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**Virginia History and Social Studies Textbooks:
History, Processes of Selection, Critiques and Possibilitites**

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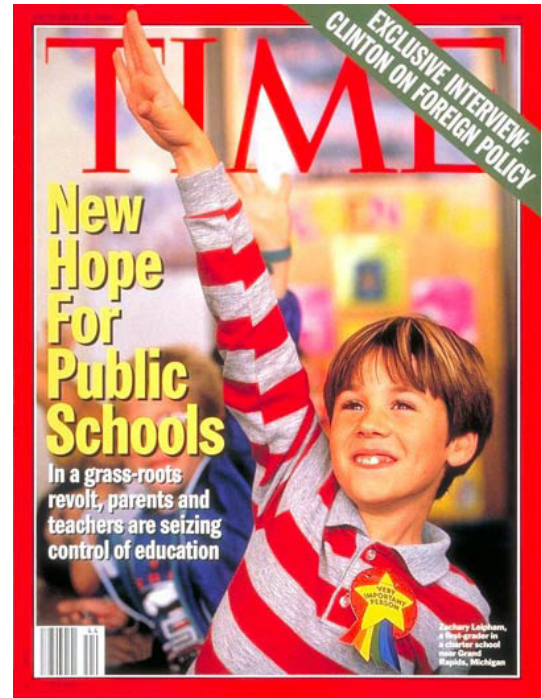
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Introduction

In 2010, the *Washington Post* reported a troubling fact about a textbook released that year for Virginia fourth graders, *Our Virginia: Past and Present* written by Joy Masoff at Five Ponds Press. The text claimed that “Thousands of southern blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two black battallions under the command of Stonewall Jackson¹.” This excerpt, first flagged by William and Mary historian Carol Sheriff, was soon denounced by many prominent historians and researchers as false, and the *Washington Post* traced Masoff’s sources back to internet writings of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a group with an interest in minimizing slavery as the prime cause of the Civil War. Following this exposure of falsehood, Virginia

administrators solicited scholarly review of the fourth and fifth grade Virginia history texts, and noted that “problems included omissions, internal inconsistencies, and questionable descriptions of analyses.”² Further investigation revealed that Joy Masoff was not a historian, but a longtime author and wife of Five Ponds Press’ President. Also startling was the fact that neither Five Ponds Press, nor the Virginia Educational administrators ever engaged a historian to review the text for accuracy before it was approved for use in public schools.³

This incident was hardly the first textbook controversy to ripple across a state. In the mid-1970s, protest of content by conservative groups Kanawha City led to school boycotts and violence.⁴ In 1994, UCLA’s National Center for History in the Schools’ release of Educational Standards for US History with increased attention to the US’s diverse ethnic makeup were deemed by many conservatives as evidence of a “revisionist agenda” and hyped in the popular press as the “end of history.”⁵



Time magazine cover
October 31, 1994

1 Sieff, Kevin. “Virginia 4th-Grade Textbook Criticized over Claims on Black Confederate Soldiers.” *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2010. 1.

1.

2 Sheriff, Carol. “Virginia’s Embattled Textbooks: Lessons (Learned and Not) from the Centennial Era.” *Civil War History* 58, no. 1 (March 2012): 44.

3 *Ibid*, 43.

4 Apple, Michael, and Linda Christian-Smith. *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 3.

5 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.”

These textbook controversies are only the most visible moments showing how American history and civics textbooks both reflect and help reproduce the deeply flawed fabric of American society. The content manifest in textbooks today reflects the incremental formalization of American educational institutions, and the American white Protestant elite's evolving relationships with and fears of ethnic minority groups. The conservative inertia of textbook content favoring the centrality of dominant narrative in history texts is a result of both legal-political factors in textbook selection, and of economic factors driving the production and marketing of Virginia textbooks.

The results for many students have been profound. Early scholars from DuBois, Woodson and Reddick to modern scholars like Terrie Epstein observe effects that range from a deep distrust of educational institutions by black students, to culturally biased evaluations of the efforts and involvement of black parents, to stark divergences in outcomes for a new black middle class as compared to lower income black citizens.

Why are issues of representation of African Americans and other minority groups so central to the debates about Virginia's social studies textbooks? Some educational scholars argue that "textbooks, for better or worse, dominate what students learn."⁶ And definitions of the core purposes of teaching of grade school history differ. For some, "school history has been regarded as the primary place in the school curriculum for students to cultivate a sense of national identity and heritage,"⁷ and for some conservative thinkers, in-depth depictions of minorities as active agents in American history and social studies texts dilutes an older idea of a proper "American" and threatens to unravel the canon of "legitimate" knowledge. To examine the roots of these controversies, one must turn to the larger history of American public education.

Part I: A Brief History of American Education and Textbooks

Exploring the peculiarities of the history of American education and textbooks sets the stage for understanding the current dynamics of policy and textbook writing. Over the course of the development of American education and textbooks, methods and goals for educating a highly heterogeneous population

History of Education 28, no. 3 (September 1999):276.

⁶ Apple, Michael, and Linda Christian-Smith. *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 4.

⁷ Foster, Stuart J. "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks." *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999):251.

have been a subject of continuous debate.

Educational scholar David Labaree has attempted to synthesize co-existent approaches to the central purpose of education into three categories. The first is the goal of democratic equality, with the central point of education as creating a citizenry of people equally prepared for participation in civic self-governance.⁸ The second approach is one of social efficacy, or that education should primarily provide young people the abilities to carry out useful economic roles competently.⁹ Labaree points to a third goal, that of social mobility, which sees education as a commodity with the potential to provide individual students advantages over their peers.¹⁰ In tracing trends and debates on American education, one can see these goals advance and recede in the discourse over time. But even more fundamentally educational scholar Stuart J. Foster argues that textbooks “prove ideologically important because typically they seek to imbue in the young a shared set of values, an national ethos, and an inconvertible sense of identity.¹¹ Thus, the fights over textbook content become a symbolic struggle for the core of shared and negotiated American collective “self.”

Early American Education: Preachers and Amateurs

American educational texts began with the importation of English texts in the 18th century. Due to peculiarities in American copyright law, publishing houses in the States did not pay royalties on European titles¹², so Boston publishing houses reprinted 1690 book *The English Protestant Tutor* as *The New England Primer* in large numbers. This text taught reading through childrens’ memorization of highly moralistic content that worked to inculcate readers with Calvinist Protestant values.

The United States was one of the first nations in the world to develop a public school system in the 1800s, starting with locally organized elementary schools in the northeast. The Common School era of the 19th century was characterized by a focus on schooling as inculcating both Anglo-centric knowledge and moral lessons on the proper behavior and attitudes of a governable “good” American.¹³

8 Labaree, David F. “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals.” *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 42.

9 Ibid, 42.

10 Ibid, 42.

11 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 253.

12 Apple, Michael, and Linda Christian-Smith. *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 27..

13 Labaree, David F. “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals.” *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 58.

Popular textbooks closely followed the model set by *The New England Primer* in religious and cultural tone. In these books, history was not a separate subject, but one embedded in core texts teaching language. Noah Webster's *Speller* books, and William McGuffey's *Eclectic Readers* series are prime examples of this type of text.. Stuart Foster calls these textbook writers "an assortment of amateurs who... helped create and solidify an idealized image of the American type."¹⁴ These textbook authors often stressed the centrality of the English roots of American societal structures, and strongly professed white protestant values like "honesty, truth, temperance, obedience, industry and thrift."¹⁵ Indeed these texts were as much moral and cultural tools as they were aimed at teaching the mechanics of literacy. Textbook writers of the time, who were predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men, expressed more generalized anxieties of the powerful concerned about the influence of the millions of Irish-Catholic immigrants in the early to mid-19th century.¹⁶

The textbook emerged as a highly influential artifact, second only to the Bible in copies sold in the late 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁷ Teachers at this time were predominantly middle class single women, trained at two-year "Normal

¹⁴ Foster, Stuart J. "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks." *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 252.

¹⁵ Foster, Stuart J. "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks." *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 255.

¹⁶ Foster, Stuart J. "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks." *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 255.

¹⁷ Foster, Stuart J. "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks." *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 255.



page from the *English Protestant Tutor*

160 MCGUFFEY'S SECOND READER,

a great many Indians then; but now there are but very few.

3. As the white people increased, the Indians were driven away or killed; often with rum. The Spaniards were not only cruel to the poor Indians, but cruel to Columbus, who discovered America; and they put him in prison, and let him die of want.

4. After this, many people came over from Europe to live in America. And in the year 1607, they came from England and settled at Jamestown, in Virginia. The Indians killed many. The settlers had many hardships to endure, and in six months, only a few men were left out of six hundred.

5. Many went to New England to live. Pennsylvania was settled by Swedes, in 1627, and William Penn came here in 1681, one hundred and sixty-five years ago. He came to this country, and a great many more, who were Quakers, came with him, because they could not worship God in their own country.

