works, how messages of inferiority are internalized and belief in the superiority of the colonizer is implanted, continuously reinforcing an “other,” lesser, inferior, subordinate, even subhuman status of the colonized. The process of colonizing the mind, of teaching inferiority, may be based on gender, on race, on physical “ability”; on any number of human attributes, but the results are the same: a human being who has been robbed of his or her dignity and full potential, who has been fractured in order to maintain a system of privilege for an elite few. Race-based colonization of the mind is not a new concept, though the terminology has

changed, along with a progressively deeper understanding of its impact and scope, and of methods for reclamation.

In 1892, feminist abolitionist Anna Julia Cooper wrote about the legacy of African American “manhood and womanhood impoverished and debased by two centuries and more of compression and degradation” as a result of enslavement.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, and well into the twentieth century, scholar and activist W.E.B. Dubois began advocating for full equality for African Americans, writing about colonization and rejecting accommodationist approaches to dealing with racism and subjugation.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, other pioneering scholars and activists—like Aimé Césaire,<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon,<sup>6</sup> Paulo Freire,<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,<sup>8</sup> Edward Said,<sup>9</sup> and Linda Tuhiwai Smith<sup>10</sup>—continued developing a body of knowledge for understanding oppression and colonization, as well as a methodology for decolonization.

Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o was one of those pioneers and in his 1986 book, *Decolonising the Mind*, he wrote about the pervasiveness of European indoctrination.<sup>11</sup> His focus in the book was the language of the colonizer, which was forced on Africans and affected every aspect of life. “African children in colonial schools and universities,” he wrote, learned “the world as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world...was Eurocentric. Europe was the centre of the universe.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1974, a number of African scholars and educators came together to formulate a way forward out of the devastating effects of colonization;<sup>13</sup> in other words, how to begin decolonizing the minds and self-identities of Africans. One of their proposals, to begin teaching African literature in Kenyan schools, described the impact of the colonizer’s Eurocentric acculturation:

Africa as a continent has been a victim of forces of colonial exploitation, oppression and human degradation. In the field of culture she was taught to look on Europe as her teacher and the centre of man’s civilization, and herself as the pupil.... Western culture became the centre of Africa’s process of learning, and Africa was relegated to the background. Africa uncritically imbibed values that were alien and had no immediate relevance to her people. Thus was the richness of Africa’s cultural heritage degraded, and her people labelled as primitive and savage.<sup>14</sup>

Not only were African cultures, histories, languages, and bodies of knowledge pushed to the margins, the European colonizers demonized and demeaned everything that was African. An example of the astounding ignorance and racism of the European colonizers was given by historian David Stannard in his book, *American Holocaust*. He quoted the very eminent Oxford historian and scholar Hugh Trevor-Roper who wrote in his 1965 book, *The Rise of Christian Europe*, that the notion of teaching African history was ludicrous: “Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach, but at present there is none, or very little; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America.”<sup>15</sup>

The result of this complete dismissal and subhumanization of colonized people is what Ngugi called a “cultural bomb” because the damage done to the psyche is so utterly devastating. “The effect of the cultural bomb,” he wrote, “is to annihilate people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”<sup>16</sup>

That the colonizer has been successful around the globe in deeply damaging people and entire nations is the reality and the

history. That the colonizer has never been successful in completely annihilating any people's belief in themselves is a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the power of resistance. Each action of the colonizer has a reaction and a rebellion, whether it's a single woman fighting back against misogyny or an entire nation rising up to evict the colonizer. These are the acts of decolonizing.

### **DECOLONIZING IS THE PROCESS OF UNDOING COLONIZATION**

In 1999, Maori researcher and scholar of indigenous education Linda Tuhiwai Te Rina Smith introduced a profound challenge to the supremacy of European/Western standards of research, academics and knowledge. In her book, *Decolonizing Methodologies*,<sup>17</sup> she shattered the myth that the colonizers' ways of studying, interpreting and claiming knowledge were the epitome and ideal of all the world. Just as important, she reclaimed and legitimized indigenous methods of studying and constructing a body of knowledge.

The supremacy of Euro/Western knowledge dismisses all other approaches to knowledge as illegitimate. Its methods of researching and learning treat all other people as lesser, "exotic" beings. The result of believing they are the only "true" human is that Euro/Western researchers have left a long legacy of exploiting, disrespecting and abusing those "others" they study. As a researcher, Tuhiwai Smith explained, "I wrote *Decolonizing Methodologies* primarily to disrupt relationships between researchers (mostly non-indigenous) and researched (indigenous), between a colonizing institution of knowledge and colonized people, whose own knowledge was subjugated."<sup>18</sup>

Colonizing methodologies treat all other perspectives as irrelevant, all other histories and cultures as departures from "normal." Colonizing people view all "others" as less intelligent, less "cultured," less civilized, less like "normal" (i.e., white) people.

The irony is that this bias results in the colonizer interpreting the world through handicapping blinders: Biased researchers (some might say "racist") are only capable of understanding other cultures through the narrow filters of their own worldview rather than with objectivity. Men who are patriarchal dismiss women entirely and so have no understanding or body of knowledge about half the human race. Tuhiwai Smith pointed out that the Western views of "Other" people were mostly based on:

"[T]he experiences and observations of white men whose interactions with indigenous 'societies' or 'peoples' were constructed around their own cultural views of gender and sexuality. Observations made of indigenous women, for example, resonated with views about the role of women in European societies based on Western notions of culture, religion, race and class."<sup>19</sup>

Patriarchal Euro colonizers can only envision themselves as the one "true" model of humanity. All others are offshoots (like womankind being a subcategory of "mankind"), aberrations to the "default," subhuman. Tuhiwai Smith quoted the observations of Lee Maracle, a Canadian First Nations activist, writer and scholar, who talks about the way Western newspapers describe "Native" people "as though we were a species of sub-human animal life.... A female horse, a female Native, but everyone else gets to be called a man or a women."<sup>20</sup> In Australia, Tuhiwai Smith pointed out, the subhumanization was the same: "Aborigine

women talk about a history of being hunted, raped and then killed like animals.”<sup>21</sup>

From Australia to Africa, from Asia to the Americas, the history of how the world was colonized by white Europeans is a mirrored history of plunder, rape and slaughter. It is a multiplied, continuing history of eradicating, delegitimizing and subhumanizing all other cultures, races and histories, of turning the world upside down and proclaiming the barbarians to be the civilized.