6. Very little good is ever got by fighting, and William Penn did not wish to fight with the

Schools.” By the end of the 1800s, heavy teacher dependence on textbooks came to define the “American System” of education to Europeans.¹⁸

Post-Bellum Changes: Reconstruction and Public Schools

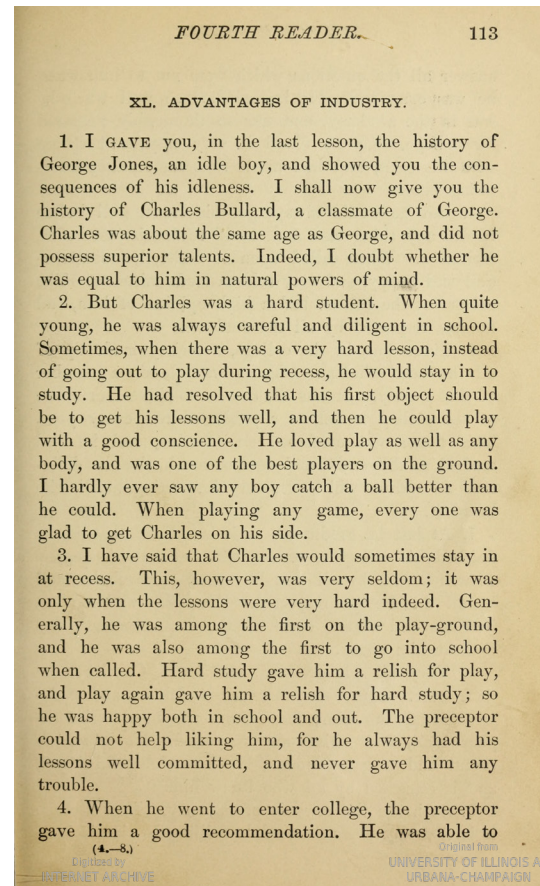
Under the Republican governments immediately after the Civil War, the US established federally funded public school systems for the first time, though these institutions were largely segregated. Congress’ establishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1865 allowed for the establishment of over 1000 schools for black students across the South in the late 1860s.¹⁹ These schools typically adopted curricula similar to those in Northern schools, and employed a mix of Southern whites, Northern whites, and local African-Americans as teachers. After reconstruction ended, these schools were consistently underfunded until the integration in the 1960s, effectively creating two parallel and unequal school systems in the American South. During this period, texts from earlier times retained their popularity as core teaching materials. As an example, McGuffey’s *Readers* sold 122 million copies in the years after 1836.²⁰ In the later editions of the 1870s, McGuffey’s text was stripped of much of its most explicit religious references in favor of rhetoric touting America as providing dreams of opportunity for oppressed peoples, and a melting-pot ideal of the assimilation of ethnic minorities. But this text still carried the fundamental structures and white-centered conceptions of American identity.

The Early 20th Century: The Progressive Era and Black Critiques

18 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 252.

19 “History of Education in the United States - Wikipedia.” Accessed November 28, 2017. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_education_in_the_United_States#Textbooks.

20 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 255.

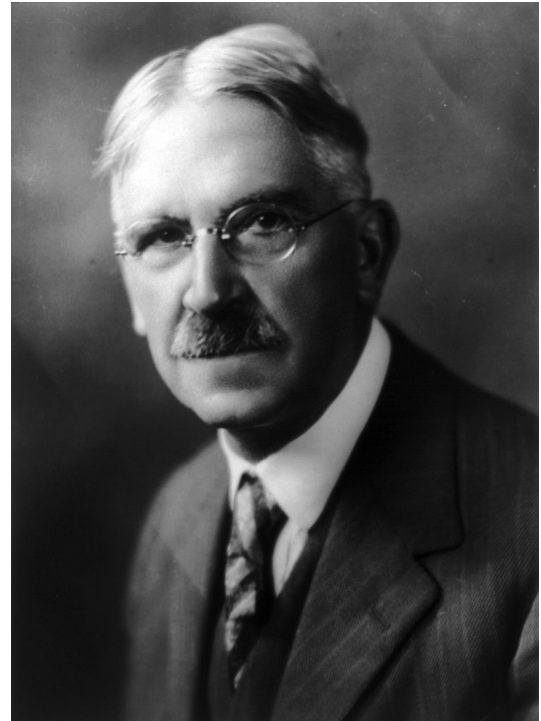


Page from McGuffey’s *Fourth Reader*, 1879 edition

The Progressive era spanning from 1890-1920, was broadly characterized by wider enrollments in public elementary education, and consumer demand for elective education expanding to secondary and university levels.²¹ Educational innovators like John Dewey, who stressed a shift from thinking of education as the transmission established “knowledge” to the practical applications of knowledge also had profound influence in defining the goals and practices of public education. Social mobility and social efficacy became primary goals of education.

The early 20th century was also a time of massive demographic and economic changes in American Society. Waves of immigration of millions of eastern and southern European ethnic groups triggered the cultural anxieties of more established whites. Anglo-conformity dominated textbook writing in the first half of the 20th century, and one of the central purposes of education became to “impose an orthodox set of traditions and values typically prescribed by a white, protestant elite.”²² While school student populations were becoming highly ethnically diverse, especially in immigration centers like New York City, most school administrators were still pf Anglo-saxon origin. Foster notes that by the 1930s, 98% of American school superintendents were born in the states, 90% were Anglo-saxon, and 85% were from rural areas or small towns.²³ As such, the decision-making structures of the public school perpetuated systems of Anglo-saxon ethocentrism.

Economically, the early 20th century, the merger of five textbooks publishers into the American Textbook Company, which consolidated control over 80% of the textbook production market.²⁴ This



John Dewey
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dewey#/media/File:John_Dewey_cph.3a51565.jpg

21 Labaree, David F. “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals.” *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 58.

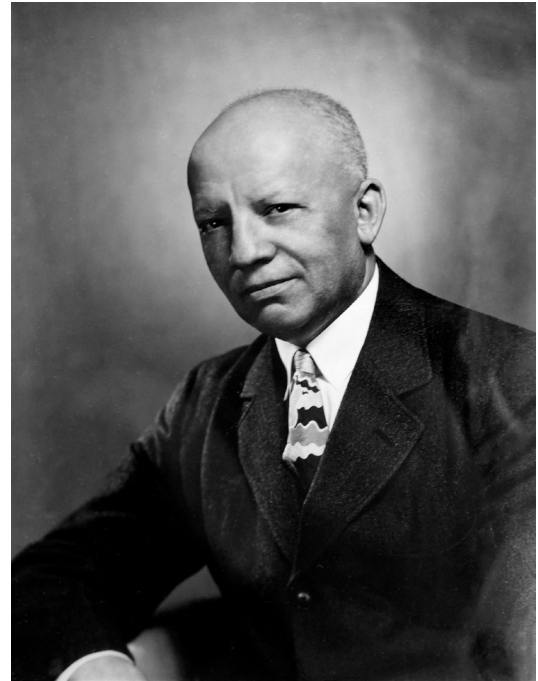
22 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 259..

23 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 260.

24 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 254.

initiated a “golden age” of textbook production, but new texts that developed during this time period were more subject specific, were typically written by historians in a self-professed objective style, and were often visually drab and verbally dense.

At the same time, teaching was still not a profession with high cachet, and teachers with a grammar or high school education were often expected to teach classes of up to 60 children in over 10 subjects.²⁵ Contrary to earlier trends, knowledge was now divided into various disciplines of specific study. By 1900, history has become a required and separate subject in the states of New York, Maryland, and Illinois, and by World War I was common throughout the country as a distinct subject.²⁶ These high demands of poorly paid teachers combined with the proliferation specialized areas of knowledge further increased teacher reliance on textbooks as deliverers of content.



Carter G. Woodson
<http://www.history.com/news/the-man-behind-black-history-month>

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, numerous black writers critiqued the American educational system from the perspective of black education and racial marginalization. Carter G. Woodson, educator, historian, journalist and author, conducted groundbreaking work on black migrational, educational, economic, and cultural history. He wrote his most influential book pertaining to education, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, in 1933. In the text, he interrogates the aims of American education with respect to black students, and strongly critiqued DuBois’ conception of the “talented tenth” who would provide a black leadership class. Reddick stressed that classical education served to bring black intellect “under the control of the oppressor²⁷” and questioned the worldview of “the misdirected Negroes thus trained.²⁸” He laid the groundwork for future approaches of critical, emancipatory, or liberatory pedagogy, by arguing that

25 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 252.

26 Foster, Stuart J. “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks.” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 254.

27 Carter Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (Washington DC: Associated Publishers, 1933), 4.

28 Ibid, 6.

education for black people should be deeply rooted in black traditions, intellectual frameworks, and history. He thought such an approach would constitute a “radical reconstruction... the system of thought which has permitted one man to exploit, oppress, and extirminate another and still be regarded as righteous must be discarded for the new thought as men as bretheren and the idea of God as the lover of all mankind.”²⁹ He stressed this new vision for schooling would prepare students to reconstruct their world in a more just image in solidarity with all black people, rather than absorbing, through education a contempt for non-white traditions.

Building on Woodson’s work, historian and media critic Lawrence D. Reddick, in his article “Racial Attitudes in American History Textbooks of the South,” conducted a content analysis of common textbooks used in 16 southern

states. This piece, written in 1934, categorized five content areas where African Americans were depicted in these texts enslavement, abolitionism, reconstruction, “progress” since emancipation, and the Negro as soldier.³⁰ He was as concerned about omission, and what was left out of texts as he was about the flawed content that was present. About slavery, he observed texts carried myths of black barbarism, laziness, and stupidity, and stressed the supposed beneficence of masters. He also discussed critical omissions, like lack of discussion of forced breeding of enslaved people, and the lack of depictions of the violence that was inherent in the institution.

While many of these themes are still present as subtext in today’s school materials, Reddick also uncovered some forms of rhetoric no longer seen in Virginia textbooks. One glaring example is a pattern he identifies: after discussion of southern Reconstruction era governments and associated political gains for black citizens, textbooks often turned directly to depiction of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) as a non-



Lawrence D. Reddick
http://www.blackpast.org/files/blackpast_images/Lawrence_D__Reddick.jpg

²⁹ Ibid, 69.

³⁰ Lawrence Reddick, “Racial Attitudes in American History Textbooks of the South,” *The Journal of Negro History* 19, no. 3 (July 1934): 226.

violent organization who served the function of restoring “social order.” He quotes one common text: ““It [the Klan] had, however, put a damper on the political aspirations of the Negro and had done much to reestablish white supremacy in the South.””³¹ While these texts depicted the KKK as peaceful, texts also often showed graphic illustrations of members visiting terror on black American’s homes.

Reddick’s concludes his study with a series of questions: ““How much is fact? How much rationalization? How much propaganda? These specific questions converge into a general proposition which seems fundamental to the nature of the state: ‘If education is to be considered the leaven and lever of democracy, to what extent are the efforts toward national unity and political solidarity defeated by sectional, racial, or any special-group tendencies?’””³² With these questions, Reddick set textbook and curricular content as objects of critical study with regard to perception, meaning, and societal structure that are later taken up by educational thinkers and social scientists.

The mid-20th Century and Virginia Histories

Historian Adam Dean, in his piece “Who Controls the Past Controls the Future” notes that during this time and shortly after, that both public school students and “the thousands of Virginia soldiers who enrolled in the U.S. Army’s World War II education programs learned Lost Cause versions of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction”³³ that Reddick had observed earlier in the 1900s. But in 1947, President Harry Truman made a strong commitment to equality by appointing the Committee on Civil Rights, which concluded that segregation was indefensible especially given the service of black Americans in World War II.³⁴

Led by Harry F. Byrd’s conservative Democratic machine, part of the Virginia’s state government’s response was to turn its attention to textbook content. Dean notes that “fear of civil rights agitation prompted state authorities to exert control over Virginias textbooks.”³⁵ In 1948, the Virginia Advisory Legislative Council recommended a “revamping of the State Department of Education with a study of

31 Ibid, 256.

32 Ibid, 265.

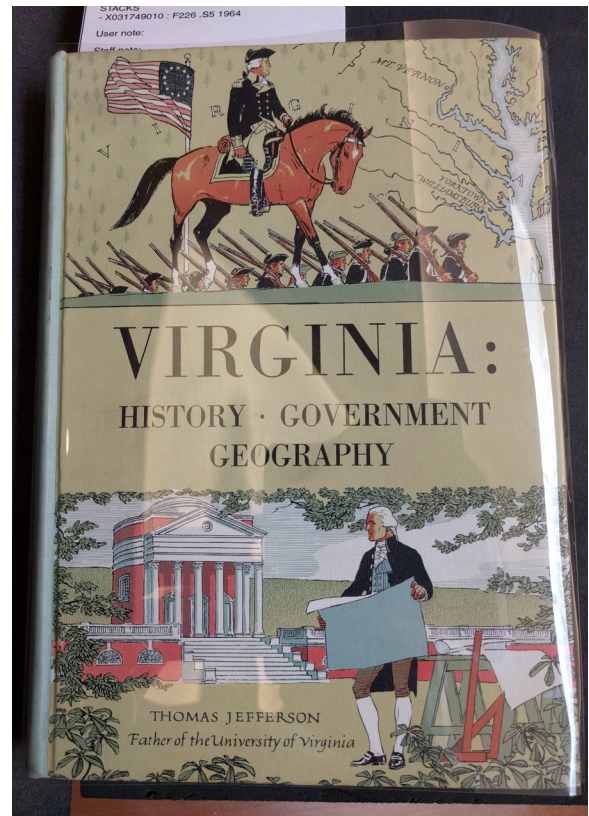
33 Adam Dean, “Who Controls the Past Controls the Future: The Virginia History Textbook Controversy,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117, no. 4 (2009): 321.

34 Ibid, 322.

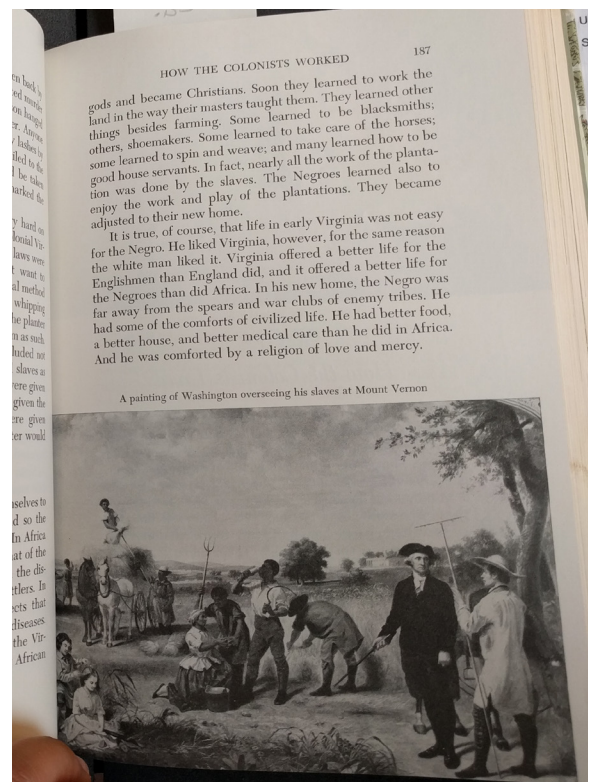
35 Adam Dean, “Who Controls the Past Controls the Future: The Virginia History Textbook Controversy,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117, no. 4 (2009): 323.

priorities in education.³⁶ The General Assembly established a Commission to Study the Curricula and Teaching of Certain Matters in Secondary Schools (better known as the Bird Commission) and tasked them with reviewing Virginians' understandings of US history and governmental structures. It assessed available textbooks and in 1951 notified the General Assembly that Virginia children had inadequate understandings of history and that "it had not found any suitable existing texts, so it had arranged for new ones to be written"³⁷

This declaration opened a period of unprecedented government oversight in Virginia textbook writing. Because no publisher would take on such a large project for such a specific market without some guarantee of sales, Virginia agreed that chosen texts would be adopted without competition for six years. But in order for the state to have oversight over content, the publisher had to agree to revise any text deemed inaccurate or unsuitable by the Commission, who would be entitled to a line-by-line review of textbook content.³⁸ Through an elaborate request for qualifications (RFQ) process, the Commission hired two companies: Scribner and Sons to publish 4th and 7th grade textbooks, and Harper and Brothers to produce high school



1957 Fourth Grade Virginia History Textbook (author photo)



1957 Fourth Grade Virginia History Textbook expounds on supposed feelings of the enslaved (author photo)

36 Adam Dean, "Who Controls the Past Controls the Future: The Virginia History Textbook Controversy," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117, no. 4 (2009): 323.

37 Carol Sheriff, "Virginia's Embattled Textbooks: Lessons (Learned and Not) from the Centennial Era," *Civil War History* 58, no. 1 (March 2012): 49.

38 Carol Sheriff, "Virginia's Embattled Textbooks: Lessons (Learned and Not) from the Centennial Era," *Civil War History* 58, no. 1 (March 2012): 49.

textbooks.

Thus began a long and painful set of conversations between authors, publishers and the Textbook Commission. The Commission, populated by political associates of Virginia's conservative establishment, continually advocated for a white, elite Virginian perspective, where Virginia was within its rights to secede from the union, where Confederate officials and soldiers were lauded and respected, where slavery was beneficial for the enslaved, and where controversy was quelled by hiding the presence of black people whenever possible. The Commission and publishers corresponded for several years over content, and argued over not only the facts of the book, but also the Commission's perceptions of the "gratuitous insults" to the state and the "boastful" un-Virginian tone taken by the textbook authors even when singing Virginia's praises.³⁹ During an 1953 meeting of the Commission, the group admitted the books were factually correct, but that Martin Schlegel, the author of the high school text, did not "understand what Virginia stands for and consequently he has missed the point."⁴⁰ This author was soon replaced by William Hemphill, a Virginian. The resulting collection of required texts, generally dubbed the "Virginia Histories" reflected romanticized notions of Virginia history and the biases of Textbook Commissioners.

The Virginia histories "sparked immediate and enduring controversy"⁴¹ after their publication in the late 1950s. Some involved in the production of the texts, like deposed author Martin Schegel and Scribner editor Lawrence Burnette Jr. publicly criticized the Commission's fixation with a white Virginian cultural framework. Later, the NAACP campaigned for improved portrayals of African-Americans, and the Norfolk *Virginia-Pilot* ran a 3 part series blasting the Virginia histories in 1965. In the piece, the *Virginia-Pilot* quoted author Schegel that history "is a method of indoctrination. It is taught as an mythology of our society, embodying our ideals."⁴² Despite public pressures, the State of Virginia continued to use the books throughout the 1960s, with only the most minor edits adding mention of Harriet Tubman and slightly tweaking the depictions of slavery in the middle of that decade. In 1972, the Virginia Department of Education decommissioned the Virginia histories, thus ending the era of direct government oversight of textbooks. However, these books were actually still used in many Virginia classrooms until the late

39 Carol Sheriff, "Virginia's Embattled Textbooks: Lessons (Learned and Not) from the Centennial Era," *Civil War History* 58, no. 1 (March 2012): 54.