Decolonizing means no longer accepting the worldview of the colonizer as true and immutable. Decolonizing is recognizing the many invisible threads that are elaborately woven together to create the fabric of colonized society. Decolonizing is recognizing that the threads are figments of imperial lies, and then recognizing that the imperial emperor is naked. As Tuhiwai Smith wrote, “Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonization at multiple levels.”<sup>22</sup> “Decolonizing,” she explained, “once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power.”<sup>23</sup>

It is also how we move beyond a world based on exploitation and hierarchies; how we construct a world rooted in collective, egalitarian action and sustaining respect for ourselves, each other and our Mother Earth.

To decolonize means to undo all the damage done by colonization, from the global injustices to the internalized self-hatreds.

To decolonize means to recognize and undertake our own work. Those who’ve been silenced and pushed to the margins must step up, speak out. Those accustomed to owning agendas, occupying positions of dominance must step back, allow others to speak and be heard, cede the territory they’ve claimed, be their own agents of change. Those accustomed to the privileges of colonization must undo their own internalized presumptions of superiority and unnoticed privileges: One of the privileges of the colonizer is that they have the choice to colonize or decolonize.

To decolonize means learning what was done, reclaiming/rebuilding what was taken, and healing fractured communities, lands, cultures, histories, and psyches.

Decolonizing is the opposite of co-optation; it is the daughter of resistance and the mother of revolution.

To decolonize means to be fully human, ready to be a citizen of our shared world.

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*Source:*  
*Decolonizing Our History*  
*decolonizingourhistory.com/home/*  
*about-decolonizing-history/*

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# ARTICLE RESPONSES

**Colonizing is more than the “creat[ion of] a settlement,” Yahn contends, and more than the seizure of territories and materials from another social group. In 2-3 sentences of your words, just what is colonization?**

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**Decolonization is another matter, and Yahn attempts to define it more than once. Again in 2-3 sentences of your own words, just what is decolonization?**

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**Looking upon your own cultural heritage and life experiences, what “holdovers” or traditions from colonization still exist on a real and day-to-day level? What are some consequences (is it educational? or religious? physical? psychological? legal? financial?) that result from these features of colonization or “colonialism” as it’s also called?**

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# Hollywood and the Whitewashing of History

By Alan McCluskey



*“The Departure of Memnon for Troy”.  
Black-figure vase produced in 550BC.*

The charge that Hollywood whitewashes historical figures “of colour” is now so widely accepted as to barely require proof. From John Wayne playing Genghis Khan to Elizabeth Taylor starring as Cleopatra, Western films have honoured the tradition with almost unerring fidelity. I say almost because a few select roles are ring-fenced for non-white actors, such as Shakespeare’s Othello – the black “Moor” who murders his white wife in a fit of jealous rage.

Much to the approval of Rupert Murdoch, Ridley Scott’s epic film *Exodus: Gods and Kings* presents Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt as a kingdom governed by Anglo-Saxon and Celtic warriors: white Australian Joel Edgerton plays the role of Ramses II, while the white Briton Christian Bale plays Moses. This is clearly a distortion when we consider the facts that contemporaneous art, as well as written records from the historians of antiquity (such as Herodotus) are unanimous in depicting the pharaohs with materiality modern novel either brown

or “very dark” skin. Wading into the controversy that ensued, Murdoch (a man not celebrated for his extensive knowledge of ancient African history) asked, “since when are the Egyptians not white?”

Of course, the argument that these are only films – works of art – and that “actors are simply actors, playing imaginary roles”, is a valid one. But it is valid because it rests on a post-racial, cosmopolitan view of ethnicity that makes the subject of racial difference entirely redundant. The fact that Hollywood has whitewashed Middle Eastern and African history since its early beginnings, and without interruption, makes me doubt such a view is seriously endorsed by the big studio bosses.

Indeed, the cosmopolitan view that ethnicity simply does not matter in mainstream film collapses when we consider other historical movies such as *Alexander* (2004). In Oliver Stone’s film, the famous Macedonian general is played by Irishman Colin Farrell, who was instructed to emphasise his whiteness by donning a blonde wig – essentially an Irishman being told to whiten up to play a Greek. Strangely, one rarely finds such enthusiasm for historical accuracy in other Hollywood movies.



*Ramses II charging the Nubians.*

Wolfgang Peterson's 2004 film *Troy* signifies perhaps the most blatant example of Hollywood whitewashing. As part of his PR campaign, Peterson declared the film to be an accurate adaptation of Homer's *The Iliad*. However, anyone acquainted with the Trojan Epics will immediately recognise the problem with this statement. Achilles does not die in *The Iliad*. Nor is there a wooden horse. These events only appear in other texts, such as *The Aethiopis* or Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*. These epics also feature another major event that comes between the final scenes of *The Iliad* and the death of Achilles: the appearance of Memnon, the black Ethiopian king.

Reading from the source texts, we learn that "Memnon, the stout of heart, at the head of countless tribes of black men from the land of Aithiopia", came to Troy's defence after receiving a plea for help from his uncle, King Priam (played by white Irishman Peter O'Toole).[1] It is barely worth mentioning that Memnon is not featured in the Hollywood film (but Peterson nonetheless includes the wooden horse and the death of Achilles). What is perhaps more surprising is the degree to which the Memnon episode in the Trojan saga has been all but cleansed from the contemporary cultural imagination at large. In spite of being the subject of an entire book in the *Posthomerica*, the character of Memnon is omitted not only in film adaptations but in most popular accounts of the story. The fact that Troy was if not an African colony then at least part of a large alliance of kingdoms stretching thousands of miles from deep inside the African interior to the periphery of Europe (and long before the dawn of the Roman Empire), has been all but eliminated from Western cultural memory.

Of course, such feats of historic distortion merely echo the contemporary narrative that insists Egypt was a Mediterranean colony settled by whites or near-whites – a

notion contradicted by all major historians of antiquity. According to Herodotus, the Egyptians originated nearer the source of the Nile, in Ethiopia (modern Sudan). They were "dark-skinned... [with] curly hair", and observed similar customs and traditions as the Ethiopians south of the river. [2] The "Father of History", as he is known, also recounts the story of "forty thousand Egyptian warriors" revolting from the Pharaoh and setting out for Ethiopia, where they subsequently "gave themselves over to the king of the Ethiopians".[3]



*Sculpture of Kiya, second wife of Akhenaton.*

Diodorus of Sicily adds further evidence that there was a shared culture along the Nile that originated in the south. He states that the southern cities of Egypt were founded long before those in the Nile Delta – which probably explains why all the major pharaohs, such as Ramses II, travelled south to Thebes to be coronated.[4] The fact that there are more pyramids in the Sudan than

there are in Egypt, and that the peoples there worshipped the same gods, used the same hieroglyphs etc. etc., removes all doubt from the premise that what we call “ancient Egyptian culture” stretched thousands of miles along the Nile – the world’s longest river. This is a river whose source was until relatively recently the world’s largest fresh water lake in the world, lying right on the earth’s equator in Tanzania. The idea that agriculture somehow originated on the outer fringes of this region, in the far smaller and out of the way settlements of lighter skinned peoples – who mysteriously went through the ordeal of travelling thousands of miles down the Nile (northwards), crossing the Sinai Peninsula, before deciding to invent agriculture on other, smaller rivers – is very tenuous. These were settlements which, from the earliest beginnings, were overshadowed and dominated by the main superpower of the region (Egypt) and did not form empires of comparable size until thousands of years later. Nor did they construct anything as large as the Pyramids at Giza (2500 BC) or Karnak Temple, which lies further south at Thebes (3200 BC). Of course, the narrative that insists civilisation was not (or could not have been) born in Africa, which gained popularity around the same time as the eugenics movement, and often deployed the same pseudo-scientific terminology, is the one that prevails today – a narrative fit for a world that has cleansed black men from the story of Troy and insists the Pharaohs were white.



*Sandstone statue of Mentuhotep II of the Eighteenth Dynasty.*

The real tragedy, of course, is that the colour of such historical figures does not matter, or at least it shouldn't. There is no pride to be found in associating oneself (or one's “ancestors”) with tyrants and megalomaniacs like Ramses II, Achilles, Memnon, or any other “warrior king”. Indeed, the very idea of “ethnic pride” is worthy of little else but ridicule and contempt. Nevertheless, that should not make us overlook the racially-determined, and extremely distorted view of history that Hollywood has been pushing for the past hundred years, especially given that it is a view that serves to reinforce the prevailing cultural idea of white superiority.

What Hollywood has been doing, therefore, matters in this regard because none of us begins to fashion a view of history by consulting hard to find and largely neglected ancient texts. Rather, we begin the process from an early age by watching easily-accessible and entertaining Hollywood movies. These are the kind of movies that subscribe to the Murdoch view of history – the one that tells us black Africans played no role in the great story of human civilisation except in the form of slaves in

the colonies. However, I have confidence that sometime in the not so distant future movies of this kind will be condemned and despised by mainstream culture to such an extent as to make their further production untenable – consigning them to the same fate as American minstrel shows. Until that time comes, we shall have to make do with making fun of Rupert Murdoch and laughing at Irishmen who wear blonde wigs.

**Notes.**

- [1] Quintus of Smyrna, *The Trojan Epic Posthomerica* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2004), p. 25
- [2] Herodotus, *The Histories* (New York: Palgrave, 1890), p. 134
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 109-110
- [4] See Diodorus of Sicily's *The Library of History*

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*Source:*  
*Counter Punch*  
*July 17, 2015*  
[www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/17/  
hollywood-and-the-  
whitewashing-of-history/](http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/07/17/hollywood-and-the-whitewashing-of-history/)

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# ARTICLE RESPONSES

Over the past 2 decades, Brad Pitt and Colin Farrell have been called guy candy too many times to count. McCluskey says it shouldn't matter who plays which characters in cinema but that it does. Based on our readings and discussions, what are the top reasons for why it really does matter?

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McCluskey's article opens the door to current discussions of Hollywood culture...and (if we return to ideas from Yahn's article) of "colonial" holdovers in a so-called "post-colonial" culture. Identify 2 other films you've viewed that whitewash history or marginalize a figure(s) who deserve much better...and 2 films that seem to blast right through the whitewashing. Be prepared to explain the reasons why you select these particular films.

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Speaking of Pitt, Farrell, and others who often receive the label guy candy (or the variation "white-guy-candy")...while keeping in mind our readings and discussions that touch on sociology and social history, why are these hardly-hidden figures considered eye candy?