40 Ibid, 55.

41 Ibid, 65.

42 Ibid, 67

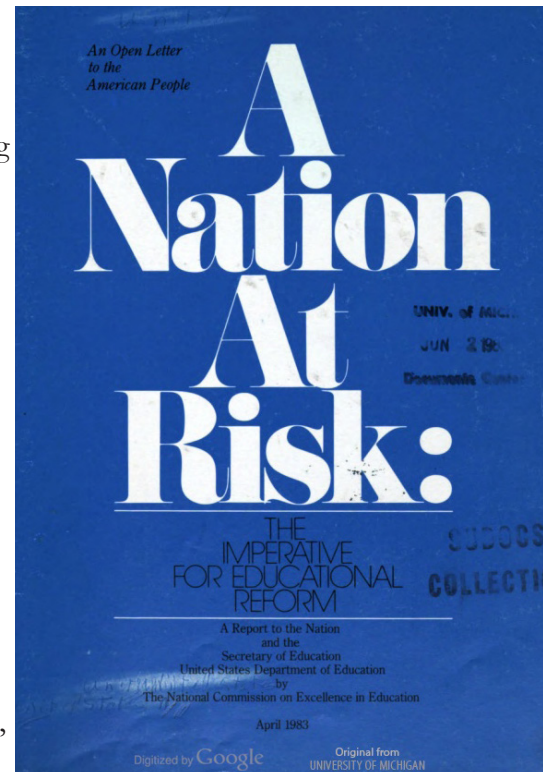
1970s.⁴³ Having felt the burn of public outcry over direct government intervention in textbooks, Virginia to a more free-market approach to textbooks at this time, switching to providing recommended history texts list rather than state-mandated common texts.

1960s to Today

In the 1960s and 1970s, schools focused back on goals of democratic equality and citizen education that were primary concerns of earlier periods.⁴⁴ Publishers responding to the pressures of the Civil Right and Anti-Vietnam War protest movements moved to eliminate explicit racial bias from most texts.⁴⁵ At this time, many publishers turned to multiculturalism, looking to incorporate more immigrant and ethnic and racial minority narratives into textbook content, though these additions often left the white elite history remaining in texts unchallenged.

This time also saw the passage of Lyndon B. Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that provided extensive federal funding to public schools as part of his "War on Poverty."

The small gains of multiculturalist approaches, however, have been subsumed by heated ideological battles over content and the resurgence of conservative elements in educational debate which has characterized the 1980s to the present. These developments in some ways echo the Virginia Textbook Commission proceedings of the 1950s. In 1983, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education appointed the National Commission on Excellence in Education to compose a report of the state of American education. The resulting tome, *A Nation at Risk*, contributed to the ongoing narrative that argued that American education was not creating a globally competitive work force, and that elementary and secondary schools



A Nation at Risk, 1983
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Nation_at_Risk#/media/File:A_Nation_at_Risk.jpeg

⁴³ Ibid, 69.

⁴⁴ Labaree, David F. "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals." *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 58.

⁴⁵ Stuart J. Foster, "The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks," *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 266.

should eliminate “non-essential” content⁴⁶. Conservative educational reformers have since focused on contest mobility which stresses comparative student and school performance and standardized testing over generalized learning.⁴⁷ These arguments won the day in 2001 with the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which formalized the premise that standardized testing could measure educational success and schools and teachers should be held accountable to this standard through Federal funding. Under this law, Virginia formed its Standards of Learning (SOLs) which are a mechanism still used today to regulate content for standardized testing, and classroom curriculum. While Congress stripped NCLB of its federal oversight provisions in 2015, they replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which turned the power of school assessment and accountability to the states.

Concurrent with legislative reforms, conservative intellectuals like University of Virginia’s own E. D. Hirsch have argued for a return to an Anglo-Saxon ethocentric approach to education, stressing the primacy of Western classical thought as providing universal “truths” that are essential knowledge. Books like Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* and Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* are examples of these arguments. Educational critics Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux summarize their positions as follows:

“On this account, the 1960s proved disastrous to the preservation of the inherited virtues of Western culture. Relativism systematically downgraded the value of key literary and philosophical traditions, giving equal weight to the dominant knowledge of the ‘Great Books’ as to an emergent potpourri of ‘degraded’ cultural attitudes. Allegedly, the last twenty years have witnessed the virtual loss of those revered traditions that constitute the core of Western Heritage.”⁴⁸

Thinkers like Hirsch and Bloom have been very influential in textbook content debates, and one can see echoes of these points in the rhetoric of the Trump campaign and its’ nostalgic admonishment to “Make America Great Again.”

In the present day, the influence of public school history and civics textbooks is still incredibly strong. Stuart Foster notes that teacher reliance on textbooks to provide structure and curricula for

46 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 78.

47 Labaree, David F. “Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals.” *American Educational Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 59.

48 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 213.

elementary and high school classes is still around 80%, as it was in the 1930s.⁴⁹ Foster also notes that four major themes in textbook content serve to provide a narrow and skewed conception of American history and identity. First, textbooks tend toward a celebratory nationalism, rushing to celebrate American “progress.” Second, they work to perpetuate the American Dream, where the only barriers to wealth and success are one’s own limitations. Third, textbooks prescribe middle class prosperity and values as the only acceptable cultural frame, and last, they tend to ignore questions of inequality that exist in history and persist to the present day.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Stuart J. Foster, “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks,” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 252..

⁵⁰ Ibid, 267.

Part II: Legal and Economic Processes of Textbook Selection and Production

Textbooks and the Law: Governmental Processes

The selection and approval of textbooks for public school classroom use centers around state-level government. The Virginia State Constitution, Article VIII, 5(d) authorizes the Virginia Board of Education to approve textbooks and instruction aids for use in public schools.⁵¹ The Code of Virginia, Section 22.1-238 further requires the Board of Education to approve texts, and provide a list of all approved materials on its website.⁵² The Virginia Code also gives local school boards the power to select any book for use as a textbook as long as the school board selects materials in accordance with the regulations of the Board of Education.

The textbook review process in Virginia is spelled out by the Virginia Board of Education (BOE), a nine-member board appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the General Assembly (see **figure 2.1** for flow chart of process). The BOE initiates review by approving the textbook review process prepared by the Department of Education, and sets the schedule for the approval of specific textbooks for the four core areas of English, Math, Science, and History & Social Science.⁵³

The Virginia Department of Education (DOE), who administers the review process on behalf of the Board of Education, then invites publishers to submit textbooks. Interested publishers show their intent to publish textbooks through submission of a two-part form. The first part is the publisher certification form which states that the company has sufficient content experts, that books will be edited for copy errors, that the books will comply with Virginia laws, and that detail the company has a sufficient quality assurance process.⁵⁴ The second part is an agreement wherein the publisher agrees to correct all fact or editing errors at their expense, and that if significant errors are found, that the state may withdraw their text from the approved list. While the publishers agree to allow DOE review of texts for accuracy, correlation to the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL), bias, content, and public comment, the publisher is

51 “Virginia’s Textbook Review Process” (Virginia Department of Education, March 24, 2011), 1.

52 Ibid, 1.

53 Ibid, 2.

54 Ibid, 3.

Appendix A

Virginia's Proposed Revised Textbook Approval Process

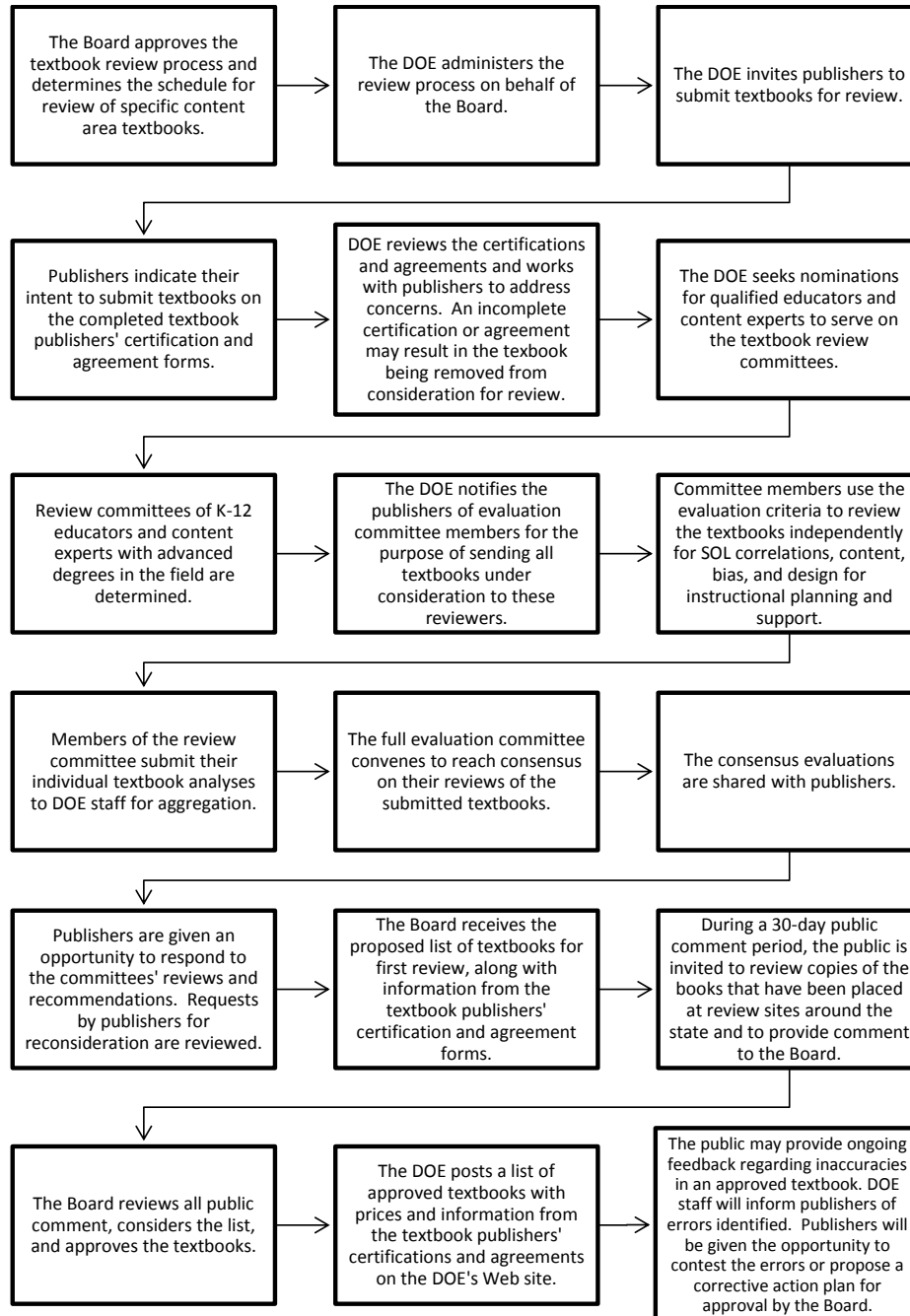


Figure 2.1: Virginia Board of Education flow chart for review and approval process for textbooks
“Virginia’s Textbook Review Process” (Virginia Department of Education, March 24, 2011), 9.

ultimately responsible for the factual accuracy of their texts.⁵⁵

Concurrently, the DOE seeks nominations for educators and content experts to serve on review committees. DOE collects nominations from division superintendents for teachers, principals, administrators and content experts to serve on the committees, and collaborates with local higher education institutions to find appropriate content experts. DOE makes an effort to find committee members from all over the state of Virginia, and each committee gets at least one teacher, one division level content specialist, and one subject matter expert.⁵⁶ Textbooks are distributed to committees, reviewed (see **figures 2.2-2.3** for review criteria and **figure 2.4** for example of SOL for textbook content correlation), and comments are consolidated and returned to publishers.

Once the review committees have finished their work, the DOE's Superintendent of Public Instruction reviews the recommended list of texts submitted by reviewers, and makes a recommendation to the BOE to accept the texts for review. Once the BOE accepts the texts for review, a 30 day public examination period begins, and "the Board reviews all public comment, considers the list, and approves the textbooks."⁵⁷ Once this process is complete, books are listed on the approved list for the state. However, these texts are subject to ongoing public comment via electronic mail. The DOE tells publishers about any errors found by the public, and the BOE has sole discretion to remove books from the approved list at any time.

School boards throughout Virginia, elected at the local level, then adopt textbooks for use in public schools. School boards appoint their own textbook review committees, provide copies of books under consideration for review by the public, provide mechanisms through which the public can share comments with the school board, and publicize selection criteria.⁵⁸ In Charlottesville, the currently adopted history texts are *Our Virginia* for 5th grade Virginia Studies, *Our America* and *American Journey* for 6th and 7th grades, and *The Americans* for high school.⁵⁹

55 Ibid, 3.

56 Ibid, 5.

57 Ibid, 6.

58 "TEXTBOOK SELECTION, ADOPTION, AND PURCHASE" (Charlottesville City Schools, June 27, 2016), <http://charlottesvilleschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/IIAA.pdf>, 1.

59 Anne Evans, "Question: Textbooks," n.d.

Evaluation Criteria Used by Textbook Review Committee

Section II: Rubric for Instructional Design and Support (Reported and may be used in correlation and approval considerations.)

Adequate A	Limited L (Note: Provide examples to support this rating.)	No Evidence N (Note: Provide examples to support this rating.)
Criterion 1 - Textbook is presented in an organized, logical manner and is appropriate for the age, grade, and maturity of the students.		
Textbook is logically organized and grade/age appropriate for students.	Textbook lacks consistency in organization and appropriateness for the grade/age of students.	Textbook is not reasonably organized and is inappropriate for the grade/age of the students.
Criterion 2 - Textbook is organized appropriately within and among units of study.		
Scope and sequence is easy to read and understand.	Scope and sequence is confusing and not easy to understand.	Scope and sequence is difficult to read and understand.
Criterion 3 - Format design includes titles, subheadings, and appropriate cross-referencing for ease of use.		
Organizational properties of the textbook assist in understanding and processing content.	Organizational properties of the textbook offer limited assistance in understanding and processing content.	Organizational properties of the textbook do not assist in understanding and processing content.
Criterion 4 - Writing style, syntax, and vocabulary are appropriate.		
Readability is appropriate for the grade level. Writing style and syntax are varied and appropriate to enhance student understanding. Vocabulary consists of both familiar and challenging words.	Readability may be appropriate but is inconsistent throughout the text. Writing style and syntax may be inappropriate or lack variety, offering limited support for student understanding. Vocabulary may be too challenging or too familiar.	Readability is not appropriate for the grade level. Writing style and syntax are often inappropriate and lack variety to enhance student understanding. Vocabulary is too challenging or unfamiliar.
Criterion 5 - Graphics and illustrations are appropriate.		
Visuals are accurate, support the text, and enhance student understanding.	Visuals are somewhat unclear and offer limited support for the text and student understanding.	Visuals are inaccurate, do not support the text, and do not enhance student understanding.
Criterion 6 - Sufficient instructional strategies are provided to promote depth of understanding.		
Materials provide students with opportunities to integrate skills and concepts.	Materials provide students with limited opportunities to integrate skills and concepts.	Materials provide students with no opportunities to integrate skills and concepts.

Note: Any subject area criteria that are required in state statute will be included as part of the state review. The Department of Education may establish criteria indicators that are subject-area specific.

Figure 2.2: Virginia Board of Education Evaluation Matrix for Textbook Review Committees
“Virginia’s Textbook Review Process” (Virginia Department of Education, March 24, 2011), 20.

Evaluation Criteria Used by Textbook Review Committee

Section I: Correlation with the Standards of Learning

Determine the degree to which content found in these textbooks is correlated with the Standards of Learning and the Curriculum Framework for this subject.		
Adequate A	Limited L (Note: Provide examples to support this rating.)	No Evidence N (Note: Provide examples to support this rating.)
Lessons are aligned with the standards.	Limited connections between the standards and the lessons are noted.	No correlation between the standards and the lessons.
Content appears accurate, clear, and in sequential order.	Content appears to contain some inaccuracies or is not always clear.	A logical sequence of content cannot be identified and/or there appear to be significant content inaccuracies.
Most of the essential understandings, knowledge, and skills are supported.	Essential understandings, knowledge, or skills are not sufficiently addressed.	Essential understandings, knowledge, or skills are not addressed.
Many opportunities are provided for students to practice essential skills.	There is limited opportunity for students to practice essential skills.	Opportunities to practice essential skills are not included.
Comments or concerns related to content accuracy, bias, or editing:		

Figure 2.3: Virginia Board of Education Evaluation Matrix for Textbook Review Committees
“Virginia’s Textbook Review Process” (Virginia Department of Education, March 24, 2011), 21.

Virginia Studies

The standards for Virginia Studies allow students to develop a greater understanding of Virginia's rich history, from the cultures of its native peoples and the founding of Jamestown to the present. Geographic, economic, and civic concepts are presented within this historical context. Students will develop the skills needed to analyze, interpret, and demonstrate knowledge of important events and ideas in our history, and will understand the contributions made by people of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Students will use geographic tools to examine the influence of physical and cultural geography on Virginia history. Ideas that form the foundation for political institutions in Virginia and the United States also will be included as part of the story of Virginia.

The study of history must emphasize the intellectual skills required for responsible citizenship. Students practice these skills as they extend their understanding of the essential knowledge defined by all of the standards for history and social science.

Skills

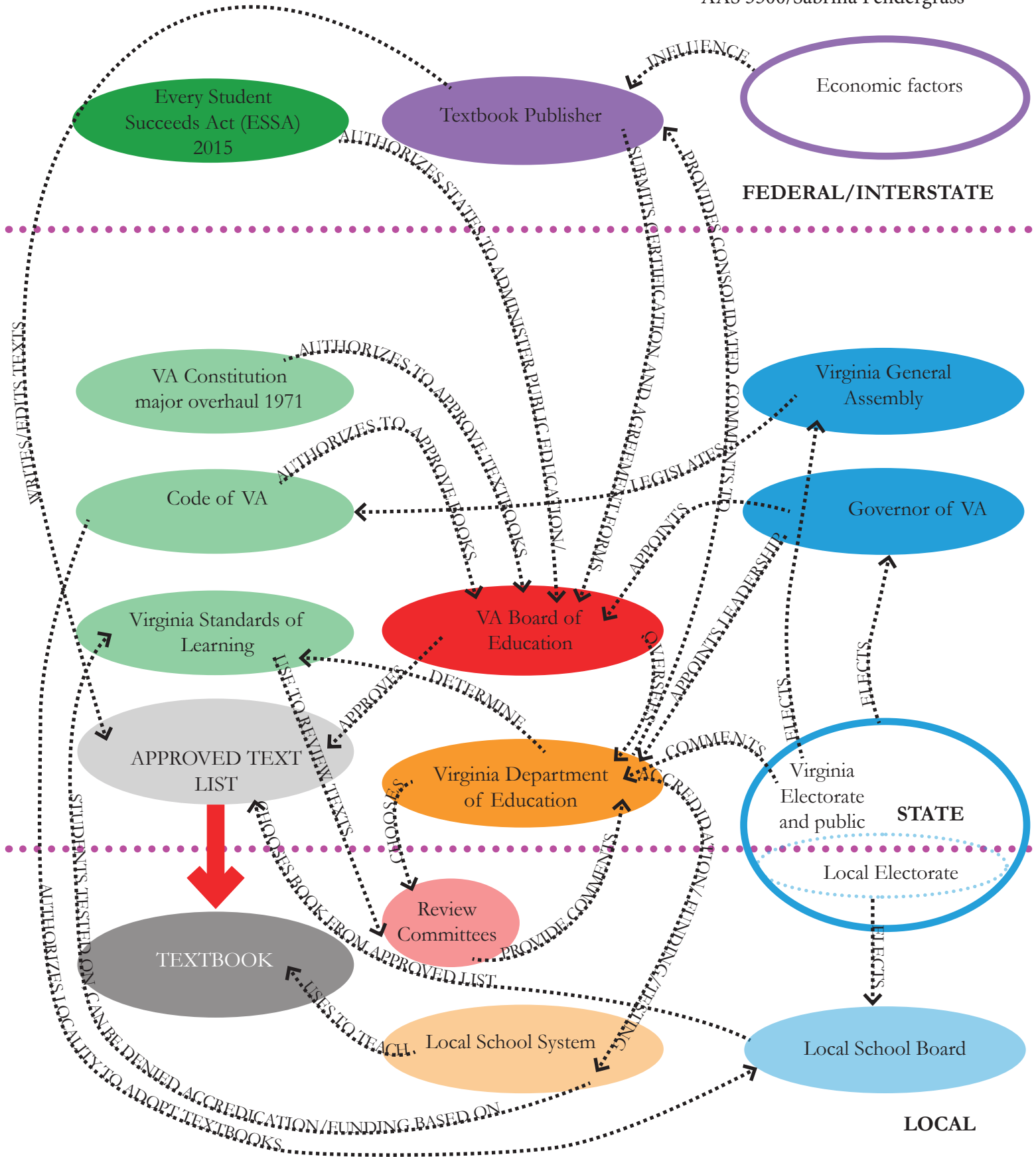
- VS.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis and responsible citizenship, including the ability to
- identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand events in history;
 - determine cause-and-effect relationships;
 - compare and contrast historical events;
 - draw conclusions and make generalizations;
 - make connections between past and present;
 - sequence events in Virginia history;
 - interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives;
 - evaluate and discuss issues orally and in writing;
 - analyze and interpret maps to explain relationships among landforms, water features, climatic characteristics, and historical events.