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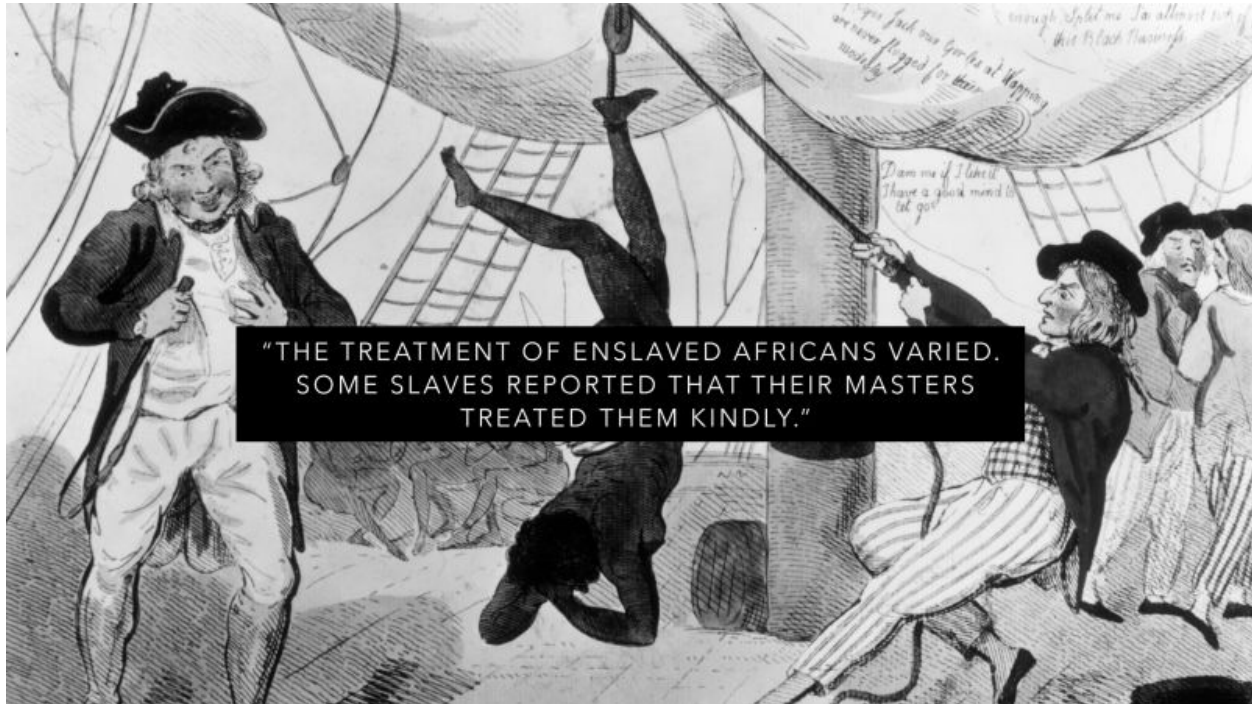
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# Here's How New Texas Public School Textbooks Write About Slavery

By Bobby Finger



In 2010, the Texas Board of Education approved a revised social studies curriculum that, wrote *The New York Times* that year, would “put a conservative stamp on history” once going into effect in 2015. In advance of their debut in Texas classrooms last week, it was widely reported that the new textbooks, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Pearson, “whitewashed” slavery by downplaying the brutality of the facts and treating it as a “side issue.”

Jezebel has obtained digital copies of some of the new “conservative” Texas textbooks (the books are available to education professionals but not the general public), and while they certainly aren’t the abomination some activists and educators feared, their contents demonstrate a troubling creep away from teaching actual history—and the unpleasant truth of America’s legacy of racism—and toward a sanitized fable of

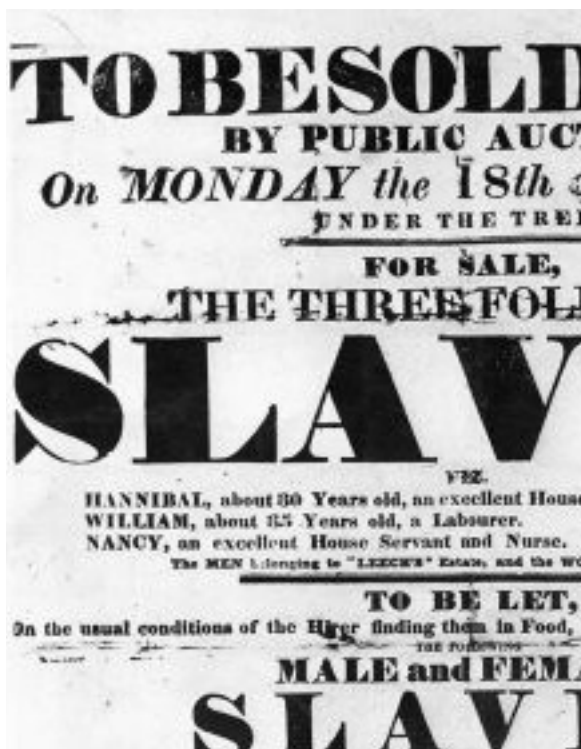
historical white morality.

Initially, some news outlets reported the textbooks omitted Jim Crow laws and the KKK altogether, but, as *Texas Monthly* pointed out in its September issue, that wasn’t exactly the case.

Happily, though, publishers mostly ignored the board, according to Dan Quinn, of the Texas Freedom Network, an organization dedicated to countering what it sees as far-right activism. “I think publishers did a good job of making sure of the centrality of slavery,” he says. Quinn, who perhaps more than anyone has sounded the alarm about the board’s bias, was distressed to read national reports asserting incorrectly that Texas children wouldn’t be reading about the KKK and Jim Crow. “The textbooks cover all of that,” he says. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s eighth-grade U.S. history textbook, for instance, includes a section on KKK terror

and the postwar black codes that created “working conditions similar to those under slavery.”