Virginia: The Physical Geography and Native Peoples

- VS.2 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the physical geography and native peoples, past and present, of Virginia by
- locating Virginia and its bordering states on maps of the United States;
 - locating and describing Virginia's Coastal Plain (Tidewater), Piedmont, Blue Ridge Mountains, Valley and Ridge, and Appalachian Plateau;
 - locating and identifying water features important to the early history of Virginia (Atlantic Ocean, Chesapeake Bay, James River, York River, Potomac River, Rappahannock River, and Lake Drummond and the Dismal Swamp);
 - locating three American Indian language groups (the Algonquian, the Siouan, and the Iroquoian) on a map of Virginia;
 - describing how American Indians related to the climate and their environment to secure food, clothing, and shelter;
 - describing how archaeologists have recovered new material evidence at sites including Werowocomoco and Jamestown;
 - identifying and locating the current state-recognized tribes.

While the official textbook review and adoption processes above may seem straightforward, many layers of public and governmental decision-making underlie these processes. **Figure 2.5** maps the most salient processes involved in approving textbook content in Virginia. Some channels of control, such as the direct election of state and local policymakers and school boards, involve direct accountability to the electorate. But many decision points are embedded deeper in the structure of the administration, especially at the state level, with administrative and appointed bodies like the DOE and BOE and their administration of SOLs and textbook approvals.

This mapping brings up a few points worth highlighting. First, the Virginia Board of Education and the Virginia Department of Education have broad influence upon many facets of the administration of the public education system in Virginia. These bodies are un-elected. The nine members of the BOE are appointed directly by the governor. The DOE is mostly composed of career administrators, and headed by the Virginia Secretary of Education and Superintendent of Instruction, both also appointed by the governor. Though the top leadership of the agencies may change drastically over different governors' administrations, opportunities do exist to form relationships with longer-term administrators in the Department of Education who determine Virginia's SOLs. Second, the Virginia SOLs have an outsized effect on both the process of writing and adopting textbooks for local use, as textbook authors and reviewers know correlation with the SOLs is one of the biggest factors in adoption to the state approved textbook list. Under the current governmental and regulatory landscape, changes to the SOLs seem to have the biggest potential for changing textbook content. Finally, since the publisher is primarily responsible for the content and accuracy of textbook materials, their internal processes, and the economic factors driving their practices should be a focus of study for anyone who wants to understand how textbook content is determined.



Regulatory Structures

Non-elected parties

Elected Entities

Figure 2.5: Diagram of relationships in the selection and adoption of textbooks in Virginia

Textbooks and Money: The Publishing Industry

Economic factors loom large in determining textbook design and content. Older statistics indicate that in 1980, total book sales totaled about \$6 billion, one quarter of that total coming from elementary, primary, and college textbooks.⁶⁰ Today the total revenues for the publishing industry have more than quadrupled, and were close to \$28 billion in 2015.⁶¹ As the publishing industry has gotten more consolidated due to the high costs of producing textbooks, a smaller number of large firms have become more competitive, and highly risk averse. By the early 1990s, the top five publishing companies controlled 58% of the textbook market.⁶² For the elementary through high school, or “elhi” market, while outright censorship is not a big issue, the “bottom line is- if there is any censorship, it concerns profitability. Books that are not profitable, no matter what their subject, are not viewed favorably.”⁶³

Publishing processes intersect in some ways with state governmental processes. Some 22 states, mostly in the South, require government review and approval of texts. Large states like Texas, Florida, and California have a disproportionate influence on the content of textbooks, and the “political and ideological climate of these primarily southern states often determines the content and form of the purchased curriculum throughout the rest of the nation.”⁶⁴

As a result of these conservative tendencies, book publishers tend to produce texts specifically designed to minimize controversy. When broader narratives of marginalized groups are added to text, they are often added in a way that does not threaten the fundamental structures of the texts: “very little tends to be dropped from textbooks. Major ideological frameworks do not get markedly changed.”⁶⁵ Thus, practices like “mentioning” prevail, where racial or ethnic minority figures are introduced but not put in context, and depictions often serve to reinforce or rationalize dominant narrative structures rather than challenge them.

Some observers of textbooks have noted that the fundamental structure of textbooks for primary and secondary school have remained virtually unchanged over the last 100 years. Stroup and Giroux note in

60 Ibid, 28.

61 “U.S. Publishing Industry’s Annual Survey Reveals Nearly \$28 Billion in Revenue in 2015,” accessed December 6, 2017, <http://newsroom.publishers.org/us-publishing-industrys-annual-survey-reveals-nearly-28-billion-in-revenue-in-2015/>.

62 Stuart J. Foster, “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks,” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 273..

63 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991,31.

64 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 32.

65 Ibid, 10.

their book: “the introductory American government course follows much the same format everywhere, and has changed very little since Ogg and Ray’s classic *Introduction to American Government* was published in 1922.”⁶⁶ Publishing companies pay a great deal of attention today to graphics, maps, and coordination between digital, text, and curricular support materials. But as a result of this tendency to leave driving narrative and organizational structures intact, textbooks have an incredible cultural inertia, and carry heavy traces of the structural frameworks of early 20th century textbook authors.

Another important factor in the production of textbooks is the internal social structure of publishing companies. As in many industries, gender-based divisions in publishing mirror carry the biased structures of long-standing corporate structures. Women are often in subsidiary rights, publicity departments, and are often copy editors and administrative workers in low-level positions. Michael Apple notes that “the lower-paying, replaceable jobs, ones with less possibility for advancement, form the ‘female enclaves.’”⁶⁷ He further notes that the men in control of “legitimate content which students are to receive as ‘official knowledge’ are made by individuals who have specific characteristics. The vast majority of these editors will be male, thereby reproducing patriarchal relations within the firm itself.”⁶⁸

These economic factors conspire with governmental

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Frederic Ogg and P. Orman Ray, *Introduction to American Government* (New York: Century

66 Daniel Stroup and William Garriot, “Teaching American Government: An Alternative to Ogg and Ray,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 30, no. 1 (1997): 73

67 Ibid, 29.

68 Ibid, 29.

controls mentioned in the previous section conspire to create textbooks that convey a very narrow lens on American history and government. Textbooks tend to emphasize the idea of linear progression of nationalistic themes and provide an overly celebratory outlook of “progress” in American History. Books tout the imagined meritocratic ideal of the American Dream, promising universal opportunity while at the same time blaming individual action for lack of economic success. They also generally reinforce white middle class prosperity and values as the ultimate goal of broader society, and ignore questions of inequity that pervade our country.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Stuart J. Foster, “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks,” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 267..

Part III: Cultural Approaches to Textbooks

Critiques of Textbook Content: Individual Fictions

As the above sections have indicated, many critics of modern American textbooks have noted that “whites receive the most attention, are shown in the widest variety of roles, and dominate the story line and lists of accomplishments.”⁷⁰ This white-centric view takes a number of different forms.

First, the overall telling of American history tends to center around elite white men as the sole drivers of history, and “African-Americans’ active participation is treated as a separate entity from the rest of the country’s development” rather than an integral part of an American narrative.⁷¹ Books also tend to ignore the history of Africans before enslavement,⁷² and this is part of a larger pattern of depicting people of color only in relationship to white people, and not in relationship to each other.

Second is the tendency to underrepresent black people, and to provide distorted and stereotypical imagery when African-Americans are depicted in textbooks. Experiences of social class and poverty that disproportionately impact communities of color are not given much attention: “social class and poverty simply do not appear on the curricular agenda.”⁷³ To make matters worse, many texts lump “women and minorities” together, as if there is no intersection between the two, and that experiences of black women have no significant difference from experiences of white women.⁷⁴ Further, scholars Schocker and Woyschner observe that representations of black women are “virtually absent from mainstream high school US history texts.”⁷⁵ One author notes that these distorted and decontextualized images of black people, and the “infusion of bits and pieces of ethnic minority groups into the curriculum not only reinforces the idea that ethnic minority groups are not integral parts of U.S. society, it also results in the trivialization of ethnic cultures.”⁷⁶

Third is a stripping of black people of agency in the telling of history. Wallace and Allen, in their

70 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 97.

71 Sherri L. Wallace and Marcus D. Allen, “Survey of African American Portrayal in Introductory Textbooks in American Government/Politics: A Report of the APSA Standing Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Profession,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 01 (January 2008): 155.44.

72 Carter Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (Washington DC: Associated Publishers, 1933), 64.

73 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 98.

74 Sherri L. Wallace and Marcus D. Allen, “Survey of African American Portrayal in Introductory Textbooks in American Government/Politics: A Report of the APSA Standing Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Profession,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 01 (January 2008): 156.

75 Jessica Schocker and Christine Woyschner, “Representing African American Women in U.S. History Textbooks,” *The Social Studies* 104 (2013): 23.

76 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 99..

analysis note that “textbooks do not show African Americans as active agents (if at all) until the Civil Rights Movement.”⁷⁷ They observe that early scholars like W.E.B DuBois argued for a reframing of history in this way, and these arguments have not yet been heeded by American textbook publishers: “by his incessant struggle to be free [the black slave] broadened the basis of democracy in America and the world.”⁷⁸

Finally, textbooks distort black experiences by focusing almost exclusively on subjugation and resistance. When black people are not being depicted as slaves, they are depicted as fighters, resulting, as one historian notes in: “the focus on showing African Americans as assertive rebels[...] implied an uncomfortable collary. [...] once the violence of slavery was minimized, another voice could whisper, saying that African Americans, both before and after emancipation, were denied the rights of citizens because they would not fight for them.”⁷⁹

Critiques of Textbook Content: Structural Fictions

At a larger scale, one fundamental half-truth in American textbooks is a distorted view of structures of power in American history and life. Political scientist David Menefee-Libey argues that both throughout American history and in contemporary America, the private sector has been so interwoven with structures of government that it should be deemed a fourth player in the system of “checks and balances” along with the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.⁸⁰ Current textbooks tend to depict “business” and “government” as in opposition to each other, but this outlook masks a long-standing interdependence between the two. Governments at all levels have and continue to use corporations to implement public policy, and as an engine for the economic development for the nation.⁸¹ Corporations in turn influence governments. They shape public policy through lobbying for and writing policy through organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). High ranking executives from major corporations often fill public offices at some point in their careers.⁸²

77 Sherri L. Wallace and Marcus D. Allen, “Survey of African American Portrayal in Introductory Textbooks in American Government/Politics: A Report of the APSA Standing Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Profession,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 01 (January 2008): 155.

78 Ibid, 158.

79 Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014), 16-17.

80 David Menefee-Libey, “High School Civics Textbooks: What We Know Versus What We Teach about American Politics and Public Policy,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 11 (2015): 422–41.

81 Ibid, 423

82 Ibid, 424.

This practice of showing history devoid of its economic entanglements has profound impacts on the depictions of racial history, and the moral conundrums underlying American History. In an example from University of Virginia, founder Thomas Jefferson is often seen as a man representing a larger paradox embedded in American structures. How can a man (and by extension a country) who so loudly appealed to human liberty and freedom also have been a slaveholder? A look at the relationships between economics and structures of power can provide some insights.

Historian Edward Baptist, provides a partial answer in his groundbreaking book *The Half Has Never Been Told*, which explores the institution of slavery as the basis for American capitalism. He argues that contrary to textbook depictions that slavery was an anachronistic institution destined to “die out” during the 19th century. In reality, the institution of slavery was the *primary engine* that launched the American economy into its current dominant place in the world economy, and that “the commodification and suffering and forced labor of African Americans is what made the United States powerful and rich.”⁸³ As such, slavery should be framed as fundamentally interwoven with the history of American wealth and power.

Other scholars, digging further into the ties between American governmental and economic worlds, have argued that in the early days of the US, the dissonance we see today between “freedom” and slavery was not seen as a contradiction, and that a deep commitment to protecting the property rights of a moneyed few is a core value written into our nation’s founding documents. Educational scholars Ladson-Billings and Tate paraphrase lawyer Derrick Bell in his analysis that in the Constitution, “there exists a tension between property rights and human rights. [...] The purpose of the government was to protect the main object of society—property. The slave status of most African Americans (as well as women and children) resulted in their being objectified as property. And, a government constructed to protect the rights of property



Thomas Jefferson as Paradox?

“Slavery at Jefferson’s Monticello: Paradox of Liberty | Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello,” accessed December 6, 2017, <https://www.monticello.org/slavery-at-monticello>.

⁸³ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group, 2014), 19-20.

owners lacked the incentive to secure human rights for the African American.”⁸⁴ In this line of argument, narratives of individual freedom serve as a smokescreen to hide the true priorities of the early American republic. They posit that the “contradiction of a reified symbolic individual juxtaposed to the reality of ‘real estate’ means that emphasis on the centrality of property can be disguised.”⁸⁵

Menefee Libey traces these deceptions even further into the chronology of American history. He identifies that conventions of Common law from England that became the basis for American law that granted charters which conferred “personhood” onto corporations.⁸⁶ These charters some granted in the early days of America, gave economic entities personhood status well before *actual black people* were granted the same status. He notes that beginning in the 1820s, and especially after the Civil War, the American government “moves to encourage and protect the development of corporations into the most powerful drivers of economic growth.”⁸⁷

Through even further extension of this lens of economic analysis, we see what in American legal and cultural systems, whiteness itself can be seen as the ultimate property of appreciable value. Law professor Cheryl Harris posed this claim in her article “Whiteness as Property” in the *Harvard Law Review*: “Possession—the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property—was defined to include only the cultural practices of Whites. This definition laid the foundation for the idea that whiteness—that which Whites alone possess—is valuable and is property.”⁸⁸ She delineates the ways in which whiteness has functioned as property: whiteness is alienable or transferrable (people are materially rewarded for conforming to white norms), whiteness confers rights for use and enjoyment (the construct of whiteness entitles one to certain societal privileges which are not available to everyone), whiteness confers a good “reputation” (it can be “diminished” or “slandered” by association with blackness), and whiteness confers the absolute right to exclude (the one-drop rule being an example).⁸⁹

Through these observations of the property functions of whiteness in American society, Harris

84 Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 97, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 53.

85 Ibid, 56

86 David Menefee-Libey, “High School Civics Textbooks: What We Know Versus What We Teach about American Politics and Public Policy,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 11 (2015): 424.

87 Ibid, 424.

88 Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 97, no. 1 (Fall 1995):58-9.

89 Ibid, 59.

links property rights, to a system of the structural rewards and prioritizations of white norms and cultural knowledge. Property rights have always had a primary place in American law, and are the basic unit of power in the American system. As long as the only legitimate claim to possession of property and power hinge so closely on white cultural practices, there will be no room for the valuation of other modes of thought.

At the same time that the construct of whiteness has been conferring huge material benefits to those who possess it, textbooks are working to hide the threads of wealth accumulation and power that result from the centrality of a white male cultural frame. Some critical race theorists argue that the mainstream depiction of the civil rights movement in textbooks consumes the visible struggle of mid-century African Americans in a false narrative of linear “progress” that fits the broader framing popular in textbooks. For example, Derrick Bell, in his legal practice observed that the Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education* is touted as a substantive victory for equal rights, but that the policies and practices that emerged after the decision did not significantly improve the quality of black education, and so decision has more symbolic place reinforcing a myth of racial progress that allow the white mainstream to pat itself on the back.⁹⁰

Anthony and Keffrelyn Brown’s content analysis of contemporary K-12 history books brings up further points on the suppression of connections between racial violence and white material privilege. They note that when acts of racial violence are discussed in these Texas-adopted texts, authors tended to “highlight individuals and/or group(s) of individual(s) as the perpetrators of such acts.”⁹¹ Through these depictions, textbooks give the impression that racist acts are a product of individual moral failings and hate, and are not tied to the larger societal institutions and structures that condone and encourage racial violence. These imaginings “ignore, undermine, or misrepresent the larger institutional/structural ties that supported (through actions and/or inactions) and, more important, benefited from, their enactment.”⁹² In this way, dominant white culture is left unquestioned, while particular “bad apples” are held personally responsible for American racism.

Having explored these threads, Thomas Jefferson looks less like a “paradox” who constantly

90 Anthony Brown and Keffrelyn Brown, “Strange Fruit Indeed: Interrogating Contemporary Textbook Representations of Racial Violence Towards African Americans,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 1 (January 2010): 37.

91 Ibid, 44.

92 Ibid, 45.

contradicted himself with appeals to personal liberty while enslaving humans. Instead, property rights and human subjugation can be seen as the warp and weft of the American social fabric. To Jefferson, his “freedom” meant his ability to possess, his rights to use African Americans by defining them as less than human through the maintenance of a culture of racial essentialism.