The magazine reassured its readers that the “travesty” of “partisan fiction” had been avoided and that the textbooks, though flawed, were far from an affront to the study of history. But, after examining copies of the 7th grade, 8th grade, and high school-level books obtained by Jezebel, it was clear that this curriculum is riddled with omissions, making frequent use of convenient, deceptive juxtapositions of slaveholder violence and the slave resilience. Sure, Texas’s new textbooks aren’t an outright travesty. But that doesn’t mean they’re anywhere close to good.



Slavery is mentioned only briefly in HMH’s 7th grade textbook. It’s not until 8th grade that the subject is expanded upon in a tone that suggests a general unwillingness to clearly state just how horrific of an institution it was. Passages that reference violence often transition to characterizations of slaves as a hopeful, god-fearing bunch whose faith and sense of community when

not working or being punished almost negated the nightmarish realities of their daily lives. And, though the violence of slaveholders is mentioned—often with quotes by former slaves—it’s generally followed by a reminder that their lives weren’t all bad. Slavery, the book suggests, was only truly miserable some of the time. For adults, this combination of half-truths and omissions makes for an unpleasant read. For children, it’s something worse: a disservice.

Just look at one of the first mentions of slavery in HMH’s Texas United States History. (All emphases in quotes our own, and the illustrations that textbook quotes appear on are ours, not found in the actual textbooks.)

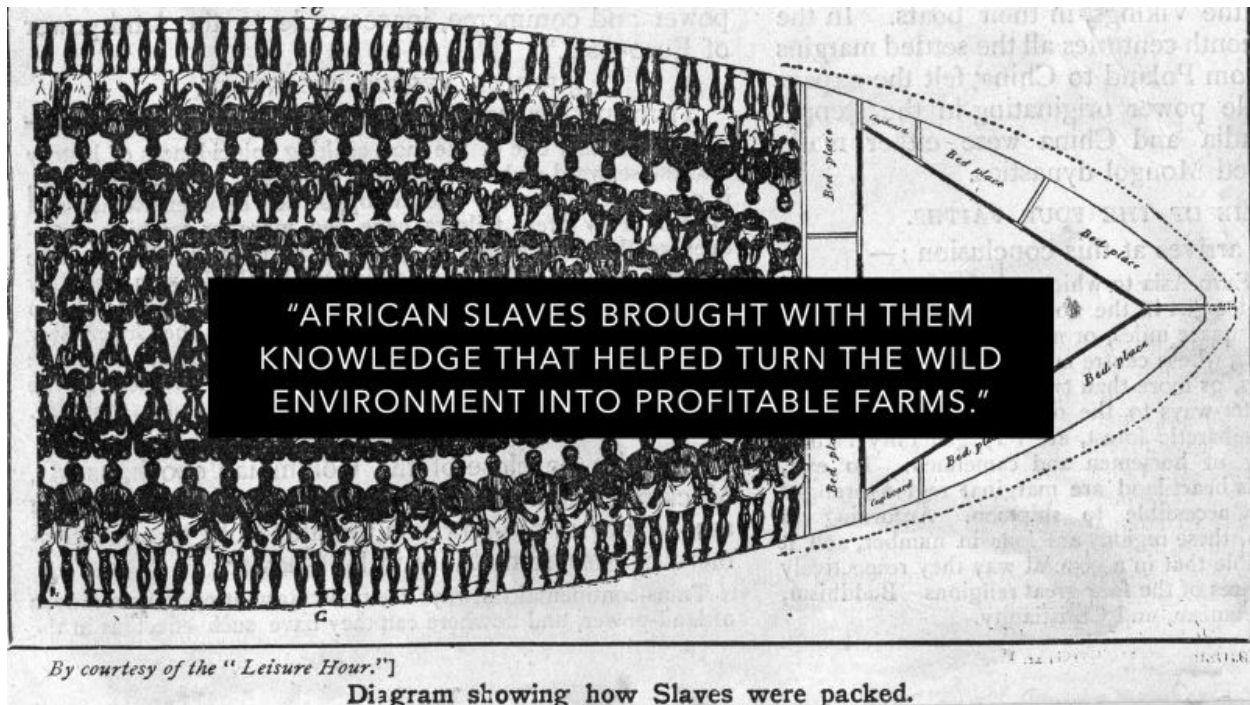
### CHAPTER 3: THE ENGLISH COLONIES, 1605-1774 | P. 77

*The colonies had many small farms and some large plantations. Farms did well because the South enjoyed a warm climate and a long growing season. Many farms grew cash crops that were sold for profit. Tobacco, rice, and indigo—a plant used to make blue dye—were the most important cash crops.*

*The southern colonies’ cash crops required a great deal of difficult work to grow and harvest. This meant a large workforce was needed. By the 1700s enslaved Africans, rather than indentured servants, had become the main source of labor. African slaves brought with them knowledge that helped turn the wild environment into profitable farms. Many had previous experience raising cattle and knew the method for clearing brush using fire.*

*Slavery was a viciously brutal condition for many inhabitants of the southern colonies.*

Africans were brought to America to be slaves, sure, but their specific skill set helped change the landscape and improve the economy!



Apart from being too little, too late, that final sentence acknowledging slavery's brutality evinces the gotta-hear-both-sides structural dodge also found in the previous section, in which six paragraphs on the "horrible experience" of the Middle Passage and slavery are followed by four on its cultural upsidés.

For example, the textbook explains some of the slave ship's brutal specifics: "The slaves were chained together and crammed into spaces about the size of coffins. The height between the decks was sometimes only 18 inches." And the introduction of American slavery is relatively mild, but clear:

*The treatment of enslaved Africans varied. Some slaves reported that their masters treated them kindly. To protect their investment, some slaveholders provided adequate food and clothing for their slaves. However, severe treatment was very common. Whippings, brandings, and even worse torture were all part of American slavery.*

However, the section closes with a rhetorical attempt to find some happy ending:

## SLAVE CULTURE IN THE AMERICAS

*Slaves in the Americas came from many different parts of Africa. They spoke different languages and had different cultural backgrounds. But enslaved Africans also shared many customs and viewpoints. They built upon what they had in common to create a new African American culture.*

*Families were a vital part of slave culture. Families provided a refuge—a place not fully under the slaveholders' control. However, slave families faced many challenges. Families were often broken apart when a family member was sold to another owner. In Latin America, there were many more enslaved males than females. This made it difficult for slaves there to form stable families.*

*Religion was a second refuge for slaves. It gave enslaved Africans a form of expression that was partially free from their slaveholders' control. Slave religion was primarily Christian, but it included traditional elements from African religions as well. Religion gave slaves a sense of self worth and a hope for salvation in this life and the next. Spirituals were a common form of religious expression among*



slaves. Slaves also used songs and folktales to tell their stories of sorrow, hope, agony, and joy.

Many slaves expressed themselves through art and dance. Dances were important social events in slave communities. Like most elements of slave culture, art and dance were heavily influenced by African traditions.

“Slavery was bad, but it had some good aspects, too.” It’s a trend that continues throughout the book, such as this section about slave codes:

### **CHAPTER 13: THE SOUTH, 1790–1860 | PPS. 426–427**

Harry McMillan recalled some of the punishments he had witnessed.

*“The punishments were whipping, putting you in the stocks [wooden frames to lock people in] and making you wear irons and a chain at work. Then they had a collar to put round your neck with two horns, like cows’ horns, so that you could not lie down . . . Sometimes they dug a hole like a well with a door on top. This they called a dungeon keeping you in it two or three weeks or a month, or sometimes till you died in there.”*

—Harry McMillan

To further control slaves’ actions, many states passed strict laws called slave codes. Some laws prohibited slaves from traveling far from their homes. Literacy laws in most southern states prohibited the education of slaves. Alabama, Virginia, and Georgia had laws that allowed the fining and whipping of anyone caught teaching enslaved people to read and write.

...which is followed directly by:

Many enslaved Africans found comfort in their community and culture. They made time for social activity, even after exhausting

workdays, in order to relieve the hardship of their lives. Although they were forced to immigrate to the United States, their culture is one of the foundations of the current national identity, especially in the worlds of music and religion.

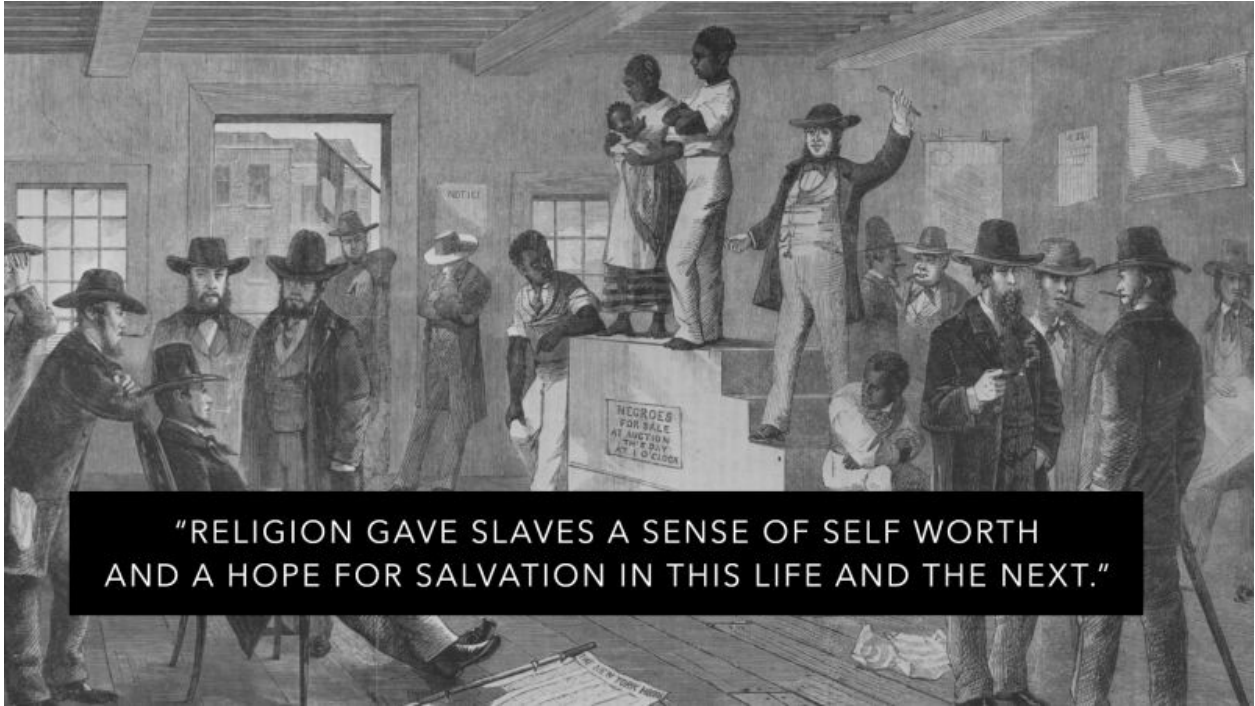
This “it wasn’t all bad!” structure isn’t the only problem with the book’s discussion of slavery and racism in the United States. The roughest truths are often softened around the edges, sometimes by the addition of just one word. On page 425 of *Texas United States History*, we learn that, “Generally, slaveholders viewed slaves as property, not as people.” Generally.