Effects of Textbook Content: Student Experiences

The distortions and simplifications prevalent in the conventions of American textbook writing have profound effects for students of all walks of life. Brown and Brown argue that “K–12 social studies textbooks are perhaps one of the most important artifacts that help construct the cultural memory(ies) held by students.”⁹³ But the mechanisms for students’ construction of meaning is not simple or static. Scholars inspired by poststructuralist analyses of texts argue that the relationships between texts and meaning are “multiple and contradictory.” That is, one cannot assume that what is in the texts is actually taught as intended, or that what is taught is learned as the writers of textbooks hoped.⁹⁴

Apple and Smith argue that students are not empty vessels who simply receive facts, but depending on a student’s background, he or she might take one of three positions with respect to the information conveyed. Students could submit to domination by, engage in negotiation with, or position themselves in opposition to any assigned text. In fact, many students may engage in combinations of all three modes of relating to texts.⁹⁵

Educational scholar Terrie Epstein looked at the specific processes of student construction of meaning across racial lines. Her study of European-American and African-American adolescents’ perceptions of history found substantive differences in the explanations students constructed for historical events, and the amount of trust student of each group put in educators and teaching materials. Epstein surveyed and interviewed teenagers from black and white families in an industrial working-class midwestern town in the late 1990s.⁹⁶ She discovered that white students tended to take a more celebratory view of American history, and described institutions of Jim Crow and Slavery as phenomena with “natural” rather than specific structural causes.⁹⁷ In contrast, black students tended to view textbook history in terms of

93 Ibid, 37.

94 Michael Apple and Linda Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook*, 1991, 13.

95 Ibid, 14.

96 Terrie Epstein, “Deconstructing Differences in African-American and European-American Adolescents’ Perspectives on U.S. History,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 28, no. 4 (1998): 397–422.

97 Ibid,

their own families' experiences of racial oppression. In interviews, she found that in these teenagers, many whom descended from grandparents who left the South during the Great Migration, had ample knowledge of how white society had committed violence against their kin, and how they and their families had specifically been denied rights due to their race.⁹⁸

The divergent realities experienced by black and white students gave white students a profound ignorance about racial inequality, and black students a profound distrust of educational institutions and teaching materials. She found that while white students typically trusted teachers and school books more than their families on the facts of history, black students tended to trust their families first, then teachers and mass media depictions as historical sources.⁹⁹ In short, white students tended to take a less critical view of teaching practices and materials, as their realities of their lives did not unveil major contradictions between what they were learning and what they were experiencing in daily life. For black students, the textbook narratives about America's history and their personal and familiar experiences were so incongruous that they tended to form more critical and oppositional stances towards these texts. Through this process, students sitting together in the same classroom were leaving with completely divergent positions on the nation's history.

These dynamics, of a textbook's dominant narrative processed through the lenses of wildly divergent social positions continue well beyond the classroom. Cultural Geographers Joshua Inwood and Deborah Martin studied The University of Georgia campus through the lens of racialized experience through archival research, interviews and roving focus groups with African-American students. They found that this carefully curated historical campus functioned in similar ways to textbook depictions of history. Black students commenting on spaces revealed the many ways that "the landscape meanings on North Campus offer a kind of 'whitewashed' collective memory, one that simplifies desegregation while shunting more complex and painful aspects of the story to individualized daily experiences, private dormitory spaces, or a virtual world."¹⁰⁰ Spaces that white students typically see as inviting, beautiful, and neutral are, for racially marginalized students "implicit and explicit messages about who created and belongs at the

98 Ibid, 406.

99 Ibid, 407.

100 Joshua F. J. Inwood and Deborah G. Martin, "Whitewash: White Privilege and Racialized Landscapes at the University of Georgia," *Social & Cultural Geography* 9, no. 4 (June 2008): 393.

University.”¹⁰¹

This study reveals how real-world landscapes begin to replicate, physically embody, and place themselves in alignment with the narrative fictions introduced to children through textbooks. These replications of textbook versions of history, place, and belonging become powerful mechanisms through which racial separation and inequality are reinforced and maintained once students leave the classroom.

Critical Education and Moving Beyond Limiting Views of “Legitimate Knowledge”

This piece attempts to explore the specific mechanisms of the statement educational critics Sherri Wallace and David Allen put forth, that textbooks are “at once the result of political economic, and cultural activities, battles and compromises. They are conceived, designed, and authored by real people with real interests. They are published within the political and economic constraints of markets, resources, and power... and what counts as legitimate knowledge is the result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender/sex and religious groups.”¹⁰² But what possibilities exist for intervention in or disruption of the continued production of textbooks and their narrow conceptions of “legitimate knowledge?”

Textbooks are small objects with outsized influence, they are both instruments of and informed by the “process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized.”¹⁰³ Overwhelmingly, critiques of modern textbooks bring up the fact that textbooks as currently conceived were “never intended to promote reflective thought, to stimulate critical analysis, or to celebrate cultural diversity.”¹⁰⁴ In fact, many scholars argue that current modes of teaching and curricular development creates a kind of “impaired consciousness,” especially in elite white students. This kind of thinking, which Joyce King dubbed *dysconscious racism*, “denotes limited and distorted understandings.. about inequality and diversity that make it difficult for them to act in favor of equitable education.”

Theodora Berry and David Stovall go a step further to indict current educational practices as a “curriculum

101 Ibid, 393.

102 Sherri L. Wallace and Marcus D. Allen, “Survey of African American Portrayal in Introductory Textbooks in American Government/Politics: A Report of the APSA Standing Committee on the Status of Blacks in the Profession,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41, no. 01 (January 2008): 153.

103 Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 97, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 50.

104 Stuart J. Foster, “The Struggle for American Identity: Treatment of Ethnic Groups in United States History Textbooks,” *History of Education* 28, no. 3 (September 1999): 253.

of tragedy... that allows majoritarian citizens the right of dominance, even in life and death.”¹⁰⁵ They specifically tie current majority approaches to textbooks as part of the violent cultural foundation of America that lurks below the visible tragedies of police murders of unarmed black children like Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice.

Educational scholars have looked to the framework of critical race theory (CRT) for some promising possible approaches to addressing gaps in analysis, and under and mis-representation of minority Americans. Lynn, Jennings and Hughes suggest a set of positions from which to work from based on Derrick Bell and other thinkers in CRT. First, one must acknowledge that racism is pervasive in American society, a daily fact of life that is difficult to uncover due to its ubiquity.¹⁰⁶ Second, as King noted in her analysis of dysconscious racism, racism a system of privilege and power that is almost invisible to those who benefit¹⁰⁷. Third is an emphasis on counternarrative storytelling to reveal and explore the experiences of marginalized people as a powerful tool for change.¹⁰⁸

Ellen Schwartz furthers the utility of counternarratives as a strategy that can work to unravel the dysconscious racism of the dominant groups in society, a strategy to:

“empower students to become more conscious and connected to the particularistic narratives which they themselves embody, and helps them to value their own and others’ knowledge bases as significant to their learning... they come to understand whose interests are served by the gaps and insufficiencies in Eurocentric presentations; further, they begin to understand in what ways their own (past and and present) voices have been and are significant to the production of knowledge.”¹⁰⁹

In suggesting this approach, she questions the western idea of a finite ‘canon’ of significant knowledge trumpeted by Hirsch and others. She also changes the position of the student from a passive vessel receiving knowledge to a valued and active participant in sharing and creating knowledge. She points to the potential for teaching to broaden understandings of human experience, if only teachers would “ask

¹⁰⁵ Theodora Regina Berry and David O. Stovall, “Trayvon Martin and the Curriculum of Tragedy: Critical Race Lessons for Education,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 16, no. 4 (September 2013): 587.

¹⁰⁶ Marvin Lynn, Michael E. Jennings, and Sherick Hughes, “Critical Race Pedagogy 2.0: Lessons from Derrick Bell,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 16, no. 4 (September 2013):607.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 607.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 607.

¹⁰⁹ Ellen Swartz, “Emancipatory Narratives: Rewriting the Master Script in the School Curriculum,” *Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 353.

questions and assign tasks that trigger an awareness in students that only some people who were historically present and involved are being discussed or considered.”¹¹⁰

Swartz and King call this kind of approach “liberatory” or “emancipatory” pedagogy. Carl Grant calls it a “social reconstructionist” education.¹¹¹ All are calling for a re-examination of the core purpose of education. These thinkers strive to equip students with critical tools that would ready them to prepare “to reconstruct society so it better serves the interest of all citizens: Reconstructionism is thus a philosophy of magnetic foresight, a philosophy of ends attainable through the development of powerful means possessed latently by the people.”¹¹²

These threads of critical race theory should also be connected to the intellectual positions of Urban Political Ecology, (UPE) scholars who examine everyday spaces as the expression of larger political, economic, and social processes. With this lens of emancipatory pedagogy, which values the processes student discovery and life experience, students could be invited to interrogate the spaces where they live. While traditional American approaches to knowledge and elite education privilege “universal” truths that turn out to be highly culturally specific, urban political ecology could supplement the ideas of liberatory pedagogy by focusing on “urban-ness not...as a fixed set of relations driven by underlying (and overarching) forces but as a series of moments in which networks of actors arrange themselves, often in new and unpredictable ways in the making and remaking of cities.”¹¹³ In this way, centering the capabilities and knowledge creation of children could provide paths to new conceptions of American and new possibilities for a more equitable social order.

While these propositions may veer into the realm of idealistic fantasy, this paper does attempt to identify smaller-scale opportunities for change within the dynamics surrounding and intersecting with the production of school texts. If one thing is clear from the fraught annals of American history, it is that subjugation of people that appears repeatedly in our past takes an absurd number of intellectual and rhetorical contortions to maintain. While the American system of public education is not likely to be transformed into a liberatory practice overnight, there are myriad opportunities to intervene in and disrupt

110 Ibid, 353.

111 Carl Grant, “The Persistent Significance of Race in Schooling,” *Elementary School Journal* 88, no. 5 (May 1988): 564.

112 Ibid, 567.

113 Nate Gabriel, “Urban Political Ecology: Environmental Imaginary, Governance, and the Non-Human: UPE: Imaginary, Governance, and the Non-Human,” *Geography Compass* 8, no. 1 (January 2014): 345.

the production and maintenance of the overriding, yet morally and conceptually fragile, hegemony of a long-standing white male tradition of teaching and learning.

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