That infuriating method of downplaying is most evident in the description of the Ku Klux Klan in HMH’s high school-level textbook *The Americans: United States History Since 1877*, in which the KKK is portrayed as having a broad range of political goals, among which violently racist political intimidation is only a lesser, incidental factor:

### **CHAPTER 4: THE UNION IN PERIL, 1850–1877 | P. 188**

*Most white Southerners swallowed whatever resentment they felt over African-American suffrage and participation in government. Some whites expressed their feelings by refusing to register to vote. Others were frustrated by their loss of political power and by the South’s economic stagnation. These were the people who formed vigilante groups and used violence to intimidate African Americans.*

*The most notorious and widespread of the Southern vigilante groups was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The Klan’s goals were to destroy the Republican Party, to throw out the Reconstruction governments, to aid the planter class, and to prevent African Americans from exercising their political*



**"RELIGION GAVE SLAVES A SENSE OF SELF WORTH AND A HOPE FOR SALVATION IN THIS LIFE AND THE NEXT."**

*rights. To achieve these goals, the Klan and other groups killed perhaps 20,000 men, women, and children. In addition to violence, some white Southerners refused to hire or do business with African Americans who voted Republican.*

It's not noted within that section that the "20,000 men, women, and children" killed by the Klan were of a fairly particular group.

When discussing the Klan's resurgence in the 20th century, the book is even less focused on violence:

**CHAPTER 12: POLITICS OF THE ROARING TWENTIES, 1919–1929 | P. 415**

*The Klan also believed in keeping blacks "in their place," destroying saloons, opposing unions, and driving Roman Catholics, Jews, and foreign-born people out of the country. KKK members were paid to recruit new members into their world of secret rituals and racial violence.*

"Destroying saloons, opposing unions." If that rundown of the KKK feels strangely unfinished to you, read this slightly more descriptive account from 1935, written by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America*.

**Lawlessness and violence filled the land, and terror stalked abroad by day, and it bured and murdered by night. The Southern states had actually relapsed into barbarism...Armed guerrilla warfare killed thousands of Negroes; political riots were staged; their causes or occasions were always obscure, their results always certain: ten to one hundred times as many Negroes were killed as whites.**

**– W. E. B. Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction***

When discussing other reconstruction-era racial violence in the South, the textbook is similarly stingy with the details:

**CHAPTER 8: LIFE AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY, 1877–1917 | P. 288**

*African Americans and others who did not follow the racial etiquette could face severe punishment or death. All too often, blacks who were accused of violating the etiquette were lynched. Between 1882 and 1892, more than 1,400 African-American men and women were shot, burned, or hanged without trial in the South. Lynching peaked in the 1880s and 1890s but continued well into the 20th century.*

In paragraphs like this, the textbook's polite elisions and factual tip-toes become an overt disservice to the children who will read them, and a particular low even from a state whose 2012 Republican platform included a ban on critical thinking. To describe the conditions under which black Americans were lynched by whites due to their failure to "follow the racial etiquette" is nearly insane; additionally, "racial etiquette" is an

extreme euphemism for a code of conduct imposed by a white society so overtly violent that it advertised lynchings in newspapers, showed up to see them in crowds totaling 15,000, and sent postcards afterwards to celebrate the fact. Lynchings weren't mere punishments. They were, writes Robert Gibson, a "cruel combination of racism and sadism...used by whites to terrorize Blacks and maintain white supremacy."

It is, however, absolutely worth noting that HMH's social studies textbooks contain an abundance of well-written and essential information about the abolitionist movement. Nat Turner's slave rebellion, the writings of Frederick Douglass, descriptions of the "daring" work done by Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Ida B. Wells: all of those topics are covered, as are the efforts of civil rights leaders of the 20th century. But there's an uneasy feeling that the significance of their achievements will be diminished to schoolchildren when not prefaced with an accurate portrayal of what they were fighting. It's hard to fully appreciate the results of progress without first being given blisteringly truthful depictions of its origins.



In Texas United States History, sections begin with hypothetical exercises called “If You Were There...” which ask students to imagine themselves as various people throughout the country’s history. At some point in chapter 3, you’re asked to step in the shoes of an early settler who’s considering a move back to England. In chapter 8, you’re a Maryland voter choosing between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

But just one of 63 sections in a book about America from the 15th century to 1877 begins by asking Texas children to imagine life from the point of view of a slave.

It’s a halfhearted attempt at empathy, and one that is emblematic of the book’s failure to make readers view slavery in the monstrous, despicable light it deserves.

While discussing this subject with my colleagues, Kara Brown said, “The thing about slavery is that I feel like I know a lot about it, but every single additional thing I learn makes me realize it was even worse than I thought.” These textbooks are acutely aware of that sentiment. In the most generous reading, the people who created this textbook do believe young Texans will eventually learn the whole truth. But as educators, they just don’t want to be the ones who told them.

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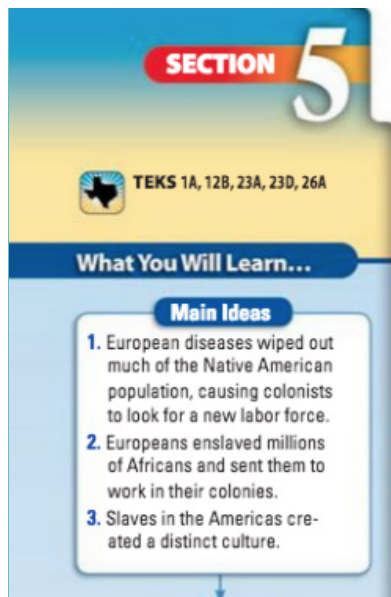
*Source:*

*Jezebel*

*September 1, 2015*

*jezebel.com/heres-how-new-texas-public-school-textbooks-write-about-1726786557*

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## Beginnings of Slavery in the Americas

### **If YOU were there...**

You are an enslaved African living in North America. Your family is all that you have. You help each other, and your family provides some relief from the forced labor and harsh life on the plantation. Still, you long for your freedom. A fellow slave has told you of a plan to escape.

**Will you stay with your family or try to flee?**

# ARTICLE RESPONSES

**A post-reading reality check: Below, identify and summarize your 2 biggest personal takeaways after finishing Bobby Finger’s guided tour through a set of history textbooks courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and Pearson.**

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**Finger’s article contends a textbook that addresses raw, often brutal historical realities can, nonetheless, not really address them honestly. What are 3 apparent techniques or strategies used by the textbook authors to address-but-not-really-address real events in American history?**

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**Continuing the thread from above: in what other written text(s) have you witnessed this behavior of discussing or explaining a 100% real incident or event without really addressing it? If you cannot recall one, take 10 minutes to conduct on-the-fly web research (e.g., use search words from our discussion and readings, or read press releases, review political tweets, etc.) Identify your selected text, and point out one technique it uses to (not) address its historical subject.**

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# How Texas Teaches History

*By Ellen Bresler Rockmore*



A TEXAS high school student and his mother recently called attention to a curious line in a geography textbook: a description of the Atlantic slave trade as bringing “millions of workers” to plantations in the American South. McGraw-Hill Education, the publisher of the textbook, has since acknowledged that the term “workers” was a misnomer.

The company’s chief executive also promised to revise the textbook so that its digital version as well as its next edition would more accurately describe the forced migration and enslavement of Africans. In the meantime, the company is also offering to send stickers to cover the passage.

But it will take more than that to fix the way slavery is taught in Texas textbooks. In 2010, the Texas Board of Education

approved a social studies curriculum that promotes capitalism and Republican political philosophies. The curriculum guidelines prompted many concerns, including that new textbooks would downplay slavery as the cause of the Civil War.

This fall, five million public school students in Texas began using the textbooks based on the new guidelines. And some of these books distort history not through word choices but through a tool we often think of as apolitical: grammar.

In September, Bobby Finger of the website Jezebel obtained and published some excerpts from the new books, showing much of what is objectionable about their content. The books play down the horror of slavery and even seem to claim that it had an upside. This upside took the form of a distinctive

African-American culture, in which family was central, Christianity provided “hope,” folk tales expressed “joy” and community dances were important social events.

But it is not only the substance of the passages that is a problem. It is also their form. The writers’ decisions about how to construct sentences, about what the subject of the sentence will be, about whether the verb will be active or passive, shape the message that slavery was not all that bad.

I teach freshman writing at Dartmouth College. My colleagues and I consistently try to convey to our students the importance of clear writing. Among the guiding principles of clear writing are these: Whenever possible, use human subjects, not abstract nouns; use active verbs, not passive. We don’t want our students to write, “Torture was used,” because that sentence obscures who was torturing whom.

In the excerpts published by Jezebel, the Texas textbooks employ all the principles of good, strong, clear writing when talking about the “upside” of slavery. But when writing about the brutality of slavery, the writers use all the tricks of obfuscation. You can see all this at play in the following passage from a textbook, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, called *Texas United States History*:

Some slaves reported that their masters treated them kindly. To protect their investment, some slaveholders provided adequate food and clothing for their slaves. However, severe treatment was very common. Whippings, brandings, and even worse torture were all part of American slavery.

Notice how in the first two sentences, the “slavery wasn’t that bad” sentences, the main subject of each clause is a person: slaves, masters, slaveholders. What those people,

especially the slave owners, are doing is clear: They are treating their slaves kindly; they are providing adequate food and clothing. But after those two sentences there is a change, not just in the writers’ outlook on slavery but also in their sentence construction. There are no people in the last two sentences, only nouns. Yes, there is severe treatment, whippings, brandings and torture. And yes, those are all bad things. But where are the slave owners who were actually doing the whipping and branding and torturing? And where are the slaves who were whipped, branded and tortured? They are nowhere to be found in the sentence.

In another passage, slave owners and their institutionalized cruelty are similarly absent: “Families were often broken apart when a family member was sold to another owner.”

Note the use of the passive voice in the verbs “were broken apart” and “was sold.” If the sentence had been written according to the principles of good draftsmanship, it would have looked like this: Slave owners often broke slave families apart by selling a family member to another owner. A bit more powerful, no? Through grammatical manipulation, the textbook authors obscure the role of slave owners in the institution of slavery.

It may appear at first glance that the authors do a better job of focusing on the actions of slaves. After all, there are many sentences in which “slaves” are the subjects, the main characters in their own narrative. But what are the verbs in those sentences? Are the slaves suffering? No, in the sentences that feature slaves as the subject, as the main actors in the sentence, the slaves are contributing their agricultural knowledge to the growing Southern economy; they are singing songs and telling folk tales; they are expressing themselves through art and dance.

There are no sentences, in these excerpts, anyway, in which slaves are doing what slaves actually did: toiling relentlessly, without remuneration or reprieve, constantly subject to confinement, corporal punishment and death.

The textbook publishers were put in a difficult position. They had to teach history to Texas' children without challenging conservative political views that are at odds with history. In doing so, they made many grammatical choices. Though we don't always recognize it, grammatical choices can be moral choices, and these publishers made the wrong ones.

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*Source:*  
*The New York Times*  
*October 21, 2015*  
*[www.nytimes.com/2015/10/22/opinion/  
how-texas-teaches-history.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/22/opinion/how-texas-teaches-history.html)*

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# ARTICLE RESPONSES

Like Finger, Rockmore examines the methods used by the Texas school textbook publishers to portray specific events in American history. What are 2 authorial techniques/strategies that Rockmore notices at work in the paragraphs inside those textbooks? Of those 2, identify and share an example of each.

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How might Rockmore's claims connect back to (or sync with) Yahn's discussion about (de-) colonization? Take 3-4 sentences to shed some light on this.

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